

PHILANTHROPIC TOURISM AND ARTISTIC AUTHENTICITY:
CULTURAL EMPATHY AND THE WESTERN CONSUMPTION OF KYRGYZ ART

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Doctor of Philosophy

by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

PHILANTHROPIC TOURISM AND ARTISTIC AUTHENTICITY: CULTURAL EMPATHY AND THE WESTERN CONSUMPTION OF KYRGYZ ART

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a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

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FOR MY FAMILY (BIG AND SMALL)

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

At its simplest, felt is tangled fibers. A single fiber of wool is covered in tiny scales, almost like the skin of a fish. With the addition of a little warmth and moisture and maybe a drop of an alkaline solution like soap, one can open the scales of the wool fibers and make the fibers interlock with one another by rubbing the fibers together. The result of this process is felt – a natural, nonwoven fabric, unique in the textile catalogue. Felt is the only fabric that can be produced in either two or three-dimensional shapes without cutting and seaming. It does not need its edges bound or hemmed to protect them from unraveling. Unlike woven and knitted fabrics, felt has no direction, so it is not stronger if one pulls it lengthwise as opposed to across or on a diagonal. Felt can be gossamer and translucent, a fraction of an inch in thickness, lace-like. It also can be several inches thick, heavy, and dense. Felt keeps us warm as insulation and winter boot liners, comfortable as mattress pads, safe as car break pads, and helps us to beautify and celebrate our world as we use it in everything from children’s holiday crafts to musical instruments to works of art. This dissertation is on the narrative strategies used by westerners when they consume felt crafts from Kyrgyzstan, but it necessarily begins and ends with the felt.

Felt

The earliest known evidence of felt dates to around 6000 BCE. The walls of the archeological site of Çatal Hüyük in Turkey were painted with patterns that closely

resemble the felt carpets of Central Asia (Burkett 1977). Felt hats adorned the 3000-year-old mummies of Ürümchi in the Tarim Basin of Xinjiang, China's far western province; felt saddle blankets were found in the tombs at Pazyryk, a site in the High Altai Mountains of Siberia near the western tip of Mongolia (Barber 1999; Rudenko 1970). In ancient Greece, felt caps were associated with the twin gods Castor and Pollux. In England, the feltmakers were one of the earliest of the medieval guilds to incorporate and later to bring about more modern labor regulations. Both St. Clement and one of the sons of Solomon are credited with its invention, as are Noah's sheep on the ark, although St. Christopher presides as the patron of its makers (McGavock and Lewis 2000, 9; Westfall 2005, 55). Yet despite felt's long and illustrious history, nowhere in the world is so closely associated with felt as Central Asia – “the land of felt” itself (Laufer 1930). And in Central Asia, the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Mongolians are particularly noted for the importance they place on this fabric.

Traditionally nomadic sheep herders, these peoples have made both a necessity and an art of felt. They construct their homes from felt. Called yurts in English, *ger* in Mongolian, and *bozu* in Kyrgyz, these round tents keep out both the heat of summer and the cold of winter. The shape of the support at the center of the roof also appears at the center of the Kyrgyz flag. Felt rugs, called *shyrdak* and *ala-kiyiz* in Kyrgyz depending on how they are made, cover the floors of the yurt. The people make felt blankets and pads for the horses and camels that make their nomadism possible. Feltmaking is so important in these cultures that there are riddles about felt, festivals of feltmaking, and blessings for felt. Even after most of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were forcibly settled by the Soviets, felt

has remained both a necessary part of life, the Kyrgyz lay their dead out in a yurt, and a source of pride and cultural identity.



Image 1. Kyrgyz shyrdak produced by the Altyn Oimok collaborative, Bokonbaeova, Issyk Kul oblast, Kyrgyzstan. This shyrdak shows typical Kyrgyz floral and “strong man” motifs in a positive/negative color pattern. (Photo by author)

Shyrdak are often considered the apex of Kyrgyz traditional art (Image 1). To make a shyrdak, a woman lays two thick, differently-colored pieces of felt one atop the other. On the top piece, she outlines her pattern in chalk based on traditional motifs that are combined to tell a story or offer particular blessings to the rug's recipient, such a pomegranate for the fertility of a newly married couple or a strong man to give a baby strength. Once the pattern is on the felt, she cuts both layers together. She then takes the motif cut from one color and pieces it to the felt which surrounded the motif from the other color, forming a positive/negative image. A cord is stitched over the line where the two felt pieces are joined to provide strength and a more finished look. The whole is finally quilted to a large plain felt, often an old or worn rug, for added support. Generally, a shyrdak will have a border pattern that surrounds a field that may consist of a series of repeated patterns or several blocks of mirrored motifs. Symmetry and bold contrasting colors are particularly admired. Shyrdak, like the bozu, are so important in Kyrgyz culture that their motifs appear everywhere: on lamp posts, shop signs, and logos. All of this, I have written about already.

This dissertation discusses felt from Kyrgyzstan, but it is not centrally *about* that felt or even felt generally. Instead, this dissertation is about westerners who buy Kyrgyz felt and some of the narrative strategies that are deployed in that consumption. During the course of my doctoral work, I wrote a book expanding the very brief synopsis of felt that appears in the previous paragraphs. Thus, having written a book on felt *qua* felt, in my dissertation I wanted to delve more theoretically into what felt means and how those meanings are made. In the process of narrowing that rather broad subject, however, I

found myself faced with a series of false starts, theoretical and practical difficulties, and forced revaluations of myself and my work. In this work, I make the claim that I am complicit in the systems and narratives I describe. My broadly-aimed critiques apply as much to me as to anyone. To make sense of this claim, however, I must divert briefly before introducing my topic properly to explain the process which brought me to it.

As a weaver, sewer, and occasional keeper of sheep with a surplus of wool on my hands, I first became aware of felt by making it. Later, as a master's student in textile history and conservation, I became interested in felt again but from a scholarly perspective. During my master's program, I one day found myself without a clear thesis topic and facing a proposal deadline. I sat down with the most comprehensively illustrated textile book I owned, Jennifer Harris's *Textiles: 5,000 Years*, and decided that I would write my proposal on whatever object in the book I found the most compelling (1993). I stopped at a picture of a felt saddle blanket from Pazyryk. I could not work on the Pazyryk saddle blanket itself, which resides in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and was under careful conservation already; but felt, more generally, is little studied in textiles, and I could work on it. From that thesis, which ultimately focused on Central Asian felt animal blankets, I expanded my research into the history, uses, and culture of felt around the world for a book entitled simply *Felt* and published by Berg Publishers in 2009.

Moving from Master's degree in textiles to doctoral work in folklore, I knew that I wanted to continue to study felt. The most obvious path was to do a traditional ethnography of feltmakers in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan seemed a good potential site: feltmaking is an ongoing tradition there, so there are many feltmakers available, and the

country does not suffer from the political unrest of some of its neighboring countries. I made my first trip to Kyrgyzstan both to do research for the book and with the intention of establishing contacts for my dissertation research. However, I soon realized that the traditional ethnography of feltmakers and feltmaking I proposed had already been done. I needed a new approach to my topic. My next thought was to work with Kyrgyz feltmakers to organize an exhibit of felt either in Kyrgyzstan or the United States, drawing on my museum background on one hand and my work as a folklorist on the other, and use that experience as a basis for my dissertation. In reflection, this concept was more problematic than my earlier idea to do an ethnography. While ethnography itself is fraught with issues of power and cultural misunderstandings, my exhibit idea was based on the colonialistic assumption that the feltmakers were not already valuing and displaying their work, that they somehow needed me, who cannot even adequately speak their language, to help them tell their stories. Yet, I knew that the Kyrgyz feltmakers and their communities do put great value in the felt, and they do exhibit and celebrate it. In the months that followed, I finished writing the book and returned to searching for a topic.

During that time, I read extensively on ethnography, issues surrounding representation, and in postcolonial discourse and visual culture. I also taught Introduction to Folklore. My students often asked the difference between folklore and anthropology, since both fields study culture through ethnographic methods. Repeating words said years ago to me when I asked a similar question, one of the answers I sometimes gave was that,

generally speaking, anthropologists study “them” and folklorists study “us”¹. In answering my students, I realized that my proposed ethnography and exhibit were about “them.” This was troubling for several reasons. First, thinking of James Clifford and George Marcus’s *Writing Culture* (1986) and Jay Ruby’s *A Crack in the Mirror* (1982), I wondered where I was situating myself in my work and my relationship with the Kyrgyz feltmakers I proposed to study. Second, following Edward Said’s concept of orientalism, I questioned whether I was unconsciously using the Kyrgyz feltmakers as a way of defining myself as a white, western cultural scholar. Finally, I realized that the entire approach I was describing to my students with such levity was based on a potentially racist paradigm of dividing “us” from “them” in the first place. Who, I pondered, are “we” anyway? And what are “we” doing with and thinking about this Kyrgyz felt? This dissertation is the result of an exploration into those questions beginning with the images “we” in the west see around “us” everyday.

Strategies

Western marketers use depictions of the lives of women artisans from non-western cultures to sell crafts, often with a subtext that claims the sales of these products will directly aid the women depicted. In doing so, these images play into buyers’ cultural

¹ The implication of this extremely reductive division is that historically anthropologists have tended to travel to other parts of the world to pursue their research, such as Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands, while folklorists have tended to remain closer to home. It should not, however, be taken to mean that folklorists are more often emic to the groups they study than anthropologists. The differences between folklore and cultural anthropology depend largely on who one asks, the training they received, and the kind of folklore or anthropology they do. The fields are very similar and there is and should be much crossover between them. To me, the difference is largely genaeological, i.e. the two fields evolved from different beginnings, thus have had to handle some different challenges or have had to deal with issues specific to their intellectual pasts. Nor should they be seen as entirely similar now. Their histories have fostered certain subjects and theoretical approaches over others, and their scholars tend still to invoke particular theories about, positions for, and analyses of their work.

assumptions about gender roles, race, and modernity drawn from museums, cultural festivals, magazines like *National Geographic*, and other media. Set alongside beliefs about the role of western humanitarian aid in the world, these appeals for sales, and well-intentioned requests for help, can be read as more complex commentaries on how the west interacts with other cultures in ways that both repeat and challenge colonial constructions of the world. Taking artworks² from Kyrgyzstan, particularly those connected to traditional feltmaking, as a case study, this project seeks to explore the folklore of the global art marketplace, as sellers and buyers, organizations, marketers and culture brokers invoke each of four interwoven narratives – tourism, philanthropy, art, and authenticity.

² I use the terms art and craft largely interchangeably. It must be noted, however, that these two terms do carry specific sets of highly contested meanings. Historically, art has been privileged over craft in the west, although the material difference between the two may be difficult to ascertain. Immanuel Kant, whose discussion of art and craft seems to be particularly enduring, categorized art as something which has no purpose other than to be seen (or heard or touched), while craft does have an ulterior function, such as stirring a pot or holding something or as clothing. For Kant, this meant that while either could be pleasing to look at, only art could be truly beautiful, because only art was freed from other, more utilitarian associations (one would always be tempted to judge a spoon, however beautiful, on its stirring abilities rather than purely its aesthetics). The discussions about and challenges to this distinction and these definitions, not to mention to what extent any specific art form is or is not art or craft, whether or not either category deserves greater regard over the other, and the assumptions of gender, racial, and class bias that accompanied both categorization and status, have filled entire bookshelves and library sections.

Nor are these distinctions purely western at this point. In Kyrgyzstan, the national art museum staff seemed most proud of the paintings by Kyrgyz artists, although there is also a room of traditional art forms, including felt rugs. Many of the Kyrgyz feltmakers I spoke with considered themselves artists, although when they showed me their art works, they were very different from the traditional pieces they made for export. I have, therefore, followed their lead and chosen to refer to all of the makers as artists. In the western marketplace, on the other hand, the objects for sale are generally termed crafts or folk art, and I discuss this nomenclature and the field of folklore's engagement in the larger discourse surrounding art and craft in greater detail in chapter four. Further, aid agencies almost exclusively refer to the objects made by those they assist as crafts and the artists as artisans, making the connection to craft stronger still; thus, I refer consistently to craft-based aid, rather than art-based aid. Interestingly, I suspect that given my experiences with the Kyrgyz artists and in the Kyrgyz museum that Kyrgyz women would also call the felt objects they offer for sale in the west crafts, keeping them distinct from more singular works of art. While I touch on the issues surrounding art and craft as terms and the hierarchy they tend to connote in the west and its implications for non-western artists particularly in chapter four, I use the terms loosely, interchangeably, and, as much as possible, without bias.

As objects move through a global marketplace, they acquire new and often divergent meanings as they pass through different systems of valuation. While much material culture study, especially in folklore, has centered on makers of objects, the process of meaning-production at the moment of consumption, especially in the global context, has generally been neglected. During the periods of production and use, people interact with objects in ways that reflect their own personality and creativity in linear narrative threads. As Michael Owen Jones describes Chester Cornett's making of his chairs or Henry Glassie the Turkish potters, makers are intimately involved in an ongoing discussion with the objects they make, relating a narrative that looks generally backward at the tradition of the object and the craft and forward towards its use (Jones 1989; Glassie 1999). A combination of specific materials, environment, skill, serendipity, and reception come together to bring an object into being. During use, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, objects acquire meanings over time that link them to a series of people and events (1989). These maker and user narratives are individualized, personal, and relative. They may draw meaning from larger social groups (for instance, a chair is only considered a chair so long as it is accepted as sufficiently chair-like by the larger community), but they are not completely reliant on those groups for their meaning (I may choose to use the object as a chair anyway). Interestingly, these are the narratives which folklorists have tended to study, narratives that show an object in production, the stories of makers, or in use, the stories of owners, and, as Richard Bauman might add, demonstrate a sense of critical competence. This focus on particularized meanings makes material culture study unusual in the field of folklore, a discipline which has defined itself recently as "artistic communication in small groups" and the groups as "two or more people with at least one

thing in common” (Ben-Amos; Dundes). The space in between these two defining narratives, that of the maker and that of the user, has been largely ignored by folklorists, perhaps because of the subtle shift in perception that occurs in that space in how people interact with and create meaning for the object.

At the moment of exchange between broker, maker, and user, objects temporarily cease to exist as discreet entities within individual narrative arcs. Instead their tangible existence as objects is eclipsed by their role as signs. William Pietz³ describes this in his reformulation of Jean Baudrillard’s argument concerning the commodified object:

...contemporary consumer society increasingly reveals...the degree to which commodities are no longer objects (those posited, but absent, signifieds) but rather image signifiers, “simulated” objects existing in a “hyperreal” social order that has been schizophrenically freed from all fixed investments of individual personality and particular desire. In postmodern society, it is no longer the material use of products that is the object of our consumption so much as the commodified meaning – the content of their form, their exchange value – now revealed as autonomous forces in packaging and advertising. (Pietz 1993, 124)

An object in the marketplace has no meaning accrued from either an intimate engagement with its production or a life of use. Its meaning rather relies on how it is presented, through advertisements or marketing; the environment in which it is found, whether it be a catalogue of ethnic art or a gallery or a dumpster; and the viewer’s generic and typographic assumptions gleaned from larger cultural scripts about similar objects, in other words, their “commodified meaning.” Such commodified meanings, therefore, are

³ Pietz disagrees with Baudrillard’s interpretation of Marx, particularly as it relates to the fetish. He argues that because Baudrillard “collapse[s] the distinction between exchange value and use value...with Saussure’s distinction between the signifier and the signified,” he reduces Marx’s commodity fetish to the semiotician’s own fetish for the signified which neglects to take into account Marx’s reliance on a religious understanding of the term fetish (Pietz 1993, 123). While Pietz makes a good argument as to Marx’s possible intent, Baudrillard is useful here in describing how meaning is ascribed to objects, i.e. how objects function as signifiers within the marketplace and how those signifiers become not only consumable but fetish objects in their own right.

group productions, especially in a direct marketplace setting, where maker, broker, and owner may meet directly.

In this dissertation, I combine methods and theories from folklore, culture studies, and visual culture with fieldwork and text-based analyses to address a series of questions: How does the west's history of colonial discourse both predicate and challenge the ways in which westerners narrate many interactions with other cultures? How are marketers, including humanitarian aid organizations, art and culture festivals, and culture brokers, engaged in the circulation and exchange between the needs of one group and the desires and needs of another? How are object meanings constructed when that construction takes place against a backdrop of popular and mass media images that mark a relationship already fraught with colonial and neo-colonial discourse?

Strategic Images...

The first image: a line of women, hair bound in floral head scarves, kneel shoulder to shoulder on the ground (Image 2). In back of them is the white-washed wall of a courtyard, perhaps piled with bags of loose wool. In front of them on the ground lies a screen made of reeds and a roll of thick fabric. They are Central Asian, Kyrgyz, and they are making felt. This is the iconic image of women feltmakers. It has appeared in nearly every western book, monograph, and article on the tradition of feltmaking in Central Asia for the last century, including my own book, *Felt*. The image catches the western imagination. It is an image of cooperative, manual labor. The women and their work seem distant from daily western life: simultaneously exotic and familiar, pre-industrial. I have captured the image myself – twice. In both cases, the women I

photographed were making felt as part of their work with a local craft cooperative that sold products to the west. The felt they were making, they would later turn into slippers or toy animals or rugs or foot stools. They told me they would like to be able to buy a feltmaking machine, for this work is hard and time consuming. Some of the women had better jobs before the Soviet Union collapsed. They are interesting women, each with her own story. They are not smiling. Many are entrepreneurial, driven to succeed in a global economy despite the difficulties of accessing it from a small town in northern Kyrgyzstan. But this dissertation is not an ethnography of these women or a material culture study of the works they produce. It is about images and narratives.



Image 2. Women from the Altyn Oimok collective rolling a large piece of felt in the traditional manner on a reed screen. Bokonbaevo, Issyk Kul oblast, Kyrgyzstan. 2007. (Photo by author)



Image 3. Kulbar Toksombaeva, a feltmaker with the Sapar Ismailov Craftsmen Family Group of Kyzyl-Tuu, Issyk Kul oblast, Kyrgyzstan, watching her booth at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market. Santa Fe, New Mexico. 2008. (Photo by author)

A second image: a woman stands alone surrounded by color and textures radiating out from textiles behind her (Image 3). She is smiling but softly with a closed mouth, not in the broad tooth-displaying way of American snapshots and billboard images. Her clothes are profoundly non-western. Her long coat-like velvet overdress, worn over a flowing under layer, is embroidered with swirling designs. Her head is covered, not by a floral scarf, but by a closely embroidered cap, perhaps trimmed in fur with a plume of feathers at the top, or a tall hat of white, wrapped cotton that frames her whole face – the traditional *elechek* worn only for special occasions. The textiles around her, mostly felt

slippers, toy animals, and small rugs, are traditional. Like the women rolling felt, she is Kyrgyz. This is the festival image. I have photographed it, too. The woman's exoticism is heightened by her clothing, by the stacks of brightly-colored objects, and by the contrast between her and the westerners who stop to look at her as they pass by in their shorts and t-shirts and sandals. She represents the women rolling the felt; though in daily life, none of them wear such clothes. This dissertation is not about these sellers either, the women who travel to the west to make business connections and sales for their cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan and who, to do so, take on the role, or at least the image, of the traditional Kyrgyz woman. But it is about that traditional image and the aesthetic difference the woman represents in a global economy that traffics in images of the exotic Other.



Image 4. Shyrdak for sale at Kulbar Toksombaeva's booth at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market. Santa Fe, New Mexico. 2008. (Photo by author)



Image 5. Dolls wearing traditional Kyrgyz styles by Kyrgyz felt artist Erkubu Djumagulova at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market. Santa Fe, New Mexico. 2008. (Photo by author)

A third image: a close up shot of felt and embroidery in vivid colors with bold and unusual designs (Image 4). This image depicts the textiles, illustrating the dynamic patterns of the felt rugs or the preciousness of a traditionally-dressed female doll holding a traditionally-dressed child (Image 5). Because the seller in the second image wears only a slight smile rather than the broad grin, western marketers tend not to show many images of the Kyrgyz women who come to sell every July at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market (in fact, there has been only one in the last three years). Instead, to represent the Kyrgyz artists, the publicists of the Market prefer this third image. Other sales outlets that market Kyrgyz arts have taken a similar approach. Western catalogues and websites, specializing, like the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, in traditionally-inspired arts from around the world, also tend to depict objects over makers. When such outlets do

show the artists, they prefer happily smiling women, ideally with big brown eyes and wearing traditional dress, holding an example of their work. The websites and catalogues, like those of the Santa Fe Market, are making a calculated choice – to, on one hand, play on western buyers’ sympathies and, on the other, reinforce westerners’ perception of their own global predominance over the object makers. This paradigm is supplied and supported by a whole host of other images. And while this dissertation is not about the felt itself, it is about how it is sold in the west, largely through images like these.



Image 6. Landscape image of Kyrgyzstan depicting mountains, a single yurt, and horses. (Photo copyright Marc van Vuren. 2010.)



Image 7. A “decrepit house” in Kyrgyzstan. This kind of photograph, along with images of soldiers and meat for sale, form the bulk of non-landscape photos of Kyrgyzstan. (Photo copyright Stephen Kiers. 2010.)

The fourth, fifth, and sixth images: one is of a group of head-scarf clad girls, shoulder to shoulder like the feltmakers and similarly set against the backdrop of a white-washed wall. This image adorns the cover of the bestselling non-fiction work *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, which captured the imaginations and sympathies of American readers⁴. The book garnered both high acclaim and exponentially increased donations for not only Mortenson’s education-oriented charity, the Central Asia Institute, which works primarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also for aid organizations throughout the region, especially those focused on women and incorporating some “useful skill,” such as the making of rugs. This kind of image (and there are myriad variations of it) bolstered by titles like “touching thousands,” “promote

⁴ I was unable to obtain rights to this image.

peace,” and “buy a rug, educate a girl,” pleads for western help, a modern fulfillment of the colonial white man’s burden. Another image paints a landscape of stark beauty. It includes high desert, snow capped mountains, possibly a single yurt or a lone person on horse or camel back. The scene is lonely and empty, it asks to be found on a map, to be explored and survived. This image is found both on the back of Mortenson and Relin’s book and in most western discussions of Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia ranging from political commentaries and academic writings to *National Geographic* articles and tour brochures. In a search for images of Kyrgyzstan on the major stock photo companies’ websites, less than 30% had people in them at all. The other 70% were almost exclusively variations of this empty landscape. The final image centers on debasement and poverty and dirt, asking often for the viewer’s sympathy and concern, but equally as often this image is intended to invoke the viewer’s distaste through comparison. These are the most common images of Central Asia perpetuated in the west. Against these already consumed images, western buyers confront the women selling textiles in Santa Fe and those making them in Kyrgyzstan. This image also captures both the allure and the revulsion of the orientalist fetish. This dissertation is about all of these images and the ways in which they frame the relationship between western buyer and Kyrgyz seller in a discourse that is unintentionally but often profoundly racist and colonial.



Image 8. Visitors lined up at one of the payment booths to pay for their purchases at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market. Santa Fe, New Mexico. 2008. (Photo by author)

And then there are the people that the lens tends not to focus on, the unexoticized, the people passing by the Kyrgyz woman or lined up for the payment booth at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, who might buy the felt offered for sale (Image 8). These are westerners, mostly white, middle-aged, and female. They are consumers. They shop in Santa Fe, the home of the arts in the Southwest, and other equally ethnically marked fairs or consume art from the comfort of their homes. They claim a desire to see the world and to help others, to encourage ethnic or traditional art, and they seek to buy authenticity. They are more interested in naming the countries of origin of the things they buy at the Market or through catalogues than the artists who made them. These western consumers are not depicted in the Market's marketing materials, nor in the websites, nor humanitarian appeals, but all of these materials are written expressly for them. They are curiously under represented and unmarked. This dissertation is also about these buyers and some of the narrative strategies that they must literally "buy into" to preserve a sense of innocence as they engage with the colonial discourse that pervades the global art marketplace and advertises the purchases they make. And finally, this work is about folklore and how the folklorist acts within a complex global, ethnic marketplace in ways that simultaneously commodify, broker, consume, and sometimes deconstruct the cultures of Others.

And Narratives

Four narrative strategies – tourism, philanthropy, art, and authenticity – form the center of this work. They function cumulatively and at times in contradiction with each

other as western consumers construct and negotiate relationships with global producers and market brokers. Each of these strategies are formulaic, providing a clear set of actions and roles through which the western consumer makes sense of her position vis-à-vis the artists whose goods she buys. Yet all of these narrative roles, while claiming to bring consumer and artist into greater contact and cross-cultural understanding, ultimately serve instead to reinforce colonial constructions of self and Other. Thus, these narrative strategies also protect the consumer's claims of innocence as someone simply interested in the world or in art, or trying to help or understand all of humankind. Further, each strategy contains an action, a concrete function for the consumer to perform to make sense of the world in which she acts, or in Michel de Certeau's terminology, a tactic⁵.

Western tourists gaze upon the world around them, constructing the ordinary in contrast to the extraordinary, the everyday against the unusual, and generally passing through all environments as though they can gaze upon others without affecting them. Tourism offers a way for westerners to encounter other cultures while maintaining a consistent view of the world and one's place within it, keeping the boundaries of difference in place. When tourists are also philanthropists, they can claim to be "giving back" via consumption, enacting the role of the historic missionary by believing that capitalism will help to change the world through the spread of capitalism itself and that consumption can, in this way, be a political act (Lau 2000, 11). For this consumer, philanthropy provides a justification for the act of cultural consumption in a society

⁵ In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau describes strategies as large-scale structures built by institutions and governments and imposed onto daily life, e.g. a map that describes a whole city. Tactics are the acts that individuals use to negotiate daily life, e.g. a specific route through the city, interactions with people and things along the way, etc. The narratives I describe are strategies, because they are proffered by institutions and governments as ways for one group of people to encounter, define, and consume another group of people. However, they also suggest specific tactics that consumers may or may not enact.

aware of, at least on some level, the problems of traditional colonialism and the unevenness of power within such exchange and in the global market more generally. Yet the appropriateness of consumption as a response to these inequalities remains unquestioned. Aesthetically-minded consumers, on the other hand, who believe that their purchases are artistically motivated, perform the role of the connoisseur, exhibiting the global artworks purchased and thereby exhibiting “good taste.” And finally, the anthropologist or folklorist, who have long placed great value in authenticity, although not without contention or ambivalence, documents, represents, translates, and ultimately brokers one culture to another, both consuming it and offering it up for consumption. The cultural broker insists on the recognition of cultural difference by drawing it specifically to consumers’ attention. Although folklorists have acknowledged and explored our own at times difficult and contradictory role as brokers and our engagement with the marketplace as a metaphor for both the field in which we study and our position within it, our role as consumers has remained largely under analyzed.

Two interconnected ideas are central here: the marketplace and the tourist. The marketplace functions both literally as a space in which goods, in this case Kyrgyz felt rugs, are exchanged for capital, where consumption is not only sanctioned but exists as the very purpose of the space, and figuratively, as a moment of contact between individuals and cultures, where meanings are produced. But the consumers trolling the western marketplace for traditional, ethnic, and folk arts⁶ in particular (as opposed to more general marketplaces for more mundane goods and services, e.g. groceries or books) bear marked similarities to traveling tourists in their interactions with what they

⁶ These terms will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

consume. The marketplace which I am describing, then, engenders, and as I will argue throughout, relies upon touristic performance. On a basic level, the marketplace becomes the space in which consumption and meaning making take place, for after all the consumption of Kyrgyz art is an exchange of goods. But the western marketplace of ethnic art I describe is not a equal one, and thus the consumer acts more like a tourist in the ways she consumes and in the way narratives are shared that undergird her consumption, than a partner in exchange.

Snapshots

I have sought, in the coming pages, to provide a series of snapshots, each focused on one of the narrative strategies westerners employ as they consume Central Asian art, and to connect these images with lines of thought drawn from postcolonial discourse, Marxist and Freudian understandings of the fetish, postmodern ideas of semiotics and consumption, and feminist theory. There is a necessary gap both between images and between the actual functioning of the marketplace and the kinds of theorizing about it offered here, just as there are gaps between a tourist's snapshots. Markets, global histories, and folklore are all in constant flux. Therefore, this work must be taken for what it is – a snapshot and a series of snapshots, images and narratives pondered, “read,” theorized and deconstructed to illuminate what transpires in the western consumptions of “ethnic” art, but not an attempt to fully describe either that marketplace or the complex relationship of the west to the rest of the world.

The second chapter, “Following the Silk Road: An Armchair Adventurer’s Introduction To Visualizing Otherness and Constructing Central Asia,” I begin at the

level of popular media to understand the background of representations of Central Asia that most westerners encounter and rely upon in daily life. In western culture, first encounters with the world abroad often occur through popular media. The field of folklore, however, has historically neglected how such media influences the ways in which westerners learn to think about other cultures. Yet we might agree with Roland Barthes that a text is “a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (1977, 146). To ignore the popular culture in favor of a perceived folk or local culture, or the reverse, is to create a false dichotomy. The division between the traditional and the modern that the field of folklore has acknowledged may not, in fact, exist. The prevalence of popular culture and mass media images leads to a particularly passive and unconscious form of consumption that can be dangerous in its assumptions. Written texts, comics, and films offer glimpses at other cultures that do not require actual travel or cultural contact but do allow the consumer to feel they have acquired knowledge and possession of the exotic, which for Central Asia is epitomized by emptiness and unknowability, violence, exotic “ethnicities,” and sexuality. We think we know something about the Central Asian states, those countries that all seem to end with “-stan”: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and sometimes Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, I spend some time here examining what we think we know about this regions, which includes common appropriations of the country ending – stan by the western press. To take this further, I look more closely at three specific “-stans” in the daily comics “Doonesbury” and “Brenda Starr,” as well as the film *Borat*. Using David Spurr’s concepts of the colonial rhetorical strategies of debasement,

negation, and, to a lesser extent, surveillance⁷, I explore how major western representations of Central Asia use of the tropes of colonial adventure stories and tourism to create a gendered construction of the region that features empty space, available yet unattainable women and dangerous men, exoticism, and a pre-modernity characterized by backwardness and filth. Such a description to some western minds provides an invitation for western development and aid, and so I turn to these in my next chapter.

To openly declare a desire to consume the Other goes against the accepted beliefs of the western tourist and even more so against the expressed intentions of humanitarians or folklorists. One might propose, then, that the guilt associated with this desire may be assuaged through self-conscious and public acts of philanthropy. My third chapter, “Made fairly in Central Asia: Supporting Global Development through Shopping,” focuses on the narrative of philanthropy and the role of the missionary, as western shoppers buy Kyrgyz objects through craft-based humanitarian aid and economic development organizations, such as Aid to Artisans, and catalogues selling global crafts, including Sundance, Viva Terra, and Fair Indigo. Political, economic, and general western interest in Central Asia has risen since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and intensified with the United States’ wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but Central Asia offers not only political interests; but in the realm of aid, the region also presents a new frontier for philanthropy, particularly as westerners become a bit too familiar with crafts from Central America and now often associate India more with job outsourcing than traditional

⁷ David Spurr, in his work *The Rhetoric of Empire*, describes twelve different rhetorical strategies used primarily in nineteenth-century travel writing, journalism, and government that helped create India, specifically, as a colonial “subject.” While many of the strategies he describes appear in western writing on and depictions of Central Asia, I have chosen here to focus on those that are both the most prevalent and the most pertinent to the marketing of art in the west as a philanthropic or aesthetic venture.

cultures in need of help. Aid projects rely financially on the support of western donors and, in the case of craft-based aid, on catalogue and website buyers. Through their purchases of Kyrgyz crafts, such consumers are able to feel that they are making a global impact and are directly helping the woman or group described in the marketing materials. This type of philanthropy is itself an act of tourism – a consumption-based interaction with another culture; but it also incorporates a missionary zeal, replacing religious conversion with the desire to initiate an economic conversion to capitalism that ultimately will demand reciprocity in the global market. Using websites and catalogues that sell Central Asian arts as primary sources, I examine both the consumer’s performance of the missionary and the concept of the gift within modern aid and development, an idea hypothesized and presented by R.L. Stirrat and Heiko Henkel, following from the work of Marcel Mauss (1997). By offering Central Asian craft-based aid projects as one current example of a progression of development-oriented missionary work established under colonialism, one similar to the craft-based aid movement begun after Reconstruction in the American South, I demonstrate how the consumption of Central Asian art illuminates the relationship between domestic imperialism and foreign policy.

Closing the gap still further between buyer and maker, in Chapter Four “Buying Art, Buying Ethnicity: Central Asian Crafts and Colonial Logic at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market,” I examine how buyers perform the role of art connoisseurs through the consumption of Central Asian crafts. Based on fieldwork and drawing on theories of Kantian taste and connoisseurship from art history, I consider how the Santa Fe Market provides a venue for the enactment of a touristic relationship between the typically female buyer and the ethnically marked maker that is predicated on

maintaining exoticism by narrating the objects as art, despite the organizers' stated goals of fostering cross cultural understanding. Claims of an aesthetic interest in Kyrgyz crafts positions western consumers as connoisseurs of fine art, situating them firmly within a history of western consumption of non-western "primitive" and "folk" art, a stance which has erased the maker while endowing the buyer with artistic status. At the Market, some of the makers have the opportunity to come into direct contact with the buyers, but the venue, display, marketing, and preconceptions of buyers work to maintain a critical distance through a system of layered binaries that emphasize self/Other, buyer/maker, and developed/undeveloped.

My final chapter, "Folklorist/Consumer: Ethnography as Cultural Consumption," turns these discussions reflexively towards the field of folklore. Many folklorists are engaged with the kinds of organizations described in chapters three and four as well as in the production of cultural festivals that foster direct encounters between non-western makers and western consumers, such as the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife. Folklorists, in closer contact with the people they study than ordinary buyers, produce representations of other cultures that are politically and culturally complex, and require constant renegotiation and re-examination. As such, folklorists are cultural brokers within this "world" marketplace. Some folklorists, such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), Richard Kurin (1997), and Robert Cantwell (1993), have usefully analyzed and critiqued their position in terms of cultural brokerage – the sale or representation of one culture to another. As brokers, folklorists recognize that they have positioned themselves as middlemen, claiming to be members of neither group and thus, implicitly, able to claim they are removed from the relations of power between groups. However, folklorists

are also consumers, taking in culture and cultural representations according to a value system historically based on authenticity. Claims of authenticity continue to influence how folklorists choose traditional arts grantees, fieldwork sites, and festival and market participants. This authenticity-based value system is clearly passed on through all of the media relating to non-Western crafts from *Borat* to Viva Terra item descriptions, to the brochure for the Santa Fe Market. In this final chapter, I implicate myself as a folklorist and a consumer. Only by recognizing our own complicit position as consumers, can we as folklorists begin to examine how our work reflects and helps to generate narratives of consumption, such as tourism, philanthropy, art, and authenticity. My goal is to initiate a conversation about how the field may ethically help serve the needs of non-western artisans without repeating the colonial tropes of previous generations.

A Note on Methodology

Folklore has tended to focus on the local and the oral; literature and discourse studies generally have centered on the written; material culture and art history examine the visual. Messages about meaning in contemporary American culture, however, are often dispersed in a mixture of forms which overlay, underpin, reference, and weave in and out of one another to build on and recreate cultural symbols. Although read through different senses or mental functions, these different media are consumed in concert. We are virtually bombarded by them from all quarters. As commodity scholar Ian Gordon has said about daily newspaper comic strips:

Comic strips convey their stories in several registers: the story in words, the story in pictures, the story of the words and the pictures, and stories that are embodied in the ungiven histories of the content and form. The

content of a given episode of a comic strip is shaped to some extent by its place in an unfolding and continuing narrative. (1998, 8)

What is true of the comic strip is true of most marketing generally but particularly true of the marketing of global crafts. Messages about culture, ethnicity, identity, peoples and places near and far are conveyed through both words and images, as well as the tensions and relationships between the two. Further, the blank spaces which are left between the words and images provide a productive space for the viewer and potential consumer to fill in not only “the ungiven histories of content and form” but the more crucial aspects of culture and power relations. Productions of meaning are also tempered by our own desires, beliefs, and understandings of the world. It is necessary, therefore, to forego some of the more traditional methodologies of the separate fields I invoke in favor of a more integrated approach. In order to gain an understanding of the concert of meanings that lie in the interstices between objects, images, language, makers, marketers, and buyers, requires (like the comics) both close reading of what is inside the frames and a larger awareness of the frame itself – the history of both the narrative unfolding and the form the narrative takes.

Folklore has long relied on the techniques of ethnography for its collection of data. In-depth interviews provide a chance for the folklorist and the person being interviewed to collaborate through conversation, to get beyond initial uncertainties and see the elements of folklore as they emerge in larger contexts. However, the folkloric interview process is also an unusual construction – most people do not sit around talking with recorders – and as folklorists and anthropologists know, the very constructedness of the event changes it. Participant-observation allows for a deeper understanding of process, e.g. not only learning how to make a felt rug but what it actually feels like to

make felt and to spend hours stitching it together, as well as the other events that take place during a specific process. Because the west is such a visually oriented culture, however, “measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown... a ‘semeiocracy’,” to favor the oral and the act of making over their textual representations and the act of showing would be to tell only part of a story (de Certeau 1984:xxi). Cultural studies and visual culture scholars tend to gather their information more from the cultural forms that are found throughout society: advertising, television shows, feature films, talk shows and newspapers. Yet, they may miss the meta-analysis which an emic participant may provide. These sources are all publicly available. For my work, all three of these methods were useful, and each provided a different insight into the work.

My fieldwork with members of the Kyrgyz women’s groups and marketers helped me to establish how these groups worked and how their goods came to be sold in the west. I made two fieldwork trips to Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 2005 and 2007, working with feltmakers in the capitol of Bishkek as well as in the towns of Bokonbaeovo and Kyyzyk Too (members of the Altyn Oimok women’s network), Kochkor (members of the Altyn Kol group), and Tamchy, as well as working with the staffs of the Central Asian Craft Support Association (CACSA) and Kyrgyz Style. The staff at Aid to Artisans in Connecticut, who had worked closely with CACSA, was also extremely generous with their time. I also traveled twice to the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, in July of 2007 and 2008, doing field research, participant observation, and short, informal interviews with organizers, artists, and attendees.

While fieldwork has informed my understanding of my subject, much of my research has had more in common with cultural studies than folklore, since I am

interested primarily in how westerners perceive and market Kyrgyz crafts. As a result, I have focused heavily on the representations of Central Asia, craft, and craft-based aid found in the west. In this sense, this work is more theoretically driven than applied. I have examined catalogues, websites, and images of Central Asia found throughout western culture to create an overall image of western notions of Central Asia. None of these methods alone could fulfill my purposes, however. I have, therefore, combined textual analysis, through the close reading of discourse and rhetoric (Chapters Two and Three), with the visual analysis of images (Chapter Three), as well as fieldwork yielding some individual interviews (Chapter Four) and a kind of participant observation (Chapters Four and Five). Each of these methods has helped to demonstrate what de Certeau calls “some of the strategic representations offered to the public” (1984, xxiii).

It is my hope that through revealing some of the assumptions and histories that are deployed in the marketing and consumption of traditional Kyrgyz crafts and some of the problematic constructions of culture that have been perpetuated through the marketing of crafts such as these, we can begin to move toward a more ethical system of global and cultural exchange and representation. This project offers one possibility for a folklore of the moment of exchange.

CHAPTER TWO

FOLLOWING THE SILK ROAD: AN ARMCHAIR ADVENTURER'S INTRODUCTION TO

VISUALIZING OTHERNESS AND CONSTRUCTING CENTRAL ASIA

The Silk Road was unquestionably humankind's mightiest river of commerce, ideas, and culture. The main Road branched off near Dunhuang, splitting north, where it skirted the Turfan Depression and the ultra-fierce Taklamakan Desert via the oases at the foot of the Tien Shan, the Mountains of Heaven. The southern route was in its turn watered by the oases of the Kun Lun, perhaps the least known of the world's great ranges. The two branches reunited at Kashgar but then threaded west into Persia and on to Europe, north into what is now Russia, and south into the Indian subcontinent, and each branch branched and braided, linking the boyars of old Rus with the mandarins of the Middle Kingdom and the sages of India with the emperors of Rome. Slowly, mysteriously, epically.

- Geographic Expeditions 2008

Vast and forbidding landscapes. Mountains and desert. The great empty spaces on old maps that lie unknowable between China and the Middle East. The only names thrillingly exotic – Samarkand and Alajabad. A caravan of camels laden with fine silks, walking in silhouette against a dimming sky. These are places where only the most intrepid of travelers go, including one of the most famous explorers of all – Marco Polo. Places where stories happen that seem more fantastic than real, including the stories of Polo himself. This travel brochure image of Central Asia is strikingly empty of people for an area described as “humankind's mightiest river of commerce, ideas, and culture.” If it were peopled, how would they be described? Men in long robes? Brigands on horseback with swords or perhaps Kalashnikov rifles? Small villages of people who appear timeless as they herd their sheep? Such images epitomize the west's romanticism of the Silk Road; and the Silk Road – slow, mysterious, and epic as the high end travel company

Geographic Expeditions makes clear – remains one of the most tenacious and pervasive symbols of Central Asia. In a western marketplace saturated with such fictional, fictionalized, and non-fiction representations of Central Asia, all of these representations build on and influence not only one another but the overall understanding of Central Asia that consumers, consciously or subconsciously, carry with them and bring to bear on their interactions with Kyrgyz art. Thus, to gain insight into how western consumers situate themselves in relation to the art objects they buy and display, this chapter seeks to address some of the major tropes proffered in western representations.

Most westerners never physically reach it, but Central Asia and the Silk Road are encapsulated in western imagination as an empty, exotic, and crucially historical place, a space in which westerners live out adventures which have little or nothing to do with the local populations. When Central Asia is depicted in the modern era by western media, these images of a tabula rasa available for western fantasy become distended through both historical and modern political relations. Employing rhetorics from colonialism, the Great Game, and the Cold War, western mass media depicts a Central Asia still empty and available for western adventurism, but one that is also populated by a poor and misguided people, duped by their leaders and held back by their own tribalism. The overlay of modern political thought and global consciousness has meant not an abandonment of the region by adventuring westerners but rather its repositioning as a new cause célèbre, as a region in desperate need of western aid and development. The modern western depiction of Central Asia bears a close semblance to historical ones, and in none of them are the many different peoples and cultures of Central Asia differentiated.

Such descriptions, as the one appearing in the Geographic Expeditions catalogue cited above, serve as a kind of mapping – locating the unknown and placing it within the boundaries of the known. As in the tour brochure description, place names and imagery work together to call to mind a set of associations which, in this case, evoke antiquity, emptiness, and romanticism. This same tour company featured sparsely drawn maps in black on faux vellum, brown-marbled backgrounds in their catalogues, marking only those places to which the tour would go, emphasizing the connection between tourists and early explorers. Cultural theorist Mary Louise Pratt has remarked that mapping was one of the first stages of colonialism as it pushed beyond the coastal edges of land into the interior as European explorers sought to catalogue and claim what they found there following science’s new taxonomic systems (1992, 29). Just as the explorer and the tourist fill in the empty space of the map with drawings and snapshots of important sights and landmarks, so do I intend to follow a similar process of mapping a few of the more omnipresent tropes associated with Central Asia in the western mind.

In this chapter, I hope to examine some of the important cultural landmarks, the iconic images, that denote Central Asia and Central Asian-ness in western society, following the dominant threads as a kind of tourist to my own culture in a similar manner to how the western tourist follows the Silk Road through Central Asia. To give a comprehensive view of the changing and conflicting forms that Central Asia has taken in the western imagination would be a project in itself. Instead, I am interested in the most recurring, most dominant tropes, the ones encountered again and again on a daily basis, for these are the tropes which everyone in the marketplace must confront on some level – the images that marketers deploy; shoppers, consciously or unconsciously, engage with

and buy into; and artists negotiate. As David Spurr states: “There is nothing especially conscious or intentional in their use; they are part of the landscape in which relations of power manifest themselves” (1993, 3). In a marketplace saturated with representations that run the gamut from completely fictionalized to completely factual, scholars need to recognize that all of these representations build on and influence not only one another but the overall understanding of Central Asia that audiences, consciously or subconsciously, carry with them and bring to bear on their interactions with Kyrgyz art. In order to understand how craft-based aid, art markets such as Santa Fe, and scholars all work to intervene in cross-cultural understanding and mediate the relationship between Central Asian makers and western consumers, it is first necessary to understand what these mediators are intervening *in*.

Mass and popular media give western audiences a set of signs which come to define not only a place but the people within it; these signs are then used as a symbolic shorthand for complex historical, political, and cultural relationships that are elided, and often forgotten, in the understandings of the audiences themselves. This concept of signs and their relationship to meanings is fairly basic semiotics, but in dealing with larger cultural signs deployed and consumed as part of a global, cross-cultural marketplace, the connection between the sign and what it signifies are much more complex and overdetermined than they might otherwise be. Because of this, it can be more useful to think of signs not in Saussure’s semiotic terms of the linguistically bound sign but rather return to John of Damascus’s conception of icons as “visible things [that] are images of invisible and intangible things, on which they throw a faint light” (*On Holy Images*) or Charles Sanders Peirce’s definition of a symbol as a sign which “is connected with its

object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind” (1960, 168-9). For Peirce, the icon and the symbol are both types of sign, which he describes “anything which determines something else” (1960, 169) or as Dean MacCannell restates it, something which “represents something to someone” (1989, 109). While Peirce’s icon displays a more direct correlation between the object and its referent (the signified and the signifier), the symbol, like Damascus’s icon, contains both this immediate association as well as the much larger cultural associations and ideas⁸.

To understand how buyers approach and think about Kyrgyz art works, then, we must first understand the specific semiotic system in which those works are consumed. Seeking out and defining some of the aspects of this larger system is all the more important because their influence on the buyer or viewer is so subconscious. As art historian Ernest Panofsky states: “But that we grasp these qualities in the fraction of a second and almost automatically, must not induce us to believe that we could ever give correct pre-iconographical description of a work of art without having divined, as it were, its historical ‘*locus*.’” (1962, 11). In other words, we are so steeped in the semiotic system in which we live and communicate, according to Panofsky, that we run the risk of dismissing both the historical and cultural basis of our own readings and judgments of what we see and the historical and cultural specificity of the objects we look upon. While

⁸ This figuring of the icon and the symbol offers multiple possibilities here. First it allows for an entire set of images and words to all reference the same signified idea. Second, the idea of one culture held by another culture is inherently invisible, intangible, and more importantly unstable, being both contradictory and dependent upon ever-updating global relations and political events as well as culturally-based understandings of mutual histories. Thus the icon is able to provide a visible and recognizable reference point which does not define its object, as it is transient, but rather points towards it without defining it. Because of its modern use in technology and its implication of both visual and linguistic components, I have chosen here to use the icon, in Damascus’ sense, interchangeably with the symbol, in Peirce’s. Further, there are places in which I have employed the term trope, as an icon that can include a narrative component.

scholars from both Kyrgyzstan and the west have analyzed Kyrgyz felt rugs according to the latter, the former has been largely neglected. Yet, when Kyrgyz felt is sold in the west, the “historical ‘locus’” is not Kyrgyzstan but the west itself⁹. Thus, this study lays bare some of the semiotic system that allows western buyers of Kyrgyz felt to make assumptions about both the felt and its makers “automatically.”

This first chapter, then, explores the foundation of western representations of Central Asia. What are the icons of Central Asia in the popular media? How do these images construct a Central Asia that simultaneously offers the region as a site of tourism and the people as in need of aid? It should be noted, however, that this is not intended as a complete or comprehensive view. Instead, it is a set of tourist’s snapshots of some of the most iconic and most repeated tropes used in the west to depict Central Asia. It is also an exploration into how these iconic images replicated tropes of colonialist rhetoric, such as surveillance and appropriation, negation and debasement as described by David Spurr (1993).

I begin with simply questioning the general western response to the name of any country whose name ends in the syllable “-stan” (which could be glossed as the equivalent of the English “-ia” in Virginia and Georgia or the town ending -burg), demonstrating through a catalogue of its uses in contemporary media how this syllabic ending has been co-opted by the west to evoke a particular kind of lawless, unfathomable place. For this analysis, I turn to the daily comics *Doonesbury* and *Brenda Starr* to explore how these comic strips’ authors have used readers’ associations of countries with

⁹ Much work has already been done on analyzing the system in which they are produced, and to repeat such work here would only serve to bolster the argument that authenticity is an ethnographic object’s most important center of value.

a “-stan” to construct locations for their characters that perpetuate these tropes of debasement, represented as corruption and brutality, in the case of *Doonesbury*, and an empty space in which westerners live out their own adventures following the trope of negation, in the case of *Brenda Starr*. Finally, I turn to Hollywood film generally, to investigate how Central Asia has been strikingly absent until recently, and to the film *Borat* specifically, to reveal the power of popular media to first negate and then appropriate an entire country and people for its own purposes and of audiences to simultaneously absorb those images and dismiss their importance. These snapshots contain western culture’s constructions of Central Asia, particularly as it has been constructed touristically and politically, interposed with the ways in which tourism underwrites those constructions, as a way of filling in some of the lines of thought in a cultural map. Like pictures from an exotic vacation, such snapshots require that I as a writer and you as a reader take on the gaze of a tourist in part to examine how Central Asia is being offered up in the west for consumption through just such a gaze.

The Logic of Tourism and the Touristic Gaze

When we ‘go away’ we look at the environment with interest and curiosity. It speaks to us in ways we appreciate, or at least we anticipate that it will do so. In other words, we gaze at what we encounter. And this gaze is as socially organized and systematized as is the gaze of the medic.

John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*

Central Asia draws particular kinds of tourists – some under the romanticism of its distant history and the Silk Road, some fascinated by the recent past of the Soviet Union, but most seem to be searching for the mysterious and unexplored. Tourism sits at

the heart of many of the west's interactions with other cultures. It is through tourism that many westerners first come into contact with other cultures – whether they travel to them or read about them in travel writings and adventure narratives set in far away lands. As such, the approach of many westerners to other cultures relies on the logic and structures of tourism to make sense of the encounter. The touristic gaze – a socially organized, simultaneous process of seeing and consuming – becomes a strategy for dealing with the dissonance created through cross-cultural encounter and mediating the loss caused by modern life. For the tourist is first and foremost a seeing man, a seemingly innocent bystander “whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (Pratt 1992, 7). Tourism has long been a site of conflicting and often subconscious desires that invoke our ideas of Otherness, nostalgia and loss, and consumption; and sites of tourism function as liminal spaces or border zones for the tourists who visit them, places where they believe “anything can happen” and are simultaneously afraid that anything will.

Tourism scholars have long posited that tourists, as we typically conceive of them – the camera-laden white middle-class travelers, guidebook in hand, checking off a list of destinations¹⁰ – is one outcome of a modernity (MacCannell 1989). Dean MacCannell defines the tourist in two ways: as a sightseer, “mainly middle-class, who [is] at this moment deployed throughout the entire world in search of experience” and as a model for “modern-man-in-general” (1989, 1). The second functions as a larger metaphorical application of the first, but what is primarily inherent in both depictions is the performance of tourism by consuming through gazing. Building on of Foucault's

¹⁰ MacCannell and Urry both developed their ideas about tourism and the tourist with specific reference to Americans of the mid-twentieth century, and much of tourism studies have followed this construction of the tourist. It would be interesting to see how tourism has (or has not) changed as tourists themselves have become a more diverse group.

description of the medical gaze, John Urry describes the tourist gaze as the process of looking at new surroundings “with interest and curiosity” in a way that “is as socially organized and systematized as is the gaze of the medic” (1990, 1). The tourist, therefore, engages in a form of active seeing that is socially and culturally determined, i.e. a tourist sees differently from an inspector (although, as I will argue later, the tourist’s gaze does have something in common with the folklorist’s). In part, this consuming gaze is predicated on Euro-American colonial projects and paradigms; in part, it is also a perceived remedy for a perceived loss.

According to some cultural theorists, the tourist suffers from a sense of loss of authenticity and naturalness resulting from the fragmentation of modern, post-industrial life¹¹ and the sense that modern experience is, by its nature, mediated. The loss of authenticity is manifested in nostalgia for a simpler past which can only be found in an Other culture in an Other place. As bell hooks describes, the Other is both pre-modern and uncivilized, and thus still whole and still experiencing life authentically.

...Foucault voices a dilemma felt by many in the west. It is precisely that longing for *the* pleasure that has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the “primitive” and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility. (hooks 1992, 27, italics in original)

The search for pleasure, in Foucault’s terms, equates to a search for completeness similar to the loss of power described above. The desire is to obtain pleasure and general well being by making up for the perceived loss through a return to a simplified past,

¹¹ While tourism is certainly not a purely modern phenomenon, its purpose and meanings have adapted and responded to modernity. Some studies suggest that tourism is as old as travel itself. Particularly compelling arguments compare the Medieval pilgrim to the tourist and some of the discussions of Marco Polo as a primarily a travel writer.

particularly when embodied in modern tourism by the country “off the beaten track”, for example, Kyrgyzstan.

Crucially, the western tourist equates pre-modern with pre-contact, implying a kind of impossible “cultural purity.” The modern tourist can only experience this assumption of “authenticity” through proxy – another culture, another place, or another person. Within such a construction, crafts which are local to the tourist’s destination become a sign both of the destination itself and of the tourist’s nostalgia for what they view as pre-modern, thus authentic, occupations – a signifying practice that Susan Stewart refers to as “authenticat[ing] the past and discredit[ing] the present” (MacCannell 1989, 53 and 109; Stewart 1993, 135-139). As hooks points out, the natural source of pleasure becomes the primitive, drawing on a connection between pleasure and the past, thus situating this pleasure in the Other, who has remained whole.

Yet the portrayal of a deep connection with nature and the “intuition” that guided these ancient healers to the right plants are not unique to these past civilizations; they also apply to contemporary cultures that are believed to be closer to nature by virtue of their distance from Western centers of power and from Western cultural norms. (Lau 2000, 7)

Places like Kyrgyzstan become epicenters of completeness, spiritually and physically, in part simply because they are not western. One method for remedying a sense of loss is through travel, whether physically by actually visiting other places or virtually by reading about them or consuming images or objects from them.

The loss of naturalness is further connected to a perceived loss of masculinity in the face of the perceived feminizing influence of existing within a “civilized” western

society¹². As Cynthia Enloe points out, “[masculinity] and exploration [are] as tightly woven together as masculinity and soldiering” (1989, 23); thus to escape one’s everyday life, whether through physical or virtual tourism¹³, is to escape a form of social castration, a smothering by social niceties. To travel, even if only in the mind, becomes a chance to escape such emasculation¹⁴ and exert control over something through the acquisition of knowledge – in the case of the tourist, another culture. The tourist thus becomes an “anti-hero” in Mary Louise Pratt’s terminology of anti-conquest:

...by which I refer to the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony. (Pratt 1992, 7)

Although Pratt is speaking primarily about explorers and natural historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the idea is well suited to dealing with tourism and

¹² The relationship between gender and civilization, on one hand, and gender and nature, on the other, is complex. Pratt and Enloe, among others, connect civilization to the feminine while portraying the natural world as the sphere of men. This construction, however, should not be understood as equating nature itself with masculinity. As McClintock makes clear, nature is also feminine – available for exploration, consumption, and exploitation by men. Because nature is feminine, *only* men are able to “tame” and “civilize” it in a heterosexual paradigm. However, once the *act* of civilization is accomplished (as it is considered to have been in the west for millennia), then there remains nothing left for men to do and civilization itself becomes both feminized and feminizing. Underlying this is a binary that makes men inherently active and the feminine inherently passive.

¹³ I discuss virtual or armchair tourism in more depth below. It is not, I believe, necessary for a tourist to actually leave home in order to utilize a touristic gaze, as the ongoing popularity of *National Geographic*, both the magazine and the cable television channel (with its Culture Shock special series), demonstrate. Especially with the advent of the internet, gazing on and consuming images of the Other is easier than ever before, and virtual tourism has the added benefit of not requiring any hardship on the part of the tourist. Indeed, it could be said to be even more empowering, since the tourist can now survey without the object of his surveillance being aware, like the guard in the center of the panopticon.

¹⁴ Most of the buyers of Kyrgyz felt, and indeed most global ethnic crafts, are women not men. Thus to what extent they are truly suffering castration anxiety is questionable. However, two issues assert themselves: first, the western women who buy global art are not, on the whole, buying items that hold prestige in the western canon, instead they are buying objects that are more closely associated with the artistic media and genres historically allotted to women, such as textiles and objects for the home, as I discuss in more detail in chapter three. Secondly, according to Pratt, the construction of the male west in contrast to the female “rest” holds irregardless of whether the tourist is male or female. This suggests an interesting spectrum of male- to female-ness, on which the East is always already more feminized than anyone from the west, and, as I will discuss in chapter two, may provide a place for western women to acquire and hold phallic power that they would be either denied or denigrated for at home.

folklore in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This claim to innocence in the course of exploration and travel is most obvious in the use of the scientific exploration and the civilizing mission – the “White Man’s Burden.” The desire for knowledge or the desire to help provide the traveler with a *raison d’être* that masks the heavily gendered constructions of traveler and place of exploration, what Anne McClintock refers to as the pornotropics, that undergird exploration stories from H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* to the *Indiana Jones* trilogy (1995). According to Mary Louise Pratt, this gendered positioning occurs even when the traveler is female, since the female traveler has often been cast as the “Spinster Adventuress,” who is removed from and somehow implicitly unfit for the traditional western female roles associated with the home (1992, 177). Travel, then, allows the tourist to exert his masculinity not only by removing the feminizing influence of western society but also by contrasting the masculine traveler to the feminized rest of the world (Said 1977). This process of meaning making, the strategy of looking at the world from the position of the western tourist, reveals a desire to create Central Asia through the tropes of orientalism, which are in turn embodied by Kyrgyz art. The question remains of where the westerner absorbs these tropes in the first place.

What It Means to Be a “–Stan”: Central Asia in Popular Media

In the west, mass media and popular culture often provide many people’s first glimpse at cultures different from their own, particularly those in distant parts of the world. Thus films, television, newspapers, and books determine the shape and timbre of westerners encounters other cultures, and through these media sources, many people

begin to construct what can be a misguided understanding of the relationships between those cultures and their own. These ideas can become unconsciously solidified into an individual's notion of what a culture or country "really is" even though they may be based on partial or heavily biased understandings of history, politics, and global power structures, on the one hand, or even completely fictional portrayals of other places and peoples, on the other. For the media consumer, fact and fiction can blend together with belief and conceptions of self to create powerfully, yet often unwittingly, held constructs of others.

As part of mass media, these images are consumed passively. They do not need to be specially sought out, but rather they pervade daily life both overtly through titles, locations, and direct engagement and much more subtly through the use of symbolic and iconographic tropes which may provide little more than nuance to a more complex image. Nor do they require an active response on the part of the audience beyond their initial consumption. Because they exist on this subconscious level in western culture, popular and mass media images and narratives are perhaps more influential in terms of how westerners construct Central Asia in their worldview than the more direct and, supposedly, balanced¹⁵ information provided by news agencies and specialist media, such as academic studies of a region or documentaries and films from that region¹⁶.

¹⁵ I am including news agencies here in a broad sense, since they are seen by many westerners as being sources of the truth, despite recent debates surrounding both the inherent bias of the media and the political leanings of specific American news services. Thus my use of the term "balanced" is somewhat tongue in cheek, as the notoriously conservative leaning Fox News espoused the phrase "fair and balanced" in the early 2000s as their tag line. I chose this specific term with its associations to draw the ultimate truth, in the sense of a singular, indisputable reality, of all of these sources into question. Longer and more in depth discussions and debates about the usefulness and existence of a singular truth as opposed to a set of interlocking relative truths can be found in other works.

¹⁶ It should be noted that these forms also carry their inherent biases and problems, the least of which may be many westerners desire to see anthropological study as portraying a singular Truth (an idea debated in

For Central Asia, many of the historic, cultural, and political notions which westerners hold about the area are subsumed under the now iconic country name ending, “–stan.” Taken from the ends of seven Central Asian countries, “–stan” has been appropriated by western media as a way to simultaneously indicate a specific part of the world and more broadly to reference a set of western assumptions about the region. Exploring what the west means when it employs “–stan” provides a glimpse at a Central Asia defined by exoticism, eroticism, extremism, violence, chaos, and ultimately pure unknowability.

Before I left for my first trip to Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2005, the most common first question I was asked by friends and relatives regarding my trip was “Where is that?” The easiest answer became a quick course in relative geography: “Two countries north of India, due west of China, south of Siberia (sort of, part of it anyway). Go to Afghanistan and go east (well, northeast) two countries.” The last sentence worked the best. My recitation of such facts made me conscious of the inadequacies of these markers, however. After all, Kyrgyzstan is a relatively small country, while India, China, and Siberia are all quite large. In listing them, I covered so much land that all I effectively established was that Kyrgyzstan was in the continent of Asia, in those spaces that are often ignored between these large powers. The American public is notoriously weak on geography but most people felt comfortable placing Kyrgyzstan next to someplace else ending in “–stan,” even if they were unsure what was north of India or west of China.

Afghanistan was also useful since many westerners seen relatively recent outlines of it on

both Anthropology and Folklore), and for both mainstream and academic audiences to believe in the inherent authenticity, again with its associations of Truth, of the portrayal of a place or culture by its members. This latter idea can be found debated in many an introduction to Folklore classroom in discussions regarding the comparative abilities of an emic versus an etic folklorist.

the nightly news during the American war against the Taliban. While that war has since been replaced by the war in Iraq, the two are connected in the American news reports. But this process of mapping, and how I constructed that map to friends and family, prompted the next question. “It’s north of India” led to “Near Nepal?” or “Will it be cold?” Not especially. “South of Siberia” brought “So it was Soviet? Do the Russians control it?” Yes, it was Soviet, no the Kyrgyz people, as they are defined nationally rather than ethnically, control it. “It’s west of China” solicited the enigmatic “oh” – it was not until later that I began to wonder if China was so east within the American sense of the world, the Far East itself, that the use of west in the same sentence caused confusion. After all, if China is the Far East, isn’t everything “west of China”? And while situating Kyrgyzstan in relation to Afghanistan seemed to give my listeners the most comfort in their idea of where the country was, it also brought the most troubling and most inevitable follow-up questions: “Will you be safe? Are they extremists? Will you have to wear a veil?”¹⁷

The suspicious associations with the ending “-stan” are so ingrained, especially following the war in Afghanistan, that to affix it to any word is to call into being a host of assumptions. The ending itself is innocuous. Like many such place name endings, a “-stan” literally is “a place” from an archaic Indo-Iranian root, thus Kyrgyzstan is the place of the Kyrgyz. The word appears to be related to the Indo-European root word -sta-,

¹⁷ My answers to these questions varied from the factual to the reassuring to the dismissive or even flippant depending on my audience, but they can be summed up this way: Yes, I will be safe, even though I may not always feel like I am, just like traveling anywhere. There are some Muslim fundamentalists there, just as there Christian fundamentalists here, but I will be in the north, which tends to be less conservative. Only if I go visit one of the Russian Orthodox churches where women are expected to cover their heads will I have to cover my own. I received the same questions before my second trip two years later and tended to modify the last answer to explain that I had never seen women in burqas in Kyrgyzstan but some do cover if they so choose, and many married Kyrgyz women, especially outside the cities wear floral head scarves that cover their hair but tie them at the back or the neck.

meaning “a place where something stands,” and is found in English names like Hampstead (Bartleby.com Inc.). A “-stan” in western imagination, however, is not so prosaic. It is a mysterious and exotic place at the far end of the earth from the United States, possibly war torn, and probably Muslim, although to what degree this is a religious, cultural, or even historic designation is negotiable. A “-stan” can be any number of real or imagined countries, so long as they conform to either a linguistic rule of having a name ending with the appropriate syllable or to a more free floating symbolic rule of conforming to western stereotypes. Further, “the stans” serves as a collective proper noun indicating the entirety of Central Asia, as well as parts of the Middle East as required by the point being made. Thus someone taking an online geography quiz commented that she was “had no mistakes, none, until I started doing the stans. Stupid stans.”¹⁸ The remark sums up much of American knowledge about Central Asia (sparse) as well as a more general sense (even among those who consider themselves worldly and culturally sensitive) that Central Asia is simply an unknowable territory inhabited by people so foreign as to be indistinguishable from one another.¹⁹ The region has developed its own character within the American mindset as to achieve personification. Indeed, the geographical ignorance of the general public combined with the mysteriousness and promise of adventure suggested by travel to a “-stan,” prompted one friend to tease that I

¹⁸ This comment was sent to me by a friend who found it posted on another friend’s Facebook page. The geography quiz can be found at http://www.rethinkingschools.org/just_fun/games/mapgame.html.

¹⁹ More subtly, I believe this also betrays an unspoken American belief that the inhabitants of Central Asia are being inscrutable on purpose just to frustrate westerners and be obtuse. This idea is upheld by serious comments overheard at the American Folklore Society’s 2007 annual meeting in Quebec City complaining about not only presentations in French at the meeting but even the general population’s speaking of French. It should not be assumed that this is a purely American trait, however. Agatha Christie defined her Belgian detective Hercule Poirot to British characters and audiences alike largely by reference to his “foreignness.”

was not, in fact, going anywhere during my last trip to Kyrgyzstan but rather having a love affair with a man named Stan.

The “—stan” ending has been heavily appropriated in the west, usually in ways meant to satirize Central Asia, draw attention to perceived problems there or between Central Asian countries and the west, or to evoke typical western associations of exoticism, lawlessness, and emptiness. The list of fictional “—stans” is quite long, from the early Ardistan from a nineteenth-century romantic adventure novel by Karl May to the video game countries of Zekistan and Adjikistan to several filmic nations, including Bazrakistan from the 1998 *Act of War* (Lee), Kreplachistan appearing in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Roach 1999), and the recent satire on the Bush administration’s wars *War, Inc.* (Seftel 2008) set in Turaqistan. Even the beloved 1950s television show, *I Love Lucy*, made use of the land of Franistan. The political satire paper *The Onion* has made use of Ethniclashistan and Nukhavastan, while conservative Melanie Phillips’ *Londonistan* presents the dangers of immigration (particularly by Muslims) in present day Britain. The region has also been collectively referred to as Trashcanistan, a term that seems to have been coined by Steven Kotkin, from Princeton University’s Russian Studies department, writing in *The New Statesman* in 2002 but seems to have been adopted more widely on the internet and among the US military. Although Kotkin used the name to indicate the after effects of the Soviet Union’s control of the region and then dissolution, it has been defined online at Urban Dictionary as anywhere “you cannot pronounce the country’s name” and “hate America” (Urban Dictionary 2009). As can be seen, whatever lies before the “—stan” is meant to betray the country’s character, almost exclusively negative. The meanings implied by the use of “—stan,” therefore, run the

gamut from the merely exotic to outright dangerous, but throughout them all, a sense of unknowability and potential chaos pervades.

As can be seen in the preceding examples, what it means for a nation or people to be subsumed under “-stan” carries with it a network of “intrinsic meaning” that both draws on western relations with and expectations of Central Asia while schooling westerners in what these relations should look like (Panofsky 1962, 7). The specific nuances of the icons used to depict Central Asia depend largely on the purposes of the western writers, artists, and media producers who help to construct them in conjunction with the global and political understandings and biases of their western audiences.²⁰ The ending “-stan” on any country’s name has become a sign for a whole system of interlocking, though at times contradictory, assumptions and attitudes which are particular to western mass culture at this moment in history, and the historic specificity of this system is crucial. As Roland Barthes says about the photograph generally:

Its signs are gestures, attitudes, expressions, colours or effects, endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practice of a certain society: the link between signifier and signified remains if not unmotivated, at least entirely historical. Hence it is wrong to say that modern man projects into reading photographs feelings and values which are characterial or ‘eternal’. Unless it be firmly specified that *signification* is always developed by a given society and history. (1977, 27)

The western symbol of Central Asia has changed tremendously during the past two decades. Once connected firmly to the Soviet Union, the region was once constructed in the west as a Russian frontier²¹ firmly held by the Soviets and largely empty except for

²⁰ I will discuss the extent to which the “-stans” are a product of the West in more detail later in this chapter.

²¹ Central Asia was also constructed in Soviet Russia as a frontier, to such an extent that a genre of 1960s Soviet films built on the tropes of the Hollywood Western but with Russian heroes and advancing Soviet politics and agendas were set in Central Asia.

missile bases and army training camps. Pre-Soviet images of Central Asia center largely on the romantic Silk Road images of the tourism brochure quoted at the beginning of this chapter, hinting at the archeological treasures to be found along its route by adventurous white men and referencing the long bygone glories and horrors of the two empires associated with the Asian steppes – Attila the Hun’s in the fifth century CE (which was ironically not Central Asian but Middle Eastern and Balkan in origin) and Genghis Khan’s in the early thirteenth. Even if British, these images also may reference the Afghan wars and the Great Game of the nineteenth century.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the west suddenly found itself confronted with a set of new nations, which were too geographically distant to give much thought to, especially in comparison to the host of newly independent nations in Eastern Europe and along the Baltic Sea. All that remained in western constructions was a combination of early romance and emptiness coupled with the kind of rural poverty and close familial relationships that sparked local and regional violence associated with parts of Eastern Europe, primarily the Balkans. Following the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks and the United States involvement with war in Afghanistan, western interest in the region increased but this single “–stan” in the southwestern corner became the archetypal “–stan.” All of these associations now combine and compete in the western construction of Central Asia, with elements deployed or ignored as required by the producers. Thus Central Asia as a symbol has gone from being primarily a place of masculine romantic colonial adventure, as we will see in the *Brenda Starr* example discussed below, to include a people beset with political corruption and mired in hopeless poverty, backwardness, and violence, as depicted in both *Doonesbury* and *Borat*. Where

these symbols appear most consistently and reflectively in daily American life is in the comics as they “mirror, . . . manipulate and exploit the American subconscious”

(Reitberger and Fuchs 1972, 7).

Lost in Kazookistan: Representations of Central Asia in Western Comics

Comics, together with the other mass media, are a substitute for genuine folklore and culture and have developed into a self-perpetuating institution, an integral part of the American Way of Life. Of all the mass media, comics mirror the American Collective Subconscious most faithfully, and we know, without McLuhan having to tell us, that comics in turn manipulate and exploit the subconscious.

- Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*.

In terms of iconic imagery, comics, particularly syndicated daily strips rather than graphic novels²², are reliant on using the most blatant symbols to get across their messages effectively given their small format and often black and white printing. Much has been written on the importance of the comics as a reflector of the American psyche and culture from both the cultural perspective, by Thomas Inge and Ian Gordon among others, and the art historical perspective, by Judith O’Sullivan. Folklore as a field has not

²² Daily strips and graphic novels both rely on clear symbolism, but my suggestion that the daily strip has some special considerations results from not only their distribution but also their audience. The daily strip has relatively small amount of space in which to advance the plot and keep the reader’s interest from day to day while ensuring that major events only come every seventh strip – in the larger space allotted to the special Sunday comics section. During the week, the strip must provide enough interest to keep the audience’s attention – often by elaborating details from the previous Sunday or even replaying them in a shortened form on Monday for those who only receive the weekday paper. The audience thus interacts with the strip very differently than they would a graphic novel, which is typically run in a 32 page format as a series or as a final book-length novel, giving the artists more freedom in how they pace their plotlines and images. Another difference in the audience is also crucial here: the comics-reader of the daily paper has paid for a newspaper with its multiple different sections while the graphic novel-reader has paid for a specific graphic novel. The daily paper reader, therefore, may have bought the paper for news, sports, business information, or to scan the classifieds; the comics are an added bonus and are considered as entertainment by the newspaper companies (note that in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch they appear under the Entertainment section of the paper’s website and as the last two pages of the “Everyday” section while papers that are seen as more serious and national, such as The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times, do not include comic strips at all, only editorial cartoons).

engaged much with comics, but exceptions do exist. For example, Ellen Rhoads, writing in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1973, compared the functions of the daily strip “Little Orphan Annie” to mythology as a form of modern American folklore that mediated the contradictions of everyday life (thus employing Levi-Strauss’s definition of mythology) (1973, 346). Rhoads work suggests that what Reitberger and Fuchs saw as a “substitute for genuine folklore” (thereby solidifying comics as “low art” at the very same time they are trying to draw attention to the importance of the medium²³) nonetheless functions like folklore within American culture. As Rhoads discovered, comics, though produced by a few and distributed to many by means of mass reproduction, may not fit within most definitions of folklore – they are not “spoken or sung traditions” (Dorson), it is questionable whether comics are “traditional, unofficial, [or] non-institutional” (Brunvand), and while they are certainly “artistic communication” they reach groups which can hardly be described as “small” (Ben-Amos).²⁴ Comics do, however, communicate, educate, entertain, and remind their readers of the social mores of society, and they do so through the use of icons which both reflect and influence the ways in which that society envisions the world. Because of these functions, and because

²³ The distinction between high art and low art and its repercussions will be dealt with more deeply in chapter three. Here, it is enough to say that within an Arnoldian view of culture, art should display the pursuit of excellence as determined by western standards of taste. This understanding of art separates high art, the unique product of an individual genius, from low art, as represented by mass media. This hierarchy has historically been used strategically (and often unwittingly) to disenfranchise artists of non-western ethnicities, as well as women, non-whites, and artists from lower socio-economic status.

²⁴ The definition of folklore has changed radically over time. These three definitions are some of the most common currently used in the field. According to Richard Dorson, “In the United States, folklore has customarily meant the spoken and sung traditions” (1959). The connection between folklore and tradition has been persistent and remains in the current definition put forth by the American Folklore Society as well as in Jan Brunvand’s 1986 introductory folklore text definition: “Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, noninstitutional part of culture that encompasses all knowledge...transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples.” In 1971, Dan Ben-Amos offered the broadest definitions of folklore: “artistic communication in small groups.”

the daily comics have such a broad reach throughout American society and are consumed alongside the morning news, the “funny pages” provide a good starting point for investigating the symbols used to represent a country ending in “–stan” and the meanings the readers are expected to fill in to the spaces between the panels.

One of the more prominent uses of the “–stan” ending in modern comics was by *The New Yorker* on their December 10th, 2001 cover depicting “New Yorkistan.”²⁵ The image shows a roughly drawn and hand lettered map of New York City, divided by colored areas into boroughs which are subdivided by black lines into regions. Each of the smaller areas are labeled using a combination of names poking fun at the residents of each area with spellings and endings drawn from Central Asian place names, or at least the perception of them. Thus, Manhattan features the regions of Pashmina and Botoxia corresponding roughly to the Upper East Side, the Bronx has become Bronxistan, and Queens sports possibly the most problematic assortment of names. These include Kvetchnya, Lubavistan, Irate and Irant in the traditionally Jewish areas; Hiphopabad and simply Bad (played off against the more northerly Veryverybad) in the traditionally African-American neighborhoods and areas called Youdontunderstandistan, Wretched Kurz, and even Spit. One area of Queens is labeled Extra Stan, while Staten Island is simply labeled Stan over a sketch of a camel. Clearly the idea is to poke fun at New York itself and the cultural and ethnic associations of its different neighborhoods. The spellings of the names, particularly the repeated uses of the endings “–bad” and “–stan” and the

²⁵ This is hardly the only use of –stan or other seemingly regional endings or depictions of Central Asia in political and satirical cartoons. Especially with the US involvement with Afghanistan dating back to the 1970s, hallmarks of Central Asian-ness including veiled women, arid mountain landscapes, camels, and minarets, many of which conflate Central Asia with the Arab Middle East, have appeared in a multitude of comics. I chose to focus on this *New Yorker* cover because of its explicit use of language and the ending –stan to comment on the regionalism of New York City.

addition of the letters k, z, and h, as in the Queens district of Kkhkhzks, in combination with the image of the camel, complete the connection to Central Asia. The question, then, remains: what were the artists were trying to say about Manhattan by using Central Asian-esque nomenclature? Given the typical associations of Central Asia, it seems most likely that they are employing the comparisons in order to highlight New Yorkers “tribalism” – their at times fierce pride in their own neighborhood, assumptions about other parts of the city, and willingness to argue the comparative superiority of regions with each other. While New York is certainly a well known city, by applying “–stan” to it, it becomes immediately less so, implying that to really understand it, one must be an insider, as presumably the artists are, and to travel there is to incur risks as one might be simply looking for Central Parkmenistan but end up among the Khouks.

By the summer of 2008, at least two nationally syndicated comic strips had moved some or all of their action to fictitious countries ending in “–stan”: “Doonesbury” and “Brenda Starr.” These strips were not the first comics to enter the “–stans.” The Disney comic book series “Uncle Scrooge” featured Howduyustan, and several “–stans” have appeared in Japanese comics, proving that the appropriation of the ending is by no means only a western trope. “Doonebury” and “Brenda Starr,” however, with their wide syndication and engagement with contemporary issues are notable for marking a growing awareness of Central Asia in the United States. Both strips are serials, featuring lengthy storylines set into larger narrative arcs spanning decades of time. Both are set in the present day and react to and comment on recent trends and politics, although to differing degrees. “Doonesbury,” by Gary Trudeau, is politically minded, satirizing the American culture and more often American politics through a cast of recurring characters, each with

their own storylines. The strip has one of the largest readerships of any politically oriented cartoon, appearing in over 1500 daily and Sunday newspapers as well as on several online comics sites; it's book-form collections top 60 million copies; and Trudeau is the first comic strip artist ever to win a Pulitzer prize (Andrews McMeel Universal). The strip follows real time, and a set of National Guard and regular Army soldiers are part of the normal cast. Trudeau duly sent his troops off to war in Afghanistan and Iraq immediately following US military action in these countries. While Afghanistan and Iraq appear as part of Trudeau's ongoing descriptions of soldiers' experiences and engagement with the wars, a third country, called Berzerkistan, made its appearance during the occupation following the invasion of Afghanistan.

Berzerkistan is clearly linked to the region of the wars, specifically Iraq, through the arid landscape and more particularly the men's wearing of robes and references to extermination of the Kurdish population. That said, however, the strip also uses Berzerkistan as a stand-in for other Central Asian countries, mostly to point out the problems with their leadership. For example, one set of strips deal with the country's leader having renamed the months of the year and days of the week after himself, referencing a similar move by the leader of Turkmenistan. The name Berzerkistan itself is both notable and obvious: the fictitious country is deemed crazy and out of control, in spite and perhaps because of its authoritarian leadership. Yet despite being overt, the country's name extends its mantle to all of Central Asia through its use of the ubiquitous "-stan" ending, implying that the adjective "berserk" could be applied to any "-stan." While the imagery of the strip links the country to Iraq and Afghanistan, more Middle Eastern than Central Asian, the use of "-stan" broadens the scope and creates for the

large readership an association between genocidal authoritarianism and most anywhere with the “-stan” moniker. “Doonesbury” is popular enough that upon my stating that my work deals with crafts from Kyrgyzstan, I have been met multiple times by the question, “Anything like Berzerkistan?”

Most of the storylines set in Berzerkistan depict its leadership in their interactions with the strip’s most sleazy recurring character, the opportunistic Duke, who has been hired to help the country improve its image. The overall representation of the country shows a leadership invested in its own comfort while unconcerned with human life or the wellbeing of the people. For long-term followers of “Doonesbury,” Duke’s entrance into any storyline is a sure sign that the situation is not only out of control but highly corrupt. As the Central Asian governments have rebuilt themselves following the end of the Soviet Union, some have been more successful than others at combating rampant corruption. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan have all had highly publicized scandals, and even while Kyrgyzstan has remained both stable and committed to a democratic model, its government has also come under scrutiny, particularly as Aktan Akaev was ousted by the so-called Tulip Revolution²⁶ of 2005. In the last few years, Pakistan appears increasingly in the western press due to governmental problems, most notably with the assassination of Benizir Bhutto. Thus the sense that the “-stans” are unstable, corrupt, and rife with openings for profiteers such as Duke²⁷ is not entirely

²⁶ Akaev was elected following the fall of the Soviet Union but corruption within the government led to him stepping down following three days of protests and minor rioting in March of 2005. The press labeled the event the Tulip Revolution, presumably because of the time of year, but the term seems overly strong for the event.

²⁷ The character of Duke is fascinating as a depiction of the modern day privateer – making money around the world in whatever way possible without scruples and often through the exploitation of others. One

unfounded, however, none quite deserve to be labeled “berserk.” Berzerkistan is clearly intended to serve as a stand-in for Iraq and Afghanistan, with its critique extending to some degree to a region that while geographically is southwest of most of Central Asia is extended to roughly everything between India, China, Russia and the Mediterranean Sea. Although less serious, “Brenda Starr” provides a sharper depiction of its fictitious “-stan” than the politically invested “Doonesbury.”

The daily comic strip “Brenda Starr” has been running continuously since its inception in June of 1940. The strip centers on the adventures of its title character, often combining world traveling escapades with on and off romantic affairs, particularly with the elusive and mysterious Basil St. John. “Brenda Starr” has none of the political and social satire of “Doonesbury” and a mere fraction of the readership²⁸, but nonetheless has kept up with the times through its concerns, side characters, and locations. Thus, in the spring of 2008, the current artists, June Brigman and Mary Schmich²⁹, sent Brenda to the minaret laden capitol of Kazookistan, following the summons of her long lost, mysterious lover, Basil, to his young son, Sage, by his second wife.

wonders though to what extent Duke can be read as a neo-colonialist version of the nineteenth-century colonial fortune-seeker, after the likes of characters such as H. Rider Haggard’s Allan Quartermain (*King Solomon’s Mines*), Joseph Conrad’s Ricardo and Jones (*Victory*) or even Kurtz (*Heart of Darkness*), the villains in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories – *The Sign of Four* and *The Solitary Cyclist* – or any number of other lone characters making their bundle in the colonies. Duke is, after all, always in whatever region of the world the United States is currently engaged with in the name of spreading democracy.

²⁸ At the time of its creator’s death in 2005, the strip was syndicated to about 250 newspapers (Severo 2005).

²⁹ “Brenda Starr” was originally created by Dale Messick for the Chicago Tribune Syndicate. During her tenure, Messick stressed that the strip depict Brenda as a strong and independent woman and be aimed primarily at a female readership. The strip was unusual for this focus in its day, but in a male dominated field, it has stayed true to Messick’s original intentions. While male artists have worked on the strip, primarily filling in backgrounds and inking images, the writing and depiction of most of the characters has continued to be undertaken only by women.

The artists relied on a combination of architecture and veiled women to signal the cultural placement of Kazookistan somewhere between the Middle East and Central Asia. The Hotel Kazook, where Brenda and Sage stay upon their arrival bears a striking resemblance to some of the famous sixteenth and seventeenth-century buildings in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, such as Nodir Divan-begi Khanaka and the nearby Kukeldash Madrassah, with a large arched entry way and mirhab shaped windows. Tented stalls lined the city streets down which women veiled either in the more typically Central Asian style (with a shawl loosely draped around the head and neck) or the more conservative form, rarely seen in the more northern and eastern Central Asian countries (with an additional piece of cloth covering the lower part of the face).³⁰ Middle Eastern scholar Faegheh Shirazi has examined the contradictory representations of the veil in the west, where she argues it has been simultaneously used to signify both availability, particularly sexual, and inaccessibility. According to Shirazi, images showing veiling and veiled women often symbolize the feminine Orient as available, sensual, exotic, and repressive of women in contrast to the masculine, rational, and purportedly “liberated” west (2001).

The suspicious Hotel Kazook owner is rather interestingly drawn as a traditional colonial agent – a white man wearing a khaki jacket with the additional pockets of a hunter on safari, who speaks the local language. It is unclear, however, whether what is dubious about him lies in his nostalgic links to colonialism or his position as a white man

³⁰ An astonishing amount has been written on the veil, on the politics of wearing or not wearing it, and on the West’s contradictory relationship to it. Far more than can be covered here. In Kyrgyzstan, most women choose not to veil, however many married women do cover their hair in the traditional Kyrgyz style, with a headscarf tied at the nape of the neck. The kinds and levels of veiling are myriad, as are women’s reasons for veiling or not. Shirin Akiner has stated that for many women in the former Soviet republics, some level of veiling was seen as a form of resistance against the Soviet government and a reclamation of local culture following the fall of the Soviet Union.

who has “gone native.” His colonial attire, however, places this country within the scope of the genre of colonial adventure stories, such as the literary works of H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling and films like *Indiana Jones*, and encourages the reader to understand it through that framework. Within the tropes of this genre, the hotel owner is suspicious because he has chosen to live outside of western society not for the furtherance of western interests – he is not himself a colonial agent – but rather in pursuit of his own monetary gain. Of course, this is also the world of “Brenda Starr,” where readers can be assured that Brenda will soon run afoul of a villain clearly up to no good for no real reason beyond villainy. The hotel owner’s dress highlights both a nostalgic desire on the part of readers to revel in the excitement and adventure supposedly offered by the colonial situation and a deep-rooted belief that western interests in Central Asia are, like Brenda’s, on the whole well-intentioned although they may be perverted by people like the hotel owner who do not uphold their nation’s mission³¹. Thus the colonial adventure story is saved from any associated guilt caused by the acknowledged problems of colonialism, just as problems with US involvement in Afghanistan has been blamed on individual contractors. As Brenda and Sage set off to find Basil with a guide provided by the hotelier, we find Kazookistan to be a largely empty place, full of danger, out of touch, and peopled only sporadically with impoverished villages. In a daily strip dedicated to their embarkation, Brenda plays out the role of the tourist, even though her purposes are not technically touristic, remarking in a triptych of panels, “I love the first leg of a journey. It’s all hope and anticipation. A time when you can ignore the fact that travel always brings trouble.” (Brigman and Schmich, July 8 2008). The reader is assured that

³¹ The idea of colonial nostalgia comes from Roberto Rosaldo’s article “Imperial Nostalgia”.

here in Kazookistan, of all places, Brenda will become Pratt's anti-hero³² and encounter trouble. Yet the reader may also be reassured that Brenda, with all of her pluck, will live to tell the tale, indeed to report it through her newspaper, and indeed she does.

Although in a troubling twist, we learn much later that her long-term on-again off-again paramour, Basil St. John, who saves Brenda and Sage from the desert, is in Kazookistan in part because he has been selling antiquities to the western market. This only becomes a problem in the storyline when his buyer turns out to be funding a military revolt in the region and using the chaos to acquire goods more cheaply rather than allowing the local Kazooks to simply profit off their historical culture (Brigman and Schmich, week of February 16 2009). While this approach does give the Kazook at least minimal rights to their heritage and it is seen as valuable, their cultural property is ultimately a commodity to be bought and sold by the west. They become the proletariat to the western aristocracy in a system of global capitalism, and there is no question that it is the west's right to consume what others have produced.

Thus the comics serve to reinforce ideas brought forward from colonial fiction that cast any "-stan" as a place of emptiness, adventure, and more prevalently today, danger. So strong are these associations that according to some rumors³³ within the

³² See tourism section in Introduction.

³³ I heard this rumor on three separate occasions during my two trips to Kyrgyzstan. The rationale was that the lack of "-stan" would help to draw western investors, who would then see the country in a different light from those ending with "-stan." The three people who told me the rumor were all Kyrgyz and all seemed to find a certain amount of irony in the idea, since the west has not provided the hoped for investment. On the other hand, the Central Asian states have attempted to foster closer economic and cultural ties within the region. A large economic conference among the leaders of those countries surrounding Kyrgyzstan was set to take place in Bishkek just as I was leaving in 2007. It would be difficult to give much credence to these rumors, but it remains interesting that that they are in circulation.

country the Kyrgyz Republic³⁴ officially dropped “-stan” from the name of the country following independence as a way to culturally and politically distance themselves from the other Central Asian states. No evidence exists to support this view, however. The name was officially declared to be the Kyrgyz Republic in 1993 when the constitution was put in place. Some Russian news agencies reported that the Kyrgyz Parliament changed the name to the Republic of Kirghizia, following the Russian spelling, when they added Russian as a secondary state language in 2000, but the reports were false. Whatever the rationale behind dropping “-stan” from the name, Kyrgyzstan is still the common usage in daily speech both locally and internationally. What is more interesting for my arguments is that the rumor of desired perceptual distance from the other “-stans” should exist at all since it demonstrates a (at times ironic) awareness of the west’s associations with the ending and their general negativity of the ending “-stan”. One other effect of the use of “-stan” in such satirical ways, particularly those like Berzerkistan and Trashcanistan, is to turn all of Central Asia into a source of comedic commentary, a chaotic foil to the order of the west, flattening Central Asia and its diverse peoples to form an Other to the west. After all, it may be difficult for many westerners schooled on images of Berzerkistan and *Borat* to break from this leveling, even when these fictional “-stans” are purely the creations of their western inventors.

³⁴ Because Kyrgyz is written with a Cyrillic alphabet, transliteration is always slightly in flux. The most common alternate form of the name in Kirgiz, though Kirghiz also appears. There is no direct English equivalent of the vowel sound alternately represented by -y- or -i-.

Borat and the Humorous Central Asian Other

...in the face of what may appear as a vast cultural and geographical blankness, colonization is a form of self-inscription onto the lives of people who are conceived of as an extension of the landscape.

- David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993, 7)

Writers and illustrators of comics have chosen to create their “-stans” from a nebulous assortment of stereotype and exoticism and have made clear their fictional status through their names. Comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, on the other hand, proffered a fictionalized place in his 2006 hit film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, directed by Larry Charles, but borrowed the name of a real place for it. In doing so, Baron Cohen inserted his created “Kazakhstan” into the western cultural understanding of Central Asia, where it filled a space that previously had been occupied only by the kinds of vague and broadsweeping tropes already discussed. Thus, like an ethnic joke that perpetuates stereotypes and solidifies concepts of identity based not only on difference but negativity, *Borat* reified what it means to be a “-stan” in the post-Soviet era and as a comedic foil for the west. Baron Cohen and many critics have defended the film’s depiction of “Kazakhstan” by claiming first that the film is not about Kazakhstan, but rather about the United States, and second that any offense should be excused in the name of humor. The former assertion fails because of the myriad ways the film blurs reality and fiction and assumes an audience with enough geographic knowledge to distinguish the two. The latter relies on the high value the west places on possessing a sense of humor and on the license accorded the

carnavalesque in Bakhtin's sense³⁵. These assumptions in turn presume a white, western, male construction of and relation to humor. Thus, if we read the film as an ethnic joke, then following Alan Dundes' work³⁶, these claims of innocence are lost in the face of the very real effects the film has had on westerners' conceptions of Central Asia.

The film *Borat* was released in the fall of 2006 amidst threats of legal action from some of the movie's unwitting participants, including the government of Kazakhstan. At its most simplistic, the film follows the travels of an ersatz Kazakh television reporter, Borat, who Baron Cohen developed as part of his earlier television program *Da Ali G Show*. Borat is engaged in making a documentary about America for Kazakh audiences. While ostensibly Borat, the reporter, has a goal – to finish the documentary and along the way to find and marry Pamela Anderson – *Borat*, the film, is really a series of staged encounters with real people misled to believe that they are part of a Kazakh documentary. Because none of the participants were aware that they were actually participating in a film for audiences from their own culture, they often leave themselves comparatively unguarded.

Borat's humor and massive success in both the UK and US – it earned \$26.4 million in its first weekend – relies on Baron Cohen's use of his character's exoticism

³⁵ Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin posited that the medieval carnival provided an opportunity for both release and social commentary by giving a sanctioned time and space in which the established cultural hierarchy could be upended for comic and critical purpose (1994). As I will discuss in more detail later, under the license of the carnivalesque, social taboos are allowed to be broken, a right which has been extended in the west to all comedy regardless of time and place. Thus, Sacha Baron Cohen invokes this license as a way of defending his work against critics.

³⁶ In the second half of *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*, Alan Dundes describes the use of ethnic jokes as a way for one ethnic group to express opinions about another ethnic group that would otherwise be viewed as prejudice or inappropriate. As in the carnivalesque, the claim of humorous intent is employed to excuse what would otherwise be considered harmful statements that perpetuate stereotypes. Dundes is particularly useful in discussing Baron Cohen's film, because they engage so directly with stereotype as a both the intended butt of the joke and as a source for humor, as I will explore.

and unfamiliarity, as well as a healthy dose of body humor to carry him through and keep him from being accused of preaching. His foreignness positions him to expose the prejudices of the people he interviews and to illustrate the ultimate failure of western multiculturalism (Strauss 2006). In other words, the film, presented as a travelogue, foregrounds the trope of the bumbling tourist making his way, one social gaff after another, through new lands. Like tourists everywhere, Borat's claim to tourism insists upon both the character's and the film's innocence – he is just a tourist and the film is only a joke; allowing both character and film producers to relinquish responsibility for the representation they have created. Skyrocketing to popularity at a time when the United States is at war in another “-stan” and only a year after the west's debate with the Muslim world over a series of Danish political cartoons of the prophet Mohammed³⁷, *Borat's* use of Central Asia as a foil serves more to bolster western cultural norms than comment upon them through its portioning of in-group and out-group status and who, more specifically, is let in on and allowed to comment on the joke.

At the opening and close of the film, the audience is treated to a montage with a voiceover narration by Borat himself about his supposed hometown in Kazakhstan, Kuzcek. Clearly not made for “Kazakh” audiences but for western ones, these sections establish the film's framing narrative and focal character and lure western viewers into laughing along *with* the film at the absurd stereotypes of the former Soviet states and

³⁷ See Smith 2009 for a full discussion. This series of political cartoons were printed by a Danish newspaper as part of a contest which specifically solicited cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. Images of Mohammed are forbidden under Islam, but this offense was coupled with the generally negative and stereotyped images employed by the cartoons. Following an initial protest by European Muslims, the newspaper defended its printing of the cartoons, which were later reprinted by several western papers covering the story. Copies of the cartoons were shown to various Muslim political and religious leaders, who universally condemned their printing. In response, both the original Danish paper and much of the western press dismissed Muslim concerns as proof that, at best, Muslims lacked a sense of humor and, at worst, were therefore uncivilized and underdeveloped.

more importantly their own taboos and insecurities “[projected] ...onto an Other who is both post-Soviet and Muslim” in order for Baron Cohen and his producers to turn around in the American sojourn and laugh *at* the audience (Kononenko and Kukharensko 2008, 16). For the joke to work, the stereotype of the post-Soviet foreigner must be both established and carefully maintained. I have already argued that in the western mindset, all “-stans” are equal and interchangeable, but *Borat* pushes this conflation further, substituting regions throughout the Soviet sphere of influence; thus in early appearance on *Da Ali G Show*, Borat claimed to be from Moldova, in one episode of the show he says he’s from Kyrgyzstan, and the Kuzcek scenes in the film were all shot in the Romanian village of Glod³⁸. As Dickie Wallace points out, most of the material and cultural depictions of post-Soviet space are specifically stereotypes of Eastern Europe rather than Central Asia, but in the logic of the film, and possibly the west, no distinction is necessary (2008). Indeed, Baron Cohen chose Borat’s ultimate home country at random, largely based on American audiences ignorance of Kazakhstan’s existence:

...the reason we chose Kazakhstan was because it was a country that no one had heard anything about, so we could essentially play on stereotypes they might have about this ex-Soviet backwater. (Baron Cohen qtd. in Strauss 2006)

The British comedian thus was exploiting the European stereotype of Americans’ having poor knowledge about the rest of the world, one sadly upheld by American educational statistics (Saunders 2008, 71 and 75). More important for his character (and my analysis),

³⁸ The people of Glod have sued Baron Cohen and 20th Century Fox for the depiction of their town in the film (See *Todorache and Ciorebea v. 20th Century Fox et al*), although they later dismissed the case. Like *Borat*’s other participants, they were not given any information about the film being made or what was being said about them in it. A documentary, entitled *When Borat Came to Town* (Stalenhoef 2008) in its shorter BBC television format and *Carmen Meets Borat* in its longer format on the American festival circuit, has been made since *Borat* about a specific young woman’s reaction to the film.

and the film as a whole, is how he constructs the stereotypical post-Soviet people in contrast to Americans and America, “the most powerful nation³⁹” (Charles 2006).

The images of Borat and his hometown are extremely stable: this is a place of extreme rural poverty, where people are engaged with or dream about western goods, but their understandings of both the objects from the west and the cultures that created it are filtered through poorly translated multimedia. They have pretensions of westernization but are seemingly so far removed from any real knowledge of the west or ability to achieve these global desires, their plight is (at least intended to be) laughable. For instance, Borat has named his son Huey Lewis. Because of these post-Soviet peoples’ lack of understanding of western ways, they are depicted as childlike following the western stereotype of the post-Soviet world as economically undeveloped and culturally unsophisticated (Kononenko and Kukharenko 2008, 15). Taking this to an extreme, however, Baron Cohen constructs them as id-driven, engaged in sex and acts of violence publicly, indiscriminately, and without shame. The body, especially bodies which are outside the Hollywood norms of beauty, and bodily function are central. Women are either middle-aged or elderly, without makeup, and often overweight, yet these women are above all sexually available. Indeed, sex seems to be the only social activity in which women take part, as all scenes of socialization other than sex show men exclusively. This focus on male socialization reinforces American stereotypes of other cultures as uncomfortably homosocial, and therefore less masculine, than the US and builds off of

³⁹ Interestingly, this is almost the exact phrase that undergraduate students in my own classes have used in their country’s defense every semester when we discuss issues surrounding patriotism, history, the American Dream, and, perhaps ironically, racism.

American male insecurity regarding their own masculinity⁴⁰, a theme which Baron Cohen continues throughout the film.

In addition to the sexism, sexual violence, and homophobia expressed in the film, *Borat's* "Kazakhs" are racist and highly anti-Semitic. Baron Cohen gains access to his interviewees' opinions on other groups of people, specifically women, Jews, and gypsies, by himself making outrageous and racist statements about them. In film critic Nancy Condee's words, "Borat's marginalized land stands in for the marginalized things we prefer to disown....Assigned to Borat, these practices are no longer really ours; they are his, although – with a nudge and a wink – the U.S. citizens of Borat's faux-documentary signal their private sympathy for 'Kazakh' prejudice of any stripe" (2006, H6). The film becomes a paean to the failure of American multiculturalism: revealing the hypocrisy of those whose etiquette simultaneously encourages them to welcome a foreigner to the point of not only not speaking out against his prejudices but endorsing them⁴¹. Thus, by believing that others in the world hold such prejudice, not only the interviewees but the audience could excuse their own prejudices by believing that others are worse.⁴² In that leap of faith, the depiction of Borat's "Kazakhs" subtly and problematically shifts to a depiction of Kazakhs. As Edward Schatz points out, because Baron Cohen tapped into already extant stereotypes of the post-Soviet world generally and Central Asia

⁴⁰ Alan Dundes has suggested that such techniques of symbolic emasculation are common in both jokes and folk tales (1987, 44 and 52).

⁴¹ Borat's interviewees fall into roughly two categories: those who are clearly attempting to be polite and get through an awkward and uncomfortable experience, such as the driving instructor, and those who answer his offensive remarks with offensive remarks of their own, such as the rodeo director who wants to hang homosexuals and the sexist fraternity brothers.

⁴² Robert Saunders notes that many reviews in the neo-conservative press in the embraced the film specifically because of its lack of political correctness, that it did not shy from showing people making racist and sexist remarks. Although he also states that many traditionally conservative writers objected to the film as un-American (2008, 145).

specifically, his audiences were prepared to take his word for it that while these images were of Kazakhstan, and while exaggerated, nonetheless they offered some glimpse of reality (2008, 58).

Based on media response to the film, American audiences clearly believed some version of Borat's "Kazakhstan" to be real despite Baron Cohen's claims. The multiple articles in the American press attempting to tell "truth" from fiction, the advertising campaign by Kazakhstan to assert their own image, and even the disclaimer on the Borat Online unofficial fan website which continues to assert that while Kazakhstan *is* a real place, it is *not* what Baron Cohen is showing all attest to audiences trust in the veracity of the filmic presentation of Kazakhstan. Whether western audiences believed the images they saw of Kazakhstan, or even any part of the stereotypes depicted in them, to be real is largely irrelevant. Like the urban legend of the killer in the back seat, we may know it to have never happened, but that does not stop us from looking in the backseat. And a joke by one people about another, especially a group that is not well known through other channels, "may be more responsible for the first group's attitudes about the second than any other single factor" (Dundes 1987, 96).

Kazakhstani response to the film varied widely: some people felt that any publicity was good publicity, some were offended, and some tried to use the opportunity to set the record straight (unsuccessfully). The Kazakhstani government, on the other hand, seeking western economic investment and further entry into world markets, found itself suddenly confronted with an enormous public relations crisis in which an outsider had effectively determined their national image for them with what cannot be said to be a flattering depiction. National image in the global economy functions as a kind of brand,

helping to attract investors to a country, and *Borat* “short-circuited the ‘benign process’ of branding” (Saunders 2008, 119). As Robert Saunders, a specialist in geopolitics, quotes, “ ‘Instead of being a regional leader and a growing economy and geopolitical power, Kazakhstan emerges as a country lost somewhere in the steppe, by turns absurd and quaint, but always gauche.’” (2008, 119). After decades of Soviet rule, this may have felt like a horrible kind of déjà vu, especially for a country still struggling to assert its national identity.

Baron Cohen’s blurring of the lines between the real and fake appears to create a carnivalesque liminality in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense – an upending of the expected cultural hierarchy as a source of humor and social commentary (1994, 199). He has, in fact, used this idea of the carnivalesque, though not in such terms, to defend his film as satire, that is, the film was intended for humor and thus normal rules of conduct do not apply. In the film’s case, this hierarchy appears to be constituted by a western hegemony that privileges the white American male as viewer and tourist, and it seems to be inverted through Baron Cohen’s main character, the Central Asian outsider Borat. Both Baron Cohen, as writer, and Borat, as foreign tourist, rely on the license of Bakhtin’s carnival and its extension, the genre of modern comedy and humor, to protect their respective stances of innocence and insulate them from critique. As folklorist Moira Smith points out, a sense of humor has become sacrosanct in the west, and to not buy into Baron Cohen’s claims of humor is to expose oneself as being potentially humorless. However, for the carnivalesque to function properly, according to Bakhtin, everyone involved must participate and accept the laws of the carnival (1994, 198). As Bakhtin puts it, “carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people... it is directed at all and everyone, including the

carnival's participants" (1994, 200). But Kazakhstan and the Kazakhstani people were never polled about their desire to participate. Indeed, Baron Cohen's humor requires that his targets (whether they were interview subjects or entire cultures) not be informed. Further, he is never the butt of his own humor; Borat might seem to make a fool of himself for humorous affect, but Baron Cohen remains resolutely out of the picture.

This haziness between the "real" Kazakhstan and the film's interview subjects, between the documentary-style presentation and Borat's fake "Kazakhstan," and the fictiveness of the film's major characters, storyline, and narration lies at the heart of the producers' relinquishing responsibility for their film's potential to influence western audiences' concept of Central Asia. Ultimately, however, *Borat's* producers' dependence on the logic of the carnival denies the power imbalance between the joke's teller and the Central Asian cultures it uses as both foil and target. While it might be easy to dismiss *Borat* on the basis that the film is not really about Central Asia, as its makers claim, it is nearly impossible, at least at present, to mention any "-stan" other than those engaged in armed conflict with the United States without someone bringing up the film. Their defense of the film on these grounds seems somewhat lost in the face of the film's influence on the popular western construction of a "-stan."

Because *Borat* is the most widespread, recent representation of Central Asia in the west, spurious though it may be, it has real effects for Central Asians trying to live, work, or sell their art in the west. For Americans whose entire knowledge of the region is based on news reports from the military conflict in Afghanistan and an uneducated overall sense of what it means to be a post-Soviet country, *Borat* fills a symbolic gap with broad stereotypes that emphasize the negative. These stereotypes are further bolstered by the

only other images, from Trashcanistan to Kazookistan, that are readily available and even inescapable in the west – all of which have been created by westerners for the purposes of their own storylines, comedic value, or politic agendas. Yet in employing a real place, Baron Cohen, his audiences, and the western press have reenacted a particularly colonial form of violence – silencing the subaltern and taking away the right of a people to protect themselves from false representations. Just as Dundes found with ethnic jokes, the defense of a slur because it is humor is invalid, as it fails to make the slur less harmful (1987, 114). Furthermore, for the unintended Kazakhstani audience, this defense has proven especially ineffective because of Baron Cohen’s assignation of in-group/out-group status: if the audience fails to get the joke, they must be out-group and therefore less developed or less intelligent or, one could argue, less westernized than those who do.

The Kazakhstani government at first attempted to fight the images put forth in the film by decrying them publicly through their embassies, the press, and by asking for the film to be censored; but these activities only led to accusations by the western press that Kazakhs were unable to take a joke. Folklorist Smith writes about the difficulties in laughing at another’s humorous depiction of oneself in a global arena (2009). Smith argues that a sense of humor has become highly valued in the west to the point that someone “without a sense of humor” is seen as morally corrupt or lacking: “Where a sense of humor is thought to be a sign of emotional and psychological health, the lack of one renders one almost pathologically deficient” (2009, 158). To not get or to react unfavorably to a joke, what Smith calls unlaughter following Michael Billig⁴³, is to

⁴³ Billig describes unlaughter as a negative response to something intended to elicit laughter, such as a joke or cartoon. Because the person employing unlaughter purposely fails to provide the expected response to the humorous performance, unlaughter can be a powerful tool, used by either the performer or the audience,

expose oneself then to accusations not only of humorlessness but to outright scorn. *Borat* was released during ongoing discussions over the absence or presence of a sense of humor in the Muslim world as a result of the Danish newspaper's Mohammed cartoons. At a time, in other words, when any place perceived as Muslim was already suspected of being humorless. Smith quotes one commentator in *USA Today*: "The ability to laugh at oneself, or to shrug off insult, is a sign of both a mature ego and a mature society....Unfortunately, much of the Arab/Muslim world has no such legacy" (Parker 2006 qtd. in Smith 2009, 165). The kinds of western stereotypes of Central Asia depicted in the film, as undeveloped and its people as violent and unpredictable, left the country without recourse. As a result, the Kazakhstani government simply could not win; their options were to either accept the film and laugh along with it, despite what damage it may do to the larger world's perception of their country, or else to respond with unlaughter and face the potential accusations of humorlessness and implied immaturity and deficiency. Either way, the western image of Central Asia would be impacted negatively.

Baron Cohen defends his stereotypic image of Kazakhstan by insisting that his film is really about the US and American culture.

The joke is not on Kazakhstan. I think the joke is on people [i.e. Americans] who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist - - who believe that there's a country where homosexuals wear blue hats and the women live in cages and they drink fermented horse urine and the age of consent has been raised to nine years old. (qtd. in Strauss 2006)

to draw attention to difference and to criticize behavior or ideas (Smith 2009, 150-151). Unlaughter can, however, deem the butt of a joke ridiculous, if other audiences supported the joke, which is what happened with the Kazakhstani government's negative response to *Borat*.

Indeed, he was surprised at the negative response of the Kazakhstani⁴⁴ government, the threats of lawsuit, and the film's banning in several Middle Eastern countries and lack of distribution in Russia and Kazakhstan itself. He was not above exploiting Kazakhstani concerns about the film, however, by appearing in character to decry them as Uzbek insults⁴⁵ and helping publicize for the film. Western critics and press became complicit with Baron Cohen in disregarding the Kazakhstani response to the film by focusing on the film's critique of America and Baron Cohen's comedic "genius" rather than addressing the ways in which both critique and comedy relied on extremely negative depictions of another culture. All of which made the unlaughter of the Kazakhstani government more damning in the eyes of many in the west. Baron Cohen's defense of the film as about America denies the possibility of a Kazakhstani response by ignoring the possibility of a non-western audience.

The discrepancy of power between the western filmmaker and the Central Asian country he chose to use for his satire makes his claims of innocence feel hollow. Writing as one of two commentators at the end of a special issue of *The Slavic Review* dedicated to *Borat*, historian Paula Michaels sums the issue up nicely:

⁴⁴ Kazakhstan has a diverse population. Some scholars have adopted the convention of referring to the government and the citizenry as Kazakhstani to include all of the ethnic groups without privileging the Kazakh for whom the nation is named. While Kyrgyzstan also contains many ethnic groups besides the Kyrgyz, the titular group is both more dominant and has a much larger percentage of the population than in Kazakhstan. The national inhabitants generally refer to themselves as Kyrgyz when speaking nationally or in global terms and by ethnic name, such as Russian or Uyghur, in local contexts.

⁴⁵ These appearances included one outside the White House during a state visit from Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazerbaev. Such appearances also furthered confusion over what was real and what fiction both in and surrounding the film. As even his extremely sympathetic *Rolling Stone* interviewer, John Strauss, remarks, "If everything that comes out of your mouth is parody, then you never have to be accountable for what you say – because you didn't really mean it anyway" (2006). Baron Cohen appears quite certain that he owes no accountability to Kazakhstan or anyone else potentially hurt by the film. The incendiary charges against Uzbekistan could well have brought international tension, as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have had long-standing difficulties and minor conflicts. Fortunately, neither country seemed to take much notice by this point. What is more disturbing to me is Baron Cohen's evident lack of forethought on how his depictions might affect the lives of real people and real countries, as I will discuss in more detail later.

Commentators and film critics reinforced and extended the film's orientalist othering. Like the nineteenth-century orientalist scholars whose writings established the image of the east in the European imagination, *Borat* hijacked Kazakhstan's ability to define itself to the western world. The mass media then further silenced Kazakhstan by circumscribing the debate about the film in such a way as to place Kazakhstani concerns and sentiments outside the frame of discussion. The western press blunted the Kazakhstani perspective by refusing to take it seriously, dismissing it as irrelevant, silly, or humorless. Critics' common refrain was that *Borat* has nothing to do with Kazakhstan, but is really about the United States. By asserting the irrelevant or laughable nature of Kazakhstani concerns, western commentators privilege a Euro-American perspective that puts the United States at the center and that rhetorically reasserts the metropole's power over the periphery. (2008, 82)

Kazakhstan and the Kazakhstani people had no chance – regardless of their response to Baron Cohen's representation, both the western press and the west as a whole, through the film's popularity, effectively insisted on their outsider status, offering self-humiliation as their only way in. This is Said's nineteenth-century orientalist process updated for modern media and a twenty-first-century Other with the west using the Other as a means of self-definition and a way to recenter all discourse around itself. In this way, Baron Cohen's claims of innocence come to resemble the claims of colonizers: dismissing the colonized population's response to colonial rule by claiming that the colonized are simply not "civilized" enough to understand.⁴⁶ Baron Cohen's strategy relies on his continuously shifting claims of "in group" or "out group" status.

In the ways in which he recreates the post-Soviet world through western stereotype, Baron Cohen is effectively making an elaborate ethnic joke, one that depends upon how he assigns in group and out group status to himself, his interviewees, the audience, and non-westerners. The film requires that the audience see Baron Cohen as an

⁴⁶ Gayatri Spivak, among others, addresses this issue of the ability of the colonized to speak in her seminal article "Can the Subaltern Speak?", although the question might also be posed "can the colonizer listen?" (1988).

insider in their group to avoid confrontation, while his character, Borat, must be construed as an outsider. To fulfill the latter end, he employs a western construction of the foreigner and the stereotypes of foreigners as a weapon to expose the dangers of stereotypes about groups closer to home⁴⁷. That he is perceived as *foreign* above all else is crucial. Baron Cohen emphasized Borat's quintessential foreignness by cobbling it together: he claims to be from Kazakhstan, carries notes written in Hebrew, and speaks an invented combination of Polish and Hebrew, while his assistant Azamat speaks Armenian. His sartorial style is clearly out of date, invoking another stereotype of the post-Soviet world as hopelessly behind the times. Yet his claim to foreignness is precisely what allows him to penetrate the social guards of his interviewees, who go out of their way to be polite and accepting of cultural difference, even as he brings a bag of his own excrement to the dinner table. This technique is intended to reveal the hypocrisy of modern American multiculturalism, which in its celebration of diversity will condone prejudice in one perceived as different rather than risk offending them. The film is successful here: it does expose a panoply of American prejudice.

Baron Cohen particularly targets American prejudice against African-Americans and Jews and uses this exposé as the film's *raison d'être*, and members of these groups who appear in the film are always seen sympathetically. Yet he is selective in the targets of his critique. While racial prejudice is not tolerated, women and the gay community, however, are simultaneously offered up for the crude humor, particularly in scenes such

⁴⁷ This is an old and well worn literary technique based on the notion that people are more willing to tell their stories and be themselves with strangers than with people they know, since the stranger will presumably leave again and thus the tale-telling has no repercussions. The story of Elijah in the Bible, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, about half of Shakespeare's plays, and much more recently Larry Shue's 1984 play *The Foreigner*, which also seeks to expose narrow-mindedness and racism through an apocryphal foreigner, all come to mind as examples.

as the interview with the three feminists in New York. Even African-American conservative activist, Alan Keyes, is brought in to remark on homosexuality (and commiserate with Borat over his unwitting encounter with a group of gay men) despite Borat's introductory prompts that this segment will be about race. Of course, one of his most important targets remains Kazakhstan, specifically, and the entire post-Soviet world, generally. This selectivity reinforces Baron Cohen's status as an in-group western heterosexual male, the target audience for his film. By claiming this in-group status, the film become less of a critique and more of "a nod and a wink," as Condee puts it, that he is not only in on the joke but that there are acceptable targets of humor – women, gay people, and non-westerners – and unacceptable ones – African-Americans and Jews⁴⁸.

Baron Cohen uses in-group status not only to relate to his audience but also to bolster his right to make racial jokes in the first place. One of Baron Cohen's defenses against his critics, especially those who object to the anti-Semitism which Borat spouts prolifically and elicits from his interviewees, is his own in-group status as a practicing Jew. In the *Rolling Stone* interview with Baron Cohen, much is made over his concerns that a complimentary appetizer at the restaurant where the interview took place be Kosher (Strauss 2006). He clearly feels that this in-group status gives him not only the right to create humor employing the stereotypes imposed on his group by others but also turns the repetition of these stereotypes into a form of resistance⁴⁹. Baron Cohen, however, also

⁴⁸ These are, of course, the two groups most targeted by white supremacy groups in the United States.

⁴⁹ This is a well documented and tried technique. Blond jokes were popular when I was in high school, and embracing and telling the jokes worked quite well as a way of diffusing the issue for me and the other two blonds in the school. Mel Brooks is perhaps one of the more recently famous filmmakers to rely on the technique, although Brooks often used the Nazis or historic groups as the absurd extreme against which Jewish rationality (and irrationality) were set. This film history makes *Borat* more troubling, since Western audiences are schooled in a dichotomous oppositioning of the two groups depicted on screen.

seems to believe that his in-group status as Jewish extends his rights of representation to all non-white or non-western groups.

Ironically, although his defenders are quick to assert his Jewish identity, they neglect that Baron Cohen is not American but British (another expansive colonizing country). Thus, while he uses his in-group status as Jewish to ameliorate his character's anti-Semitism, his nationality creates the question of whether this is a deep look at the dark sides of his own culture or a more elaborate joke by one group of westerners about another. After all, Americans are often stereotyped in Europe as being racist, sexist, and naïve, particularly by being too accommodating or too trusting of others; these are precisely the images of Americans which *Borat* puts forth most strongly. In this case, then, the film can be seen not as an exposé, but rather as one (formerly?) dominant culture's in-group joke about another (more recently) dominant culture. This begs the question of who is actually in on what joke? Because the United States is considered a larger political power with substantially greater neo-colonial reach than most other countries, it is also susceptible to outsider critique, but the same cannot be said of Kazakhstan. While Baron Cohen may be able to excuse his use and solicitation of anti-Semitism through his in-group status, he has no such comedic rights to Kazakh stereotypes.

Without a doubt, *Borat* is essentially an elongated ethnic joke, told by a British comedian about Americans, told by a westerner about Central Asians or Kazakhstanis, told by someone identified with America, who supposedly won the Cold War, and about post-Soviets, who lost it. It may be easy for critics to excuse Baron Cohen's use of these stereotypes, especially as such stereotypes are the common fodder of jokes the world

over, but it does not make them less potentially divisive or harmful. In thinking about *Borat* as an ethnic joke that specifically deploys stereotype to demark the boundaries between self and other, folklorist Alan Dundes' research becomes particularly useful. Dundes has shown that most groups have jokes that assert group status at the expense of another, typically neighboring, group. Pollack jokes, Irish jokes, and Canadian and Mexican jokes all serves as examples. Yet, as Dundes states:

If comedy and tragedy are merely opposite sides of the same coin, then we must look long and hard at the humor of international slurs. Stereotypes are a factor in the formation of prejudice, and prejudice often prevents people from accepting one another as individuals. (1987, 114)

The kinds of ethnic jokes Dundes studied relied on an in-group audience using a stereotype of an out-group as the basis not only of humor but to mark and clarify boundaries between “us” and “them.” *Borat* works similarly but on several levels at once. Borat, as a character, establishes himself as out-group among Americans so that Baron Cohen can gain the trust of his interviewees. Yet as the epitome of an out-group member, Borat also serves as the butt of a larger slur against the post-Soviet world for the in-group white, western, male audience. Baron Cohen claims in-group status with this audience as a western, heterosexual male making slurs against gay people, women, and non-westerners. As a British Jew, however, he goes one step further, claiming status in another group to which his audience may not belong: one associated stereotypically with both entertainment, on one hand, and the intelligensia, on the other. In this last step, he seeks to divide himself from any audience members who failed to get his joke, either because they truly embraced the views being ludicrously proffered by Borat and his subjects or because they did not fit within his assigned groups, which includes a Central

Asian audience. What remains is the problem of Baron Cohen's use of a real place and culture, without regard to the effects of his actions on that culture, including its ability to manage its own self-image on the global stage.

We cannot assume that *Borat* has a direct influence on those who seek out ethnic art, on the kinds of shoppers described in the next two chapters, but I believe it does have an indirect one. The film is so much a part of American culture and has contributed so much to the western representation of Central Asia generally and Kazakhstan specifically, that its tropes, built themselves from western symbols of the post-Soviet world, have become part of the west's understanding of the region. As such, the representations Baron Cohen deploys are difficult to avoid even for those who have not seen it. Certainly, the film did reinforce western constructions of Central Asia as a kind of empty space, perhaps even more so by pointing out that the space was so empty in the western imagination that it could be filled by nearly anything no matter how crude, exaggerated, or outright fictional. Further, Baron Cohen peopled that space with largely indistinguishable, brutal inhabitants, marked largely by their intolerance and misogyny on one hand and their hypersexuality and violence on the other. Nonetheless, *Borat* did spur western tourism in Central Asia (Brown 2006). Thus, audiences did take from it a sense of having seen a part of the world hitherto unknown to them, even if only briefly and in images which they know logically, if not subconsciously, were created for Baron Cohen's comedic purposes rather than as any form of documentary.

The Semiotics and Colonial Discourse of Armchair Tourism

... sightseeing is a ritual performed to the differentiations of society.

- Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*

For Central Asia, the western icons used to reference and define the region and its people have lingered on the landscape, particularly images of its vastness and harshness. Central Asia fills the blank space on the map between the more defined and fleshed out, though no less contradictory or romanticized, images of India, China, Russia, and the Middle East. Central Asia is striking in its very absence, and this absence creates a negative space for colonial discourse to fill. When this space has been peopled, it has generally been with individual western explorers and adventurers, from Duke in *Doonesbury* making his freewheeling millions in a corrupt dictatorship to Basil and Brenda living out their adventures and love story against an erotically exotic and mildly dangerous backdrop. These westerners are contrasted with groups of often warlike nomads or archetypes of a mysteriously feminized Other, the construct of orientalism combined with Cold War era propoganda. The inhabitants of Central Asia, when they are seen at all, are debased and through their debasement, they are made available to western desires, whether for their land, the wealth of that land, or their “savior” in western terms. These stereotypical images of Central Asia reference and reflect each other. They build on earlier representations until they form a cohesive set of icons, until, indeed, they come to function for the western reading or viewing public, as tourist sights. They are to the armchair Central Asian tourist what the Eiffel Tower is to the visitor to Paris. They are the must-see objects of the west’s Central Asia, and without at least some of them, the western reader or viewer cannot claim to have truly read or seen “Central Asia.” Rightly

or wrongly, intentionally or not, these iconic images become part of the westerners generalized conception of what Central Asia is, and because these images emerge from a history of colonial thought and discourse and continue to be couched in the rhetoric of colonial discourse, they encourage westerners to think about their relationship to Central Asia in colonial terms.

The viewers and readers of the media described here, from *The New Yorker* to *Borat*, approach the representations of Central Asia that appear in the west as tourists. They are not anthropologists trying to gain a deep understanding of another culture and the motivations of its people. They are not missionaries seeking to help the impoverished and save souls (at least not yet). Rather, their interaction with the other culture will be limited, they will remain largely in control of the experience, and they will return to the security and familiarity of home at its conclusion. They seem to believe that their contact with the other culture is innocuous at worst, if anything, they seem to believe they are more likely to suffer from it than the people of the other culture, and beneficial at best, spiritually to themselves and materially to the people of the other culture for whom they provide financial assistance. For the viewers and readers of western media depicting Central Asia, the stakes are even lower. They do not leave home in the first place. No physical *contact* takes place. They are armchair tourists.

Mary Louise Pratt describes the tourist as the “seeing-man... -- he whose imperial eyes look out and passively possess;” tourists travel to see the sights (1992, 7). The “sights” can be anything, including single monuments like the Eiffel Tower, places like New York City, or “typical” scenes or landscapes; they include the performance or representation of tasks or even whole societies, making the familiar unfamiliar through

time period, location or cultural process. Colonial Williamsburg or the Maori marae performances in Rotorua, New Zealand are good examples. Yet “sights” also extend to objects and places which seem perfectly ordinary but are not by virtue of their lineage, history, or provenance, such as Salem, Massachusetts (Urry 1990, 11-12). For the armchair tourists, the travelers who never left home and travel only passively through media representations rather than actually encountering geographic places, it is the specific use of the gaze that allows them to fulfill the role of a tourist – a role achieved through a semiotic understanding of both tourist sights and their iconic images as signs.

In the same way that a sign “represents something to someone,” in MacCannell’s rephrasing of Peirce, a tourist attraction serves as a marker of a sight for the tourist (1989, 109). As MacCannell diagrams the relationship:

[represents/ something/ to someone] sign
[marker/ sight/ tourist] attraction (brackets in original 1989, 110)

Thus, the tourist sight relates to and represents the location and by extension the culture visited in the same way that the sign relates to and references the signified. However, the connection between the sign and the signified is arbitrary. To reuse his example, there is nothing in the Statue of Liberty that inherently links it to the idea of liberty except its name. Similarly, there is nothing in the ending “-stan” itself that automatically evokes sweeping, empty steppes, as the syllable’s modified appearance in English names like Hamstead makes clear (MacCannell 1989, 117). Instead, the connection between the idea or ideas being represented and the signs used to represent them is purely a cultural construction of the sign-makers negotiated with the viewers. The signified may have little

or no control over its own representation, as is clear in the Baron Cohen's appropriation of the image of Kazakhstan and the Kazakhstani people's inability to alter it.

Nonetheless, the tourist site provides the tourist with fulfillment because of its ability to stand in for the place itself, because it not only represents that place but also represents the qualities of that place the tourist has come in search of, namely the authenticity that the tourist feels is missing from his daily life but still existing in the Other place. As a result, the tourist sight is endowed with meaning as an embodiment of perceived authenticity, able to impart a kind of shared "authenticity" to the tourist and to substantiate the authenticity of the tourist's experience. In this way, visiting tourist sites becomes ritualistic, a form of pilgrimage, whose stages are conveniently marked out by guidebooks (MacCannell 1989, 43).

For the armchair tourist, no such confirmation of the travel experience itself is required; corroborative evidence of the image provided by other representations of that place will suffice. The kinds of signs used to symbolize Central Asia are repeated from one representation to the next forming a relatively stable construction over time, with occasional adjustments made to account for historical and political changes as they arise (or not, as they can change quickly and cause confusion to outsiders). These iconic images of the empty land, the veiled woman, or scenes of poverty become pre-requisites for any portrayal of Central Asia, sacralized in the same way that tourist sites are for tourists. The iconic images become necessary to the validity of the rest of the representation. Western audiences draw on their pre-formed and often inadequate understanding of Central Asia as they interpret new images of the region and weigh them against what they believe they already know. Thus, the images presented by *Brenda Starr*

are the current manifestation of a long history of images of westerners in Central Asia, beginning at least with Marco Polo and stretching through the biographies of real-life explorers and archeologists such as Sven Hedin and Aurel Steina as well as fictional adventurers created by Hollywood, like Indiana Jones. It is precisely for this reason that distorted or completely fictionalized images, such as those described in this chapter, are so problematic, as now every image of Central Asia seen in the west must grapple with the earlier specters, which have been erected solidly on colonialist rhetoric.

The tourist gaze simultaneously takes in the new sites, and through them establishes a system of binaries that help to mark touristic experiences as out of the ordinary realm of daily life, the objects viewed and purchased as exotic, and the persons who made them as Other. Furthermore, these sites can include entire societies and particularly those elements of a visited society that appear most different, most Other, and, in keeping with the connection between Otherness and pre-modernity, most anachronistic⁵⁰ (MacCannell 1976, 55). As John Urry states: “Tourism results from a basic binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary” (1990, 11). In other words, it is that which marks a tourist site as different or exotic that makes it useful to fulfill the needs of the tourist. This creation of binaries allows the tourist to both utilize tourist sites, whether real or virtual, as sources of both internal and external “authenticity.”

⁵⁰ John Urry and Andreas Huyssen both tie the rapid increase in the number of museums and museum visitors to a increased valuation, or I would argue a fetishization, of the past. Huyssen further connects this idea to what he calls a process of musealization – the increased collection and display of objects, souvenirs, ideas, events, and sites, up to and including the visiting of museums themselves as a way to effectively contain and compartmentalize both memory and modern life (Huyssen 1995; Urry 1990, 128)

For tourists, however, the differentiation between themselves and the Other further allows them to maintain their innocence against any charges of engaging in or consuming colonialist discourse. These claims to innocence and purity, to the clarity of the gaze in search of knowledge interestingly replicate the similar claims of the early explorer and, historically, the journalist. Like early explorers, the tourist is also focused on establishing crucial differences between himself and that upon which he gazes, for it is through such differentiation that he both knows he has experienced travel and gains the sense of power which led him to travel in the first place. Yet like the journalist, the tourist is able to maintain difference, distance, and innocence through claims of objectivity. In describing the colonizing rhetoric of surveillance, David Spurr explains the journalist's position thusly:

But the gaze upon which the journalist so faithfully relies for knowledge marks an exclusion as well as a privilege: the privilege of inspecting, of examining, of looking at, by its nature excludes the journalist from the human reality constituted as the object of observation. (1993, 13)

The nuance of the armchair tourists is the ability to gain this power vicariously and at a remove, ultimately supporting and consuming a western orientalist understanding of the world while maintaining enough physical distance to disavow knowledge of the affects of their actions. By consuming media images rather than actually traveling, the armchair tourists can position themselves as too distant from the Othered subject of the image to affect the people depicted. The armchair tourist effectively attempts to become Schopenhauer's aesthetic subject, "an observer freed from the demands of the will, of the body, capable of 'pure perception,' and of becoming 'the clear eye of the world'" (Crary 1992, 76).

The extent to which the tropes of emptiness, adventure, and need, and of negation, surveillance, and debasement are repeated in the portrayals of Central Asia by the popular media reveal both the level to which Central Asia is constructed in terms of colonial discourse and the resilience and power of such discourse over time. More problematically, because these are presented in the context of popular media, they often are received without critical analysis. Therefore, not only does the audience maintain its distance and thereby its belief in its own innocence, but that distance itself is maintained in part through the reduction of the import of media images as not requiring analysis. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett demonstrates this problem in her discussion of museums' use of the tropes of tourism as a means of marketing their collections:

Such tropes form an archive of historical understandings that go uncontested. Their playfulness insulates them from the very critiques that destabilized celebrations of the Columbus Quincentenary and that have brought museums themselves to task for their historic role in grand projects of discovery and conquest. Marketing a troubled history that glorifies colonial adventure and a repudiated anthropology of primitivism, tourism provides a safe haven for these ideas. (1998, 136)

As museums and tourism perpetuate and even promote westerners' colonial constructions of their relationships to other parts of the world, popular media also repeats colonialist rhetoric through its iconic images and narrative devices.

Conclusion

Armchair tourists, steeped in iconic images of Central Asia produced largely by the west for the west, bring the understanding gleaned from these images of what Central Asia is and their relationship to it to bear in the marketplace. Whether they are conscious of the influence of these images or even in denial of it, western audiences cannot help but

be schooled by such images, and thus their interactions with new representations of Central Asia, whether in the media or in a catalogue of global arts and crafts, are predicated on these ideas. Because of the colonial interpretation which western popular media relies on in representing Central Asia, the audience responds to these iconic images in ways that further the colonial, or in the specific markets I am discussing, the neo-colonial enterprise. If they respond at all, which it should be noted most do not, then the options of the armchair tourist are limited and predictable – they can become actual tourists, as some viewers of *Borat* did, or they can become armchair missionaries. These latter form the subject of the next two chapters. The armchair missionaries seek to fulfill the white man's burden from home through their donations to microloan schemes, charities, and non-governmental organizations and, more specifically, through their purchase of global folk arts offered for sale using some of these very same iconic images from popular and mass media.

CHAPTER THREE

‘MADE FAIRLY IN CENTRAL ASIA’: SUPPORTING GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PHILANTHROPIC SHOPPING

It is through the interplay of public discourse and global markets that the nexus of personal, social, and planetary health is constructed and fixed in the public imagination and thus becomes more of an obligation than an option for individuals to pursue.

- Kimberly Lau, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* (2000)

Greg Mortenson and David Relin’s nonfiction account of Mortenson’s efforts to start schools in the mountains of Pakistan, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace... One School at a Time*, became an instant bestseller upon its release in 2006, the same year as the film *Borat* became a hit. Politically, the United States was engaged in two wars in the Middle East and Central Asia – Iraq and Afghanistan, which, as we have seen, helped propel the region to the forefront of the national consciousness. Mortenson’s book release was perfectly poised to tap into this rising interest, for the book relates the adventurous tale of his travels through Pakistan in pursuit of summiting K2, bringing his reader, the armchair tourist, along with him as he navigates first the glaciers of the Baltoro, then the equally perilous niceties of Pakistani village etiquette, and finally the ins and outs of business and politics in Central Asia. Relin, the journalist who served as Mortenson’s writer for the book, paints a Pakistan only slightly removed from Rudyard Kipling’s India, cutting the adventure story from the same cloth as *Kim* and with nearly all of Kipling’s colonialist tropes firmly in place. In the opening pages, Relin indulges in describing the wildness of the place, the inhabitability of the land and the lawlessness of the few inhabitants. The author naturalizes the Balti people among whom Mortenson lived, saying at one point that they “were not much different from the ibexes

they hunted” (2006, 25 and 117), describes the local markets as “chaos” (2006, 154), and repeatedly remarks upon the dirt the people live in (2006, 24, 70, 73, and 91). All of these are hallmarks of colonial discourse recurrent in the western depictions of Central Asia. Yet Relin’s reliance on them and the subsequent success of the book (and absence of any mention of its colonialist tone from reviews) highlights how ingrained this paradigm is in western culture. As the subtitle to the book suggests, however, it was intended as more than a romp through Pakistan on a colonial adventure. Mortenson has a mission.

The Iraq and Afghan wars, especially with their associated reports of civilian deaths and strong western reactions to the treatment of women in the region⁵¹, not only drew attention to Central Asia but also pricked the national conscience. For 2006 was not only the year of *Borat*, it was also the year Muhammad Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, won the Nobel Peace Prize for the successful development of microloans, a system⁵² that gives individuals (often women) loans of extremely small amounts of money to start businesses, to help alleviate poverty. And following the colonial logic of “the white man’s burden,” westerners began to seek out ways to help Central Asia, with Greg Mortenson offering them a particularly compelling one – he builds schools, particularly for girls. The book is intended as a long appeal for donations

⁵¹ This is a highly contested and complex issue, and one which is often misunderstood in the west. I have already discussed the iconic image of the veiled woman, and I will be discussing the role of women as recipients of aid in more detail later in this chapter, but here it should be noted that images of women in burqas and reports of the harshness of some Shariat judges towards women not only dominated the western press but were used by some as justification for the wars when both issues, veiling and traditional law, are considerably more complicated than western media has made them seem.

⁵² The system involves more steps than this popular rendition of it makes it appear: the borrower must belong to a group, co-operatives are encouraged, who then impose a level of peer-pressure to make sure that the loan is repaid. Borrowers must also subscribe to a series of principles laid out by the bank that include items on hygiene, the education of children, and the growing of food. The loans are made solely on trust, with no official paper. Loans can be for as little as US\$25-50. Since the success of the Grameen Bank, multiple similar organizations, such as Kiva International, have sprung up following similar practices.

for Mortenson's Central Asia Institute, dedicated to building schools in remote villages across Pakistan and in other Central Asian countries⁵³. This philanthropic interest has driven sales of the book even higher and made it excellent fodder for high school and college reading programs (University of Missouri chose it for its Mizzou Reads program for incoming freshman in 2008, as did Saint Louis University for its similar program the same year). Interestingly, the philanthropic intent of the book's message seems to encourage readers to dismiss the colonial discourse in which it is couched. No doubt, Mortenson's aim to build schools is a good one, but it is questionable to what extent the good intention of one message can supercede the more troubling messages that are conveyed alongside it, for it is unlikely that the book would have been so successful had the colonial adventure narrative been absent. Relin employs techniques common to marketing in his sale of Mortenson's message: he places the desires and needs of the aid recipient secondary to those of the potential donor. I have engaged in this discussion of Mortenson and Relin's work because it demonstrates the connection between the consumption of popular media as well as the intersections of westerners and Central Asians in a common marketplace based around the former's desire to give aid to the latter. If the consumers of *Doonesbury*, *Brenda Starr*, and *Borat* are armchair tourists (see Chapter 2), the consumers depicted in this chapter are armchair missionaries – they hope to benefit the Central Asian artists through the active consumption of Central Asian arts made available through catalogues and websites or by making generous donations, all while remaining safely and comfortably at home.

⁵³ In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that my uncle is an avid supporter of Mortenson's and has given money to the Central Asia Institute in my name.

In recent years, felt products made largely in Central Asia have increased in popularity in the west, especially in the form of Christmas-related ornaments, wreaths, and as a material for children's toys. While felt generally seems to be enjoying a revival of interest, due in part to increased environmental consciousness and a more general rise in interest in craft during more difficult economic times (see Mullins 2009), felt objects produced in Central Asia and with provenances which stress fair trade, environmentally sustainable manufacturing practices, or women makers, in cooperatives or otherwise, are particularly sought after. Indeed, it is difficult to find felt product marketing strategies which do not highlight some sort moral provenance in their sales pitch. This is particularly true on the internet, where many felt objects are sold. The marketing of such crafts, then, scripts their consumption as a philanthropic act – the buyers are led to believe that their purchase will directly contribute to the well being of the maker, the maker's nation, the marketplace itself, and even the earth through their consumption, all without leaving home. This scripting puts the consumer into the role of philanthropist, a role which the consumer may not only be willing to accept but, given the sheer extent to which this marketing strategy is used, may be actively seeking. Further, by marketing such objects through etiological narratives, marketers lead consumers to believe that the objects' histories absent in the mass produced are reinstated. However, because the narratives are so similar and built from the tropes of Central Asia common to popular media, the marketers are not so much rehistoricizing as mythologizing, creating originary tales, "myths" in folkloristic terms, that flatten and ultimately erase the makers because they position the objects as signs for larger histories, "myths" in postmodern terms.

This chapter will first provide a close reading of a number of advertising texts and images used to market Kyrgyz felt, describing how aid and development agencies work in conjunction with online sales sites as mediums between makers and consumers. I hope to examine how, set against the backdrop of common depictions of Central Asia, these advertising pitches attempt to intervene in the popular understanding of Central Asia by presenting a “real” Central Asia represented by the objects for sale and the stereotypic descriptions of their makers. Yet these depictions of the “real” Central Asia and the actual artists often fall far short of their intentions. Because of the ways in which the maker is depicted as Other, product descriptions bear more in common with creation myths than documentaries or field reports. Further, being couched in the language of aid and development, the scripts typically position western buyers as philanthropists in relation to Kyrgyz felt makers, setting a script that effectively flattens the makers and encourages consumers to act out the “white man’s burden” through their purchases. Here, I first investigate how product descriptions act as myths in both folkloristic and semiotic terms. Then I examine to what extent this intervention by philanthropic marketing organizations is successful or ultimately repeats the kinds of colonial discourse typical of mass and popular media images of Central Asia. Finally, I offer a theorization of the philanthropic position – the narrative of philanthropy and missionary work which the consumer implicitly buys into when purchasing these objects – by exploring how these appeals manipulate not only buyers’ understanding of transnational and western gender roles but also the gifting relations and the kinds of moral obligations associated with missionary work.

Discourses of the Marketplace: Aid, Development, and Fair Trade

The discourse of the marketplace is crucial, for in this context the ways in which western society makes meaning are exposed. In the production and stories of the makers themselves, we learn about the makers. In the years of an object's ownership, we learn of the accumulated meanings of a life lived with that object. But in the marketplace, maker, seller, and buyer come together and negotiate a meaning based on larger social constructions of self and Other. At the moment of transaction, buyers reveal the logic of their consumption, which may be more concerned with exoticism, aesthetics, perceived authenticity, or even a nebulous idea of helping someone than with the accuracy or actuality of these attributes. At the marketplace, makers, sellers, and consumers meet with ideas about each other, gleaned from their culture and personal backgrounds, always already in place.

The marketplace itself

This construction of the marketplace owes much to Mary Louise Pratt's description of the "contact zone," a concept that I will return to periodically throughout this work. Pratt defines the contact zone as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations..." (1993, 6). The contact zone, for Pratt, is a space of inherent coercion and inequality born from colonial encounters, but it is also a productive space. While I strongly believe and seek to demonstrate that such inequalities are also at work in the marketplace, I have chosen the marketplace as a guiding metaphor over the contact zone because I would like to offer it eventually as a space, though flawed, for the potential for

equal exchange. First, however, it is helpful to understand briefly how various fields have described the marketplace.

Most scholarly discussions of the “marketplace” have originated either from business studies and economics, which focus on the capital of exchange and not on people or meanings; visual culture, addressing the images and objects exchanged but generally not the location or actors involved; and communications, centering on the media surrounding exchange while often eliding both the marketplace and the object. In folklore, the marketplace has either been a literal site for fieldwork, or a metaphoric space in which either folklorists act as brokers of a cultural commodity or, following Mikhail Bakhtin, a place where the “folk” are able in theory to express themselves to their full creative potential.

Put rather simply, economists writing about the exchange of global goods and services tend to be most concerned with solving economic problems and tend to define the marketplace broadly as any space in which goods or services are bought and sold. American economists Jeffrey Sachs and William Easterly present opposing capitalistic solutions to global poverty, yet both of their goals are to ultimately increase the size of the market by expanding it to places currently too poor to participate. Other economists focus on what is being exchanged, under what legal terms, and at what monetary rate. Yet economists are not concerned with how the objects being exchanged are given meaning or what those meanings are. Further, they are largely unconcerned with the individual and the role of the individual in the processes of the marketplace.

In visual culture and its associated field of art history, when globalization is addressed, the discussion often focuses on the digital, as Arjun Appadurai examines

(“Here and Now” in Mirzoeff 1998, 173-179), or on migrations, usually of people rather than objects, such as Nestor Garcia Canclini and Kobena Mercer’s articles in the same volume. Some visual culturists, particularly those engaged with postcolonial discourse, investigate issues of images in the marketplace and the construction of Others, such as Anne McClintock’s section on nineteenth-century British soap labels in *Imperial Leather* (1995), but these often ignore how these images are engaged with in the marketplace itself and how they are replicated across market levels.

Following the focus of McClintock’s work, media studies, communications scholars, and anthropologists have similarly written on the role of the advertising image. Johan Fornäs, Karin Becker, Erling Bjurström, and Hillevi Ganetz, writing from a media studies perspective, offer a compelling look at the ways media has been sold, used, and consumed in a mall in Sweden in *Consuming Media: Communication, Shopping and Everyday Life* (2007). Their work offers the useful concept of the “translocal” as a space that is both intensely local in its position within a specific given community and yet transnational in both the processes, such as consumption, and the reach of those processes that it contains or engenders at the same time⁵⁴. The authors argue that the modern mall is such a space, but the same can be said of the global art marketplace, because it relies upon the intense locality of the object being consumed in contrast to the presumed transnationality of the consumer. As I will discuss in much more detail later, the object is only desirable if it is perceived as different. Nonetheless, this work is centered on media

⁵⁴ A mall is a phenomenally transnational space, as the authors point out – the form could exist anywhere in the world with little to distinguish one from the next. Indeed, I can personally attest to this as I found the mall in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to be nearly identical to ones near my home in St. Louis, Missouri with little beyond the inclusion of a Kyrgyz shashlik restaurant in the food court and Cyrillic characters on the signage to differentiate them.

rather than people or meanings. Anthropologists also have ventured into studies of the world of advertising, both from the perspective of the advertisers themselves through fieldwork in ad agencies and in terms of the images they produce, as represented by books such as Timothy Dewall Malefyt and Brian Moeran's *Advertising Cultures* (2003). None of the works I have mentioned so far, however, has addressed how meaning is made at the point of consumption, the kinds of representational narratives that marketers invoke, purchasers buy into, and makers may or may not have control over, and the ways in which active consumption of the Other is not only *de rigueur* but promoted at both multiple market levels and in the most unlikely of marketplaces.

As I have stated, folklorists have tended to approach the marketplace from three perspectives: as a field site, as brokers, or as onlookers in a field setting. The latter view⁵⁵ is encompassed most succinctly by Richard Kurin's work *Reflections of a Culture Broker* (1997), which details his work for the Smithsonian and the compromises that inevitably take place when presenting one culture to another. Kurin consistently positions himself as a protector of the peoples whose cultures he seeks to present, which often places him in opposition to both his intended audience and other museum staff. This self-appointed guardianship, while well intended, seems at times to write the artists out of the equation entirely. Also writing from the Smithsonian, but documenting the annual Folklife Festival, Robert Cantwell appears more aware of his ambiguous position vis-à-vis the folk artists performing in the festival in his work, *Ethnomimesis* (1993). Yet while folklorists write about the difficulties they have in maintaining their relationships with the

⁵⁵ The issues of the folklorist as culture broker and the ramifications of that stance, indeed many of the ideas laid out in these paragraphs, are ones I will return to in more depth in chapter five. Here, I hope only to give very brief examples by way of a few well known titles of how folklorists have tended to write about the idea of the marketplace rather than to analyze their works in detail or break theoretical ground.

artists as they engage in such brokerage, the marketplaces in which such brokerage takes place and the consumers of the performances are left either underanalyzed, unexplored, or largely taken for granted. Cantwell's work also describes the marketplace, or at least uses the idea of the marketplace to describe the kind of exchanges that take place between artists and attendees at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. In this sense, he is aware that more can be exchanged than goods or services, knowledge is also a commodity, but his descriptions are generally more evocative than analytic. For him, as for Deborah Kapchan, the marketplace is a fieldwork site, a backdrop rather than an event or performance or thing to be studied (Kapchan 1993).

Kapchan is, in fact, one of the few folklorists who have directly studied the marketplace *as* marketplace. In her article "Hybridization and the Marketplace" in *Western Folklore*, she explores the marketplace as a kind of "event" in Richard Bauman's terms, an enactment of folkloric performance that comprises a genre of its own:

The marketplace is both public event and social process – 'scene,' 'act,' and 'agent,' in Burke's terminology (1969). It is, following Burke, a concept which does not 'avoid ambiguity,' but which 'clearly reveal[s] the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise.' ... The marketplace represents a symbolic locus of contact with the foreign, whether the connection be physical or abstract, in goods, tongues, or ideas. (1993, 308-9)

Kapchan's definitions are extremely useful here in her awareness of the marketplace as a continually shifting process and a space of contact between peoples that can be both safe (especially in comparison to other contact zones, such as political boundaries or wars) and simultaneously destabilizing, because they call into question the participants' assumed worldviews. However, ultimately, Kapchan's marketplace is more "scene" than "agent" and serves less as a subject of study than the site in which she conducted

research. Her ultimate goal, after all, is not to describe the marketplace and its effects, but rather to offer it as a site of productive combination, what she terms hybridization⁵⁶, on the part of the sellers. For all her theorizing, Kapchan seems to reject the marketplace as the folkloric genre she suggests it might be, and yet again, the consumers, both the buyers purchasing goods and the folklorist watching the event, are notably absent. Perhaps the work conceptually closest to what I propose here is *Selling the Indian* (2001), edited by Carter Jones Meyer and Diana Royer, and written predominantly from the fields of American studies, English, and History. This text explores how larger (white) American culture has appropriated and commodified Native cultures, including chapters on the ways in which philanthropy and art have been linked together (see chapters by Trump and Meyer) and the role that tourism has played in creating a marketplace for Native art (Hill and Goertzen).

Drawing upon all of these texts, the marketplace can be formulated as any space in which the exchange of goods and ideas from one person to another and from one culture to another takes place. With the advent of internet sales, the marketplace is no longer necessarily a physical space, like the Moroccan marketplace Kapchan described, nor a permanent one, like Fornäs's mall. Marketplaces, however, can be culturally specific, such as an American flea market or Kyrgyz animal bazaar. Marketplaces also can be contact zones, producing cultures of their own. They are surprisingly conservative and filled with traditions – just think of the ringing of the bell to start each day on Wall Street – while inherently dynamic not only in what they sell and how they sell it but also

⁵⁶ Kapchan uses the term hybridization to simply mean mixing or the existence of multiple meanings or, at times, even code-switching. I believe this to be a misappropriation of Homi Bhabha's original use of the term as the appropriation of symbols from a colonizing culture by the colonized as a form of resistance.

in the kinds of meetings between participants that they allow to take place. The marketplace I describe is thus a space for the exchange of physical goods for monetary currency from one culture to another, goods that serve the functions of tourist art. Further, it is a space in which it is assumed that goods are typically produced through exploitative processes and seeks to either undercut or redress that exploitation through aid, development, and fair trade. Finally, it offers the possibility of encounters between buyers, sellers, and makers and the creation of narratives about those encounters which take on mythic proportions.

Aid and development

Before turning to the advertisements of crafts in catalogues and online, it is helpful to understand some of the terminology common to the world of aid and development which are utilized in the marketing materials for Kyrgyz felt. The terms “aid” and “development” define two related but different approaches by western individuals and organizations to rectify the needs they perceive to exist among the rest of the world’s populations. Each term has a long and storied history, and both forms of intervention continue to exist side by side in today’s world. In this dissertation, I will define the major differences between the two as 1) a matter of the driving paradigm behind the *desire* to help, 2) the location of the responsibility to help, either with the individual or the nation, and 3) the anticipated outcome of help. Aid arises from an individual moral impulse, often though not always couched in Judeo-Christian religious notions that we must assist those seen as impoverished. As with much missionary work, such assistance may come at a cultural price for those being “aided,” such as religious

conversion or the adoption of western modes of dress and lifestyle. Aid, on the part of the aid workers, may be seen as a gift, a sharing of benefits, and as a gift, there may be an assumption of reciprocity or reward⁵⁷ (see Mauss).

Although the roots of development also are rooted in a distinct system of morality based on Judeo-Christian thought, “development” strategies eschew the openly moralistic tones of providing aid as a duty for individuals and transfer the responsibility to help those in need to larger national and international bodies, including not only prosperous first world countries like the United States and Britain but also organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and United Nations. “Development,” like aid, creates relationships of reciprocity, but in this case, the expectations for reciprocity lie between global entities functioning in a global economic sphere where the stakes appear higher. What truly marks development as different from aid is a focus on economics generally and capitalism specifically. The goals of aid may range widely from alleviating hunger to medical intervention to agricultural or technological projects, all ultimately collaborating in the goal of creating a “better,” that is more western, society, whose economic development also typically benefits the donor nations by creating either new consumer markets or better work forces. The publicly stated goals of development projects, however, always keep the wellbeing of the global economy at the center of the discourse. For development, economic markers, such as gross domestic product and access to global markets, are primary, with societal stability based on western democratic models viewed as a secondary benefit of economic success.

⁵⁷ In traditional missionary work, the reciprocal gift comes not from the aid recipients but rather from God, since the missionary’s work promises a place in heaven upon death.

In reality, most projects, including those I will be discussing here, fall somewhere in between the two extremes of aid and development and contain elements of both, in part because western morality, especially in the United States, is so closely tied to notions of capitalism⁵⁸. With this in mind, I have chosen to use the term craft-based aid for all of the projects working to promote traditional art in Central Asia. Even though many of the groups discussed in the following pages, such as the Central Asian Craft Support Association, Kyrgyz Style, and Aid to Artisans, are more clearly oriented towards economic development in their missions, I am primarily interested in the western marketers and consumers of art produced by these organizations rather than the organizations or individual artists themselves. As we shall see, these marketers and consumers are heavily invested in a narrative which endows the individual, rather than the nation, with the ability to inspire social change through moral consumption.

Fair trade

The term “fair trade” also requires a brief explanation here as it appears in the marketing of Kyrgyz crafts and Kyrgyz products featured in sales outlets primarily dedicated to its principles. The term fair trade generally refers to the processes through which the object was produced and obtained. Although no legal definition of fair trade seems to exist, a group of at least 20 organizations, working under the international Fair Trade Labeling Organization based in Germany, monitor and certify companies and products as “fair trade.” In the United States, TransFair USA serves this function. Fair

⁵⁸ The link between capitalism and particularly the Calvinist work ethic is echoed by the American Dream. The idea that everyone is created equal before God opens up the possibility for someone to work their way up from poverty.

trade policies insist on the rights of producers to receive a fair price for their products, to safe and equitable working conditions, to democratic organization, and to direct access to markets; and fair trade also encourages wider community development and environmentally sustainable production methods. The modern fair trade movement is predominantly agricultural, originating in the Netherlands in 1988 in response to a dramatic fall in world coffee prices that led to a particularly exploitative market that disadvantaged small scale coffee growers (TransFair USA 2009). Yet the notion of fair trade has its roots in older craft-oriented organizations, often started by churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that brokered the sale of crafts produced by impoverished communities to wealthier ones as a means of economic development⁵⁹. The advertising texts discussed in this chapter are typically offered by companies specializing in fair trade, either overtly in their mission statements and policies or implied through the language and imagery used by the catalogue or website. Thus, the concepts that guide fair trade permeate these texts. Importantly, however, while the advertisements align themselves with the noble aims of fair trade, development, and aid projects intended to reduce poverty and create social wellbeing, it must be acknowledged that there is great potential for such projects to be fraught with contradictory and problematic messages.

‘Made Fairly In...’: A Close Reading of Advertising Texts

The catalogue *Fair Indigo* specializes in clothes, jewelry and a few crafts that have been purchased in developing countries through fair trade practices. Each of its product descriptions ends with the line “Made fairly in...,” followed by the country in

⁵⁹ I will discuss this history in more depth later in this chapter.

which the product was produced. As a marketing strategy, this line serves to reinforce the company's mission of fair trade in the mind of the consumer, just in case the catalogue's name, the lengthy description of the company's trade practices in the opening pages, and the boxed texts featuring artists' histories and images have not made this abundantly clear. The line insists that this object, the specific one under consideration by the consumer, was made in a specific place and under "fair" conditions. In other words, it provides the product with a history. Interestingly, however, that history is more geographic than personal. The line "made fairly in..." declares *where* the object was made but not *who* made it, and the boxed artists' biographies featured every few pages do not cover all of the objects pictured, thereby allowing a few artists to stand in as stereotypical makers. This elision of the artist suggests that for buyers the idea of *an* artist in a specific impoverished locale is more important than knowing *the* artist, regardless of place.

The concept of selling handmade products as a way of soliciting funds for aid work and providing artisans with overall economic development is hardly new. However, the advent of the web and online shopping coinciding with a rise in global and ecological awareness in the 1990s increased both the number of outlets bringing global art to western markets and the accessibility of such markets to mainstream consumers. In this marketplace, philanthropy is a value added attribute: consumers are willing to spend more for a product if they believe that their purchase is benefiting someone or something. As a result, both sales outlets and the products they offer emphasize their philanthropy. In enticing consumers to sales outlets, marketers must reassure shoppers that the companies they buy from are committed to aid and that the products they offer benefit the consumer,

or at least bolster the consumer's sense of morality. Advertising for these venues relies on phrases that first emphasize the consumer's ability to effect change, thus "do good," and secondly position the consumer as a colonial style missionary helping a generalized global Other, through references to the world, the globe, or difference. While outlets promote themselves in these broad terms, product descriptions highlight those elements of the objects' biographies⁶⁰ that bring their specific Otherness into focus while simultaneously drawing attention to the impoverishment of the maker. This move signals consumers that they can approach these objects in the same way that they approach tourist art – as fetish objects (see discussion below). For Kyrgyz objects, such descriptions simultaneously cite the Kyrgyz's nomadic tradition and tribal culture as well as the country's incorporation in the USSR, despite all of these being largely historic. In selling both the outlets and the products, marketers strive to empower consumers to consume by assuring them that their consumption will have a direct impact on the world through the creation of a viable narrative of philanthropy.

Tourist art as fetish

In the process of ameliorating the losses of modernity, global art, such as Kyrgyz felt, can function as a fetish object, transitioning the power from the Other to the buyer through consumption in the same way that a tourist consumes the cultures he visits. For the tourist, culture is distilled into a work of art which can be transported home to safely contain and signify the Kyrgyz as Other. But as Edward Said has shown, this identifying practice is reflexive – the object signifies more about the western tourist than it does

⁶⁰ I am borrowing the term "object biography" from Jules Prown. He coined it to describe an object's entire history including not only its origin but also its consumption, ownership, and use.

about the Kyrgyz maker, while at the same time maintaining crucial distinctions between self and Other (Ash 2000, 219-20; Csikszentmihaly 1981, 39). The self reference that things contain and their ability to evoke relationships with other people, places, and times generally outweigh the inherent usefulness of those things. The major reason for surrounding oneself with them, then, is their symbolic nature (Csikszentmihaly 1981, 239). In this system, tourist art helps to identify the consumer as a particular kind of person: one who travels, survives, assimilates, and is concerned with larger world issues.

To serve this purpose, the craft object *cum* souvenir must be sufficiently exotic, that is it must *look* Other. After all, tourism is a celebration of differentiation (MacCannell 1989, 13). As the location of tourism must demonstrate what John Urry calls “the binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary,” so too must the souvenir encapsulate the unfamiliar (11). Because marketplaces such as the catalogue Fair Indigo or the Santa Fe Market focus on the convenience and comfort of the consumer in a “small world” approach⁶¹ to non-western art, the buyer’s self-reflexive readings take precedence (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Kimberly Lau has demonstrated the extent to which western consumers act out their engagement in such fetishization of the Other through their espousal of practices, from yoga to tai chi, and in their consumption of goods. The maker exists for the buyer primarily as a rationale. Already endowed with the function of self-identification all objects possess, these crafts bear what Urry terms “aesthetic reflexivity” – they signify the self through their obvious exoticism

⁶¹ This approach to cultural presentation offers specific booths or areas which each display the “highlights” of a specific culture, often geographically arranged. It has been a standard format in the West for everything from the nineteenth-century Crystal Palace to World’s Fairs to Disney World’s Small World or Epcot Center. The implication of such displays is that the viewer will see the most iconic two or three items of any given culture and be able to move swiftly on to the next booth.

(qtd. in Crouch 2003, 10). For the craft buyer who never left home, tourist art exported by humanitarian aid organizations may offer a substitution for the act of traveling while providing the same functions. For this buyer, the act of consumption allows them to perform the role of tourist while maintaining physical and cultural distance, thus tourism becomes a dominant strategy in negotiating one's relationship to the rest of the world and maintaining the position of power in that relationship, as mandated by both colonial history and the casualties of modern life. The global art marketplace offers the possibility of a trip around the world without the inconvenience of flights and inoculations.

The sales outlets

The online marketplace has created an ever-expanding and ever-changing amalgam of outlets that sell art from Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. Kyrgyz felt can be found for sale on websites operated by individual sellers with their own sites such as Kyrgyz Shop⁶², individuals on conglomerate sites, like the Snow Leopard Trust on eBay or Sugarplum Orphans on Etsy⁶³, and regular companies, like Fair Indigo, with their own websites. Yet those that specifically highlight the Kyrgyz origins of their products are also almost exclusively sites with a fair trade or humanitarian mission. Such websites target philanthropic consumers by appealing directly to their sense of “doing good” for

⁶² As far as I am aware, Kyrgyz Shop is the only merchant of felt online selling directly from Kyrgyzstan and marketing in English. While Altyn Oimok, one of the cooperatives I worked with, runs a website, it is not set up well for orders.

⁶³ While eBay is the well-known auction site, Etsy is a cooperative site for crafts. Sellers post one or more pages of their products, usually self-produced, and sales are run through the Etsy company. Unlike eBay, which is organized by product, Etsy is organized by producer/seller. World of Good, which is eBay's philanthropy-oriented site, is separate from eBay itself and functions slightly differently. I will be discussing it in more detail later in this section. While still organized first by product, it also allows searching for products by their “goodprint,” i.e. what is benefitted through the consumer's purchase, and features specific makers.

Others, with the implication, stated or not, that such benevolent actions *will also benefit the consumers themselves*. Outlet mottoes, the brief tag lines that appear on their home pages and often throughout the websites, attempt to deliver this message to potential consumers as memorably and quickly as possible.

The same company that begins each descriptive paragraph with “Made fairly in,” Fair Indigo, also trademarked a slogan that could be representative for the entire global craft marketplace in the west: “Look Good. Feel Good. Do Good.” This triple imperative sums up, in a telling order, how marketers of global crafts see their target audience and sell to them by invoking first the buyer herself as an object of a larger society’s gaze, secondly identify the buyer as a passive agent both courting that gaze and basking in it, and finally spur the buyer as an active agent able to affect society. Thus the philanthropically oriented sales pitch moves the buyer from complete passivity to complete activity through their act of consumption by shifting the focus of the western gaze from the buyer, as its traditional female recipient, onto the maker, who is Other and therefore available to be gazed upon and consumed.

First and foremost, the catalogues and websites want the shopper to “look good” both physically through wearing or using the products proffered for sale and socially through the statement that such items make about the wearer. Further, the shopper may “feel good” about their purchase, knowing that they have not merely shopped but that the production of their new possession fits within their moral code of fairness. This is not to say that they would not buy something that did not openly advance the principles they ascribe to but rather that objects which are associated with them have value added. Because the new object has such value associated with it, it also is able to reduce the

potential guilt associated with shopping in the first place. Finally, the purchase itself is put forth by the slogan as an action of good. Thus, it becomes possible for the buyer to help the world generally, to aid a typically female artist specifically, and to gain a new possession without ever leaving the comfort of her's own home. It is unlikely, however, that the buyer will ever know who precisely was helped or how or by how much. Instead, they have purchased *the hope* that their purchase was helpful.

So lucrative has this marketplace become that even eBay, the giant of online auctions, has added its own World of Good site, which promises “Where your shopping shapes the world”:



Image 9. World of Good header. This logo appears on the top of every page on the World of Good website. (World of Good 2009)

Like Fair Indigo's, World of Good's slogan puts the agency for global economic change directly into the hands of the consumer. Indeed, this motto grants the consumer power not only to influence a single artisan, which, given the huge number of items available for sale each pointing towards a different artist in need, may feel like a meager contribution to the consumer, but the slogan also promises to change the very way the world works. The World of Good consumer is given the opportunity to “shape the world,” presumably to make it a better place or at least one with relatively equal access to markets. This phrase seems to make the consumer godlike, creating the world in her own image through

spreading American values of capitalism. However, as Kimberly Lau points out in her analysis of western practitioners of tai chi and yoga, it is questionable to what “degree...individuals have agency within the consumer society” (2000, 14).

Both Lau’s alternative health practitioners and the consumers of global crafts through philanthropic organizations literally buy into the idea that their consumption creates change. Both involve an act of justifying one’s consumption of the Other by positioning that consumption within a larger paradigm as a form of social and political action. Both groups believe that their consumption creates change in a global capitalist system that has historically been inherently unfair. However, both are also predicated on an impossibility – that active consumption within a system can change that system. For the consumers of alternative health products that Lau discusses, part of their consumption is motivated by the belief that by choosing the alternative rather than the mainstream option, they are “subvert[ing] the larger systems of global capitalism” (2000, 14). Consumers of global crafts, however, are engaged in a curiously contradictory thought pattern, for their consumption is simultaneously subversive of global capitalism, because they chose the handmade and the local (albeit not of their own locality) over the mass produced, and supportive of it, after all part of the point is to bring the makers into the global economy, ultimately to make them better consumers, to shape the world in their own image.

Ultimately, the World of Good consumer is doing something she wants to do – to shop; and World of Good’s motto not only acknowledges that desire but also clearly turns it from a potential negative to a positive. All of the outlets discussed here offer shoppers the opportunity to simultaneously consume and give, or at least the belief that their

consumption is also an act of generosity, thereby removing the stigma of consumption. Marketing researchers Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda identified three kinds of guilt associated with the consumption of goods in the western marketplace: guilt related to others, usually close relations, self, and society (2003, 168). Yet most of this guilt construes consumption as a kind of failure, either in one's relationships or personally. For example, the guilt may be the result of spending a large amount of money on a personal item without consulting one's spouse, or spending more than a pre-determined allowance in a given time period. Social guilt is related to buying products that are perceived as not adhering to social ideals, such as not being eco-friendly or being purely for the enjoyment of the user. The researchers, being marketers themselves, offer several suggestions for how to turn the guilt of consumption to a store's advantage by offering "compensatory or rationalization options," in other words, sales to make consumers feel that they are getting the product for less or else that the purchase is perceived as doing a greater good such as "helping others"⁶⁴ (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003, 168). World of Good and similar outlets are therefore following marketing advice by providing a rationale for consumption, namely, that buying the objects they purvey will help someone in another part of the world. The guilt of consumption is ameliorated by focusing it outward and the shopper can continue shopping with a clear conscience in regard to both her own spending and her social responsibilities.

⁶⁴ The authors of this article offer the following example: "an upscale shoe store runs a campaign at the end of every February (a notorious post-holiday slow time for sales) – the campaign tag reads, "Over 750,000 Americans go homeless each night. Think how many would love to be in your shoes." The campaign allows customers to bring in an old pair of shoes that will be donated to a charity; in return the consumer receives 20% off any new pair of shoes. Such a campaign could be quite successful given it provides both amendment and rationalization options at the time of purchase" (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003, 168)

While Fair Indigo promises that the consumer will look, feel, and do good and eBay hypothesizes a consumer-god able to shop the world better, 10,000 Villages describes not a shopping experience but an anthropological one, with shopping side trips. 10,000 Villages' motto is "Discover a World of Difference" (see Image 13). 10,000 Villages is one of the most well-established outlets for aid-based crafts in the United States and Canada. Founded in 1946 by a Mennonite woman in response to a trip to Puerto Rico where she met impoverished women artisans, the company, still run by the Mennonite Central Committee, brings crafts from 38 countries to 156 retail outlets around North America (Ten Thousand Villages 2009). Unlike World of Good's pointed consumerism, 10,000 Villages positions the buyer as an explorer, discovering the world as though for the first time. And like the colonial explorer, the newly discovered world is available for consumption. The company attempts to mitigate the consumption aspect by providing images and biographies of the artists, but this increased information seems rather to turn explorer into tourist, consuming not only the material objects of the world but the people who created them as well by both drawing attention to and flattening difference⁶⁵.

This formulation of and focus on superficial difference between buyer and maker is paramount for the entire aid-based craft enterprise to work. It allows the consumer to retain a position of power as a colonizer spreading the dominion of global capitalism

⁶⁵ Interestingly, 10,000 Villages maintains separate but linked websites for the United States and Canada. While the US site lands directly on the shopping page and offers a menu bar across the top in which four of the seven selections are aimed at different styles of shopping, the Canadian site is significantly more focused on showing and telling the stories of the artists who produce the goods offered for sale. The differences between the sites may be the result of what appeals work in two different cultural venues. Nonetheless, it implies that American shoppers are less concerned with the specifics of who might be helping than with the objects themselves.

while implying an underlying equality between maker and consumer that excuses the conceit of the philanthropy and the colonization the tourist who wants the cultures and art they consume to be noticeably Other, the philanthropic shopper also requires her purchases to carry a hallmark of difference in by negating the agency of the artist. Like



Image 10. Ten Thousand Villages landing page. (Ten Thousand Villages 2009)

order for her intended philanthropy to be readily noticeable by associates. The commodification of difference, however, furthers the capitalistic project and thus undermines true philanthropy. To repeat Lau's restatement of Stuart Hall's argument about the commodification of difference:

Stuart Hall insightfully describes the sharp political dimension of this desire for commodified, but imagined, difference: global capitalism seeks to maintain impressions of difference through a type of cultural flattening that provides only the impression of particularities, thus extending the power of global capitalism by 'operat[ing] through' and promoting various forms of cultural difference. Difference becomes a highly marketable commodity, and this form of globalization has made it chic 'to eat fifteen different cuisines in any one week,' to wonder at pluralism while taking 'pleasure in the transgressive Other'.... Similarly, just as the impression of difference enables the project of global capitalism, the impression of conservative resistance to such difference has precisely the same effect. As Hall suggests, capitalism is able to maintain its global dominance by

presenting a world in which difference is commodified, sanitized, and thus *neutralized* for easy consumption. (Lau 2000, 11)

The kinds of differences emphasized by the marketing of both global crafts and their sales outlets are ultimately superficial: faces are rarely white but always smiling, while artistic aesthetics are apparently different but not challenging. These differences stand in for an Other that transgresses by his very difference, but they are not transgressions that threaten because they are conveniently repackaged as consumable. It must be noted, however, that it is not the placement of the object itself in the marketplace that “neutralizes” it, but rather the narrative through which it is sold which draws attention to it as different. Thus, while the mottoes of sales outlets might draw consumers’ attention to the concept of difference, marking everything subsumed under the umbrella of the website as Other, the advertisements themselves carry the weight of inventing or describing that difference to drive home the sale.

The advertisements

The language used to describe Kyrgyz felt offered by such outlets reveals a reliance on the kinds of narratives surrounding Central Asia already described – nomadism, traditionality, remoteness, and poverty. While these are almost wholly negative attributes in popular media, forming the basis for satires like *Doonesbury*, the advertisements spin them more positively. Hence tribalism and nomadism become code words that enhance authenticity, and ads are liberally spiced with references to the makers’ culture and traditions, building on buyers’ assumptions that these are qualities Others possess and positioning the objects for sale as fetishes. Thus far, the

advertisements for Kyrgyz art works appeal to consumers by following the pattern of Central Asian representation already established in popular and mass media. But the advertisers are aiming for something more concrete – sales – and to get them, they must offer something more concrete in return, not only in the form of the felt rugs or toys but in the proffered “reality.” After all, this is no fictional “-stan,” or so the advertisements claim. Yet to appeal to a population already primed to think of Central Asia and Central Asians in terms of naturalism, premodernity and debasement, the easiest pitch is the one that does not deny these attributes, but centers and invokes them. Since the sales outlets themselves are aimed at philanthropy, the philanthropic appeal must come through in each pitch, and poverty, unemployment and ideas of fairness, demand an emotional response by pricking viewers’ moral conscience and a pragmatic response that is most easily assuaged through purchase.

The product descriptions for Kyrgyz felt nearly all stress the makers’ nomadic roots as a way of highlighting not only their difference but also their premodernity. As I have argued, the fetish for consuming goods seen as representative of the Other comes from the belief that the Other lives a simpler, more natural, and less technologized (in other words, less modern) lifestyle, and that access to this lifestyle can be gained through possession of objects marked as originating with the Other. These claims of premodernity are marked by references to the Kyrgyz people’s historic nomadism and “tribalism.” In other words, those elements that make the Kyrgyz seem most primitive and Other are foregrounded in the product descriptions. For example:

[Kyrgyzstan’s] people were nomadic horsemen, herding sheep, cattle and goats. Felt making and embroidery are important traditions used in all the

pieces that make up the traditional Kyrgyz nomadic home – a circular yurt. (Original Women)

Figures [in this nativity set] come inside a gaily decorated miniature “yurt” – the traditional felt dwelling of Central Asian nomadic peoples. (The Hunger Site Store)

The workshop that produces our toys is dedicated to preserving the traditional craft of felt making with origins from early nomadic tribes. (Raspberry Kids)

Westerners, overwhelmingly settled themselves, ascribe nomadism a kind of special status that incorporates a romantic ideal of constant travel and premodernity. The nomad has continuous access to the kind of recuperative powers which many westerners feel travel outside their own day to day existence can provide, therefore the nomad is always in a more relaxed, more enlightened state. Further, the nomad lives in closer connection to nature by necessity, for the nomad’s form of travel is not reliant on airplanes and cars but on horseback or foot. Therefore nomadism is positioned as an inherently premodern condition, one which is given up in favor of agrarianism as a group evolves⁶⁶.

Nomadism is not purely positive, however. Because nomads are not part of a geographically stable community, settled people can see them as a threat, believing their actions to be unaccountable. Such viewpoints are typical in western discourse regarding

⁶⁶ Many evolutionary texts of earlier eras placed nomadism as a stage, linking it to hunter/gatherer societies and herding societies. Although most evolutionary anthropologists today do not attach judgment to these stages, claiming that herders are somehow less evolved than farmers, such problematic hierarchies certainly once existed in the field and remain, even if only in vestiges, in popular understandings of these societal classifications. They are perhaps given more weight than they might otherwise be since most of the people making such judgments are themselves settled. Anne McClintock discusses these issues in terms of the Family of Man images common in Victorian evolutionary texts in *Imperial Leather* (1995). The kinds of societal level evolutionary diagrams I am discussing grew out of the diagrams McClintock describes, which portray the comparative “evolution” of various ethnic groups placing whites at the top and all other ethnic groups lower down.

Roma or Traveler populations⁶⁷. Nomadism is only romantic when performed by Others and more specifically Others who are not present in the modern west. Thus, objects produced by nomads come with the potential risk of contamination, which can heighten the attraction to the object, especially as a fetish (see McClintock 1995, 152-155). As a result, the advertisements above stress either the distance between Central Asian nomads and western buyers by placing the nomadism soundly within a longstanding tradition, a distant location, or a no longer extant past. The Kyrgyz fit all of these classifications. Once a strongly nomadic culture, few Kyrgyz are truly nomadic now, having been settled, often by force, by the Soviet government. Those who retain a nomadic lifestyle today typically move only between summer pasture and winter housing in a village rather than the constant travel of western romanticism and generally are not producing felt for sale in the west but rather for their own uses. Nonetheless, the appeal of nomadism is so strong that one description, appearing in *Original Women*, uses the word no less than three times.

Ultimately, nomadism is deployed by marketers and copywriters to stress the essential Otherness of the product by fixing on the distance between maker and consumer:

Today after decades of economic isolation, Kyrgyzstan is building its future on its craft traditions. With increased contact with other cultures and training,...[Kyrgyz women] are bringing these beautiful and graphic rugs to new audiences far from their nomadic yurts. (*Original Women* 2009)

⁶⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of this topic, see current debates on the status of and racism against the Roma in Europe or Traveler communities in the UK and Ireland, such as Robbie McVeigh and Ronit Lentin's *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland* (2002).

Despite having placed Kyrgyz nomadism in the past earlier in the description, the marketers have chosen to bring the sale home by reiterating it, this time in the present, by positioning the artisans in “their nomadic yurts.” This final sentence epitomizes this process of both geographic and evolutionary distancing that allows the consumer to consume the Other safely, since the Other remains far away. While evolutionary distance is signaled by “nomadism” and “tribalism,” geographic distance must be drawn attention to separately.

The sheer geographic distance of Kyrgyzstan from the west appears in most of the product descriptions, but it often appears hand in hand with historical references that reinforce western consumers’ assumptions about the nation’s premodernity:

Kyrgyzstan, on ancient east-west silk route is a landlocked, mountainous country. (Original Women 2009)

Imported from Kyrgyzstan, a Central Asian nation along the famous Silk Road.... (The Hunger Site Store 2009)

For over two and a half thousand years, the nomadic peoples of the remote Tien Shan Mountains in Kyrgyzstan have created their dazzling felt rugs. (UK Home Ideas 2009)

Such descriptions clearly place Kyrgyzstan not only in a part of the world perceived as topographically remote to the west but temporally remote as well. By drawing attention to Kyrgyzstan’s historic location on the Silk Road, marketers cue consumers to associate the products for sale with the epitome of Orientalist exoticism and, ultimately, a place that no longer exists, if it ever did in the first place. After all, the height of the Silk Road as an active trading route is considered to have taken place during the Byzantine Empire in the west, the Timurid Dynasty of Persia, and Mongol Empire coming out of the east, all before the fifteenth century CE. By the nineteenth century, it had nearly been

abandoned as the Persian and Ottoman Empires crumbled and Central Asia was beset by the skirmishes and wars resulting from the colonial aspirations of the Great Game between Britain and Russia. These product descriptions, then, are offering more romanticism than reality in their distancing of the Kyrgyz, but they do so to help preserve the consumer's sense of cultural superiority.

Further, the Original Women description includes two further markers of cultural Otherness common to philanthropic sales appeals: the traditionality of the culture and/or craft and the poverty and need of training of the makers. The idea that culture and tradition are things Other people possess but westerners have lost in the face of modernity is the common misconception that every college level folklore class must address on the first day⁶⁸. The attraction of tourism comes in part from the potential to encounter and consume culture, which the tourist believes himself to be lacking. The consumer of global crafts follows a similar logic, but it is augmented by the sense that the non-western object grants "culture" to the consumer. These claims to culture are signaled in product descriptions by references to the traditionality of the art form.

Felt making is an integral part of the Kyrgyz culture. Felt making and embroidery are important traditions used in all the pieces that make up the traditional Kyrgyz nomadic home – a circular yurt. (Original Women 2009)

While the full veracity of this claim is questionable, its primary purpose is not to instruct but rather to let the consumer know that the objects have the potential to act as tourist art. Its informational quality has as much depth as a standard tourist brochure, offering

⁶⁸ See Toelken's discussion of who possesses folklore (1996, 19). This issue has received a great deal of attention over the years, from William Newell's original listing of what constitutes folklore in 1888, which clearly excluded white Americans from being the folk, to more recent reinterpretations of the field. Regina Bendix addresses the topic over time in her work *In Search of Authenticity* (1997), as does Simon Bronner in *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (1986).

interesting but easily digestible “facts” that can be repeated to future viewers of the object. The information about the maker’s culture marks the objects as “traditional” and thus acceptable fetish objects for consumers who feel that they are estranged from culture. Placing this symbolism within colonial discourse, Susan Stewart calls such objects “souvenir[s] of the exotic,” which help to define the civilized self in contrast to the primitive other and thus uphold colonial distinctions even while the buyer engages in a performance of cultural awareness and understanding (1993, 146). The rhetoric of “cultural sensitivity,” however, both justifies a consumption of the Other rooted in orientalism in consumers’ and marketers’ minds and allows marketers to exploit consumers’ pose of caring by deploying philanthropic appeals that highlight the neediness of Other makers (Lau 2000, 8).

Product descriptions also rely heavily on philanthropic appeals either by depicting Kyrgyzstan in terms of unemployment, poverty, and debasement or by stressing the developmental role that the organization plays in the lives of the artisans. Raspberry Kids’ description of their felt bowling set exemplifies both strategies:

Kyrgyzstan is an economically depressed country in Central Asia.... Since 1992 the workshop has provided vocational training to unemployed women and has worked to raise awareness and find markets for hand-felted crafts. The workshop is trying to improve the economic livelihood of women in their community by creating air and sustainable employment opportunities. The women use locally sourced 100% natural mountain sheep wool to hand felt and hand sew our toys to our design specifications. (2009)

This description draws consumers’ attention directly to Kyrgyzstan’s social problems⁶⁹, which westerners steeped in popular media images of Central Asia accept as a given

⁶⁹ That Kyrgyzstan does suffer from high unemployment cannot be denied, but many of the women making felt were originally trained in other fields and lost their jobs due to the changes that took place following

state, and inserts the western management company, The Playful World, as a force for change. In this description, the women who make the felt toys are given subject status only once and then it is qualified by the final “to our design specifications,” presumably to allay any consumer fears of shoddy workmanship from these dispossessed women.

The focus on training in product descriptions like Raspberry Kids’ offers consumers a pragmatic response to the poverty outlined in the first half. In effect, this advertisement states a given problem, unemployment and lack of skills, and provides the solution, The Playful World workshop funded through consumers purchases. This method relies on consumers’ adherence to the proverb “Give a man a fish and he’ll eat for one day; teach a man to fish and he’ll eat for the rest of his life.”⁷⁰ They believe that their purchase will not simply help provide funds for development projects but will also encourage the learning of specific skills. This philosophy has been one of the guiding principles of not only the organizations discussed here but also a relatively new movement in development ideology that replaced earlier attempts to alleviate global poverty through direct monetary input or economic regulation⁷¹. This ideology places “a stress on participation, on empowerment, on bottom-up as opposed to top-down approaches to development, a stress on process rather than blueprint projects, on

the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, one of the feltmakers and accountant at the Altyn Kol feltmaking cooperative had been a plant manager at a large factory before the Soviet collapse and had been unable to find work in her area after the factory closed.

⁷⁰ This proverb is generally attributed to the Bible, but the attribution is erroneous.

⁷¹ This philosophical difference is what lies at the root of probably the two biggest developmental movements within the United States as represented by the competing work of Jeffrey Sachs, who supports a top-down approach to poverty reduction through a combination of western monetary input and economic and governmental restructuring in poor nations, and William Easterly, who believes that individual solutions to specific problems must come from the communities in need who can then network with organizations and granting institutions. Currently, it seems that Sachs has more of a following in government and development circles, which is perhaps not surprising since his approach most closely resembles the kinds of imperialistic administrative techniques already established and in place in global politics.

indigenous rather than on expert knowledge” (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). While this approach to development might seem to support a more grass roots and potentially empowering form of poverty reduction, it is fraught with pitfalls. First, the local knowledge which is meant to serve as the basis of support is now revealed to the global marketplace, risking intellectual property infringement since such goods are rarely copyrighted. Second, the organizations appear to give the makers agency and knowledge with one hand, while also taking it away with the other by insisting on the makers’ need for training and assistance. The depictions of the makers as innocent of global economic standards or in need of training ultimately patronizes the makers in the same way as early slavery abolitionists’ depictions of Africans as “ ‘simple’ savages” unable to look after themselves without western intervention (Brantlinger 1986, 189).

Consumers may believe that their purchases, by helping development in other parts of the world, are helping to create compensation for a history of global exploitation. Purchases of global crafts may assuage not only the guilt of consumption itself but also the guilt of wealth disparity and uncomfortable histories. The narrative of fair trade, for example, often follows this pattern⁷²: the current use of contracts and fairness in labor practices is meant to ameliorate the history of exploitation in production (Stirrat and Henkel 1997, 76). This kind of consumption, typical of the organizations discussed here as well as by the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) development movement, which has ballooned in the last 20 years, “represents a form of populism and sees itself as attempting to overthrow the remnants of colonialism or the forms of neocolonialism that

⁷² This narrative of fair trade as a compensation for or rectification of previous exploitation is particularly obvious in Indonesian coffee marketing, as coffee production was historically extremely exploitative and thus where fair trade as a marketing device began.

have developed since World War II” (Stirrat and Henkel 1997, 67). In product descriptions, this assertion of populism take become pedantic, as in the Fibernotion advertisement for a Kyrgyz felt donkey:

This beast of burden is laden with charm. Handmade in Kyrgyzstan by artisans who we support through fair trade because the work of every artist or craftsman should be valued. (2009)

Such development projects are intended to empower the typically oppressed on a global level, but they rely on the guilt of westerners who can see their purchase as a kind of moral reparation that simultaneously promotes a less economically stratified global society.

Stirrat and Henkel’s description of the “populism” of development projects is revealed by the focus of marketers and organizations on those who have typically been considered oppressed. Product descriptions make note of women in developing countries as makers and draw attention to the local, the handmade, and the unique:

And these beautiful, naturally colored wool felt rugs, come directly from Kyrgyz village women’s hands. (Original Women 2009)

Handmade in and fair-trade imported from Kyrgyzstan. (The Hunger Site Store 2009)

...made outdoors by the tribal women....each Shyrdak [felt rug] tells a unique story and comes with an explanation of the symbols to reveal their meaning. (UK Home Ideas 2009)

These descriptions, while exposing consumers’ investment in the maker as ordinary, also interestingly fetishize that maker by dissecting her and fixing only on her hands, as exemplified most eerily in the first quotation. The fetish of the handmade is part of western desire for what is perceived as premodern as the handmade is contrasted to the mass produced objects of modernity. To possess something that is “handmade”,

therefore, allows the consumer access to authenticity through what Walter Benjamin refers to as the “aura” of the object⁷³ (1955). What is particularly interesting about these product descriptions, however, is the fetishistic fragmentation of the maker herself that distills the desired authenticity into her hands alone and turns the made object into a kind of phallus⁷⁴, because it has been touched by the Other. However, because it is now endowed with the power of authenticity, the object cannot continue to reside with the Other, making its purchase by westerners that much more necessary, for both the consumer, as a fetishistic act, and western culture, as an imperial one.

Of course, given the western investment in narratives that are consistent with popular depictions of Central Asia, it is unlikely that a product description that showed Kyrgyz feltmakers as individual innovative artists, trained in art schools, or the cooperative leaders as the business women that they most often are would do much to sell the product. Such individualistic genius or success is reserved for the American Dream and thus for Americans. While it may be seen to be replicated around the world, indeed Americans generally will say they believe that it ought to be, it is the classic colonialist trap – the indigenous Other can never live up to the model of the colonizer. What many of these tropes illustrate, however, is the importance of the makers’ stories as a means of marketing. The fixation on the makers interestingly separates advertising which seeks to capitalize on humanitarianism from the standard advertising for mass produced items

⁷³ According to Benjamin, the original art object possesses an aura which makes it the unique carrier of the artist’s genius. While the mass produced and the reproduction have the ability to bring original works of art to the masses, they lose the aura of the original in the process.

⁷⁴ According the theory of the fetish described by Freud, a fetish object works as a phallus. The fetishist suffers from a deep sense of loss of power. In order to assuage this sense of loss, he or she relocates the power from whatever was lost to another object – the fetish. By possessing the object, the fetishist is able to regain the power that was lost by proxy (Freud 2001).

which highlights the desires of the consumer, turning myth-making into a successful marketing strategy.

Mythologizing Global Crafts in Folklore and Semiotics

I'm talking about the difference here between *empathy* and *sympathy*, between feeling *for* the other and feeling *with* the other. The distinction came to matter to me. It still does. When you abandon and betray those with whom you empathize, you're not abandoning or betraying anyone or anything that's as real as yourself. Taken to its extreme, perhaps even pathological, form, empathy is narcissism.

- Russell Banks, *The Darling*

Baudrillard, in his discussion of advertising, claims that the success of advertising through the conflation of the advertising message with the product it sells is possible because of the distinction between products, which contain the social history of their making, and objects, which do not. The advertising for mass made products must hide the exploitative processes of their manufacture by fixing consumers' attention on the object and what it has to offer the consumer rather than the product with its potentially uneasy history (1996, 175). Interestingly, it is precisely the product's history, purportedly cleansed of exploitation, that philanthropy-oriented importers and sales outlets seek to reinstate. By focusing on the makers' stories and leaving the consumers' benefits either to their imagination or buried in the marketing for the outlet itself, philanthropic marketing effectively changes the object back into a product. Yet these histories are so similar to one another that they cease to be histories in the sense of true accounts of the past and instead become etiological myths⁷⁵.

⁷⁵ In the remainder of this chapter, I am using the word "myth" in two unrelated senses: first, in the folkloristic sense as a specific type of narrative that explains origin; second, in the postmodern sense of a second order signifier-signified pair. Each of these meanings aids the explanation of how the advertisement

Mythological narratives

The field of Folklore has a very clear definition of “myth,” developed from a long engagement with the study of mythology from the early solar mythologists, such as Max Müller. While I am aware of that definition and history and draw on them in the first part of this section, I am not claiming that the advertisement narratives *are* myths in the folkloristic sense. I do, however, believe that they attempt to serve some of the same *functions* of myths. As discussed above, these product histories follow similar patterns. They detail the woman’s name, geographic location, a reference to her former hardships, and always end with a glowing report of her current improved status, which is generally indicated by better water, education, or sanitation. Such information creates an origin myth for the object, in which the maker becomes creator. Anthropologist William Bascom defined a myth thus:

Myths are prose narratives, which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. . . . [Their] actions are set in an earlier world, when the earth was different from what it is today, or in another world. . . . (Bascom 1965, 4)

Many of Bascom’s hallmarks of “myth” are applicable to product descriptions of Kyrgyz crafts in philanthropy-based outlets. Such descriptions purport to provide a truthful account of the product’s history by displaying its creator. They are “accepted on faith” by consumers who generally do not research the proffered facts any further, and consumers

narratives are functioning for the consumers, but they do so in very different ways. I have chosen to use the term “myth” for both because it has already been defined clearly in the two different areas, even though this may lead to a certain amount of confusion going forward. The other option, coining my own word for one or the other, seemed an inadequate and inappropriate compromise that would only lead to further confusion rather than resolving it.

are able to cite these narratives later when asked about the product they have purchased by friends. Myths are also regarded as sacred (Bascom 1965, 6). While it may seem that there are few areas less sacred than the capitalist marketplace⁷⁶, philanthropy and philanthropic organizations assume a particular set of morals, which in the west is based on Judeo-Christian beliefs. The consumer, therefore, believes herself to be performing a good act within that moral system, almost a kind of prayer. Because of the moralistic overtones of philanthropic consumption, then, product descriptions can take on an aspect of the sacred, even if they are not intended or overtly read as such.

According to Bascom's definitions, these product descriptions would be construed as legends were it not for the consumer's process of Othering the maker. Legends resemble myths in that they are narratives that are believed to be true. Unlike myths, however, their primary characters are human rather than gods or animals, they take place in the recent instead of the remote past, and depict the "world as it is today" (Bascom 1965, 6). Indeed, it is possible that the believed intent of the philanthropic organizations which produce these narratives is to create something closer to a legend than a myth, since they hope to draw a connection between the maker and consumer by showing the maker's human face. However, the consumer is invested not in similarity but in difference. The product description as a myth serves to heighten that sense of difference by detailing the maker's distance, either cultural, geographic, or both, from the consumer. This distancing, in turn, keeps the maker comfortably separate from the consumer and flattens the maker into an archetypal Creator, working in an Other, premodern world and a mythological age.

⁷⁶ The idea of the marketplace as purely secular is, of course, highly debatable.

By mythologizing the product, then, marketers return it to its object status, in Baudrillard's terms, because although the means of production are now on view, the history built around them is tailored to the desires of the consumer. The felt nativity set⁷⁷ offered by The Hunger Site Store is a good example of this:

Here's an unusual nativity set with a great story behind it! Imported from Kyrgyzstan, a Central Asian nation along the famous Silk Road, this nativity set is crafted entirely from felt fabric and thread. The Holy Family is joined by a camel, a sheep, a donkey, a horse, and the three Wise Men. Figures come inside a gaily decorated miniature "yurt" -- the traditional felt dwelling of Central Asian nomadic peoples.

Imported through Aid to Artisans (ATA), which has worked in Kyrgyzstan since 1995 as part of the USAID-funded Counterpart Consortium. ATA provides training and technical assistance to improve Kyrgyz artisans' access to local, regional, and export markets. (The Hunger Site Store 2009)

This product description offers a mythologized object whose actual history of production is subsumed under the elements of its origins that make it "unusual" on one hand and endow it with the power to provide aid on the other. Kyrgyz felt makers make both these sets and a wide variety of Christmas ornaments for the western market because they have been told by groups like Aid to Artisans that westerners will buy them. Needless to say, in a country that is 90% Muslim, Christmas ornaments and nativities are not traditional items. Consumers, however, are signaled to focus on this "story" in the first line and primed to think of the nativity's origin in terms of a story rather than a history. The story, then, is developed along romantic lines: the set is handmade in Kyrgyzstan, which is described in exotic terms, referencing "the famous Silk Road" and conjuring up images of spice and cloth laden camels led by Marco Polo in a mythological age of Asian exploration. The traditional nomadic life of the maker is brought to bear on the image,

⁷⁷ I actually own this nativity set. It was given to me as a gift several years ago, because of my interest in yurts. I have always found the yurt nativity set particularly fascinating.

but reduced literally as well as figuratively to a “gaily decorated miniature ‘yurt’,” drawing attention to the traditionality of the makers and the premodernity of their lifestyle. The reader is meant to particularly note the word yurt, placed so alluringly in quotations and then defined, even though this is the anglicized Russian term for the structure which in Kyrgyz is known as *bozi*⁷⁸. The description thus provides the product with a history set in a remote past, in an other world, and makes that world mythological by invoking the traditionality of the art form.

Finally, the maker appears at the bottom of the description and then only as the indirect object of the infinitive “to improve” in a sub-clause. The subject of the sentence is the American aid organization Aid to Artisans, who in actuality worked in conjunction with the Kyrgyz group, the Central Asian Craft Support Association (CACSA). By erasing the contribution of CACSA and nearly erasing the artisan, the mythologized description recenters the action away from the moment of production onto the western importer cum explorer, making the object feel as though it were not produced but rather discovered in the same way that America is said to have been “discovered” by Columbus. This emptying the land of non-westerners is what David Spurr refers to as the colonial discourse of “negation,” which denies the existence of the Other (1993, 92). Such language discounts the very humanity of the Kyrgyz makers, thereby fulfilling Bascom’s rule that the myth’s characters are non-human.

This description provides an origin myth for the nativity set that purports to give a product history, a “real” glimpse into Kyrgyz art, but fails to reveal the means of production, because it is focused instead on the desires of the consumers for something

⁷⁸ Because yurt is the accepted English word for this kind of structure, I have continued to use it in this context.

“unusual” with “a great story” that supports their idea that Central Asians *need* western organizations for “training and technical assistance” and therefore need them as consumers. Just as Columbus’s “discovery” of a land already peopled by Native Americans rhetorically opens North America for physical colonization, the product description, as Spurr puts it, “acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire” (1993, 92). Once emptied, western consumers are then able to write a “Central Asia” of their own imagining into existence, one crafted from the tropes of popular media representations of the region and requiring western intervention to bring it into modernity through “training.” This re-creation of Central Asia as the western imaginary, “Central Asia,” moves beyond the fairly straightforward mythologizing of the product to mythologize larger east/west relations. Edward Said describes just this process:

In short, having transported the Orient into modernity, the Orientalist could celebrate his method, and his position, as that of a secular creator, a man who made new worlds as God had once made the old. (1979, 121)

In other words, the product mythology, which turns the maker into a non-human Creator functioning in a mythological era, recreates the consumer as colonial philanthropist while maintaining the consumer’s belief in his own innocence. At the same time, the orientalist myth casts the consumer as Creator of the Kyrgyz, bringing modernity just as Prometheus brought light. This second mythology, of the consumer cum creator, relies on the consumer understanding herself symbolically as philanthropist, that her consumption is enacted for “good,” which itself depends upon the mythologizing of the maker into a symbolic creator. This second level system of signs reveals these mythologies as myths not only in the folkloristic sense but in the postmodern sense as well.

Postmodern myths

Theorist Roland Barthes redefined the term myth to describe a specific semiotic form that relies on a displacement of the signifier from what it signifies. Postmodern myths make a statement about the relationship between another signifier and signified.

To use his example from a *Paris-Match* magazine:

On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (Barthes 1994, 116)

The image contains several layers of meaning. First, a black soldier is giving a salute to the French flag, signifying patriotism. However, read as an image produced on the cover of a mainstream French magazine during the 1950s, when French colonialism was under attack and disintegrating, this seemingly simple sign becomes a more complex statement about the meaning of that sign, that is, as a myth, as a defense against the detractors of the French colonial enterprise.

To return to the yurt nativity, the image of the yurt and the figures of the holy family wearing elements of traditional Kyrgyz dress can simply signify a nativity set. Even with the addition of the accompanying product description, the text as a whole can be taken at face value – here is a nativity set from Kyrgyzstan, where people make felt and once lived in yurts. What changes this image from that seemingly more simplistic kind of sign into a postmodern myth is a combination of the addition of the second paragraph of the description, relating how Aid to Artisans helps Kyrgyz feltmakers, and

the larger context of the nativity's sale on a website dedicated to philanthropy, The Hunger Site Store, in a culture that typically constructs Central Asia as a space ripe for economic and cultural colonialism. These factors help to reiterate the necessity of philanthropy, and even colonialism, in Central Asia by drawing the reader's attention to the "story behind" and then structuring that story so that it highlights Kyrgyzstan's seeming premodernity. It also interestingly hints that the Kyrgyz are making progress in ways approved of by the largely Christian west by making Christian religious paraphernalia. As a result, to read the nativity text as Barthes reads the image on *Paris-Match*: here is a nativity produced in felt by Kyrgyz artists – a set produced so that: a) people all over the world can celebrate the birth of Christ with the same iconography but with regional flavor proving that we are all "brothers in Christ"⁷⁹ and b) Central Asians are in poverty, in need of "training and technical assistance" *provided by the west*. Therefore, Kyrgyzstan needs economic and cultural colonization for the benefit of its own people. As can be seen, such postmodern myths become a slippery slope, yet this is exactly the message the marketer hopes to project, since it is the kind of message most calculated to elicit a response in the form of sales from a consumer determined to do good.

The real danger of such mythologizing lies not in the message the myths impart but in the ways that these myths are constructed as fact. Barthes states that "myth transforms history into nature" (1994, 129). In the case of his French soldier, the French

⁷⁹ Displays of nativity sets from around the world are a fairly common occurrence around Christmas time, at least in the west. Sets from a variety of countries are readily available for purchase from outlets like 10,000 Villages. The message seems to be a missionary affirmation of the universality of Christianity in concert with a kind of simplified multiculturalism that focuses on the veneer of difference as a way to prove similarity. For a more in depth discussion of the problems of the multiculturalist approach, see chapter four and Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996).

Empire becomes a fact. Indeed, the assumption of the reality of the Empire is so strong that Barthes's own imperialism comes out (admittedly tongue in cheek): "*The French Empire? It's just a fact: look at this good Negro who salutes like one of our own boys*" (italics in original 1994, 124). The mythology of the yurt nativity assumes poverty, traditionality, and nomadism are the *natural* state of Kyrgyz people, which thereby *requires* a philanthropic response from the consumer because the Kyrgyz artisans not only lack access to markets but are even in need of "training and technical assistance." By attributing naturalness to the current state of Central Asia, however, the consumer also abdicates responsibility for either the lack of market access or any increased improvement, since if the Kyrgyz fail to escape poverty, it can be blamed on their reverting to their "nature."

Further, because myth turns things into fact, it also depoliticizes them, "it purifies them, makes them innocent," through a denial of the epistemology of that fact (Barthes 1994, 143). By making such western assumptions about Central Asians into fact, these mythologies serve again to emphasize difference. Except, because that difference is now also naturalized, it is no longer the relatively benign display of difference common to multiculturalism but rather the more problematic difference of nineteenth century racial hierarchies that gave white colonizers their *raison d'être* on the basis that non-white peoples were incapable of either governing themselves or making the most of their own resources (McClintock 1995, 37-39). Similarly, western consumers of global aid-based crafts are led to believe that their consumption is required in order for artisans in developing countries to survive. The ability to govern may be granted to all (although this is highly questionable), but the ability to adequately use resources, now through giving

them market access, is still considered the sole province of the west. Just as scientific “facts”/mythologies underlay the nineteenth century colonialism, so now do economic ones support philanthropic consumerism.

Reading these product descriptions as myths reveals the gap between the re-historicized object, Baudrillard’s “product,” that global craft marketers claim to be presenting and the mythologized “objects” they actually do offer. According to Barthes, “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (1994, 142). In other words, the Kyrgyz feltmakers become subsumed under a kind of object amnesia that displaces them from the role of maker to that of the consumer’s beneficiary, i.e. from agent to indirect object of a sub-clause. By producing myths, whether folkloristic or postmodern, which are believed to be true rather than reproducing the truths of the maker’s lives or the consumer’s beliefs, philanthropic sales outlets’ depictions of Central Asia serve less to change the western popular understanding of the region and its people than to augment certain aspects of it, such as the level of poverty, the lack of access, and the role of women as downtrodden bearers of tradition dedicated to pulling themselves up. Further, by mythologizing the Kyrgyz makers, these outlets effectively distance the consumer from the maker by placing the latter into an archetypal role in a narrative that is always already apprehended by the consumer as Other. Adding this to Barthes’s understanding of the role of postmodern mythologies to depoliticize, these product descriptions ultimately serve to reassure consumers of their own innocence in the face of the exploitation of capitalistic processes by replacing the rhetoric of capitalistic sale with colonialistic discourse about the White Man’s Burden.

The Philanthropic Consumer: The Missionary and the Gift

For years, ever since the Civil Rights movement got taken over by blacks, and the white college kids like me and the white lawyers and clergymen were sent home from the South, leaving us with only the splinters that were left of the antiwar movement – SDS, Weathermen, the Yippies, Diggers, and so on, all of whom were white and middle class – I'd felt somehow cheated out of my true mission, as if in my chosen line of work I'd been deprived of an essential tool, and that tool was black people.

-- Russell Banks, *The Darling*

In the marketing of Kyrgyz felt, the consumer is buying as much into the advertising messages that surround the products as into the product itself. Kimberly Lau sums up Jean Baudrillard's discussion of advertising: "it is not the object that we buy as a result of advertising; rather we buy into the ideology of the advertisement" (Lau 2000, 16). In other words, consumers are buying what the advertising pitch promises them, whether it be the sexual attractiveness offered by any number of clothing and liquor ads or a better life for someone in a developing country implied by the marketing of global crafts. The overall message of the advertisements for the Kyrgyz crafts discussed here is one of philanthropy that casts the consumer as a donor, giving a sustaining gift to a Kyrgyz artisan through the act of consumption. The philanthropic script clearly helps sell products, as marketing researchers have found, yet it works through an ambiguous set of rationales which are left to the consumer to fill in. Because the philanthropist gives selflessly to a generally accepted cause aimed at improving the lives of others, the philanthropic consumer is able to recreate her act of consumption as one of giving. This revaluation of the act lets the consumer reassert her innocence both in terms of her consumption, which is now a gift, and her participation in capitalistic neo-colonialism, in

which she is no longer the colonizer but the missionary. The concept of the gift and the colonial missionary must be understood together here.

Sociologist Marcel Mauss most famously theorized the gift. According to Mauss, the act of giving a gift establishes a moral connection between the giver and the receiver. A gift is never given “freely;” instead it places a moral obligation on the receiver to reciprocate (Mauss 1990, 65-66). As a result, the gift is always connected to the giver and symbolic of them (Mauss 1990, 11). Applied to the worlds of development and philanthropic consumption, this concept becomes problematic. The philanthropic consumer, because they seem to believe that their purchases provide help, see their act of consumption as a kind of gift to the maker. This is not a simple exchange of money for goods, but rather a weighted exchange in which the maker receives both money and a gift of faith that the maker will use the money to live “better” – a nebulous, unqualified term that could relate to nutrition, availability of water, education for children, more land, better shelter, or simply greater economic buying power. This gift confers moral obligation upon the maker to use the gift in a way that the donor can recognize as useful and appropriate. Such obligation can become a form of social control, particularly when the consumer is able to place restrictions on how the maker spends money. Many development organizations enact exactly this kind of control by restructuring their giving from donating goods or currency to makers to providing advice and training, thus enacting a form of cultural imperialism (Stirrat and Henkel 1997, 71-72).

The maker provides a symbolic object to reciprocate for the gift of investment on the part of the consumer. The object, therefore, becomes a myth in Barthes’ sense, standing in for the secondary sign of the gift, but the object only reciprocates for the

monetary part of the gift, which is covered by the dictates of capitalist exchange; the moral part of the gift must be reciprocated differently. Because the gift always contains the giver, the act of giving from the west to the east is fraught with orientalism. The object as sign comes to represent not only the Other but also the consumer himself, because as a reciprocal of the gift it reflects the consumer's moral capital. As Stirrat and Henkel state:

...givers receive the reassurance that, despite the immoral nature of the world within which they live and of which they are a part, they can still transcend that world as moral human beings. (1997, 79)

In this way, the object of the Other serves to help define the consumer, just as tourist art says more about the tourist than the culture that produced it, and the west has historically used the Orient as a reflection of itself. Moreover, because only part of the gift is reciprocated by the object itself, the maker is "left in a position of indebtedness and powerlessness" (Stirrat and Henkel 1997, 73). The only way that the maker/recipient can effectively reciprocate the gift in the eyes of the consumer/giver is to follow the advice of the organization in the middle, whose mission is always one of entering global economies and effectively making them more western. As a result, the consumer is no longer engaged in a seemingly simple exchange of goods for capital but rather in a morally-based exchange of giving that seeks to maintain a kind of moral high ground by evoking the same kinds of relationships between westerners and non-westerners as the missionaries of the nineteenth century sought to impose on the indigenous populations among whom they worked.

Missionaries have gone hand in hand with the imperial project nearly from its inception by the early European explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The

importance of the mission lay not only in the practical services it was seen to provide by forging ties with indigenous populations and helping create infrastructure for administrators and merchants but also in the moral justification for imperialism that they provided by masking the inherent violence of imperialism with a discourse of moral necessity. But while the colonial administration is focused on social control, the colonial missionary hopes to create socio-cultural mimesis, to make the Other less different.

Sociologist T.O. Beidelman explains:

...imperialistic colonialism involves a sense of mission, of spreading a nation's vision of society and culture to an alien, subjugated people.... Missionaries invariably aimed at overall changes in the beliefs and actions of native peoples, at colonization of heart and mind as well as body (1982, 4 and 6)

The primary claim of the missionary is an investment in the indigenous population as individuals in an effort to "save" or "civilize", in other words, to assert western culture over the Other, to make the Other less Other. Thus, while the missionary movement was seen as providing imperialism with a softer edge, the effects of missions were often no less problematic, violent, or oppressive of the indigenous population, since they sought to replace religious and cultural beliefs, traditional ways of life, dress and manners, and even language.

The missionary project, as Eric Hobsbawm notes, became easier with the technological developments of the nineteenth century, such as the telegraph, the train, and the steamship, which allowed westerners to travel to the edges of their countries' empires while keeping touch with home (1989, 13-14). If the nineteenth-century technologies increased the ability of westerners to go to the colonies and become missionaries, twentieth and twenty-first-century technologies have made it possible for

westerners to be missionaries without ever leaving home or immersing in the Other's culture and place as their forebears did. The fiction⁸⁰ of the internet is that it has created a global society in which westerners can directly access and thus impact cultural Others from around the world, because we reside in a global village. However, the popular global village metaphor masks the power dynamics at work online that privilege western language, western technologies, and western understandings of visual and material culture. In such a society, it becomes possible to be a missionary for only a few minutes – long enough to place an order for an piece of ethnic art. The philanthropic consumer, therefore, becomes a missionary of the neo-colonialist project, even though it might be the furthest thing from her intentions, because she believes that her purchase is helping someone else specifically by providing “training” or spreading “development,” both incredibly difficult terms to pin down. The craft object becomes a symbol of both the buyer's moral standards and the maker's gratefulness for the buyer's gift of investment. In other words, the object comes to act as a kind of contract which is understood by the consumer as a pledge on the part of the maker to become less Other.

As missionaries of capitalism, philanthropic consumers follow the “teach a man to fish” proverb strictly, but the idea of teaching is not value neutral. The consumers expect a share of fish as thanks for the lesson and they expect to retain control of the fishing

⁸⁰ I call this a fiction, because while the internet has indeed made it possible for people around the world to communicate (assuming there are no language barriers), access to the internet is not universal. Some governments place tight restrictions on what their citizens can do and see online, and in many developing countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, large regions are without the necessary telecommunications infrastructure to support internet use. This was one of the largest problems faced by the Altyn Kol cooperative. They had designed a website to sell their felt rugs directly to the west with the help of a Peace Corps volunteer, but the only hosting sites they could find required a constant DSL link, and they were lucky to get a much slower dial-up connection a few times a week when the lines were all working just right. Making international telephone calls from the village where they are based still required going to the post office and giving an operator the number and waiting for her to tell you which telephone booth to take once she had connected your call.

rights, to belabor the proverb. While they may give money to charity in other aspects of their lives, their consumption of global crafts is not categorized as charity, what Stirrat and Henkel term a “free gift,”⁸¹ but rather as assisting development. Thus, consumers expect to receive something tangible as well as something more intangible to consume from the people they believe themselves to be helping. The philanthropic narrative requires that an exchange take place, since the philanthropy is ultimately designed to support artisans entry into or greater involvement with the global economy based on the belief that once there, these artisans will support themselves. However, the gift portion of the transaction can never be fully repaid, which allows the consumer to retain a sense of cultural superiority and to reassert the moral obligation of the imperial project while asserting his own innocence, in much the same way as a missionary.

Intentions and Unexpected Consequences: Philanthropic Consumption and Gender

It should not be assumed that organizations such as Aid to Artisans or 10,000 Villages or any of the others mentioned here are involved in a large scale confidence game, playing on the consciences of consumers as a way to better sell their products or wittingly advancing the goals of cultural or economic imperialism. These organizations believe in their missions and that their work is truly contributing to better lives for specific people, who in turn impact their communities; the imperialism of either the

⁸¹ The authors take up Jonathan Parry’s argument that people giving to charities, including NGOs, do so out of sheer altruism, that it is possible to give without expecting reciprocation. However, as Stirrat and Henkel explore, even the free donor of money does get a sense of benefitting the world at large and moral sanctity from that gift (1997, 71, 78-79). I agree with Stirrat and Henkel here, since philanthropy, especially in the west, is laden with a Christian understanding of giving, according to which charity on earth is rewarded in heaven. Thus there is an expectation that the gift will be reciprocated, even though it may not be by the recipient of the “gift.”

mission itself or the implied imperialism of the organizations' product marketing are either seen as unimportant or a lesser evil, simply the cost of development (Aid to Artisans 2008). Development programs must be funded somehow, and for those working with artists, selling art seems a logical and simple method for fundraising. Nor are consumers necessarily consciously aware of the narratives they are espousing when they engage with the kinds of marketing discussed above. Instead, they believe that they are buying something they want while making a moral stand, making this kind of consumption special. Yet because this consumption is laden with the weight of missionary history and enacted based on partial truths that mythologize rather than reveal, it neglects the ways in which it acts to support both neo-colonialism, as I have discussed, and the continued oppression of women.

Because of this tie to the missionary, gender has been a major factor in the creation and success of philanthropic shopping. During the nineteenth century, the missionary movement became more and more feminized as the imperial project progressed, and it has become feminized again in twenty-first but in a different way. By the late nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution had changed middle class women's roles in the home from producers to bastions of morality, while at the same time, these same women began to become involved in "good works" outside the home. For many such women, missionary work in the colonies offered a professional life they could not access at home that was sanctioned by their society, which had endowed them with special "moral worth;" hence the archetype of the female missionary entered into western

iconography⁸² (Huber and Luetkehaus 1999:9). As a result, missionary work and its support have often been viewed as the province of western women, and correspondingly, many of the websites and organizations described clearly cater to women consumers, carrying significantly more women's clothing than men's, featuring décor items for the home, and typically laid out with large amounts of white space, which is believed to appeal specifically to women shoppers⁸³. More recently, however, not only are the missionaries mostly women, but the recipients of aid and mission work are also women.

The concept of the women's cooperative that produces traditionally made items for sale in the west as a way of helping the members and their children out of poverty has gained particular attention in the last five years, particularly since Grameen Bank founder Muhammad Yunus was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. Indeed, the focus of much of the west's recent philanthropic activities in the developing world has centered on helping women. In part, this reflects the same nineteenth-century notions of gendered morality that led so many western women to become missionaries in the first place, except that now such heightened moral value is endowed on non-white women, especially those from war torn areas where the men are heavily implicated in ongoing violence. The rationale for focusing development projects on women also comes from a similar impulse to that which leads some consumers to buy ethnic products as a way for compensating for colonialism: to offer compensation for cultural biases, both global and

⁸² To name but a few: in film, Ingrid Bergman's Gladys Aylward in *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958) and Kathrine Hepburn in *The African Queen* (1951); and in literature, Jane in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the multiple families of missionaries in James Michener's *Hawaii* (1966). Perhaps most iconic of all are the non-fictional figures of Mother Theresa internationally and Jane Addams of the settlement house movement within the US.

⁸³ Fair Indigo offers an excellent example of this kind of design layout.

local, that disempower women. Both of these ideas are summed up in the Grameen Bank's statement on why they focus on women:

Women in Bangladesh are neglected by society. Through the opportunity of self-employment and the access to money, Grameen Bank helps to empower those women. In addition, studies have shown that the overall output of development is greater when loans are given to women instead of men, as women are more likely to use their earnings to improve their living situations and to educate their children. (2009, FAQ page)

While Grameen specifies women in Bangladesh, the current development system has become more and more focused on women in recent years, as evidenced by Greg Mortenson's schools for girls and women's centers in Pakistan. Yet what this statement reveals is an assumption that women are essentially more trustworthy and socially invested than men⁸⁴. Indeed, by centering development monies and programs on women, the western world both displaces expectations of its own women to uphold morality onto non-white women, effectively outsourcing morality, and characterizes the developing world as feminine in contrast to the masculine west, a hallmark of orientalist thought (see Said 1979).

The philanthropic consumer's position as capitalist missionary relies on just this kind of gendered structuring of the world, since so much of the marketing highlights women as makers and recipients of aid. As the historic missionaries hoped to bring indigenous populations into the fold of western religion, complete with its gendered hierarchy, so missionary consumers believe that their purchases will bring indigenous

⁸⁴ One could argue that this approach effectively re-entrenches some of the chauvinism that led to women's disenfranchisement in the first place by not providing any deeper cultural change in how girls and boys are raised. However, this is not an argument that can be taken lightly. There is no doubt that educating and empowering women leads to generally better societies, i.e. typically more peaceful and with a higher standard of living by western metrics. The problem is a larger one of how to effect lasting cultural change that does not rely on essentialized notions of gender, which is as much, if not more of, a problem in the west as anywhere else in the world. After all, it is the western assumptions about gender, and women's morality, that has helped to bring about and sustain the kinds imperialism discussed here.

women into the fold of western capitalism, with its infamous glass ceiling. Such a focus on women and helping women, so popular in the west, can have unintended consequences in non-western cultures with different gender relations however.

Rekha Mehra, the Director for Economic Development at the International Center for Research on Women⁸⁵, has argued that supporting women in the small manner of institutions such as the Grameen Bank and Kiva International to do labor that is traditionally considered “women’s work” within their culture often fails to acknowledge the women as real producers, since the work itself is already devalued (1997). Further, turning women into producers does not necessarily give them access to capital or the means of production. As anthropologist Farida Hewitt found in her work among the Balti of northeastern Pakistan, modernization through development projects often backfired for the women. Development programs that taught women skills allowed them to become producers, but their production freed men to leave the villages and lead more western-styled lives with the assurance that, because of the restrictions on contact between genders, their wives and daughters were maintaining traditional lives within the villages. Further, as a family’s wealth increased, so did the restrictions on the daughters of the household, who now had to be protected by being kept in the home for the sake of the men’s honor (Hewitt 2008). In the northern areas of Kyrgyzstan, where much of the felt is produced, access to modernity was not restricted by gender, but many women did feel that they were expected to both maintain traditional life and culture while also supporting

⁸⁵ The International Center for Research on Women is a think tank, located in Washington, D.C. and New Delhi, India. Although their primary activities are in research and publishing, they also organize and support development projects aimed at women throughout the world.

their families financially through their labor⁸⁶. This situation bred a certain amount of resentment, especially among younger women, towards men who were seen as feeling entitled and unwilling to work. Yet the formulaic nature of the marketing materials for non-western goods in conjunction with the philanthropic script that the consumer is encouraged to participate in helps to mask these realities by offering partial stories of women maker's success. After all, the woman whose success with her felt in the western market results in her daughter's increased education and ultimate theft as a desirable wife does not make a story that sells well in the west. For these marketing schemes to work,

⁸⁶ This situation was somewhat complicated by the practice of bride theft, which though illegal was common in the north, especially in the area around Kochkor. In bride theft, a woman is typically taken from her family's home or she is waylaid while out around the town and kept at her prospective husband's home overnight, with the wedding being performed the following day. Bride theft has been growing steadily since the end of Soviet rule in 1991. Approximately half of all Kyrgyz weddings are estimated to be the result of kidnappings, with two-thirds of those being non-consensual (Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007). While technically illegal, multiple factors make it difficult to prosecute. First, a significant number of such thefts are orchestrated by the couple themselves as a form of elopement, especially where the couple is very young or the girl's parents disapprove. Second, another portion are organized between the two sets of parents, in which case both bride and groom can be viewed as victims, or between the prospective husband and the girl's parents, as is common for older men wanting to marry significantly younger women. When the situation is coercive, there is often little recourse for the stolen woman. Once she has spent the night in an unmarried man's house, she is considered no longer pure or desirable, and her parents may refuse to take her back or she may endure worse treatment from them and other people in the town than from her new in-laws because of the perceived taint. Economics can also play a role, particularly if the bride's family is poor and the groom's wealthy. Educated and intelligent women are considered particularly good brides, because they will bring their intelligence to bear on the household, but this effectively removes these women from the general labor force at an early age. Further, although the national government officially condemns the practice, it has also been somewhat dismissive of it, while simultaneously, it has been promoted culturally as an ethnic tradition and those women and activists who fight it risk being perceived as traitors. For more information see the documentary, "Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan" directed by Petr Lom; Cynthia Werner's article on bride theft as a form of nationalism and shaming practices enacted towards the bride, "Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition" (2009); and Russ Kleinbach and Lilly Salimjanova's article discussing the spurious legitimization of bride theft using the traditional Kyrgyz law system, the *adat*, "*Kyz Ala Kachuu* and *Adat*: Non-Consensual Bride Kidnapping and Tradition in Kyrgyzstan" (2007). Because this is a growing problem faced by Kyrgyz women, more research on the practice of bride theft itself, the roles and rights of women who have been victims of bride theft, and the effects of this system on women as producers of felt would be beneficial in order to ascertain if a connection exists between bride theft and the women's networks I have described, and if so, what it is and how it is impacting the daily lives of these women.

they must stay true to the overarching narrative of the west as a creator of the rest of the world in its own purified image.

Conclusion

The global art marketplace is one that thrives on partial particularities and the belief that the image of one woman in one place can stand in for all non-western women. It is a marketplace dedicated to “doing good” but without ever specifying what “good” means and offers consuming as the only method of “doing.” It is a marketplace that insists upon the realism of the images it offers its consumers by repeating what they already believe to be true about a region or a people. It is a marketplace that mythologizes, that turns makers, buyers, and objects into signs, where only the marketers seem to have agency. It is ultimately a marketplace not so much of goods but of good intentions. And what is wrong with good intentions? After all, Kyrgyz women do benefit from the felt they sell in the western marketplace, regardless of the stories attached to it. As Stirrat and Henkel point out, “For them, what matters is less self-realization than access to material goods and services” (1997, 73). For most of the feltmakers I spoke with, the object was just that, an object, and the west was seen as a lucrative market. Some, however, were unhappy with what they felt to be mediocre support from westerners, who would buy felt with overtures of helping improve lives and offer to sell it in the west, but whose sales would fall short of expectations or were only interested in helping so much and no more. Meanwhile, many westerners who set out to serve as sales outlets or importers of Kyrgyz felt were frustrated by cultural differences in standard business practices as well as technology and communication issues. A huge discrepancy

between everyone's expectations and the actuality of how much help was on offer or could be achieved resulted.

Western humanitarian aid organizations promote the production and sale of crafts as a method of development, and there can be no doubt that such groups have done significant good in giving artists better access to global markets and thus "better" lives. Ultimately, Kyrgyz feltmakers are provided with a stream, though unsteady, of income, and western consumers do gain both an object they can use and display and a sense of wellbeing, the moral capital of having engaged in philanthropy. It is perhaps the paradox of the marketing of aid and development through the sale of global crafts that the very narratives that most appeal to white consumers are also those that most often invoke colonial understandings of global relations. However, I am unsure what is truly gained in the long term by a system that thrives off of a kind of myth making that relies on the desires of westerners to reclaim a sense of innocence for both the colonial and neo-colonial projects and for their own complicity in them. For this system deprives the agency of both consumers and makers by insisting that consumers fulfill the moral obligation of philanthropists and by preserving westerners's belief that colonialism has ended and perpetuating the Othering of non-westerners. An audience member at a conference suggested to me that the way around consumption laden with such colonialist rhetoric was through a direct aesthetic engagement with the object; a move that shifts the object from catalogue to vitrine. This approach does recontextualize the object in terms of art and abandons the script of the White Man's Burden that is so troubling in the product descriptions. So it is to the aestheticizing narrative, the object as art work, that I will now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR
BUYING ART/BUYING ETHNICITY: CENTRAL ASIAN CRAFTS AND COLONIAL LOGIC
AT THE SANTA FE INTERNATIONAL FOLK ART MARKET

Ethnographic artifacts are objects of ethnography. They are artifacts created by ethnographers. Objects become ethnographic by virtue of being defined, segmented, detached, and carried away by ethnographers. Such objects are ethnographic not because they were found in a Hungarian peasant household, Kwakiutl village, or Rajasthani market rather than in Buckingham Palace or Michelangelo's studio, but by virtue of the manner in which they have been detached....

- Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, 17-18)

Scholars, collectors, and buyers have constructed the meaning of "folk art" in relation both to art, as an unmarked category, and "folk" as a designation signifying at one end an individual at odds with society and at the other a distinct group of people, often marked by their ethnicity or local community. Simon Bronner has pointed out that how folk art has been defined in the United States has depended largely on whether the emphasis is placed on the first word or the second, drawing attention to the group as "folk" or the object as "art" (1986b, 191-192). While Kyrgyz felt is most often sold directly to the consumer through the kinds of catalogues and online outlets described in chapter three, Kyrgyz artists and their representatives also act as active sellers directly in contact with western buyers through their participation in the folk art marketplace. Made up of day or weekend long events that typically occur on an annual basis throughout the US, this marketplace is special in the ways in which artists and consumers are brought together in a festival-like space that brings to the fore assumptions about art, taste, and Otherness. Like the catalogues, many of these art markets and fairs carry a subtext of

philanthropic consumption, which complicates their primary message of selling objects of artistic excellence.

Moving between a more theoretical discussion of western assumptions about art and taste and specific examples offered by the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market⁸⁷, I will consider how such art markets use the language of art and art consumption. This artistic narrative, like the philanthropic one already discussed, shields the ways in which western visitors use colonial logic as they purchase Kyrgyz textiles as souvenirs to take home, not from travels in Kyrgyzstan itself, but from the much closer venue of the Santa Fe Market. The buyer at Santa Fe, although not a tourist in the traditional sense, nonetheless is engaged in touristic consumption, which centers on creating the self through consuming the Other – a kind of consumption promoted by the aid organizations which support traditional craft production as a means of development. Based on my fieldwork at the Santa Fe Market in 2007 and 2008, I consider how the Santa Fe Market provides a venue for the enactment of a touristic relationship between buyer and maker that is predicated on maintaining the exoticism and Otherness of the artists, in part by contrasting the Santa Fe Market with a similar art market I attended in Tamchy, Kyrgyzstan in 2007. I explore how the structure and events of the Santa Fe Market encourage such a touristic experience, despite the organizers' goals of fostering cross-cultural understanding and the promotion of these artists as artists stated on their website, in the Market's brochure, and in other marketing materials. Indeed, the very claims of

⁸⁷ The official name of the event is the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market. Organizers and attendees appeared to refer to it more conveniently as the Folk Art Market, the Market, or among those from outside of the area, metonymically as simply Santa Fe. For ease, I have chosen to refer to it by either of these latter two appellations. Further, market, with a lowercase m-, will be used in the economic sense of a general place of sales. Thus market forces, for example, refers to those things that affect markets generally. Economic terms will be defined as needed.

multicultural understanding and philanthropy for the artists allows the consumer to collect objects from other cultures “guilt free.” Before I continue, however, I want to make it clear that I am equally implicated in this system – as a white, western consumer and attendee of the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, and perhaps most importantly, as a folklorist intimately engaged in the consumption and brokerage, to use Richard Kurin’s term⁸⁸, of culture.



Image 11. The Santa Fe International Folk Art Market entryway. 2008. (Photo by author)

⁸⁸ As mentioned in chapter three, Richard Kurin explored the idea of folklorist or anthropologist as “culture broker” in his 1997 work *Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian*. Kurin defines a culture brokers as professionals who “study, understand and represent someone’s culture (and sometimes their own) to nonspecialized others,” a process that involves negotiation, dialogue, and mediation (118-119). He contrasts brokerage to either an extractive model of cultural presentation, which involves the theft of cultural artifacts for display, or a “flea market” model, in which representations of all kinds produced by a range of people are presented alongside one another. Cultural brokerage has become guiding model of cultural representation in the last few decades and one that is both espoused and taught by many folklorists, particularly in the public sector.

At the Market

My introduction to the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market in 2007 created an impression of surrealism. I learned about the Market in a conversation with a friend, who spends each summer working in Santa Fe. I knew about the Santa Fe Museum of Folk Art but not the relatively new and separately-run Market held every year on a weekend in July. Knowing my interest in ethnography and art, my friend suggested I might coincide a visit with her with the days of the Market. I checked the Market's website and was startled to find myself looking at precisely the sort of event I had been studying and wanted to write about. While most art fairs and markets are local events, creating venues for local artists to sell their work, the Santa Fe Market reaches out to artists from around the world, to the exclusion, in fact, of locals. This makes it one of the few venues in which artists who live and work in places like Kyrgyzstan come into direct contact with American buyers, and thus one of the few venues in which I could observe these interactions take place.

Coming from the green Midwest, I felt shocked by the absolute brown of Santa Fe – everything was brown, increasing my sense of both surrealism and detachment. As I entered Museum Plaza, the site of the Market, however, the brown was festooned with colors. Colors were draped over everything. Not only did the cloth, pottery, and jewelry add color, the Market itself was shockingly bright with banners, flags, and decorations. Above all, it was cinematic. It felt like the market scene in any number of colonial adventure stories from *Casablanca* to Disney's *Aladdin*, *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* to the recent remake of *The Mummy*. I expected a chase to come through

at any moment, and someone to hide in a large basket. While Santa Fe itself felt unfamiliar and outside of the norm, at least for me, the Market felt equally liminal to the rest of Santa Fe. I stayed until the Market closed and did some shopping of my own. But mostly I watched, listened, and talked to people, made some contacts among the Kyrgyz vendors, and met a friend from an earlier trip to Kyrgyzstan.

One cannot simply look at the International Folk Art Market as a singular event but rather must take into consideration its position within both a history and a calendar of art marketplaces, many of which have cross-cultural or philanthropic missions at their base. The city of Santa Fe prides itself on both its reputation as a destination for artists and admirers of art and its numerous art markets that take place throughout the year and culminate with the famous Indian Market. In addition to the various weekend or week-long markets, the city boasts a large number of museums⁸⁹ and art galleries. As the popular Lonely Planet tourist guide book states: “In Santa Fe, it’s all about the art” (www.lonelyplanet.com 2009). Art is continuously on display and for sale throughout the city, and the Santa Fe tourist is primed to look at and consume art. Yet while Santa Fe has attracted artists from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, whose work is represented in the galleries and museums, it is particularly well known as a place to see and purchase Southwest Native American art. This distinction comes in part from the Indian Market, which has been showcasing Native American arts since 1922.

⁸⁹ These include the Museum of New Mexico, the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in the center of town, alongside numerous historical buildings, as well as the Museum of International Folk Art, Wheelwright Museum, and Museum-Indian Arts Laboratory in a separate area on the edge of the city. The Folk Art Market takes place at this latter venue.

The Indian Market was the brainchild of a group of white intellectuals and artists who resided in the Southwest in the 1910s and '20s – a time during which the US government was actively seeking to assimilate Native peoples through detribalization. This group, led predominantly by archeologist Edgar Hewett, espoused a romantic and colonialistic view of Native Americans generally and the Pueblo peoples in particular as more in touch with nature, spirituality, and community than modern Americans of the day (Meyer 2001). As part of an attempt to promote the value of Native cultures, Hewett, along with writer Mary Austin, became interested in the preservation of Native art and artistic traditions, believing it to “[embody] a special vision lost to modern American culture” (Meyer 2001, 193). While Hewett strove to showcase Pueblo culture at the annual Santa Fe Fiesta, Austin worked to establish the Indian Arts Fund for the purpose of “[collecting] and [preserving] the best examples of Indian art as educational tools for young native [*sic*] artists and [taking] steps to make Indian art a vital, redeeming part of modern American life” (Meyer 2001, 199). Their work ultimately resulted in what was originally known as the Indian Fair spinning off from the Santa Fe Fiesta in 1922.

The Indian Fair later developed into the Indian Market – an event aimed at displaying the finest of local Native artists’ work for sale by outsiders as a way of promoting both traditional Native art in the United States as well as economic development in the Pueblos. As historian Carter Jones Meyer and anthropologist Molly Mullin both point out, however, the Indian Market was founded on inherently racist principles since the privilege of determining what constituted “good” Native art rested almost solely among the white patrons of the event rather than the Native peoples – a situation that has been perpetuated to some degree in the International Folk Art Market,

as I will explore later (2001; 1995). Today, the success, from an economic perspective, and celebrity of the Indian Market has created a ongoing two-tiered market in Native art on the streets of Santa Fe: tourists encounter Native American artists with their artworks, predominantly jewelry, available for sale displayed on rugs around the town square; yet these artists and their work are simultaneously juxtaposed with much more expensive examples of Native American art in the exclusive shops and galleries for which Santa Fe is known. Thus, the International Folk Art Market can be seen as an extension of a larger, longstanding civic project – the display of specific local or ethnic art forms for touristic consumption as a development project aimed at helping the artists and an ethnographic project in documentation.

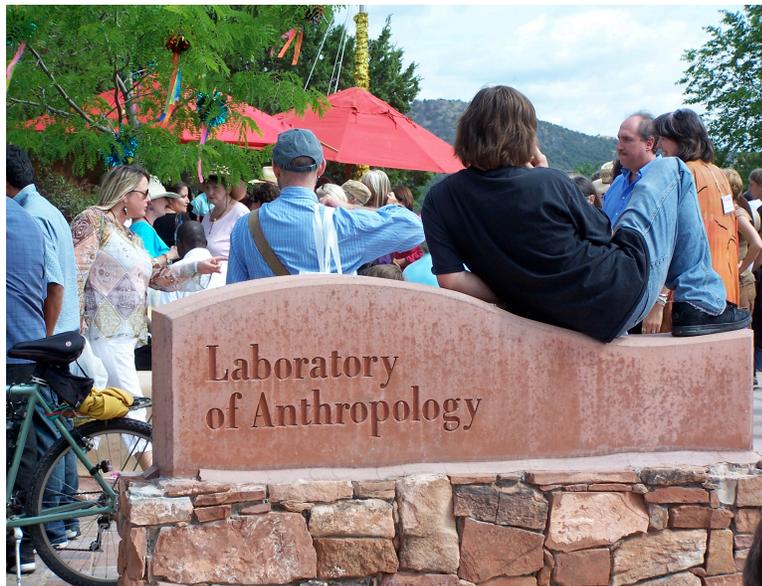


Image 12. A sign for the Laboratory of Anthropology on Museum Plaza, where the International Folk Art Market takes place. The people in the photo are Market visitors, and the tents covering some of the booths can be seen in the background. 2008. (Photo by author)

The Santa Fe International Folk Art Market takes place over the second weekend in July and seeks to bring together artists from around the world to sell their work. Now

in its fifth year, the Market is held annually on the grounds of the Santa Fe Museum of International Folk Art, which underscores the connection between the goods being sold in the grounds and the art inside the Museum, or at least the items available in the gift shop. The Market consists of three large areas of booths for individual artists or artist groups, a stage featuring performances primarily by local New Mexico groups engaged in “ethnic” arts, and a food area with vendors selling almost exclusively either Asian (mostly Thai or Chinese) or New Mexican food. In 2007, the Market invited 110 artists from 40 countries to sell their work over two days to more than 17,000 visitors, 55% of whom came from outside of the Santa Fe area, including 41 states and five different countries. Only artists from outside the United States and those who have immigrated to the United States (although there appeared to be no one from this category in either 2007 or 2008) are invited to apply to show their work⁹⁰. The Market solicits artists from around the world, but an examination of their materials reveals that “international” appears to largely translate as “developing nations.” The conflation of these two terms is underscored by the rhetoric of development and aid throughout the Market’s program. In 2008, the number of artists remained constant, but attendance was expected to increase by 20% to approximately 20,000⁹¹. Total sales at the Market were \$1.3 million in 2006 and \$1.7 million in 2007, with each booth earning \$15,000 on average. Artists can choose to handle sales themselves, if they are able to process credit cards and have a way to cash

⁹⁰ The rationale given for this exclusion by Market organizers is that there are many other outlets for those folk artists from within the United States to show their work. There may be other logistics at work here as well, however. Santa Fe hosts a number of art markets throughout the year, most notably the Spanish art market and the Native American art market. It is possible that the International Folk Art Market established the exclusion of American artists so as not to compete with these other local ventures. The result, however, heightens the sense of artists as Other, as I will discuss in more detail later.

⁹¹ At the time of writing, the total attendance for 2008 had not yet been made public.

personal checks, or they can allow the Market to handle sales for them. Of those artists whose sales were handled by the Market, 73% earned more than \$10,000 net (Santa Fe International Folk Art Market 2009). While most countries were represented by four to five artists, some had only one, and Mexico had nearly 40. These numbers are somewhat misleading, however, since many artists showed their work in the booths together and some had work in several booths⁹². In 2007 and 2008, several Central Asian artist groups were represented at the Market with their own booths, including ones from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Among the booths featuring Kyrgyz artists, one carried only felt rugs and slippers, one specialized in small felt dolls wearing traditional Kyrgyz dress, and the others displayed an assortment of items, including felt rugs, slippers, small figures and toys, and bags as well as some woven and quilted textiles. Additionally, CACSA had a booth in the UNESCO Heritage Award winners area next to the stage.

The organizers of the Folk Art Market, based on the biographies of the board of directors appearing on the Market's website, come from a variety of backgrounds in anthropology, philanthropy, business, museums, art, and the business of art. For example, one board member is a former director of Aid to Artisans, several have served on the boards of various museums, several others have served in the Peace Corps, and many are either entrepreneurs in their own right or else anthropologists specializing in areas or peoples known for their artwork, such as the highlands of Peru. Many are engaged with

⁹² Further, these number reflect the information appearing on the Market's website and in the "Artists' Bios" section of the program. In 2007, however, Mairam Omurzakova (representing the group Altyn Kol) is the only artist listed from Kyrgyzstan. When I attended this market, there were at least two other Kyrgyz feltmakers there – one booth run by CACSA, and the other by Anara Kerimbekova of Kyrgyz Style, a group mostly oriented towards marketing felt rugs which often buys pieces from Altyn Kol; thus Altyn Kol was represented twice but in different places and different ways.

multiple projects aimed at aiding artists and artist communities, either internationally or in the region of Santa Fe (www.folkartmarket.org 2009). Further, the Market was established specifically for the purpose of providing a venue for international artists to present their work to an American buying public. Although the worlds of international aid, development, business, and politics are complex and inextricably tangled together, I believe that the Market organizers' intentions are altruistic – the board members, staff, and volunteers truly hope to “help” international artists.

The artist and the market



Image 13. Dinara Chochunbaeva, director of CACSA, shows a bag to a Market visitor at CACSA's booth. One of the Kyrgyz artists is standing at left. In the background, one of the Market's volunteers can be seen sitting at the booth's table. Most of the textiles seen in this photo are woven rather than felted. They are made of long strips that traditionally were used to tie the large felt pieces to the yurts and are considered their own art form in Kyrgyzstan. (Photo by author)

For the artists, the Market offers a relatively unique opportunity – the chance to sell their work directly to the end user rather than through the more typical channels of

the export market. Most of the artists who present their work at the Market work on a fairly small scale. They might run a store in their local country and they may be involved in export to the west, but many are looking to expand their sales and reach new buyers. Yet the Market is more than simply a venue for increasing sales. The Market also serves as a place for the artists to network with other artists, marketers, and buyers for larger organizations. Market organizers further the mission of the event by supplying both a space for this networking and a series of training courses and events outside of the Market itself to teach artists international business practices. Yet the Market and Santa Fe itself offer the artists another opportunity as well – the chance to be tourists.

Market participation requires coordination, careful budgeting, and advance planning. Artists are selected to participate in the Market through a juried application process; only about one-third of the applicants are accepted, with priority given to those who have not presented at the Market previously and cooperatives of several artists. If more than one art form is to be shown in a single booth, each artist must fill out a separate application for each art form. The financial outlay for the artists is extensive, although many are sponsored by groups or individuals in the US working either directly with artists or through the Market organizers. Travel, shipping, and accommodation all are at the expense of the artists. The Market requires that goods be shipped by air freight, increasing costs but also insuring swift delivery. Furthermore, all of the paperwork for importing the goods falls on the artists as well. The average cost of a round trip airplane ticket from Kyrgyzstan to the US was approximately \$2000 per person in 2007. Add to that the cost of shipping the large, heavy felt rugs, that are the main product of most of the Kyrgyz artists, by air – at least \$1500 – 2000. Most of the Kyrgyz groups sent only

one representative, but given that the GDP per capita estimate for 2007 was \$2000 (compared to \$46,000 in the US), the cost of sending someone to the Market is not only phenomenal but beyond the reach of most groups without sponsorship⁹³ (Central Intelligence Agency 2009). Yet participants are generally eager to come to Santa Fe as attending the Market offers more than just sales.

The Market is designed in part to help foster stronger global economic ties by educating international artists in the basics of getting their work into US markets. To this end, artists arrive in Santa Fe several days before the actual Market begins. Some of these days are spent touring the area and visiting large craft-oriented gift stores for a glimpse at local craft marketing in the US. Santa Fe provides an excellent venue in this regard as a place which has capitalized on its connection to local arts and local artists. For many of the artists, especially those who knew one another from previous years in Santa Fe or other trade shows, the Market functions as a place to network, catch up with colleagues, promote (and hopefully sell) their work, perhaps learn something new, and at the end of the day enjoy themselves. Many of the artists seemed to appreciate this opportunity to relax and take some time off before the rush of the Market, and some use the days and nights leading up to the weekend as a kind of short vacation. As one artist from Africa told me (explaining that she was tired from having stayed up until four in the morning the night before) she works extremely hard all year and so she takes full advantage of the

⁹³ Sponsors are solicited by the Market, which provides full funding for 25-30 first-time groups to attend each year. Sponsorship of a full booth is \$10,000 for a cooperative and \$5000 for a single artist, although lesser amounts are also accepted as a way to underwrite portions of an artist's expenses. Artists must demonstrate need in order to qualify for sponsorship (Santa Fe International Folk Art Market 2009). This said, there also seemed to be some unofficial sponsorship as well. The group Vista 360, an organization that fosters mountain cultures and is based in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, appear to have independently brought over representatives from Altyn Kol, with whom they have a long-standing relationship.

chance to relax for a few days and go out with other artists in between Market obligations. Like tourist destinations everywhere, the liminality of Santa Fe as a tourist site releases the artists from the usual social strictures of home. The desire among artists to relax may be amplified as a perceived reward for their work both during the year and at the Market itself.

The local tours and the more relaxed schedule of the early part of the week allow for an interesting reversal of the touristic gaze, giving those who will spend their weekend being looked at an opportunity to gaze at others. For a few days, these artists are able to be tourists, to observe the exoticism of the US, and to gather stories, knowledge, and images to take home. Though it may be touristic, the artists' gaze, unlike the generic tourists', is limited in its ability to possess. The tours, focused as they are on displaying successful western craft marketing strategies, retain a hierarchy of developed/undeveloped that reinforces the artist's status as an un- or underdeveloped Other. Further, the artists' tourism is contained chronologically by a schedule that puts their Market obligations and Market related interests first, physically by the buses that take them from one venue to another, and spatially by their accommodations, all in a single hotel. The transportation and accommodation of artists is always a logistic problem for organizers and using single locations and large vehicles makes the week's events easier to manage. Using a single hotel can also give the artists more opportunities to make connections and share experiences at the end of the day. However, these aspects are not always considered from the artists' perspective. Robert Cantwell recounts the difficulties that arose during the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife when the artists were transported between the National Mall and their accommodations in the

dorms of Georgetown University on a bus borrowed from the National Zoo, with “ZOO BUS” painted across the sides (1993, 145). On the whole, the artists brought to Santa Fe seemed fairly content with the arrangements and events planned by the organizers, although a few complained of the difficulty of buying last minute supplies, since the hotel was not within walking distance of the larger, inexpensive stores.



Image 14. A performing artist at the Market taking a break and watching the visitors. (Photo by author)

The issue of time availability to be a tourist also causes constraint. The days leading up to the Market are intended by the organizers not so much as a holiday but rather to provide training, thus even the tours and visits to area shops reinforce the business side of being in Santa Fe. Tourism on the part of the artists, then, is a product neither of the Market’s organization nor of simply being in someplace other than home, but rather becomes a direct choice of artists to combine business with pleasure. In

this sense, the artists' tourism could be read as an act of hybridity⁹⁴ – a mimicking of aspects of western tourism on time borrowed from the more “serious” work of Market participation that allows the artists to reassert their own agency and by recasting themselves as travelers exploring the exoticism of America and Santa Fe.

Western translations: Market workshops

In 2007, on the Thursday before the Market, artists participated in a series of workshops. The morning was devoted to pricing workshops to help artists standardize the asking prices for their works according to a model that balances the input of materials and labor against predictions about what the market will pay. In the afternoon, artists attended four out of six workshops covering a range of topics aimed to help them move further into western markets, including information on exporting to the US, international marketing and trade shows, website design, co-operative organization, and finally and most pragmatically booth display, focused on presenting at the Santa Fe Market itself. Each workshop lasted roughly 45 minutes. Most of the workshops were presented by white Americans: for example, a former import shop owner who now works as a wholesaler and consultant with ATA presented the workshop on international sales and

⁹⁴ I am using hybridity in Homi Bhabha's sense as described in *The Location of Culture* (1994). For Bhabha, hybridity is a system of appropriation and revaluation of the signs of the colonizer as a way for the colonized subject to regain agency through subversion. This works here in neo-colonial terms as the artists “play at” being western tourists complete with all of the stereotypical overindulgence and consumption that implies. Several artists I spoke with stated that the Santa Fe Market provided them with a chance to really relax and “let go,” to use the words of one woman, since they were outside of their home countries and regions where no one knew them and visiting the purportedly permissive American culture. Some had commissions from friends or relatives for specific purchases to make or places or practices to see, and many carried cameras, particularly for use outside of the Market grounds. These actions on the part of many of the artists signify an undermining of the colonialistic difference between ethnic Other artist and white American consumer that the Market creates. The artists effectively recreate themselves as hybrids by transforming from their role at the Market itself as highly visible ethnic and artistic Others to less visible unmarked tourists and consumers.

two local interior designers led the booth display workshop. The co-operatives workshops, led by the head of a Peruvian co-op, provided the one exception. These workshops focused on essential information about the realities of shipping and customs, labeling requirements, and other details, some of which seemed to be more relevant to some artists than to others, depending on where they saw themselves within the market structure, what kind of business they hoped to engage in, and their knowledge base. Taken together, the workshops laid out a fairly comprehensive picture of the expectations of western markets and buyers at least on a practical level, which almost wholly subsumed the importance of traditionality to both western cultural and market norms.

Export markets for the kinds of handmade goods available at Santa Fe are typically part of the mainstream market level of consumable products. In other words, they are neither cheaply mass-produced goods sold in high quantities at places like Wal-Mart nor are they high-end, expensive, designer-labeled luxury goods available only in specialty boutiques, galleries and fashion houses. Instead, they fall between these two – closer to luxury items in their general individuality and limited quantities but unable to command anywhere close to the same price (Gibbs 2008). The mainstream market is further divided into categories, like a department store, and each category has its own set of trade shows and buyers. For example, Kyrgyz shyrdak (felt rugs⁹⁵) fit best in two market categories: home textiles, and rugs and floor coverings; however, most of the Kyrgyz groups also produce felt slippers which are part of fashion accessories, toys which fall under children's goods, and Christmas ornaments which fit in the holiday category. Further, all of these items may be considered part of the folk art category, even

⁹⁵ See description and image in Chapter 1.

though in market terms this category really applies more to items perceived as American folk art, such as painted signs and weathervanes.

Because each category has its own trade shows and buyers, artists must immediately learn how the west defines these categories in order to be successful. Yet given the cost of attending each show, the stakes of understanding the market are high. To follow the Kyrgyz example, shyrdak may not do well in a folk art show, even though they are included in places like Santa Fe, because they do not fit western buyers' expectations of what folk art is, based on popular conceptions of the term as relating to singularly American products, and reinforced by the home décor and collectibles press and many folk art museums. Similarly, since most westerners do not think of felt as a typical floor covering, shyrdak may sell better as wall hangings, seat cushions, or table decorations, even though their primary use in Kyrgyzstan is on the floor. Workshop leaders emphasized the point that artists cannot assume that western buyers plan to use the goods in the same way as they were intended, and as I will discuss later, evidence among buyers in Santa Fe bore this out. Further, leaders reiterated over and over that artists must conform their labels, marketing, catalogues, and even their art to western terminology, aesthetics, and expectations.

The insistence on conformity to western standards pervaded the workshops which I attended and pertained to nearly every aspect of the artists' work and the sale of that work. The Peruvian woman who presented on organizing co-operatives stated that although her co-op's impetus is primarily to save the local weaving traditions while making a little money on the side (this particular co-op does not encourage weaving as a full time occupation but rather as a way for village farming families to supplement their

income), they nonetheless coach new weavers in how to modify traditional designs and products for western lifestyles. An example of such modification in Kyrgyz felt is the inclusion of footstools made of pieces of shyrdak produced by groups like Altyn Oimok, as footstools would be highly unusual in a modern Kyrgyz household much less a traditional one. Since goods must be categorized and labeled according to western market sectors, artists must learn the language of the western marketplace to produce sales.

Such reclassification of goods to western nomenclature extended further to the importance given to each descriptive term, again reinforcing western thought patterns that elide individual artists from outside the west. In the grammar of the marketplace, function comes before place of origin; thus as one workshop leader pointed out, a label or catalogue entry can read “Spoon, Handmade of Wood from Mozambique” but not “Handmade Wooden Mozambique Spoon.” While the latter begins with how the spoon was made and from what, emphasizing its production, the former centers on the thing itself – the spoon – and only then specifies how it was made and where. Interestingly, however, this restatement seems to distance the object from its place of production and in turn the culture and person who produced it; “handmade of wood from Mozambique” leaves it unclear whether the spoon itself was made in Mozambique or if the wood simply was grown there. Stressing the object over the maker also moves the object from an individual, attributable work of a specific artist in the eyes of the western consumer and points toward the realm of the mass-produced, where an object’s function is given primacy over its provenance.

This shifting of marketing terms has several results. First, as stated above, it distances the object from its maker, effectively erasing the maker from the marketing and

replacing her or him with an ethnicity or geographic place of origin. This erasure and substitution, in turn, allows marketers to cash in on a paradoxical double thinking on the part of consumers. Marked according to its ethnicity or geographic origin, the object can be marketed as “traditional,” which is often seen as endowed with special, almost spiritual, characteristics, making it desirable to touristic consumers. At the same time, however, because these consumers are culturally schooled in the idea that art is produced by an individual genius as opposed to as part of a tradition, the lack of a specific artist’s name or the lack of marketing of the art *through* the name of the artist (e.g. painting, from Spain by Picasso or a shyrdak of wool from Kyrgyzstan by Altyn Kol as opposed to a Picasso painting or a Altyn Kol shyrdak) moves the object out of the realm of Art⁹⁶ and consequently out of the top, luxury market level. To put it another way and use an example from Santa Fe’s town square, the shifting of attention from artist to object function and place of origin moves the object out of the gallery and onto the blanket’s of the sellers around the square. Thus, while the Santa Fe Market might stress that those presenting their works are traditional artists from cultures around the world, in order to better sell those works, they are encouraged to accommodate their traditions to the west. While it might be possible to argue that shoppers at the Market are exposed to artistic cultures from around the world, because this exposure takes place within the structures and using the language of the western marketplace, it seems more likely that the lasting effects of this exposure reside not in the shoppers but in the artists.

⁹⁶ “Art” is used here to imply that most western consumers engage in an understanding of art following Kant’s notions of taste and thus separate high art from low art. This idea will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Presentation of the goods, in addition to labeling, is expected to conform to western notions of beauty, design, and display both in a sales booth in places like Santa Fe, at trade shows, and in the shipping of the objects to buyers. Western principles of display were explained to the international artists in the booth display workshop by two women who identified themselves as local (Santa Fe) designers. For their workshop, they had borrowed items from the Folk Art Museum's gift shop and supplied cardboard boxes, fabric, and a selection of binder clips, tape, wire, and string. The ensuing workshop was full of do's and don'ts, delivered quickly, in a didactic tone of voice, as the designers proceeded to fill up their sample table and backboard with neatly covered boxes and brightly colored merchandise. Their suggestions included diversifying the levels of items on display by using fabric covered (not draped) boxes, putting out enough products to fill the space while not overcrowding, and grouping items with similar designs together, rather than by use or by the artist's categories, in order to encourage shoppers to buy them as a set. All of their recommendations required some outlay of cash, including a shopping trip to a fabric store and an office supply store at the bare minimum; however, no such shopping trips appeared as part of the artists' itinerary. If they wanted to go, they had to find their own way. Finally, the designers and organizers stated that the Folk Art Market "preferred" the use of natural materials for stands, either wood or wire, rather than the readily available and inexpensive clear plastic stands, although they did not explain why. One can only assume that the goal was make the displays look more "natural," and whether the motivations were aesthetic or environmental, the result emphasized the western connection between Otherness and naturalness. Interestingly, however, many artists chose not to follow this last recommendation.



Image 15. Altyn Kol's booth displaying shirdak and typical Market visitors. 2008. (Photo by author)



Image 16. Booth for a group of artists from Afghanistan, showing a different display style. This style was aimed more directly at promoting their group's humanitarian mission. 2008. (Photo by author)

Suggestions for presentation also extended to sales outside of the Market and trade shows, including the appearance of shipped goods to wholesalers and retailers. One other workshop leader suggested that all items the artists sold should be packaged with

clean, new materials and in such a way that the buyer felt as though they were opening a gift. While for the workshop leader, and presumably for western buyers, such packaging showed the artists' pride in their products, for the artists, this packaging may require a greater investment in supplies which might not be readily available in their country. Further, this insistence on the presentation of mailed packages does not take into account different postal standards and requirements in non-western countries. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, most packaging is done at the post office by the staff, so that the items can be inspected for the customs forms before being sent. Thus, the kind of carefully packaged presentation suggested would be impossible without incurring the additional expense of a courier service like DHL or FedEx. All of these recommendations for display replicate the window dressing of western department stores, such as using vitrines to raise and isolate items seen as important, and keeping space between items that they may be seen in isolation⁹⁷.

That these modes of display are western can be seen in the differences between the type of booths promoted by the Market, with their carefully worded labels layered display, and the booths found at a CACSA sponsored regional craft fair in the small Kyrgyz resort town of Tamchy in August of 2007, which though "organized" bore no labels and whose display more closely resembled the local bazaars. Unlike the larger and more prosperous town of Cholpon-Ata, Tamchy does not contain high-end facilities for

⁹⁷ Developed in France and England during the nineteenth century, such window dressing and shop display originally stood in stark contrast to the collections of museums, which followed the model of the curio cabinet stuffed full of items. However, as museums became required by changes in funding sources to reach out to the general public and compete in the entertainment marketplace, shop display became the inspiration for modern museum exhibit design – literally making the museum object visually consumable (Georgel 1994:117). With the Market situated on the Museum of Folk Art grounds, the boundaries between the Market and Museum are made porous.

wealthy visitors from across Central Asia. Instead, it is primarily a summer destination for local Kyrgyz families from Bishkek on weekend holidays⁹⁸. The Tamchy fair resembled Santa Fe in its use of colored flags to create an atmosphere of festivity and the provision of individual booths for artists. However, the arrangement of these booths and the artists positioning of both themselves and their works demonstrated a noticeable contrast. While in Santa Fe space and careful arrangements were recommended, in Tamchy, goods were more often piled and mixed together in the booths. In both markets, large items could be hung individually across the back of the booth to provide ambiance, and in both, this technique was used as a way to highlight objects like shyrdak. Possibly because of the lack of table space at the Tamchy market, the ground became a prominent showcase, with piles of goods laid out either far in front of the booth or else to the side where possible.

⁹⁸ Cholpon-Ata lies approximately 10 miles east along the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul from Tamchy. The town is substantially larger and more well off, Tamchy and features a number of “luxury” resorts which are mostly patronized by foreigners visiting Kyrgyzstan and ethnic Russians. Several large privately owned dachas lie on the outskirts of Cholpon-Ata, which according to rumors in Kyrgyzstan are primarily owned by members of the Kazakh mafia. Cholpon-Ata is also an administrative center, however, and the closest town to a nearby field of petroglyphs, which is a UNESCO site. Western tourists are now more commonly being encouraged to stay in Tamchy instead of Cholpon-Ata through the Community Based Tourism network. While I was in Tamchy, I encountered a tour group being led by CACSA, two separate smaller groups of French tourists and a pair of Dutch couples traveling together, as well as a Swiss couple who were staying in the same home as I was. A group of Kyrgyz girls I met on the beach said that Tamchy was a popular place among Kyrgyz because it was inexpensive, although western and Kyrgyz tourists rarely interacted and stayed in different styles and levels of accommodation – the former in family run guest houses and the latter in what might be described as a combination of a motel and American-style campground. They were amused by the novelty of finding an American there, since most of the westerners in Kyrgyzstan are European. They invited me to share their dinner one night at their local hotel, which was extremely different from the local home in which I was staying. They slept in a tiny room with no window, keeping the door open for air, although a curtain was stretched across it for privacy. The door could be padlocked from the outside for security when they were not there. They cooked their own meals in an outdoor covered kitchen and dining area, and they would bring their lunch with them down to the beach. For their room and the use of the cooking facilities, they paid roughly one-quarter of what I was paying for a fully enclosed, fully furnished room of my own with breakfast included and a hot shower available on request.



Image 17. Tamchy bazaar for Central Asian crafts, organized by CACSA. 2007. (Photo by author)

In Santa Fe, such display would have been difficult due to the restricted pavement area. Further, the shoppers in Santa Fe seemed to largely ignore those pieces that were on the ground, as though they assumed them to be under negotiation by another buyer or not for sale, since they were physically separate from the items in the booth⁹⁹.

In Santa Fe, artists were encouraged to wear “traditional” clothing and be “available” in front of their works for interactions with buyers, even though many of the artists did not speak English. Thus, most of the interaction between buyers and booth representatives took place not with the artists but with either their interpreters or with Market volunteers, who often knew little or nothing about the objects¹⁰⁰. In Tamchy, artists wore their everyday clothes and more often sat behind their display tables without

⁹⁹ Shoppers’ apparent disregard of objects on the ground seems strange, given that the Native American artists who sell on the square in the center of Santa Fe place their work on the blankets on the ground. It is possible that shoppers at the Market focused more readily on objects on the tables because of the booth format, where tables were already provided.

¹⁰⁰ At one of the Kyrgyz booths in Santa Fe, I found myself explaining the location of Kyrgyzstan and the correct pronunciation of the name to one woman buying a shyrdak (as well as explaining that what she was buying was called a shyrdak and was a traditional artform), since the volunteer who was selling it to her did not know.

exhibiting much open interest in buyers until approached. Indeed, the booths in Tamchy bear a striking resemblance to the booths in the local bazaars in which Kyrgyz buy the majority of their goods¹⁰¹.

Despite these differences, the booths at Santa Fe were closer to those at Tamchy in their presentation, especially later in the day, than they were to the ideal model laid out in the workshop. This may have been an issue of practicality, as there was little storage available for extra merchandise. For someone like Mairam, who was listed as the artist but had in fact brought a large number of shyrdak made by a variety of the members of Altyn Kol (indeed, given the group's 800 members, it is possible that every piece she brought was made by a different woman or group of women), keeping as much on the table as possible may have been an issue of fairness, since Altyn Kol functions as an intermediary seller, passing the money earned for each piece back to its maker. But the

¹⁰¹ Any town of size has its own bazaar and large cities will have several, many specializing in certain kinds of goods (such as clothes or groceries or the famous spice bazaar in Istanbul). The bazaars were promoted under the Soviet government, who built Bishkek's Osh Bazaar in the 1960s. The bazaar consists of a variety of stalls, grouped according to the kinds of merchandise they sell – thus at Osh Bazaar there are distinct sections for vegetables, grains, a building for meats, another housing candy and sweets downstairs and bolts of cloth as well as tailors to sew it upstairs, house wares, and so on. Each stall is run by an individual or family, who choose what stock to carry and set their own prices, usually within a few som (in 2007, 40 som = US\$1). The large bazaars, like Osh, cover huge areas, extending well beyond the original market area and buildings. As one Kyrgyz woman explained, Kyrgyzstan has its own market levels. The lowest level of mass consumer goods is available from the bazaar. Most Kyrgyz buy basic consumables and everyday clothes at the bazaar, filling immediate needs from local nearby shops. Towns like Tamchy, which do not have their own bazaar, may have specific market days or people may travel to the next town. At the next market level, Zum, which is the biggest department store in Bishkek, also runs on the bazaar model of many small, individually run booths; however its prices are noticeably higher and it specializes in larger, more expensive items, such as electronics and washing machines. Curiously, the top floor of Zum, near the appliances, is also the best place in Bishkek to find tourist items, from postcards and t-shirts to lower quality handmade shyrdak and kurak (pieced and quilted textiles, often made up of small squares of fabric in geometric motifs). The highest market level is found in the new malls, most of which seem to have been built by Turkish investors, and closely resemble European, if not American, shopping malls. Bishkek has at least two of these, probably more. The one nearest my lodging featured three air-conditioned floors of shops, including several Turkish boutiques, a movie theater, a food court (which had all of the standards one might expect – American, Chinese, pizza, and kebabs), and a grocery store on the ground floor. These groceries appeared to cater almost entirely to foreigners living in the city, carried many imported items, and had prices several times higher than those available at the bazaar.

similarity may expose the ways in which artists quickly return to familiar models of sale, especially in the intensity and busyness of a space like Santa Fe. The differences between a more local craft market, such as Tamchy, and international markets like Santa Fe, produced in the west as a show of “traditional” art forms by non-western artists, illustrate the extent to which the kinds of training provided by the Santa Fe Market workshops say more about western consumers’ expectations of the marketplace than about the cultures from which the artists came.

The intention of workshop leaders is clearly to help boost artists’ sales by presenting their goods in ways that make sense and seem familiar to western shoppers; however, the implication is that while artists must conform to western norms of commerce, buyers need not alter either their shopping habits or stereotypes in any way. The format of the Market may give the impression of the bazaar, but it is carefully controlled and constructed. The ways in which the Kyrgyz booths at the Market may end up resembling those at Tamchy is more likely to be the result of artists who choose not to adapt entirely to the gift shop model suggested by the workshop organizers, either by conscious choice or simply because their works do not fit into the kind format being recommended. This seems highly likely in the case of a group like Altyn Kol, which carries mostly large shyrdak, which do not fit well into the small booths available at Santa Fe. For many of the artists, including the Kyrgyz women, increasing group sales is crucial, thus the desire to conform to the proffered standards may be strong. On the other hand, if one of the goals of the Market is to increase cross-cultural awareness, it seems that the burden of such awareness currently lies more with the artists than with the consumer, who remains free to inscribe each object with her own desires and ideas. If, for

international artists, the Market is a crash course in western marketing techniques and a rapid repackaging of art forms for western tastes; for the Market's shoppers, it is more like a trip through the galleries and extended gift shop of someplace like the National Geographic Society. While the artists, performances, and food seemed almost pointedly diverse, the Market's patrons were notable for their homogeneity – largely white, female, and between 30 and 70 years of age¹⁰². In other words, they looked a lot like me.

Mapping the Market, mapping the world: Market visitors

Standing still at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market takes some effort, since it is easier to keep moving with the slow-flowing streams of visitors urging everyone forward along the rows of booths. Standing still requires stepping to one side or the other, either into one of the booths or off the pavement onto the dirt. It is a conscious act. Only at the ends of the rows where people spill out and mingle with those coming from other booths is a pause possible, and only in the two designated areas for watching performances and eating from the food stalls is actual stillness encouraged. The Market is in constant motion. Yet standing still, sitting along the edge of the pavement or under the trees in the grassless areas between rows, provided a new perspective on the Market. These areas, designed to help form the terraces between the strips of the parking lot, seem strangely empty compared to the throngs under the tents gazing at the objects for sale. It is striking how much these spaces, simply by their lack of pavement and lack of manmade coverings, act as voids. Few visitors set foot on the dirt and when they do, in

¹⁰² Unfortunately, I do not have audience statistics as they are unavailable. The Market organizers do not collect such information. My conclusion is based on my own observations throughout the fair and rough estimates of those waiting in line at the central cashiers and to board the shuttle bus to and from visitor parking downtown.

order to move around someone moving more slowly or to catch up with friends, they do so for as few steps as possible. The dirt offers a place for artists to get a brief respite, for their children to play, and a spot from which to be voyeuristic – to gaze at the gazers. When I step onto the dirt, I feel removed, totally outside and looking in. Yet standing on the dirt, I can listen to each new visitor approach a single booth, and by standing on the dirt, in the uncharted and unpaved land, I can hear each visitor construct their map of the world through the Market. The first thing that many people say as they approach the booth I am watching is a variation on “Oh, this is Kyrgyzstan” or “Where is this? Where are these things from?”

The Market actively encourages a view of the event as a trip around the world through the use of maps. The main brochure available at the Market as well as the advance marketing materials, including billboards in Albuquerque and the website, make a point of listing the countries represented by graphically highlighting them on a map of the world. On the website, artists are arranged by broad region: Africa, South and Central Asia, Europe and Eurasia, and the most broad of all, the Western Hemisphere. Only the United States is marked out in grey as though to say “there are no folk arts here.” On Sunday, the last day of the Market, “passports” are given out to children, who are encouraged to get a stamp of the flag of each represented country, given out by the artists themselves or, more often, by the volunteers helping in the booths. Once they have checked off every country on their list and collected all of their flags, the children return to the Passport booth to look at a giant map of the world with pins stuck in all the artists’ homes and to receive a button declaring “I traveled the world at the Santa Fe Folk Art Market.” Maps are also available of the Market itself. The center of the program is a map

of the site, and copies of this map are posted around the Market. Thus, both Market organizers and visitors construct the world according to maps; they map the world as they map the Market. But as the people I overheard talking demonstrate, this mapping is more complex than it might seem as it replicates a process of constructing and organizing the world according to the seer – the visitor, the traveler – rather than to those being seen.



Image 18. The Passport program booth for children attending the Market. 2008. (Photo by author)

The process of mapping is one of the initial stages of the colonial enterprise. Mary Louise Pratt describes the rise of some of the earliest European colonial projects in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in conjunction with the rise of taxonomical systems of natural history. While the natural scientists sought to organize the natural world, explorers attempted to fill in the maps beyond the coastlines, and both tried to create “order out of chaos” (1992, 25). The seventeenth and eighteenth-century explorers often combined these two goals: mapping their movements into the interior while documenting the natural flora and fauna they found there, or employing someone else to do so. More

importantly, this documentation centered on naming as Europeans labeled landmarks, rivers, mountains, and plains, replacing any local appellations with European imports in a process of claiming, both physically as land and symbolically as titularly European¹⁰³. As Pratt argues, “the naming, the representing, and the claiming are all one; the naming brings the reality of order into being” (1992:33). Just as these explorers sought to expand and eventually control their world through this process of mapping and naming, so the visitors at the Santa Fe Market follow a similar impulse to create “order” through their initial comments as they approach the booths. The comparison between early European explorers and Market-goers can be made on several levels because of the way the Market is organized. Like the explorer, surrounded by people largely of his own background as he travels to the new worlds on his ship, the Market visitor leaves the familiarity of downtown Santa Fe on a bus full of other visitors. Faced with the complexity of the Santa Fe Market and primed by marketing materials to think in terms of maps, visitors at the Market enact their own circumnavigation of the world, filling in the empty spaces on their maps with iconic crafts.

This process of mapping seemed to follow a distinct pattern among visitors – beginning with the maps provided by the Market in the program available at the gate and at the site where the bus picked visitors up downtown. Two maps guided visitors through the Market. The first, of the Market itself, provided the most information, with an overall

¹⁰³ This process, especially as it was carried out following the first flush of colonial occupation, was often traumatizing for the local population, who found their own lands being referenced according to the paradigms of the colonizer. Brian Friel admirably describes the process and psychological results of colonial renaming in the Irish context in his play *Translations* (1981). Friel’s play also brings up interesting questions relating to the ongoing debates in folklore, anthropology and comparative literature about the potential violence of translation and the power of language. Many scholars have also written on the effects of both mapping and naming on colonial administrations, local populations, and world social and political histories, particularly in Africa.

representation of the site. It resembles a mall map in style: each squared booth marked by a number for easy reference both in the key along the side and in the following pages. Pay stations, the performance stage, food area, museums, and support tents (such as a visitor information booth and first aid, as well as an ATM and the mailing booth) also were marked clearly. This semblance to mall schematics reinforces the commercial purpose of the event and belies its complexity. The Market map lay at the centerfold of the program, making it easily accessible.

The second map depicted a simplified political projection of the world as we are used to seeing it in the United States, with the Western hemisphere on the left and centered on the Atlantic Ocean, Europe, and Africa¹⁰⁴. Unlike the Market map, this map fills only the top third of a single page at the beginning of the section which provides information about each booth alphabetically by country. Different countries' political boundaries are marked by thin black lines. There are no topographical features or cities marked, except for Santa Fe, which is located with a star and appears in bold. The countries represented at the market are colored in with bright orange, yellow, blue, or green like a child's coloring map, and these countries are labeled with their names. What becomes clear looking at this map is how four particular areas seem to jump out in color, while the unrepresented, uncolored, and unnamed countries retire in very light grey against the white background. Asia and the northern half of South America are

¹⁰⁴ The Atlantic-centered projection, although the most common, has been criticized for its focus on Europe and North America, particularly by countries on the Pacific Rim. World maps which placed those countries at the top center of the map are readily available, although primarily as tourist souvenirs in New Zealand and Australia. In a quick Google search for "world maps", excluding close-up views, I found only five maps in the first 200 image hits that did not have the standard Atlantic-centered projection: two were Australian "corrective" maps; one was a cartoon depicting two sixteenth-century maps – one Atlantic centered and the other Pacific centered, reportedly to appease Chinese merchants; one was a modern Pacific-centered map; and the other interestingly centered on the Americas, dividing Asia in half at the eastern edge of India.

particularly noticeable in part because of the brightly highlighted large countries they contain – India, Russia and China, and Brazil. Central Asia springs out in stripes of blue and green. Two smaller areas emerge across Africa, one in the south and one in the west. Mexico jumps out as an even smaller fifth region. But while the upper right and lower left of the map are full of color, the other diagonal, containing North America in one corner and Australia and the south Pacific in the other, is empty, as though undiscovered. This sense of an unfound diagonal is highlighted by the blank spaces covering all of northern and central Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Looking up from these maps, the visitor enters the living space of the Market itself, and like explorers stepping off of a ship or tourists off a plane, she moves from charting to naming.

Approaching each booth, many visitors' first action was to name the country represented, as stated above – "Oh, this is Kyrgyzstan." Such naming was made easy and perhaps encouraged by the signs distributed by the Market listing the artist's name, country, and sponsor, which artists were instructed to hang in one of the upper corners of the back panel of their booth, in clear view for visitors. Since many of the names were long and visitors likely uncertain of their pronunciation, stating the country's name provided an easy method of designating the booth; yet such a pragmatic reading of this naming process fails to take into account larger naming processes and the importance of naming in claims of knowledge and ownership. The labeling of booths by place of origin rather than artist subsume the maker in the same way as the relabeling of the works within the booths do. As David Spurr argues, in order to colonize a territory, it must first be made available for colonization by emptying the land of any previous inhabitants; a process he refers to as negation (1993, 92). In the naming that took place at the Market,

the visitors emptied the land by disregarding the names of the artists themselves, despite the ready availability of those names in both the booths and the Market program. In the days that I spent at the Market, I do not recall hearing any visitor refer to any of the booths by the name of the artist – only by the country or the booth number. This substitution of place for person effectively places the objects for sale outside of western art by denying the individual genius of the artist and transferring the *artist's* creativity in *making* an object into the *visitor's* creativity for *recognizing* what is tasteful¹⁰⁵.

Naming the country helped to place it into the visitor's own internalized view of the world, garnered from the walls of early childhood classrooms and the regular pullout supplements in National Geographic, a view encouraged by the Market's publications. By positioning the country geographically, the visitor is able to draw a series of potential conclusions about that country as well as about the culture that produced the works for sale. For example, an awareness of the ending “–stan” on Kyrgyzstan may lead to assumptions that the country is Muslim, mountainous and arid, at the least and on the more subconscious level at which cultural symbols often work, that the people there are nomadic, lawless, violent, or extremist and the women veiled¹⁰⁶, as discussed in the first chapter¹⁰⁷. Indeed, such associations between the items for sale in the booth and any general knowledge about the place or its region often followed the initial naming; as one

¹⁰⁵ I will discuss this issue of taste and the location of creative genius later in this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ None of the Kyrgyz women wore veils, in the western understanding of a Muslim *hijab*, which fits closely to cover the face and neck; however, one did wear a head scarf in the Kyrgyz style – covering the hair and knotted at the nape of the neck. The Kyrgyz style of head scarf bears more of a resemblance to traditional women's head coverings throughout Eastern Europe and Russia. They often chose to only wear traditional dress one of the two days or else only on Market grounds.

¹⁰⁷ To what extent these rapid associations take place would be impossible to know without more in-depth psychological research. That some people do make them, however, was clear from the comments I overheard at the Market at the various Central Asian booths particularly linking Central Asian countries with Muslim fundamentalism.

woman said, “Kyrgyzstan. I think it’s Muslim¹⁰⁸.” For some, any knowledge seemed to be better than no knowledge, and thus spurious information was also recited, with facts about one Central Asian country standing in for another. The importance of knowledge is paramount here, for to have knowledge suggests the visitor is more than a casual tourist passing through on vacation.

Naming not only displays the visitor’s knowledge but gives her proprietary rights as well. As Pratt has stated, to name is also to claim (1992, 33). By naming each booth, visitors both demonstrated what knowledge they had of a place and increased their knowledge by symbolically connecting each country with the art form found in the booth. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this was a relatively easy process, as all of the Kyrgyz booths carried felt shyrdak except for Erkubu Djumagulova’s, which carried her felt dolls (some of which were holding tiny rolled felt rugs). Further, only one artist not from Kyrgyzstan carried any felt – Narantsetseg Sambuu of Mongolia. The connection between Kyrgyzstan and shyrdak was solidified. Other countries, however, had more than one art form on display. Mexico, for example, was represented by a large number of artists working in a wide range of media, including ceramics, silver, woven textiles, wood, and even wax and papier-mâché. Yet as the visitor gained a sense of the colors, textures, techniques, and motifs “typical” of each artist, she could extend these “typical” aspects to the entire culture of the country as a whole through the replacement of the artist with the country. With this increased knowledge about the country itself, the visitor could later lay

¹⁰⁸ Kyrgyzstan is predominantly Muslim, but the level to which it is practiced may be compared roughly to the level to which Christianity is practiced in the United States. If anything, much of Kyrgyzstan appeared to be more secular than the US. There are fundamentalists in some areas, every town has a mosque, but many people, who label themselves as Muslim, do not actively practice, and many people practice a kind of syncretism, combining Islam with animist beliefs.

claim to an expertise in all arts of that country. I saw precisely this kind of claiming of both a country and status through knowledge on the bus on the way to the Market grounds in 2008, when one woman asserted to her friend, a Market first-timer, that a given booth was clearly Pakistani. She was able to claim such knowledge because she had attended the Market in previous years. (It turned out to be South African as the bus arrived close enough for the signage to be legible, proving the interchangeability of ethnic difference in the western mindset.) Part of the claims to knowledge on the part of Market visitors rests on a perception of themselves as educated people buying from less-educated Others, what Pratt describes in the early colonial era as the lettered explorer encountering the “non-lettered peasant” (1997, 35). Such a binary is upheld by the use of the word “folk” in the International Folk Art Market’s name, implying an historical construction of “folk” as inherently pre-modern¹⁰⁹.



Image 19. Artist from South Africa, dressed in traditional clothing styles, works on weaving a basket while sitting at her booth at the Market. 2008. (Photo by author)

¹⁰⁹ This concept of folk and folk art is touched on in more detail later in this chapter but forms the basis of chapter five.



Image 20. Two Kyrgyz feltmakers jokingly pose for a picture. Kulbar Toksombaeva, on the left, wears traditional Kyrgyz style clothing but with a modern felted floral shawl around her shoulders. Altynai Osmoeva, on the right, is dressed in her everyday clothing, with a felt hair piece of her own design. Altynai is playing with perceptions of Market artists as “traditional.” 2008. (Photo by author)

This contrast between modern visitor and “folk” artist is upheld by the Market organizers’ suggestion that the artists wear traditional ethnic dress. Many of the artists complied and had brought elements of their ethnic dress or entire costumes specifically to wear at the Market. About half of the Kyrgyz women at the booths wore some level of traditional dress. Most often, this involved a long full dress with a long, embroidered, velvet, sleeveless coat over it. A few also wore traditional Kyrgyz hats: either the small, shorter, fur-trimmed round hat with its pointed top or the tall, wrapped, cloth *elechek*,

which is considered a national symbol. Neither of these are worn in Kyrgyzstan except for special occasions that call specifically for ethnic dress, such as some weddings or funerals. The Kyrgyz women artists were clearly “dressing up” for the Market, and many chose to only wear traditional Kyrgyz clothing for one day. As one complained, it was too hot. The Market organizers’ sartorial recommendation, however, helped to create an easily identifiable site of difference between visitors and artists that effectively kept artists as Others and on display for as long as they remained traditionally dressed. This could be the full day depending on the difficulty of changing. The suggestion to wear traditional dress should not be seen as entirely negative, however, as many artists were proud to proclaim their ethnicity sartorially at the Market. Nonetheless, they seemed very cognizant of westerners’ reactions to ethnic or traditional clothing styles and roles which they assumed by choosing to wear it or not. Several artists joked with one another that putting on their regular (non-traditional) clothes allowed them to be “incognito” as they walked through Santa Fe in the evenings, since few Market visitors would recognize them out of traditional dress. On some level, then, the artists can be construed as consciously performing the role of “folk” for the buying audience at the Market grounds. Indeed, both artists and organizers work together to construct this performance of “folk” and, more interestingly, to keep visitors believing that what the performance depicts is authentic¹¹⁰, in part by providing supportive reference materials, such as the maps.

Like the early explorer reaching into the interiors of the continent beyond the coastal outlines, the Market visitor attempts to fill in mental maps of both the Market itself and the world. Encouraged to this task by Market publications, the visitor seeks to

¹¹⁰ I will be delving into this issue of authenticity and the value placed on the authentic in Chapter Five.

establish names and gain images and perhaps collect samples from the booths, representing the extent of their travels and the cultures of the “countries” visited¹¹¹. It is this last activity that furthers the colonial project reinscribed by the Market; in the moment of purchase, as Said puts it, “scientific geography [gives] way to commercial geography” (1979, 218) and the expansion of knowledge becomes nearly synonymous with the acquisition of goods. It is important to keep in mind that visitors come to the Market to *buy*, and what they hope to purchase are objects whose characteristics have been predetermined by the Market organizers as “international folk art.” Within the first term lies a system of maps and a kind of navigation of the world as tourist and explorer, but the second and third terms are also crucial, and carry with them specific histories that are also at work in the marketplace.

Yet, the mapping encouraged by the Santa Fe Market casts Market visitors as travelers. As a result, many of these visitors are effectively shopping for tourist art. For this buyer, the act of consumption allows them to perform the role of tourist, while maintaining physical and cultural distance. Yet like a western tourist in Kyrgyzstan, the buyer at Santa Fe brings to her purchase with some of the same expectations of acquiring personal meaning and authenticity in the shape of a Kyrgyz for herself felt rug or slippers. Kimberly Lau has demonstrated the extent to which western consumers act out their engagement in such fetishization of the Other through their espousal of practices, from yoga to tai chi, and in their consumption of goods made by “others” (2000).

Because marketplaces like the Santa Fe Market focus on the convenience and comfort of

¹¹¹ Given this mapping system, it is interesting that the Market does not arrange its booths according to a geographic system, with all the Central American booths in one quarter, the Asian booths in another. Such an organization, however, may betray the lack of those areas not represented, such as the South Pacific, as well as the comparatively large numbers from other areas, like Mexico.

the consumer in a “small world” approach to non-western art, the buyer’s self-reflexive readings are able to take precedence over the desired messages of the makers, sellers, and presenters (in this case the organizers of the Santa Fe Market). Thus, the buyer may miss crucial information that the maker wished to convey. The maker exists for the buyer primarily as a rationale, an Other in need of aid. And the rhetoric’s of aid and western multicultural sensitivities justify a consumption of this Other which is rooted in orientalism (Lau 2000, 8).

To function as tourist art, the art object cum souvenir must be sufficiently exotic, that is, it must *look* Other. As the location of tourism must demonstrate what John Urry calls “the binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary,” so too must the souvenir encapsulate the unfamiliar (1990, 11). Such a search for the exotic was encapsulated by the comments of buyers at the 2007 Santa Fe International Folk Art Market as they compared their purchases. One woman holding up an Uzbek silk ikat shawl commented, “I can wear it to that wedding and no one else will have anything like it” (fieldwork at Santa Fe 2007). Already endowed with the function of self-identification all objects possess, these crafts bear what Urry terms “aesthetic reflexivity” – they signify the self through their obvious exoticism (qtd. in Crouch 2003, 10). Placing this idea within colonialist thought, Susan Stewart calls such objects “souvenir[s] of the exotic,” which help to define the civilized self in contrast to the primitive other and thus uphold colonial distinctions even while the buyer engages in what is perceived to be a performance of cultural awareness and understanding (1993, 146).

The collection of tourist art creates a double sense of “bliss outside time,” first through its acquisition during travel and then through its movement into their own personal museum (Huysen 1995, 27).

The need for auratic objects, for permanent embodiments, for the experience of the out-of-the-ordinary, seems indisputably a key factor of our museumphilia. . . . The materiality of the objects themselves seems to function like a guarantee against simulation. . . . (Huysen 1995, 33-4)

Cultural and literary scholar, Andreas Huysen, brings together the importance of both authenticity and the naturalness/primitiveness of the Other for the tourist. By possessing tourist art, which is perceived as singular, authentic, and natural, the tourist allays her fears of modernization, symbolized by the mass-produced, the simulacra, and the synthetic¹¹². Yet this tendency to create a personal museum, seen by the tourist as preservation of both the object and her own status, instead is a process of “killing, freezing, sterilizing, dehistoricizing and decontextualizing” art objects (Huysen 1995, 30). Further, the tourist is able to use the art object in a larger project of scientific classification, itself a kind of mapping. For the tourist returning home, the souvenir comes to stand for an entire place within a collection of other representative objects which signify the world to the owner and the owner to her community as worldly (Wilson 1999, 242). However, the act of classification is also ultimately a colonialistic one, since by consuming, reinterpreting, and classifying the collection to his own system, the tourist possesses and controls the Other (Hoganson 2003; Pratt 1992; Spurr 1993).

¹¹² The idea of simulacra has been explored extensively by Plato (1955), who described it in the allegory of the cave, and much later by Jean Baudrillard (1988). For both, simulacra are entirely negative. More germane to this discussion, however, is Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which appeared in *Illuminations* (1955). For Benjamin, an art object contains a specific aura. This aura cannot be fully imparted through reproductions of the art object, even though such reproductions allow more people to experience the artwork than might have otherwise. This is also the aura that Huysen refers to in his phrase “auratic objects.”

These processes of museumization and classification require a fragmentation of meaning that distances the object from its originating culture and purpose and reinscribes it with the owner's chosen associations. After the purchase of an object, the system of classification which the owner now imposes within her own personal museum serves to further sever the object from any meanings given to it by the maker and place it within his own cultural paradigm – “making order out of chaos” (Csikszentmihaly 1981, 14-5, 39; Pratt 1992, 25). The object's originating culture is thereby reduced to no more than a classifying mark that ultimately serves to define the owner as someone who has knowledge of and therefore control over diverse cultures around the world, much like the imperial exhibitions of nineteenth-century Britain (Hoganson 2003, 260; Kriegel 2003, 230-1). The object and the collection in which it now resides become prescribed embodiments of both the self and the Other¹¹³. The owner thus is able to lay claim to not only the attributes associated with the group by whom the object was made, such as the perceived authenticity and naturalness of that group, but also to attributes specific to her own culture, for example, being the kind of person who has money and adventurousness enough to travel, the education to appreciate her experiences, and the ability to know value, in other words, to possess artistic taste.

¹¹³ Where this binary between self and Other interestingly breaks down is in the purchases between artists. Many of the artists seemed to be engaged in shopping of their own in occasional breaks from their booths. Often these transactions were based in trading objects and increased as artists tried to reduce their inventory at the end of the final day. For the artists, the objects they traded for and bought could as much be souvenirs of their trip to Santa Fe as anything else and a reminder of the Market, thus fulfilling rather different functions than similar objects were for white Market visitors. Yet again, the Market serves multiple purposes for its various participants - the artists move with relative fluidity between roles which are fixed for both organizers and visitors.

Artistic Tourism at the Nexus of Folk Art and Primitivism in Santa Fe

As the product of a generally non-ruling, relatively unaffluent social class or subcultural group, ...folk art is testimony to the class differences that exist between this art and its makers and the high art of the elite class, which establishes the hierarchical system in which folk art is often judged.

– Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. “The Politics of the Past in American Folk Art.” (1992)

This process of mapping the arts by both their location in the Market and their place of origin emphasizes first the Market-goer’s performance of tourism and, through it, identifying the Otherness of the objects being sold and of the people who made them. This kind of comparative positioning not only marks difference, but reinforces the identity of the buyers, specifically as members of a buying west in contrast to a making East. As already stated, tourist art helps to identify the consumer as a particular kind of person: one who travels, survives, assimilates, and is concerned with larger world issues. This assertion of personal identity was exemplified by a woman on the bus at the end of the first day of the Market in 2008. The other visitors on the bus were interested in the drum she had bought. She proudly proclaimed that it was from Africa. When questioned more closely, however, she could not say where in Africa. Further, she did not intend to use it as a drum, looking, if anything, slightly disgusted by the possibility that she would consider such a move. Instead, she explained, she planned to put glass on top of it and use it as a coffee table. The most important aspects of the drum for her were its inherent exoticism (being from Africa) and its potential as a talking piece in her home and, by extension, a comment on herself.

Buyers at the Santa Fe International Art Market are engaged in a kind of global tourism that relies on defining the art objects for sale as generically complex, endowed

with the characteristics of both tourist and folk art as well as connected to the artistic history of Santa Fe. On the one hand, tourist art connects the object to the world at large and gives status to the owner as a traveler; on the other, folk and ethnic art allows the object to be understood hierarchically as “Art.” Both keep in place crucial distinctions between the self and Other. The Santa Fe Market thus takes place within at least three overlapping (and sometimes contradictory) art worlds, each with its own historic trajectory: western collection of primitive or ethnic art and its relationship to folk art; Santa Fe’s reputation as a location for art, especially the art of cultural Others; and the western tourist’s consumption of art objects from their travels.

For Howard Becker, an art world consists of the collective “network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that the art world is noted for” (1982, x). Becker establishes this definition in opposition to both the more popular use of the term that evokes “fashionable people associated with ...newsworthy objects and events that demand astronomical prices” and the sociological study of art that views “art as something special, in which...the essential character of the society expresses itself” (1982, x-xi). Becker’s conceptualization of an art world recognizes that art is not typically produced in either an individual or cultural vacuum, instead it is the product of ongoing negotiations between artists, viewers, buyers, marketers, and consumers, to name but a few, that exist within specific cultural, historic, and geographic locations. Such a definition coincides with elements of performance theory in Folklore Studies that

center on the co-production of folklore between performer and audience¹¹⁴. The artists at the Santa Fe Market, then, are engaging simultaneously with not only their own cultures, as the sociological view taken by the Market's marketing materials suggests, but also with the shoppers at the Market. This becomes increasingly true as artists return from year to year and tailor their booths according to past experiences, as well as with more generic western expectations of both ethnic art and the global crafts market¹¹⁵. More specifically, a Kyrgyz feltmaker, like Mairam of Altyn Kol, must balance her individual creativity and the designs and motifs of traditional Kyrgyz aesthetics with western expectations that encompass aesthetics, current trends, and economics, as buyers' focus on the cheapness of products demonstrates. To understand how buyers at the Santa Fe Market are engaged in artistic tourism, then, it is necessary to contextualize each of the art worlds in which artists and buyers are engaged: the history of the western art categories of primitivism, ethnic and folk art; the history of art in Santa Fe; and the world of tourist art.

The importance of such contextualization was made clear to me when I presented an early version of this chapter and some of the main ideas of this project at a conference on Central Asian studies in Toronto in 2008. The paper elicited several strong reactions, but by far the most common came not from a Kyrgyz woman or the other Central Asians in the audience, who rightfully questioned the validity of applying colonial discourse to Kyrgyzstan, but rather from white men who worked as museum curators or scholars in Central Asian studies. In the questions following the paper and later discussions with

¹¹⁴ Specifically, see works by Richard Bauman(1978) and John Miles Foley (2002), among others.

¹¹⁵ The diversity of these retail outlets that promote ethnic art is impressive, since they include not only shops like those discussed in Chapter Three, but also small boutiques and import stores at one end of the spectrum and large scale national chains like Pier 1 and World Market at the other.

some of these men, they seemed to take exception to my work on two levels: first, they objected to my description of the consumption of Kyrgyz crafts by westerners as being tied in some way to colonialist structures and ways of thinking about the world; second, they universally and individually asserted the importance of aesthetics, insisting that the consumers had no notion of the makers or where they came from but were engaging with Kyrgyz crafts on a purely aesthetic level – consuming them as art for art’s sake. The first argument felt defensive. While the Central Asian audience members I spoke with were content with my awareness that colonialism and postcolonialism are complex and that I was not categorizing Kyrgyzstan as a contemporary colonial county, these western men appeared alarmed that I would use the terminology of colonial discourse at all. Being pressed, they seemed to feel that colonial thinking could not exist outside of a clearly colonial or postcolonial situation, as described in India and the Caribbean. Since such a situation did not exist in Kyrgyzstan, the consumption of Kyrgyz arts ought not to be discussed in terms of colonial discourse. Yet each, as we discussed the issue, would declare that they themselves owned Kyrgyz and other Central Asian crafts (two were wearing some sort of clothing embellished with Central Asian traditional embroidery, weaving, or appliqué).

The second – that the consumption of these crafts was motivated primarily by an “honest” appreciation of aesthetics – caused me more thought. One man, in particular, described how during his first extended trip to Central Asia, he saw a *tush kiyiz*, an embroidered wall panel, in someone’s home, fell in love marveling at this new aesthetic he had never encountered before, and spent the rest of the trip searching them out, finally returning home with a large stack of them, which continue to decorate his house. He

made a point of his aesthetic engagement with these textiles, his fascination with the design and the use of color. I offered that perhaps he was right that western consumption of Kyrgyz crafts could be aesthetically based, after all, people were unlikely to buy things they did not like to look at; however, the conversation went further, and we discussed the difference between people buying such crafts at a place like the Santa Fe International Art Market and people buying similar crafts at Target during their annual Global Bazaar. Why, I asked, are ethnic crafts so popular? Is there really a difference between Santa Fe and Target? Yet he stayed true to his cause, arguing that while he was willing to accept my reading of western buyers as engaged in a kind of colonial tourism for Target shoppers, he was intent to redeem the Santa Fe shoppers – they were consumers not of authenticity and Otherness but of art. We were interrupted by the start of the next panel, but I felt uneasy: could aesthetic consumption of one-of-a-kind, handmade craft objects be totally free from the kind of colonial thinking I was describing? Somehow, I thought that it could not be so simple. Especially since this narrative of aesthetic beauty and taste did not seem to coincide with what I saw actually taking place at the Santa Fe Market. Moreover, the man's arguments revealed a class bias by implying the local, mainstream shoppers of home furnishings at Target were less aesthetically motivated than the presumably wealthier buyers in Santa Fe, prepared to pay substantially more for an item sold as art, or even him, willing to trek across the world to find his wall hangings. If anything, however, based on my experiences at the Market, the reverse may be more accurate: the Target buyers, without maps of the world to guide them, labels declaring place of origin or the promise of encountering ethnic artists, might be said to be more

motivated by aesthetics and personal taste than their Santa Fe counterparts. Still, the possibility of a pure aesthetic motive remained.

One further response at the conference has bearing on my thinking. At the final dinner, two people approached me – a man from the United States and a Chinese woman who is pursuing a Ph.D. in Germany in Central Asian studies. The two had worked together for several years running high-end tours of Central Asia for wealthy Australians. These tours lasted nearly a month and cost close to 10,000 Australian dollars; they predominantly attracted white professionals in their late 40s to early 60s, many retired. I had noticed them smiling during my presentation and even laughing a few times. They pulled me aside, almost as though what they had to tell me was secret, and said that they knew that my talk had caused some disagreement and that some audience members felt implicated and offended. Yet, they wanted to let me know that they agreed with my analysis: it was borne out by their experiences with the people who took tours they led. For them, the tours provided good jobs – good food, an expense paid trip through areas they enjoyed and a chance to see friends they had met en route, and the potential for great tips; however, they claimed that the Australians were much more interested in consuming culture than interacting with those they considered “Others.” I felt vindicated but troubled. What does it mean to approach something, especially a craft from another culture, “as art”? Does the meaning change when objects are classed specifically as “folk art” as they are in Santa Fe? Is it really possible to separate art and aesthetics from all of the other social and cultural constructs that people use to uphold their worldview? I found one answer in the development of western art historical ideas about non-western art and folk art.

Folk art, primitivism, and ethnic art

Although the long history of global trade proves that art objects have been making their way around the world and between cultures for millennia, the western consumption of non-western art, through looking, collecting, or buying, has only relatively recently moved from the auspices of anthropology. Starting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the broader interest in “exotic” art was led by artists such as Rousseau, Gauguin, and Picasso, who became interested in some of the traditional arts of the South Pacific and Africa as inspirations for their own work. Their interest drew the attention of the larger art world, and the collecting of non-western art by westerners as “art” rather than artifact was soon well underway. Around the same time period, folk art – as a local artistic object produced by artists who were not trained in the academy – came to the attention of collectors in Europe and America. These newly imported objects from “untrained” artists both local and global, however, presented generic problems for the western academic establishment. If the art of other cultures was to move from the natural history museum to the art museum, how should it be categorized? What should appear on its label? Where should it be placed within the museum? The issue of what to call this group of objects has continued to prove problematic, as the shift from calling them primitive to ethnic demonstrates and as an examination of the Santa Fe Market’s use of the term “folk art” makes clear.

Folk art, as a term, has developed both from and in contrast to other words applied to non-western art, as well as to western art which was not produced within the fine art establishment. The Santa Fe International Folk Art Market has relied on the fuzziness of the term to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Yet whether these

objects are called folk art, ethnic art, traditional art, primitivism, or any of several other names, the terms tend to reveal much more about the culture, or even the specific group of scholars and collectors who developed the categories, than the cultures to whom they are applied. Further, folk art has been endowed with different meanings at various points in history and geography. At a very basic level, folk art has historically referred to art produced by western artists who did not receive formal artistic training, while primitive or ethnic art has implied art produced by people from non-western cultures, generally by non-white people. More recently, with the increase in travel and the vogue in ethnic art, however, the terms have faded into one another, while the history of the terms continues to reveal the expectations which visitors to a “folk art market” such as Santa Fe might hold.

According to one trajectory, folk art specifically means locally produced art objects, with the implication that the locale is a rural, lower class community. Gerard C. Wertkin, writing in the introduction for the *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art*, traces the history of folk art as a category to the development of the early Scandinavian folk museums in Sweden and Denmark during the 1870s. These museums were intended to showcase the art made by the lower classes, and more specifically by the “folk” – the peasant class which was characterized by “rural communities with a deep connection to place, the members of which are bound together by ties of kinship, ethnicity, religious faith, common agrarian life patterns, and inherited or received traditions in the arts” (Wertkin 2004, xxviii). This conceptualization of the folk stressed the local and the conservative in contrast to fine art’s investment in the universal and the innovative. Originating in Europe, this definition of folk art puts the origins of interest in such art

soundly under the influence of the romantic nationalist movements which had begun during the early and mid-nineteenth century with the works of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Andrew Lang¹¹⁶. It also is in keeping with the definition of folk provided in the first issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* by the American Folklore Society's first president William Newell, who intended that the journal should cover only "a) relics of Old-English Folk-Lore...; b) Lore of Negroes...; c) Lore of Indian Tribes; d) Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc." (Newell 1888, 3). While this definition held sway and continues to have influence in the American field of folklore, the term "folk art" developed rather differently in the United States.

The centennial of 1876 helped to spur the interest in American folk art. In these early days, the term "folk art" in the United States partially drew its inspiration from the European term by focusing on the local and rural, but rather than include the local from throughout the country, it tended to imply Americana objects, such as the whirligigs, barn paintings, local signs, quilts and woven rugs of New England. Early interest in these "American folk" objects was spurred on as part of the Colonial Revival, and as such, it is not perhaps surprising that this interest centered on the local products of the original colonial region. This rather simplified history, however, emphasizes the underlying connection between folk art and the past (Wertkin 2004, xxviii). In the early part of the twentieth century, folk art gained a much larger following and began to be collected not primarily for its historical import but as an artistic genre in itself. Certainly, its

¹¹⁶ I will discuss romantic nationalism in more depth in the next chapter because of its important role in the founding of folklore as a field of study and the way that it focused on authenticity as the primary location of value. For the purposes of this discussion, it is enough to note that folk art as a category had its beginnings in the same modes of thought that called attention to folklore and therefore is fraught with some of the same problematic history of racial and class-based hierarchies.

association with the past, and more specifically with the perception of the past as a simpler and happier time, remained an important source of interest, but it began to take a back seat to the cultural origins of the artist. It should be noted, however, that the artists themselves remained either unknown or obscured; what was important was not *who* they were individually but *where* they came from culturally, ethnically, and geographically.

By the mid-twentieth century, the cultural origin of the artist became paramount as a distinguishing factor between the folk art of the west and the so-called “primitive” art of Africa, South and Central America, Oceania, and much of Asia¹¹⁷. As Holger Cahill, one of the early experts in American folk art wrote in 1931:

Folk art does not include the work of craftsmen – makers of furniture, pottery, textiles, glass, and silverware – but only that folk expression which comes under the head of fine arts – painting and sculpture. By ‘folk art’ is meant art which is produced by people who have little book learning in art techniques and no academic training, whose work is not related to established schools. ...Much of it was made by men who were artists by nature, if not by training, and everything they had to say in painting and sculpture is interesting. (Cahill qtd. in Wertkin 2004, xxix)

The folk art genre was thereby extended to include all manners of “art” which were produced by artists without formal training regardless of their position within larger communities or traditions. Cahill’s definition is telling, since it seems to rid folk art of its earlier ties to the rural idyll and the peasant class, opening up the genre to those whose art is neither a product of the academy or connected to the artistic community in which they live and create, such as Henry Darger’s paintings. By privileging art over craft, painting and sculpture over all other media, and the individual over the community, Cahill

¹¹⁷ Asian cultures present a curious case in terms of their inclusion or exclusion in the category of primitivism. In most cases, it seems that China, Japan, and Korea were not seen as “primitive” cultures. Likewise, some Indian art and much Persian art was also excluded. However, this was not universal. The societies of the Indonesian archipelago and many of the southeast Asian cultures certainly were named as “primitive.”

ultimately serves more to bolster the distinction between high art and low art by elevating particular artists than he does to break down the hierarchy itself. Of course, it is unknown whether he was trying to do anything else. Instead, he created a separate genre in opposition to the fine art establishment or “academic art,” as Henry Glassie commented in 1968, while at the same time insisting on the same evaluative standards as the academy (qtd. in Metcalf 1992, 34).

By opening up the potential for what could be considered folk art, Cahill effectively created a system that Michael Vlach refers to as “folk art by fiat” – an object is folk art because it is declared by outsiders to be so, thus forging connections between all manners of objects that might otherwise have little in common (1992, 16). Because folk art now focused on individuals instead of communities, it came to also be called outsider art, as well as a host of other names that highlighted its position as separate from high art and often described folk art objects with adjectives that stressed naiveté, innocence, simplicity, and charm, and still hung on to the earlier connections between folk art and the “country” as well as the past (Vlach 1992, 15; Jones 1993, 18). Such terms are heavily loaded with silent comparatives between the innocent outsider artists and the presumably cosmopolitan collector¹¹⁸. The assumptions of naiveté, innocence and simplicity have remained pervasive, and the designation of “folk art” as art harkening

¹¹⁸ While folk artists may now be given individual credit and celebrated, such as Grandma Moses, many collectors and academics continue to express concerns about whether folk artists will be able to maintain the qualities of innocence and simplicity in their work once they have been “discovered” by collectors and museum staff and brought into the lime light. In other words, there is a sense that once found, folk artists may cease being “folk,” with detrimental effects to their art. This narrative closely resembles similar fetishistic “discovery” and contamination narratives as discussed by Mary Louise Pratt (1992) and Anne McClintock (1995).

back to early white Americana (with the single addition of African-American quilts¹¹⁹) continues to dominate the popular collectibles and decorating press. However, Cahill's revision of the term along with larger social changes¹²⁰ has had the effect of allowing groups and artists who might have been considered only as "primitive" or "ethnic" through the mid-twentieth century to eventually break into the market as the Santa Fe Market aptly shows.

The Santa Fe International Folk Art Market sharply differentiates itself from these persistent earlier definitions of folk art by only including artists from outside of the United States and Europe (with the exception of the one potter from France). Indeed, the Market's definition of folk art lies much closer to the common understanding of what is now called "ethnic art" with its antecedent primitivism. Nor is the Santa Fe Market alone in blurring these two genres. The International Institute of St. Louis, whose primary mission is to help new immigrants, especially those from developing countries arriving with refugee status, holds a Festival of Nations each summer at which they feature "folk art demonstrations" by the immigrant populations they serve (International Institute of St. Louis 2009). While the home décor press continues to distinguish between folk and

¹¹⁹ African-American quilts have gained much attention in the last 40 years, since the rise of fiber arts in the late 1960s, and even more recently with the publication of wildly successful and alarmingly subtitled books such as *The Quilt's of Gee's Bend: Masterpieces from a Lost Place* (Arnett et al 2002), which spawned not only exhibits and several more books but a series of postage stamps as well. African-American quilts have gained further recognition through the debates of the last two years over whether or not quilts produced by slaves ever included directions for following the Underground Railroad. It is worth noting, however, that the one area in which African-American visual artists have been granted recognition is in quilting – a medium associated with the past, strongly connected to women, and low in the classical artistic hierarchy.

¹²⁰ It is difficult to measure the effects of social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s on the fine art world. There is certainly evidence that these played an important role in breaking down the barriers of the art museum to non-white and women artists. For a more complete discussion of this topic as it relates to fiber arts generally and felt specifically, see chapter six of Mullins 2009.

ethnic art, festivals in particular and many scholars have moved toward a definition of folk art as any art produced by a specifically local population, although only the Smithsonian Folklife Festival seems to include both western and non-western artists under this title. This more general use of “folk art,” however, can hide the problematic history of western consumption of non-western art and the ways in which that history continues to influence western assumptions about the arts of other peoples. Not only does this expansiveness make the term potentially meaningless, as John Michael Vlach (1992) both fears and celebrates, but it also risks drawing parallels in western consumers’ minds that emphasize the perceived commonalities between these diverse arts – namely, their connection to groups who are not considered mainstream or part of the arts establishment and are more often linked to idealized notions of the past and pre-modernity, the handmade, and naturalness.

During the early twentieth century, museums, artists, and collectors began to take an interest in the art of non-western peoples, especially those from tribal societies. These arts had earlier been the purview of explorers and colonial administrators, but the rise of modern anthropology incited more widespread interest in the subjects, or at least artistic expressions, of the new field’s study. Objects which anthropologists brought back to the west were typically displayed in natural history museums as examples from other societies, which were generally deemed less civilized and thus more “primitive.” This often unacknowledged placement of non-white cultures as below or behind white society invoked the understanding of race represented in the mid-nineteenth-century “tree of man” illustrations, which used a corruption of Darwin’s evolutionary theory to support

the idea that white people were “naturally” more “advanced” than other races¹²¹. It was in just such anthropological museums that the western artists typically credited with “discovering” non-western art – Picasso and Gauguin – first encountered it; yet the objects they encountered were not labeled as art, but rather as “primitives,” and this appellation has had surprising longevity.

Sally Price gives perhaps the most comprehensive list of the possible meanings of the term “primitivism” as it has been used to define a genre of art. Her compiled definitions include those from the mid-twentieth century that stress the level of “development” the artists’ cultures have obtained – “people who have not developed any form of writing” or “whose mechanical knowledge is scanty – the People Without Wheels” (Christensen 1955, 7 qtd. in Price 1989, 2; Hooper and Burland 1953, 20 qtd. in Price 1989, 2). Yet she also offers more critical (and flippant) possibilities:

Any art capable of evoking in Western viewers images of pagan rituals – particularly cannibalism, spirit possession, fertility rites, and forms of divination based on superstition.

The art of peoples whose in-home languages are not normally taught for credit in universities.

Any artistic tradition for which the market value of an object automatically inflates by a factor of ten or more upon export out of its original cultural setting. (Price 1989, 2-3)

These definitions are not that far fetched, nor are they much out of date. Although Price is being somewhat tongue in cheek, she does highlight the deep-rooted connections between art classified as primitive and western associations with that art as inherently exotic, esoteric, and crucially for my argument, undervalued by its makers. Writing in 1979,

¹²¹ For a good description and discussion of some of these illustrations and the uses to which they were put see McClintock 1995, 36-39.

Richard L. Anderson chose to use the term primitive, albeit with reservations, in writing about art in cultures located in areas as widespread as Indonesia, west Africa, Alaska, and Central America. By the term, he defined any society with “simple technology . . . , small and sparse population; and . . . a limited degree of social, economic, and political specialization” (1979, 7). As Cahill’s definition of “folk” reveals the ways in which western untrained artists were made consumable in the western fine art world, the primitive arts of non-western peoples were similarly recategorized according to the terminology and aesthetic systems already in place in the west. All of these definitions belie a hierarchical relationship between the west that is doing the viewing (and consuming) and the non-western cultures who are making the art that is being viewed, one that bears striking similarities to the self/Other constructions at work in tourism and philanthropy.

Since the 1970s, primitivism has come under attack as a term. Scholars including Price and certain civil rights activists have pointed out the problematic assumptions of racial hierarchy that lie behind the term’s use. The change was slow to come, however, as the quote from Anderson above from 1979 and New York’s Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 exhibit “Primitivism in 20th-Century Art” both demonstrate (Rubin 1984). From the 1980s on, other terms have been offered: popular media has tended toward calling formerly primitive objects “ethnic,” although this implies that the western and presumably mostly white readership does not have ethnicity¹²². Museums have moved

¹²² White westerners’, especially Americans’, belief that they do not have ethnicity or culture can be seen in any contemporary folklore text or classroom, where the first order of business is to convince students that they, too, have folklore and are part of a culture. This issue, which seems self-evident to someone who has spent years interested in the field, was driven home to me one semester with a class of students who steadfastly refused to believe that their actions, beliefs, legends, etc. were other than individual choice,

towards terming the curatorial department which deals with these objects by the excessively nebulous conflation “Africa, Oceania, and the Americas,” as though art and the peoples from these areas are all much the same. Meanwhile, the field of Folklore Studies has preferred to term everything not produced by establishment-trained artists as folk art, as is reflected in the Santa Fe Museum of Folk Art, the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, and the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. This distinction is also problematic, however, since it maintains a distinct line between self and Other.

The acceptance of non-western art in the establishment has proven to be a double-edged sword. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that reclassifying objects from “ethnographic artifacts” to “primitive” or “folk” art and exhibited as paintings or sculpture rather than cultural productions or relics not only elevates that art to the fine art museum but also can raise the status of the people that made it (1998, 57). Western collection, therefore, can be viewed as a positive revaluation of earlier hierarchical systems of race. Certainly buyers in venues like Santa Fe are attracted to purchase art in such milieu by a belief that their consumption is also an act of philanthropy and world awareness. However, such collection insists that the non-western objects conform to western classificatory systems. As Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner comment:

Formal recognition was extended, like the political sovereignty granted to a newly independent colony, but the infrastructure of Western knowledge formations remained firmly in place. To be represented as “art,” in other words, the aesthetic objects of non-Western peoples had to be transposed into the Western system of classification of fine and applied art. (1999, 7)

even when it was pointed out to them that they were all wearing jeans, sweatshirts or t-shirts bearing either the university’s name or their fraternity or sorority, and tennis shoes or flip-flops. It is my belief that the American obsession with individualism carries much of the blame here, however, a friend who teaches folklore in Ireland commented that she faces a similar issue with students who are convinced that folklore consists solely of relics of the past and does not apply to them.

Phillips and Steiner's argument draws attention to how the acceptance of non-western art into western fine art functioned as an act of colonization. As such, this acceptance can be seen not as the process of enlightenment that many in the west cast it as, but rather as one of appropriation through the rhetoric of erasure and renaming. In other words, it follows precisely the same logic as the recommendations that artists at Santa Fe follow in the relabeling of their work for the western market: not "handmade wooden spoon from Mozambique" but "spoon, handmade of wood from Mozambique." The history of primitivism in the west, however, offers interest beyond its name, primarily because of the ways in which the western collectors of primitive art have historically positioned themselves as worldly consumers as well as consumers of the world and as arbiters of taste while effectively erasing the artists.

Tourist-collector: Taste and the western consumption of folk art

While the shoppers at the Santa Fe Market may not consider themselves collectors, their relationship to the objects they peruse and purchase and to the people who produced those objects bears much in common with the mindset of the western collector of non-western art. Indeed, it might be difficult to distinguish between the two, especially among those who see their travels as a marking off of places they have been to and seen, a view the Market organizers encourage with the passport program. After all, this kind of tourist is effectively a collection of sites (as well as sights)¹²³. Specifically, however, both believe their consumption of art from outside their cultures to be in some

¹²³ The documentary film *Cannibal Tours* (O'Rourke 1988) features one German tourist to Melanesia who epitomizes this kind of touristic collection of places, at one point proudly listing all of the places he has been as he smiles from beneath his khaki explorer-style hat into the camera.

way philanthropic either directly through the exchange of money or a belief that their purchases provide assistance to the producing culture. Indirectly, their purchase may signify for them a commitment to saving cultures perceived as on the “point of demise” in the face of modernization. But most importantly, the Santa Fe shopper and the western collector resemble one another in the ways they situate their purchases within a familiar history of western art, including the classificatory schemes described above, and in the way they use their purchases to reflect and define their own identities.

Western consumers or collectors of primitive or folk art insist upon their altruism (one could say philanthropy) in recognizing quality where none had been seen previously, while at the same time claiming the aesthetic genius normally reserved in western culture for the artist. The collector’s ability to lay claim to the social cache of good taste lies precisely in the erasure of the artists. Westerners’ belief in the anonymity of non-western artists on the surface may be the result of the artists not having signed their work as western artists do. Yet, more importantly, westerners view these works as cultural rather than individual products, as evidenced by the definitions of primitive art given by Sally Price above. As we have seen, however, the western marketing structures that allow non-western arts to enter the market ensure that such anonymity is maintained¹²⁴. What is more disturbing is that for decades, many western collectors have both insisted on this anonymity and seen it as a positive attribute. Vincent Price, who was an avid collector of African art in addition to the king of 1960s horror films, echoed the thoughts of many western collectors of non-western art in his remark that “in ‘primitive societies’ the artist chooses to ‘write himself out of his creation’” (qtd. in S. Price 1993,

¹²⁴ This is not to say that some non-establishment artists do not receive individual recognition. Grandma Moses most notably comes to mind, but these are by far the exception rather than the rule.

62). However, as Sally Price (no relation) points out and my fieldwork in Santa Fe exemplifies, the extent to which choice is involved is highly questionable. Erasure of the artist transforms objects that westerners previously viewed as relics of a dying past in the case of folk art, or the creations of primitive and exotic cultures in ethnic art, both notably out of touch with modernity, and redeems them through reclassification as “folk art,” making them “safe for collection, preservation, exhibition, study, and even nostalgia and revival”¹²⁵ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 161). By erasing the artist, however, the path is cleared for western collectors to use the objects as status markers for themselves as tourists, philanthropists, and connoisseurs.

In a venue like the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, status resides primarily in the claims many visitors have to good aesthetic taste casting them into the role of collectors with both the knowledge and money to purchase “art.” In Sally Price’s ethnographic study of African art connoisseurs, she concluded these collectors maintain:

...a strong and widely shared perception that the aesthetic quality of the objects on their coffee tables and display shelves derives from their discerning “eye” rather than from the aesthetic vision of the people who carved, constructed, or painted these objects. Many collectors see themselves and their colleagues as doing for African sculpture (for example) what Andy Warhol did for Brillo boxes and Marcel Duchamp for urinals. (1993, 46)

Purchasing tourist art is a form of collection, both for the sake of personal documentation and authentication and for set completion. While in his article on souvenir Sidney Kasfir makes a distinction between collection for the necessity of completeness, one item within a set, and collection for the purposes of nostalgia and memory, in which the item is “self-

¹²⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is referring here to folklore and the ability of the name “folklore” generally and the heritage industry in particular to transform those traditional cultural elements which have been repudiated and cast off in the name of modernity from “errors into archaisms,” thereby giving them new status but also often erasing vital information at the same time.

referential,” both intentions are fulfilling similar purposes for the owner. In either case, a loss must be filled, and the self-referential souvenir still must exist within a set of objects that the owner uses to portray him or herself (Kasfir 1999, 72). That many anthropologists (including the two who objected most to my analysis at the Toronto conference) are also collectors is not surprising given this role of tourist art as self identifier, but it has long been an aspect that the anthropologists themselves have ignored (Graburn 1999, 350) or only nodded to as a possible reason for their interest in the subject (Hepburn 2000, 288; Kasfir 1999, 72).

Part of the attraction to collection embedded in Western values is the possibility of the source “drying up,” making objects of a given genre increasingly more rare. Rarity is highly prized in a collection and the possibility that a work of tourist art “represents the final, fleeting testimony to the tenuous existence of rapidly vanishing worlds” plays heavily on the desire to discover and possess those worlds given the certainty of their ultimate usurpation by “progress,” that is western technologies (Phillips and Steiner 1999, 17-19). In this system, hybridity, in the sense of cultural mixing, is prized as a means of adaptation and a coping mechanism, but only on the part of the consumer. The consumed must be saved from such cultural mixing, since this would contaminate the source of purity (Phillips and Steiner 1999, 18). This is precisely the thought process reflected by one of the collectors in Toronto – he collected Central Asian embroidery himself but decried the appearance of Central Asian motifs both in products in the western mass market as well as western items in Central Asia. The collection of such art objects thus becomes a museal strategy for preservation based on a belief of imminent demise and fears of loss of the past (Rowlands 2002, 105-6). This could be construed as

an altruistic impulse on the part of the collector except that such collection, like tourist art, serves a self-reflexive and self-satisfying purpose as well that may overshadow the museal function.

Price argues, and my example of the woman on the bus in Santa Fe with the African drum demonstrates, that the importance of folk or ethnic art to the predominantly white western buyers is the objects' ability to convey information about buyers themselves – their sense of aesthetics, their knowledge (however unconscious it may be) of taste. Scholars from Veblen on have remarked on the role of tourism as conspicuous leisure, and as I have demonstrated, the buyers at the Santa Fe Market are engaged in a kind of tourism. However, in the context of global craft consumption, the influence of leisure on meaning is secondary to the claims to knowledge which such objects make on behalf of their owners.

The cultivation of the knowledge that makes the touristic understanding of these crafts possible is equivalent to the cultivation of Kantian taste. While the buyers are unaware that they are subscribing to Kant's dictates of taste and beauty, may even be shocked by the suggestion, Kant has become so much a part of western assumptions about art, that these notions are embedded in the way that most westerners approach aesthetics of any kind. Kant has continued to dominate much of western thought on art despite attempts by art historians, folklorists, anthropologists and cultural theorists to move past his ideas. Immanuel Kant set forth his theory of what makes an object beautiful at the end of the eighteenth century in *The Critique of Judgment*. According to Kant, taste is the ability to recognize what is beautiful. Beauty is inherent in the object, not in the eye of the beholder, thus standards of beauty are universal, or as Kant says

“valid for everyone” (2001, 213). Further, an object can only be beautiful if it has no other purpose, since its usefulness will cloud the viewer’s judgment, for example, it would be impossible to say that a spoon is beautiful, because one would never be able to see it merely as an object and not take into account how good it is at performing the functions of a spoon. The problem with this conception becomes obvious when placed into a context that is already fraught with orientalist notions of self and Other and the colonizing rhetoric of erasure.

Part of the attraction of the Kyrgyz craft is that it does not conform to the typical western standards of beauty developed through western art and design, marking it as Other. These assumptions of aesthetic Otherness, however, require placing the Kyrgyz craft in opposition to western material culture, particularly western fine art. Just as the tourist upholds Urry’s binary of ordinary/extraordinary, the collector of folk and ethnic art maintains a similar distinction both visually and through specialized knowledge. The buyer’s labeling of the craft object as exotic automatically positions it outside of western art, but if western art is the standard of beauty, the basis for the cultivation of taste, then the Central Asian craft object is, by its very position, not beautiful and therefore not art. This contrast is ironically made more apparent by the placement of the Santa Fe Market on the Museum of Folk Art grounds. From one viewpoint, the location on the Museum grounds lends status and affiliation to the event as well as familiarity for the buyer. The Market carries out the same functions that visitors expect from the modern museum:

... museums are very familiar public spaces. We have learned to expect that the contents of museums will educate us, stimulate reflection, give us an excuse to contemplate “the finer things,” allow us to have “been there, done that” as tourists, and allow us to go shopping as well as have a nice cup of coffee. (Crane 2000, 13)

At the Market, buyers exist in a similar venue – they are educated, stimulated to reflection, encouraged to contemplate objects labeled as art, can mark not only tourism in Santa Fe or at the Museum of Folk Art off their list of places to visit but also add to that list any number of countries represented in the Market, go shopping, and enjoy a full meal. Not only does the Market fulfill the functions of the museum, but Market visitors’ expectations of the Market and the goods for sale there are heightened by its proximity to the Museum and the location in Santa Fe itself. By connecting Museum and Market objects through claims of generic status as folk art, the location allows Market shoppers to imagine their own purchases and their “trip” around the world of the Market as a replication in miniature of the larger scale purchases and travels of museum curators. In other words, the Market effectively asks shoppers to cast themselves as collectors, further strengthening the museal impulse and the belief system which Price revealed many collectors subscribe to – positing the collector as a benevolent arbiter of taste. Ultimately, however, the location at the Museum of Folk Art serves rather to undermine the parallel it attempts to draw between the international, the physical art works for sale, and the objects in the Museum, because of the ways that it encourages shoppers to act as collectors of “art” as well as tourists. Instead, it lays bare a series of oppositions – inside/outside, art/craft, commodity/artifact, self/Other – that reinscribe the colonialist consumptive practices and thought well documented in both of the groups whose roles shoppers take on.

Conclusion

Thus, although we should continue to question, as Sally Price and other critics of Primitivism have argued, the assumption that Western peoples have art, and others have artifacts, the processes by which artifacts become art offer no refuge from inequality.

– Molly H. Mullin “The Patronage of Difference: Making Indian Art ‘Art, Not Ethnology’.” (186)

The art works available for sale at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, therefore, may be sold through Market advertising that promotes buyers’ belief that their purchases are philanthropic. Many seemed to believe that by attending the Market, they were helping to forge ties between the west and the developing countries represented and that their purchases were directly helping the people they saw standing in the booths, often in ethnic dress. In actuality, however, their contact with the artists was limited if it existed at all. For one thing, the person in the booth cast as artist was often not an artist at all, but the administrator for a group or cooperative, as was the case with the majority of Kyrgyz booths. More importantly, buyers tended not to talk to the artists or representatives, but instead they conversed with the almost always white volunteers with their matching Market t-shirts who were assisting at each booth. The philanthropic sheen which both Market materials and shoppers literally bought in to mask the more complex and problematic assumptions and expectations of both the shoppers and the script provided to them by the Market organizers as well as the uses to which they will eventually put their purchases. After all, to openly declare one’s own imperialistic fantasies or a desire to consume the Other goes against the accepted beliefs of the tourist and the anthropologist within Western culture.

By claiming a philanthropic mission, shoppers at markets such as Santa Fe seem to subscribe to a belief that their shopping offers a chance to help the economic progress of Others while simultaneously helping to preserve ethnic art while decorating their homes and acquiring status among family and friends. In other words, the philanthropic script offers a rationale and, more problematically, a moral imperative for an act of consumption that is ultimately self-reflexive for the consumer. Given this, it becomes questionable to what extent organizations from ATA and CACSA to the Santa Fe Market can succeed in their stated goals of promoting cultural awareness. Certainly, some level of increased global awareness does take place by putting western buyers into contact with art and people from other cultures, and we can hope that at least a few of those buyers are inspired to discover more about those cultures. However, the rhetoric of multicultural tourism sells well and Market organizers encourage shoppers to cast themselves as both tourists and collectors. Because of this construction on the macro-level of the Central Asian art market generally, the extent to which western buyers individually make sense of Central Asian art in orientalist and colonialist terms undercuts the good intentions of many of the aid organizations, makers, and buyers.

The very structure of the Market and the goals it presents to both artists and visitors requires that objects be detached from their cultures and placed into western paradigms of art and economics. The non-western artists may be present and may have contact with their western buyers, but the physical presence of the former does not alter the expectations or assumptions of the latter. Indeed, some buyers may take the artists presence as an endorsement of the structures of detachment, reclassification, and appropriation that undergird the Market, using it to defend themselves against the kind of

critiques I have offered here. On the other hand, to argue that such critiques should result in the demise of the Market and similar venues is untenable. The Santa Fe International Art Market does help to give international artists and their work more exposure, hopefully challenging if not breaking down the standards of beauty that privilege western art and Kantian concepts of taste, despite the extent to which these ideas are ingrained in western culture. In doing so, however, they both promote a progress according to a western value system, one that requires a reclassification according to western markets, western expectations, and western notions of art. Through money comes progress, but as it stands now, this progress must be carried out and expressed solely in western terms. Nonetheless, progress toward a more inclusive model cannot be made without careful examination of the realities and histories of the current one.

CHAPTER FIVE

FOLKLORIST/CONSUMER: CULTURAL BROKERAGE AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

Rather, the question is: who is mobilizing what in the articulation of the past, deploying what identities, identifications and representations, and in the name of what political vision and goals?

– Ella Shohat, “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’”

In the previous chapters, I have slowly narrowed my focus from the broad popular depiction of Central Asia as wild, debased, and empty to the consumers of Kyrgyz crafts through online outlets that support humanitarian aid and development projects to shoppers at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market who come into direct contact with the makers of those crafts. At each of these steps, the consumer and maker come closer to one another and in doing so are fleshed out, literally and metaphorically. The maker moves from being an anonymous but stereotypically impoverished and Othered Central Asian to a representative woman, the recipient of aid in the form of a microloan and dedicated to doing good for her family and town, to an actual person standing there in ethnic dress beside a table laden with felt. Through this narrowing of focus the consumer, too, becomes more real, from the iconic westerner to the specific shopper at Santa Fe, typically female, middle aged, and white. In this process, I have hoped to show how each layer influences the next, how the consumer at Santa Fe cannot help but be influenced by *Borat* or the images in *National Geographic* or the catalogues from Fair Indigo that come through her door, because this is the culture in which she exists and which helps her construct and position herself within the world. Yet I have so far neglected one final layer of distance between maker and consumer and, as a result, a consumer who consumes

most actively, who seeks out that which she consumes, and comes into the closest contact with the maker. This chapter focuses on the folklorist in the marketplace.

Beginning in the 1990s, several folklorists began to question how the collection and more particularly the presentation of folklore commodified culture. The marketplace became a guiding metaphor in the field, with the folklorist positioned as the broker of folk culture, in contrast to earlier models that centered folk culture in the local and were built on the metaphor of the village. Dorothy Noyes in her article “Group” for the “Keywords” special issue of *The Journal of American Folklore* commented on this trend:

...as an emblem of [our disciplinary imaginary] I prefer the village to its recent rival, the marketplace...I grant that the marketplace is the vitiated air we breathe and consequently deserves all the scholarly attention we have begun to give it. But let us not allow the empirical to kill off the imaginary entirely...I fear that, with our tendency to celebrate what we describe, we may unwittingly do the same for the multinational. (1995, 473)

Noyes acknowledges that the marketplace is vital. She admits that folklorists are actively engaged in the exchange of commodities and the commodification of culture and, following the publication of works such as Robert Cantwell’s *Ethnomimesis*, many folklorists readily acknowledged their position as “culture brokers” and the issues which such brokerage presents. Yet her words reveal both a romanticism and a bias not uncommon in the field that isolates the imagined “folk” from modern society or the west by placing them outside of the marketplace and into the village. After all, we do not say we have villages in the United States. She ignores that villages also have marketplaces and villagers also engage in commodity exchange. Her use of the term “vitiating” is further telling, for it assumes that the marketplace is inherently corrupt and suggests that no good may come of it. Thus, while she acknowledges that the marketplace is useful as a

metaphor, she rejects it not because of its aptness but rather because of many folklorists' tendency to "celebrate what we describe." This seems to me, however, not a failing of the metaphor but rather a desire for culpable deniability.

Using Noyes's remark as a starting place, I draw out the metaphor of the marketplace as a way to expose and discuss some of the complexities and compromises of representing aspects of one culture to members of another. I begin with a discussion of how folklorists have engaged with the marketplace both as a metaphoric crucible for the creation of folklore and as a real commercial enterprise in which we act as brokers of culture, a position that keeps folklorists separate from and in control of culture as a commodity. By interrogating the brokerage model of cultural representation, I hope to reveal first a commodification of culture through a process of flattening and depoliticizing as a result of the prevalent, though frequently critiqued multicultural model of representation, that lays it bare for neo-colonialist consumption by an empowered western audience, and second a revaluation of culture in which authenticity becomes capital. Finally, I want to return to the position of the folklorist, not as a middleman between producers and consumers, somehow removed from the actual process of fetishistic consumption of Others, but as a consumer him or herself.

Two caveats should be kept in mind. First, in the previous chapters, I used Kyrgyz felt as a sample case in the consumption of global arts and crafts by westerners; here the stakes are much broader, and thus I will broaden my scope significantly to discuss issues of representation more generally with specific reference to the kinds of cultural representation in which folklorists are most typically engaged – the festival, the ethnography, and the exhibition. As a result, this chapter takes a radically different

approach to the material, being more general and more theoretical than earlier chapters, and may seem like a departure from the rest of the work. However, folklorists as brokers are engaged at every level in producing the kinds of representations discussed in the previous chapters, if not of Kyrgyz felt or humanitarian aid catalogues specifically then of many other cultures in many other forms, all of which, as we have seen, influence one another. Second, I am a folklorist. It is the profession I chose out of a deep love of the kinds of subjects I found being pursued there and the commitment of the field to look beyond the few great and famous names or moments of any generation to see the everyday lives of people. Thus all of my remarks, critical as they may seem, apply as much to me as to anyone. Nonetheless, I truly believe that if we as a field do not critique ourselves and challenge ourselves to push the limits of our theories and test the efficacy and ethics of our methodologies, then we will lose relevance. Barre Toelken said that folklore must be both dynamic and conservative in order to survive (1996, 38-42). If this is true of folklore as a subject, as most folklorists accept, then it is equally true of folklore as a field. Because I am implicating myself, I have chosen to refer to folklorists as “we.” Certainly there are folklorists who do not think in the ways or do the things that I describe, there are folklorists to whom, because of their own identities or positionality or methodologies, my remarks not only do not apply but could seem offensive. There are certainly folklorists who will disagree with my description of the field and the people in it. We are a multivocal group. However, specificity and relativity, whether born out of postmodernism or sensitivity, should not be silencing. Folklore is predicated on a belief that people act culturally, that a person behaves in certain ways and does things in certain ways that are influenced by their culture. Yet folklorists have often excluded themselves

from a critique of cultural influence. If we are to make such assumptions about others, about the people we study, then we must also extend our logic to ourselves, and be aware that we are also cultural beings, who act from within particular political and social systems and that those systems affect how we view others and more specifically how we represent them. We live in a capitalist culture. We ought to recognize the power of the marketplace and acknowledge the discomfort that our own role within it causes us.

An Introduction to Folklorists in the Marketplace

Folklorists have hardly been shy of positioning themselves in relation to the marketplace, as fieldworkers writing about it, as brokers acting in it, and as a space, that slips between the metaphorical and the real, in which folklore itself takes place. As a site for fieldwork, the marketplace has only rarely been utilized by folklorists, and those who have engaged with it and its inhabitants, have eschewed the western marketplace in favor of the more culturally specific and ethnically marked marketplaces of exotic locales. Deborah Kapchan, for example, wrote extensively on women and tradition within the Moroccan marketplace (1996). The western marketplace as a site of field research has largely been left to other fields, such as consumer research, marketing, and economics. The one exception, as noted earlier, being the in depth interdisciplinary study of a mall in Sweden, whose authors contained no folklorists but did include two culture studies scholars (Fornäs et al, 2007).

Folklorists also have engaged with the marketplace on a theoretical level, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's work, as a space where folk culture not only takes place but is given equal hearing with official culture. For Bakhtin:

The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one.... The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it retained a certain extraterritoriality on a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained 'with the people.' (1994, 213)

This definition has been compelling to folklorists because of its emphasis on the unofficial, that is, "the folk," and by extension by its emphasis on the local. According to Bakhtin's arguments, the carnivalesque and its associated folk humor are able to take place in the marketplace because, within the extremely stratified system of the Middle Ages, it was the only place where class difference was comparatively leveled. While this conception of the marketplace does foreground folk culture, Bakhtin is specifically discussing the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and more specifically their depiction by Rabelais. Thus to embrace Bakhtin's marketplace as a metaphor for the power of the "folk" neglects the specificity of his arguments as well as the current ways in which class, race, and gender are marked in the modern marketplace. Further, it confers folk status only on those who are unofficial, in Bakhtin's terms, or outside of the power structure, and associates both marketplace and folk with the past – ideas which have been much disputed by more recent folklore scholarship (see Bauman and Paredes 1972; *Journal of American Folklore* "Keywords" special issue 1995; *Western Folklore* "Theorizing Folklore" special issue 1993). More germane to this work, both of these special issues problematized and redeemed folklorists' role as cultural brokers, charged with creating representations of one culture for an audience of a different one.

The idea of cultural brokerage was developed in the 1950s to refer specifically to a middleman, but it was revisited specifically in terms of the dealing of non-western art to westerners by Christopher B. Steiner in his work in *African Art in Transit* (1994). Drawn

on a metaphor of economic trade to describe the role of curators, art historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and the like, the broker moves between the sellers in one place or culture and the buyers in another, but rather than exchanging goods, the culture broker represents, “sells,” one culture to another, typically a non-western one to westerners. Yet, the broker is more than a simple messenger, or “go-between” to use the term Steiner borrowed from Robert Paine, “who faithfully relates instructions and messages between two separate parties” (1994, 154-5). Instead, the broker translates, manipulates, re-presents. Steiner sums the role up this way:

Hence, rather than simply facilitate the relationship between two different groups separated by social, economic, or political distance, the broker actually constitutes, molds, and redefines the very nature of that relationship. (1994, 155)

Yet it should be noted that the broker’s influence is not without base or direction.

Folklorist Richard Kurin describes the job requirements of a culture broker: to “study, understand, and represent someone’s culture (and sometimes their own) to nonspecialized others” – a process that includes negotiation, dialogue, and mediation (1997, 18-19). The broker for Kurin becomes a kind of cultural interpreter, whose knowledge base of two different cultures allows him to translate between them. Kurin further contrasts this brokerage model of cultural representation with what he calls the “extractive model,” on one hand, which is a kind of cultural theft performed while traveling among another people, and the “flea market” model, on the other, in which everyone is given access and widely divergent representations can exist side by side. While the former was common to an earlier era of folklore, that sought to record and preserve the folklife of Others without reference to those who created it and led to particularly exploitative relationships and

representations¹²⁶, the latter, while seemingly more egalitarian can cause important messages to be lost and create confusion.

The brokerage model is both useful, for it does adeptly describe what many folklorists do especially in the public sector, and revealing, drawing attention to ongoing problems of power discrepancies within the field. Whether building museum exhibits or festival presentations, writing ethnographies or teaching, folklorists (including me) broker culture for a living. Brokerage as a metaphor for what folklorists and others related fields do is, in some ways, refreshingly honest. Its variety of meanings suggests the uneasy role that such scholars and cultural presenters fill by highlighting the positive potential of such brokerage and the more typical neutral and negative connotations of the name “broker.” The Oxford English Dictionary offers two main definitions for “broker”: “a retailer of commodities; a second-hand dealer” and “one who acts as a middleman in bargains” (1989). Taken in themselves, these definitions are fairly neutral; however, the quotations showing usage and some of the sub-definitions show a tendency in English to connote brokerage as tainted. For example, while stockbrokers may be generally considered upstanding citizens, pawnbrokers are often less favorably looked upon, and the term broker has historically included pimps and procurers of all kinds. However, in the more recent writings of folklorists, the use of the term is intended to draw attention to the role of folklorist as negotiator and middleman; it is intended to be a neutral, if not positive, term.

For Kurin, as for many folklorists, the cultural brokerage model offers the potential for more equal cross-cultural exchange than the more unidirectional

¹²⁶ I discussed this kind of representation in depth, particularly as it relates to the terms “primitive” and “folk,” in chapter four.

representations historically produced in folklore and anthropology. As Frank J. Korom states:

As someone who supposedly can mediate between separate cultural and economic worlds, the culture broker is in a position to advocate a more balanced relationship, which could bridge the gap – at least theoretically – between the institution and the members of the community being represented. (1999, 260)

This is certainly a noble goal, and it cannot be doubted that the presence of folklorists and anthropologists on museum staffs can help a group being represented in a museum exhibit see that at least some of their concerns are met. To use an example from the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, during the planning of exhibits for the museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the conservation staff met with tribal representatives and exhibit curators to discuss how that tribe's objects would be presented, what conservation could or should be pursued, and what information was admissible or necessary for the general public. One such meeting resulted in one of the Museum's conservators traveling to the Tuscarora tribe and working with Native bead makers to rebuild a beaded cloth for display, since the Tuscarora people felt that it would be inappropriate to display the object in its aged state¹²⁷ (Heald 1997). Such consultations can be rare, underfunded, and often divisive, as Kurin's description of his antagonistic relationship with Smithsonian curators over the storage of a Native canoe that had been carved during the American Folklife Festival and was to become part of the collection of the American Museum of Natural History portrays. His narrative reveals a deep rift between where he, as a folklorist and friend of the carver, and the curator, as a

¹²⁷ Such restoration work goes against current conservation practice, under which damaged areas may be visually compensated for but nothing should be added to or removed from the object and dirt and damage are considered part of the historic record.

representative of the institution and its larger collection, located the canoe's value, respectively as a "living" signifier of the individual carver to be viewed singly or a material example of a larger society to be placed among other such objects (1997, 64). While brokerage can lead to such moments of either rethinking representation or struggle, as a metaphor, it also, perhaps unwittingly, uncovers some of the problems inherent in representation itself.

Kurin's definition of the cultural broker's job as to "study, understand, and represent," implies that full understanding can be achieved through study. This implication also underlies much folklore and anthropological theory, starting with Franz Boas' cultural reflector theory, which assumed that folklore reflected its culture's values. Subsequently, folklorists and anthropologists have sought better ways to represent, yet always with an underlying belief that better understanding is based in simply more study, greater context, and ultimately more accurate representation. Said points to this as a central flaw with the social sciences generally:

The idea encouraged is that studying Orientals... "we" can get to know another people, their way of life and thought, and so on. To this end it is always better to let them speak for themselves, to represent themselves (even though underlying this fiction stands Marx's phrase...for Louis Napoleon: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.') But only up to a point, and in a special way. (1979, 293)

Said is writing specifically about the western promotion of language study as a means to gain a better understanding of a studied culture through immersion in the culture's daily life. Yet as Said points out, such study, like much of the folkloristic representation of other cultures, only allows for the depiction of certain kinds of speech. For Said, what the west neglected was the Arabic literary tradition; in Kyrgyz art, not only do the painters and sculptors get overlooked by the west, but so do artists who use felt as a medium for

non-traditional objects. Further, increased study may be the cause of tension rather than its solution, particularly for groups who have witnessed how studies by outsiders have been used as rationales for or means of further subjugation (Smith 1999). As Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva has commented, the etic approach, long considered by scholars to increase objectivity, decreases accountability, since the researcher is able to leave the group and publish accounts never seen by participants in the study (Masayesva in Leuthold 1998, 1). Such concerns about the effects of representation on those represented have led to a growing sense of unease in the field and some changes in methodologies, such as Elaine Lawless's reciprocal ethnography approach (1992). This approach aims in part to level the power dynamic of the fieldwork relationship between scholar and ethnographic subject through open dialogue and exchange about the ethnographic process in both directions, requiring a much greater level of trust and a significant narrowing of the distance between ethnographer and ethnographic subject as well as a willingness on the part of the scholar to relinquish the safety net of claims of objectivity and some control over the product (Lawless 2000, 200). Thus, while progress has been made methodologically in the gathering of ethnographic information, many cultural displays continue to be plagued by unequal positions of power between researcher or broker and the people researched or represented. This disparity occurs in part because, despite claims that the goal of such brokerage is to bring two or more groups together, the success of the broker is often dependent on how he or she can maintain distance.

The culture broker's job security relies on the two cultures never fully coming into contact. As Steiner notes: "the success of the middleman demands the separation of

buyers from sellers” (1994, 130). This necessity for continued distance creates an interesting challenge to the depiction of broker as cultural advocate described by Korom, which Kurin believes himself to embody, as well as to the conceit of many cross cultural presentations that they are offering “contact” and “understanding,” including most museum exhibits and the Festival of American Folklife. Yet the maintenance of such distance allows the broker to recast himself, thus ridding himself of the potential taint of commerce at the same time that he commodifies and reenacts a process of cultural Othering. Said describes a similar process for the professional Middle Eastern or Asian studies scholar: “The modern Orientalist was, in his view, a hero rescuing the Orient from ... obscurity, alienation, and strangeness....” (1979, 121). The reason brokerage is requested at all is to bridge perceived cultural, economic, linguistic, or political differences (Steiner 1994, 130). The role of the broker as expert translator, however, becomes moot if people are able to cross this distance on their own. Whether or not that is possible remains in question, since it might require a level of discomfort or dislocation beyond what most are willing to undergo. The issue of cross cultural understanding, on the part of both consumer and broker, combined with the broker’s belief in his own heroism is at least part of the problem. The representation of others (and Others) is intrinsic to folklore. It is what folklorists *do*. Yet such representations rely on a revaluation of culture as a consumable commodity, an equation that is often concealed when the celebration of culture takes precedence over the ethics of representation.

So What's Wrong with Celebrations?: Culture as Commodity

In truth, all men are brothers, but as generations pass, it is differences that matter and not similarities.

– James A. Mitchner, *Hawaii*

...multiculturalism allows orientalism to pass for...cultural sensitivity.

– Kimberly J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism*

Dorothy Noyes concern, quoted in the introduction to this chapter, that “we,” folklorists, tend to “celebrate what we describe” and thus may end up celebrating “the multinational,” i.e. the global corporation, is not without foundation. It is a fairly short step from the celebration of multiple ethnic heritages in the kinds of multicultural festivals that are performed throughout the United States every year, including the Festival of American Folklife and the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, to a celebration of multinational corporations as working across ethnic and political boundaries in the interests of all, and the path between the two is paved by the kinds of developmental rhetoric discussed in chapters three and four. Indeed, a glance through any recent *National Geographic* issue will provide multiple examples of multinationals using the language of development and multiculturalism to sell themselves, including IBM, ExxonMobile, and Toyota (November and December 2009). Yet it is difficult to follow Noyes’ logic that such celebratory tendencies means that “we” as a field should reject the marketplace as a useful metaphor and much less a subject of study. Instead, “we” should perhaps look more closely at what happens when we celebrate and why we are so inclined to do it, especially as the language used by the festival is being co-opted by multinationals to sell their products. Lying at the root of such celebration is a specific

construction and commodification of difference that fetishistically attempts to elide differences that evoke more troubling and difficult questions of race, class, and gender, thus making them safe for consumption, by shifting the focus onto seemingly more benign, dehistoricized differences. In other words, multiculturalism.

If folklorists and others engaged in cultural display are brokering culture, then culture itself becomes a kind of commodity to be bought and sold, traded and consumed in the global marketplace. To change cultures into commodities, however, is to reduce and to reify them, because they can only be consumable, especially by members of another culture, if they are remade into a familiar form through the flattening of anything contradictory and, typically, political. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett dealt with this idea extensively in terms of the politics of touristic display in her book *Destination Culture*, suggesting that cultural brokerage and tourism may be two names for the same consumptive process¹²⁸ (1998). What Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states about the ethnographic object is equally true of the brokered culture: “Ethnographic objects are objects of ethnography. They are artifacts created by ethnographers when they define, segment, detach, and carry them away” (1998, 2). By selecting and detaching particular parts of a culture, whether it be elements of material culture, dance, song, or traditional cure, the culture broker turns those elements into commodities and the culture itself into a kind of stereotype divorced from its historic and political specificity.

¹²⁸ The biggest differences between cultural brokerage and tourism are the location and the focus of study. In tourism, the tourist leaves home and locality to consume another culture, generally in their home or locality. In cultural brokerage, the consumer and the consumed culture both remain separate in their own localities, while the culture broker travels back and forth between them. One could argue, on this basis, that the tourist is able to achieve a closer contact with the culture he consumes, however, this would neglect the presence of all of the culture brokers who work to mediate, ease, and direct the tourist’s experience.

Multiculturalism has been promoted in the public forum as a way to celebrate difference and get beyond the conflicting histories that have existed between diverse groups in the United States at least since the 1970s. While the public seeks to attend the latest cultural festival, eat in the most recently opened “ethnic” restaurant, and take classes in the newest, “ancient” physical fitness and healing techniques imported from Asia, Africa, or indigenous South America, academics have begun to question the often subconscious motives of these festival-goers as well as the ultimate efficacy of such unilateral celebration. Multiculturalism optimistically seeks to acknowledge difference without distress, to elide the actual past through nostalgia for authentic culture. To this end, multiculturalism works through three interconnected modes – nostalgia, fetish, and collection – that result in an essentializing of cultures that reduces difference into a consumable package. Through consumption, white Americans are able to assuage their guilt over past injustices, while mitigating personal insecurities by redefining their position in society through contact with, and thereby, they believe, inclusion in, minority cultures.

As stated above, multiculturalism works through a fetishization of difference that seeks to control that difference by a process of cultural categorizing and, ultimately, the reduction of difference to a kind of surface detail, a patterned scarf or combination of herbs. The fetishist focuses on a desired object as a way of compensating for a perceived loss. In modern society, this loss is often associated with a sense of lost authenticity in the face of modernization and a desire to reconnect to a romantically envisioned agrarian past, held either by the rural or the ethnic, who are constructed as rural. Multiculturalism serves to link authenticity with ethnicity such that all that is ethnic is inherently authentic

and the fetishized object which will create fulfillment and negate the loss caused by modernity is the ethnic Other. As Susan Stewart formulates this idea:

...the exotic offers an authenticity of experience tied up with notions of the primitive as child and the primitive as an earlier and purer stage of contemporary civilization. (Stewart 1993, 146)

In this construction, the exotic is seen as closer to nature, less industrially (and socially) advanced and therefore more authentic so that what multiculturalism offers is a chance to possess through interaction a reclaimed sense of authenticity. Multiculturalism operates on a basis of fetish that “relies on sentimentalism and nostalgia” (Lau 2000, 7). Yet because the ethnic is now reified and commodified, it is also available for collection.

Multiculturalism draws on the mixed impulses of celebration of those elements of human identity that we tend to believe are nonquantifiable, such as culture, and categorization and quantification of those same elements. Andreas Huyssen describes current American society as one of “museumphilia” – westerners seek to place everything, from licensed children’s toys to whole cultures, within the framework of the museum, thereby categorizing and limiting all that is contacted (Huyssen 1995, 27-30). This system gives westerners control over and understanding of the rest of the world by extending the status of the artifact as the meaning-laden representation of an entire category, forcing the definition of categories according to similarities and imposing “order out of chaos” (Czikszenmihaly 1981, 14-5). In this way, the multicultural event becomes a sort of museum collection, with each culture providing a representative cuisine and cultural expression – dance, music, etc. – and each taxonomically labeled according to country of origin or region of the world. The multicultural stage, then, comes to resemble a conveniently framed exhibit, a cultural zoo (remember Cantwell’s

description of the ZOO BUS at the Festival of American Folklife), through which westerners can come safely into contact with Others without being contaminated if they so wish. It is just this kind of collection of ethnic categories that bell hooks describes “Eating the Other:”

[I] found myself walking behind a group of very blond, very white, jock type boys....Seemingly unaware of my presence, these young men talked about their plans to fuck as many girls from other racial/ethnic groups as they could “catch” before graduation. They “ran” it down. Black girls were high on the list, Native American girls hard to find, Asian girls (all lumped into the same category), deemed easier to entice, were considered “prime targets.”...

To these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white “innocence” and enter the world of “experience.” As is often the case in this society, they were confident that nonwhite people had more life experience, were more worldly, sensual, and sexual because they were different. (1992, 183-184)

While this example may feel extreme, such collection of ethnic Otherness occurs on a daily basis with the consumption of ethnic food. By categorizing the women according to the race they intend to “fuck,” these boys effectively reduce any threat they may feel from women or nonwhite people generally, especially as many of them confront race, feminism, and issues of cultural disparity for the first time. The act of reducing the women to categorical types to be consumed and checked off a list, reiterates the boys’ position of power by asserting order over what they feel threatened by.

This kind of categorization and collection is a classic move of colonial rhetoric as we have encountered already in the naming of different types of art. Here it applies more broadly to entire cultures. David Spurr describes this process as “classification,” whereby “Western writing generates an ideologically charged meaning from its perceptions of non-Western cultures” (1993, 62). These meanings, however, are predicated on western

systems, which allow them to be codified and carry the ideological weight of fact by their association of with larger philosophical structures such as Science. Mary Louise Pratt details the long history of western colonization through classification in her discussion of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries' fascination with natural history, beginning with Linneaus, the famous botanic taxonomer:

Like the rise of interior exploration, the systematic surface mapping of the globe correlates with an expanding search for commercially exploitable resources, markets, and lands to colonize, just as navigational mapping is linked with the search for trade routes. Unlike navigational mapping, however, natural history conceived of the world as a chaos out of which the scientist *produced* an order. It is not, then, simply a question of depicting the planet as it was. For Adamson (1763), the natural world without the scientist's ordering eye is "a confused mingling of beings that seem to have been brought together by chance...." (Pratt 1992, 30)

The process of dividing, cataloguing, and naming breaks down societies into consumable parts according to a western ordering system, and thus paradigm. The necessity for order as a way of reasserting western power, however, results in a "cultural flattening that provides only the impression of particularities, thus extending the power of global capitalism" (Lau 2000a, 11). By reducing difference to a category loosely named ethnic, i.e. not white middle class American, multiculturalism sanitizes cultures for easy consumption and marketability, what Lau refers to as "the reduction, fixing, and ultimately, containment of difference" (Lau 2000b, 71). Further, by turning culture into a commodity through this kind of flattening, it becomes decontextualized, divorced from its political implications (Rosaldo 1993, 64).

Many culture brokers are not unaware of the dangers of such imposed systems and have striven to promote groups being represented to depict their own ordering; however, often such systems are so ingrained in the western institution and mindset that

they are hard to avoid, such as the division of museums by time period and school for western art and geographic region for the art of the rest of the world or the ethnic divisions of most multicultural events. This kind of geographic division can be particularly difficult for nomadic groups or those from regions like Kyrgyzstan, which is linguistically Turkic and predominantly Muslim, which would suggest a grouping with the Middle East, yet culturally closer to Mongolia and some Tibetan and Nepali ethnicities, implying an Asian or Himalayan grouping. However, “Asia” tends to imply the far east of China, Japan, Korea and possibly the southeast of Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma, and the Kyrgyz have little culturally in common with any of these ethnicities. It would be impossible to either fully represent or to market the whole set of contradictions that make up any given culture, and a move towards completeness would also stress the bounds of multicultural taxonomy to the breaking point. By centering the representation of non-white ethnicity onto a few carefully chosen and detached “traditions,” however, brokers are able to provide white westerners with bite-sized pieces that effectively erase any real difference by erasing any perceived guilt for historic and ongoing exploitations. For the categorization and consumption of Other cultures is, as I have stated, a fetishistic attempt to assuage guilt.

The connotations of the terms collection and fetish, particularly as they apply to other cultures, are almost wholly negative. They are precisely the historic impulses that drove colonization and that multiculturalism seeks to redress in the present, ironically through their reuse. If the history of the United States is one predicated on racial division and national disunity, then multiculturalism is an effort at national unity and identity

formation, based on the creation of what some folklorists refer to as a “usable past”

(Jones in Bronner 2002, 23):

“Multiculturalism” supplements abstract political citizenship where the unrealizability of the political claims to equality becomes apparent: it is the national cultural form that seeks to unify the diversity of the United States through the integration of differences as *cultural* equivalents abstracted from the histories of racial inequality unresolved in the economic and political domains. (Lowe 1996, 30)

Lisa Lowe’s definition marks several elements of multiculturalism which are salient here: the need to create a unified identity and the necessity of erasure for that identity to be feasible. In this way, multiculturalism reinvokes nostalgia for a past of racial and cultural harmony that never existed, while simultaneously deploying an imperialistic construction of America’s attitude towards immigrants, one “that ‘discovers,’ ‘welcomes,’ and ‘domesticates’” them (Lowe 1996, 5):

Multiculturalism levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism, which asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion. (Lowe 1996, 86)

Thus, American national identity becomes simply a mantra of inclusiveness that does not reflect the realities of American life, because the process of multicultural representation and consumption has reduced ethnic difference to a double binary of white/consumer as distinct from non-white/consumable.

Such multiculturalism builds on commodity fetish by stamping products with cultural authenticity by sheer virtue of their link, however tenuous, with a non-white ethnicity. Since commodification requires categorization and categorization requires reduction to essentials from the etic perspective, then multiculturalist displays end up

presenting a sort of false culture, one that does not and cannot exist naturally in order to avoid cultural contradictions and maintain the celebratory stance. As Neil Bissoondath discusses regarding official multiculturalism in Canada, in Noreen Golfman's understanding of his work (and one can assume that Canada's multiculturalism works similarly to the United States'), multiculturalism only remains safe so long as it is commodified:

...the official multicultural policy in Canada has involved marketing fabricated notions of identity. Such a political condition encourages the commodification of false culture, not its healthy organic growth, but a specialized, exclusive "cult" of behaviors. Official multiculturalism then...produces a false or inauthentic or even debased form of identity. The implication is serious: like a wayward young man who joins up with the Moonie, a new Canadian might need to be rescued from such a cult in order to recover something about himself and the world from which he strayed. (Golfman 1996, 176)

Bissoondath would seem to suggest that if the ethnic minority becomes, in a sense, too ethnic, the members of the minority must, "humanely," be brought back to the cultural mainstream. Taken to a cynical extreme, then, multiculturalism as a system functions not dissimilarly from the line of multicultural Barbies, with each culture reduced to a new outfit for an otherwise generic Barbie, and the whole line aimed at sparking the fetishist's desire for completing the collection, for owning one of each (Lau 2000b, 73). Ironically, all of the essentialism and taxonomy of multiculturalism is driven, at least on to some extent, by a guilt inspired impulse to celebrate the Other.

Crucial in hooks' description of the boys who want to fuck women of various ethnicities is her acknowledgement that these boys do not see their consumption as problematic in any way, but rather as a kind of celebration of difference, which can be erased through consumption. As she puts it, "They see their willingness to openly name

their desire for the Other as affirmation of cultural plurality....” (1992, 184). The boys do not see their consumption as a reassertion of their own position of power any more than visitors to multicultural programs, from museums to festivals, or buyers of ethnic crafts online and in markets consider their interest as anything other than honest interest. However, the ways in which the cultures they consume have been made available, through dehistoricization and detachment, and specifically intended for enjoyment and celebration, assure that the hegemony will remain in place. Hooks states:

To make one’s self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one’s mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relation with the Other. (1992, 183)

Unfortunately, it is precisely this sense of the “playground” or the celebration that many culture brokers not only purposefully create in the forms of festival and exhibition but that many folklorists, perhaps unintentionally, construct in their desire to share their enthusiasms for culture generally with other people. The great paradox of cultural brokerage is that cultural representations must appeal to the audience, generally those who are already in a position of power, and make them feel as though their consumption is both joyful and welcome. Yet, it most often does so by reasserting what is familiar to them, as we have seen in the case of the Kyrgyz felt sold through a narrative of debasement. As a result, folklorists and other culture brokers have tended to highlight difference and offer it up for consumption at the same time that they admit the problems of multiculturalism.

Richard Kurin acknowledges that the audience must be drawn in to any representation and must be able to leave feeling better than when they came in, especially in the current era in which museums and other cultural institutions cannot necessarily rely on either governments or philanthropists for their funding. As a result, museum and festival representations of other cultures are a constant negotiation between multiple goals and interests, or as Kurin puts it, “institutional mission¹²⁹ and scholarly/curatorially informed practice had to be weighed against the pragmatics of politics and economics” (1997, 38). Yet the politics of such events are often dictated by the desire to create a feeling of temporary goodwill and celebration and by the economics of needing to increase audience numbers¹³⁰. Too much catering to audience, however, can ultimately defang any real statement that such representation can make, at their worst, by simply repeating hegemonic stereotypes so as to placate the audience. As Cantwell states:

The conceptions to which such signs give rise in the Festival’s environment of radical dislocation, the imaginary pictures of the whole people and ways of life for which the other has been made to stand, are essential to the feeling of goodwill, which is, in turn, socially essential; hence, the festival setting actually inspires us to form conceptions of others that are more or less developed versions of stereotypes. (1993, 151)

¹²⁹ Institutional missions can have an important impact on the kinds of representations seen in specific institutions. For example, the National Museum of the American Indian’s mission states that the institution “is committed to advancing knowledge and understanding of the Native cultures...through partnership with Native people and others” (National Museum of the American Indian 2010). This last phrase has effectively meant that any representation must include the modern voices and the curatorial approval, on some level, of the people being represented. Contrast this to the Museum of International Folk Art’s mission: “to enrich the human spirit by connecting people with the arts, traditions, and cultures of the world” (Museum of International Folk Art 2010). This statement, on the other hand, could be read as problematically eliding the people who actually produce the art. Yet, it must also be noted that these two museums, while both exhibiting Native art, do so for different audiences, in different contexts, and with different aims. James Clifford’s article “Four Museums” in his book *Routes* (1997) offers an excellent discussion of how the divergent missions and intended audiences of four museums with large Native collections affect how those collections are displayed or to what extent they are displayed.

¹³⁰ For example, one of the major questions on Missouri Arts Council grant applications is how the organization plans to increase audience numbers and reach out to new audiences.

For Cantwell, however, this repetition and formation of stereotypes does not seem too problematic, since it does succeed, he claims, in creating “goodwill.” Nonetheless, one is left to wonder what is the cost of such goodwill.

Building from Griaule, Edward Said has suggested that representation is always an act of violence, and that the violence of representation is the unavoidable burden of anthropology and its associated fields, such as folklore (1985, 4-5). Ruth Behar, agreeing with Said, remarked that representation is always achieved through reduction, decontextualization, and miniaturization, thus making it impossible to avoid some level of violence to the subject (1993, 271). However, following Said’s remarks on Orientalism, Behar also has argued that all representation is a form of self-representation. And for Behar, this self-reflexivity offers hope:

... insofar as we realize that ethnographic work is inherently paradoxical, being ‘a process by which each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of others even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so.’ (1993, 271)

Yet it is questionable how aware most readers really are of the double-sidedness of the ethnography’s mirror, especially those of popular ethnographies and other representational books, such as *Three Cups of Tea*, along with the general attendees of multicultural and ethnic festivals. The kinds of remarks overheard in Santa Fe and the continued use of colonialist rhetorical tropes would suggest that most audiences do not see the ethnographer in the representation. Further, to insist that our representational goals are always what the audience departs understanding is to ignore a large segment of cultural and literary theory that would suggest otherwise (Clifford 1988, 52). Roland

Barthes claimed that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination,” an argument that he felt led to the “death of the author” (1977, 148).

As a result, Behar’s hope for a self-awareness of our limitations, like Cantwell’s for goodwill, may prove more of a conciliatory move than show actual change. For while reflexivity and goodwill are certainly noble aims, neither the ethnographer nor the goodwill is on display or being consumed, as I hope that the previous three chapters have shown. What is commodified and on offer in brokered displays such as festivals and museums is culture, specifically non-white or non-hegemonic culture as packaged by western, white culture, and it is valued and sold not by the amount of “goodwill” it provides the consumer towards the consumed. Even in philanthropic narratives of humanitarian aid and development, goodwill for the Other is a byproduct of the moral rectitude the consumers feel for themselves, and not a requisite byproduct at that. Rather, such brokered culture is valued by its authenticity.

Authenticity as Capital

I could not revel in the rest the way Linda did – with a shiny, bright love undimmed by the heat, the smog, the traffic.... Linda traipsed everywhere in her embroidered Chinese shirt, its high collar unfrogged. She wore Chinese peasant earrings, silver, with a bat and cloud design, and wires so thick her ears bled.

...she loved the authenticity.

-- Don’t you see, it’s so real, she said. That’s so rare these days. Don’t you see?

Linda had grown up in the suburbs where wall-to-wall carpet muffled every sound and every meal came out of the freezer. The land of pink and green she called it.

– Gish Jen, *The Love Wife*

Practices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as simple transfer or extension.

– James Clifford, *Routes*

If multiculturalism, with its processes of categorization, flattening, and commodification, helps to describe what happens when folklorists and other culture brokers “celebrate what we study,” regardless of whether the subject is a multinational or not (indeed if one is inclined to censure the multinational then such representation might offer a strategy for subversion), the questions remain of *why* we are inclined to celebrate in the first place and what precisely it is that we are celebrating. The answers to both may lie in folklore’s disciplinary history and, more particularly, in how the field creates and assigns value. Thus far, in my analysis of the cultural marketplace, I have extensively explored how consumers consume and what kinds of larger narratives they ascribe to as they do so, and I have described some of the places in which that marketplace exists. Further, we have seen some of the ways in which value is ascribed to objects and through them to cultures based on the needs and desires of the consumer. In this marketplace, the location of value is an ever-shifting target, dependent on the specific marketplace and market level and the context, the narrativization, of the consumptive act. In the philanthropic narrative, value is based on a perception of how much good is done through the purchase: the object itself may or may not be construed as having intrinsic value, but it is valuable on the basis that it provides “help” to someone and, more specifically, a sense of moral worth to the consumer. For the aesthetic consumer, value resides in the object’s non-conformity to the aesthetic legacy of western art, and therefore in its ability to reflect the good taste and connoisseurship of the consumer for recognizing it. Folkloristic value, however, and the value given to most cultural representations, lies in authenticity.

Regina Bendix's intellectual history *In Search of Authenticity* details how the field of folklore has been predicated on an ongoing search for the authentic that has, from its earliest days, been tied closely to the commodification of culture valued as authentic. From early on, Bendix argues, folklore has been invested in authenticity both as a subject and as a way to advance itself as a social science:

Declaring something authentic legitimated the subject that was declared authentic, and the declaration in turn can legitimate the authenticator.... Processes of authentication bring about material representations by elevating the authenticated into the category of the noteworthy. (1997, 7)

Thus beginning with German Romantic movement in the late 1700s and early 1800s, folklorists such as Herder and collectors like the Grimms turned to the "folk" as a source of authenticity, sensuality, and poetry in the face the modernizing and alienating forces of the early Industrial Revolution, on one hand, and the reason and logic of classicism on the other. The folk still possessed authenticity because they had not yet become modernized themselves, being largely rural, agrarian, and impoverished, what Herder called the "old and wild people" (Bendix 1997, 39). Herder and the other Romantic nationalists therefore located the "soul" of their culture in the agrarian class, since the upper classes had been corrupted by travel and modernity¹³¹. Yet this authenticity, fetishistically located in the folk, was also available for both consumption throughout the populace through "artifactualization," in the form of published collections aimed at middle and upper class audiences, and exploitation to nationalistic ends (Stewart in Bendix 1997, 36).

¹³¹ Interestingly, such Romantic nationalism that locates authenticity and true national character in either agrarianism or the working class remains current in American political discourse, particularly on the right where it is embodied by individuals such as Joe the Plumber, Glenn Beck, the "humble fireman," and, at least according to her publicists, Sarah Palin, and provided with an antithesis in the form of John Kerry, the wealthy, wine drinking, liberal.

As the nineteenth century continued, folklorists strove to legitimate their field of study in a growing culture of scientific enquiry, a struggle that would continue well into the next century. To do so, however, authenticity, as a romantic value connected to the soul and poetry, and cultural essentialism had to be redefined “as a scientifically verifiable entity” (Bendix 1997, 46). As Bendix states:

... faced with the need to create something approximating normal science, seeking refuge in authenticity standards seemed one of the few ‘solid’ means to establish authority over a landscape of shifting cultural productions. (1997, 123)

In other words, by defining the field of folklore in terms of authenticity, folklorists sidestepped overlapping too much with other cultural studies fields like anthropology and found a common, quantifiable attribute that could be indentified among wildly disparate texts from different genres and ethnic origins, thereby creating a niche commodity of their own and a clear purview of connoisseurship and professional legitimacy. This definition of folklore as the search for authenticity would guide the field well into the twentieth century, and in doing so, turned authenticity into a fetish, always located in Others and lost to the modern age. Thus, in the nineteenth century both the solar mythologists, including Max Müller, and the British evolutionists, such as Andrew Lang and Edward Burnett Tylor, turned to etiological theories of folklore that placed the authentic in the distant past, well out of modern reach, and either corrupted by modernity or grown out of on the way to civilization, respectively (Zumwalt 1998, 77-78). This in turn paved the way for folklore analysis to become more “mechanical,” to use Rosemary Zumwalt’s term to describe both the search for authentic ur-texts in the Finnish age area school and the categorization of folktales by Aanti Aarne and Stith Thompson. In this

way, the field claimed legitimacy by equating the search for authenticity with other scientific searches by distinguishing the real from the fake, or in Richard Dorson's terms folklore from fakelore, according to prescribed formulae, like Vladimir Propp's.

From the artifactualization of the nineteenth century, the "discovery" of folklore and the publication of folklore texts, whether in print, recording, or display, has always been a means of commodification that simultaneously helped advance the folklorist while making the folklore "safe" for more general consumption. This process, however, relied on decontextualization, collection, and categorization to provide the subject of study – some of the same processes, in fact, which I have already described in postcolonial terms. Further, following the model of the nineteenth-century folklorists who located authenticity in the past and the Other, the authentic as a commodity is always in scarce supply, because with modernity and contact, it has always already disappeared. Baudrillard describes this as the fate of ethnology: "in order for ethnology to live, its object must die, by dying, the object takes its revenge for being 'discovered' and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it" (qtd. in Bendix 1997, 9). The search for and consumption of authenticity, then, is like opening and drinking an old cask of fine wine – it can only be consumed once. The authenticity of folklore, however, is even more slippery. Authenticity, especially in the form of performance, can never be displayed or represented, since any such move will inherently change the context and thereby diminish the authenticity (Bausinger in Bendix 1997, 9). Conversely, each performance can also be viewed as an authentic one – no more and no less authentic than any other. The folklorist, as a culture broker and connoisseur, retains tight control of authenticity as a form of capital, as that value which is both continuously sought and fetishized within the cultural

marketplace, and which, once consumed, ceases to exist, necessitating the ongoing search for other examples of authenticity.

Folklorists have certainly become aware of and discussed the problems inherent in privileging authenticity as capital and commodifying culture. Nonetheless, the power of the search for authenticity and its associated vocabulary to continue to direct the course of the field remains strong, both in how we study and how we represent. The history of the field has been marked by the desire, according to German folklorist Bausinger “to salvage and celebrate the artificially decontextualized” (Bendix 1997, 174). My own experience serves as an example. In an early rendition of my dissertation topic, I was interested in exploring how Kyrgyz traditional feltmaking and felted objects have changed as they have gained greater attention in the global marketplace and adapted to western tastes and expectations. As I discussed the topic and began my preliminary fieldwork and research, however, a series of problems presented themselves. The first was an issue of anthropological conceit: to look at how something has changed with contact assumes that there was a distinct moment of contact, a before and after. It assumes that there is such a thing as a culture that is not always already in conversation with the cultures around it, and through them, with cultures even further away, in an ever widening circle. Nonetheless, the uncontacted people remains the holy grail of field work. In retrospect, this notion strikes me as particularly ridiculous in my case, since the Kyrgyz reside along one of the oldest and longest trading routes in the world; it is a culture which has been “in contact” with peoples stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific for thousands of years. The felt objects I wanted to study have already been adapted. Secondly and more interestingly, I found it impossible to describe my project to

anyone who worked in or studied folklore without having to clarify, often multiple times, that I was not interested in making an argument of greater or lesser authenticity. I was interested in change, as an ongoing, dynamic, and necessary process, in which each step has value and meaning. But to describe a before and after in relation to tradition, I found, implied a value judgment in which the before, the authentic, was inherently positioned as superior to the after, the contaminated and inauthentic. Tellingly, it became apparent that folklore training itself (or perhaps the kinds of people drawn to study folklore in the first place) created folklorists invested in authenticity, as connoisseurs of the authentic, even a decade or more after we as a field have critiqued this investment.

To return again to Noyes comment that “we tend to celebrate what we study,” we celebrate in part, then, because we ourselves have a stake in that celebration. Folklore as a field was built upon and continues to be held together by the search for and fetishization of authenticity; it is what we celebrate. Authenticity is the capital we, as scholars and brokers, possess. As a field, we celebrate it perhaps because we always have, and as folklorists we are nothing if not drawn to tradition, and perhaps because it provides a common ground between foodways and folktales, place and patrimony, rugs and rape stories. As stakeholders, we often cannot afford, quite literally in the politics of either academia or public arts funding, not to be celebratory. However, to only celebrate, without self-reflection or analysis, or, as Noyes would seem to suggest, to avoid those aspects of ourselves which make us uncomfortable, ultimately diminishes the value of our subjects of study, our field, and ourselves. If Bendix’s intellectual history of folklore shows us anything, it is that the search for authenticity as a driving force in folklore is itself a form of consumption, a commodity fetish, and as such is not distinct from but

rather part of the marketplace. To fund the search, folklorists have become culture brokers, selling off what authentic commodities we find as each fails to fulfill the sense of longing. Yet ultimately, we are the ones who have devoted our lives to the search, and therefore the fetish and the consumption of that fetish are both ours. For that reason, if for no other, we must study the marketplace and reposition ourselves not just as brokers but as consumers as well.

Folklorist as Consumer

I more or less lost touch with Linda, though I did hear, years later, that she too adopted two girls from Asia. Of course she was ecstatic and took teaching jobs abroad whenever she could. I saw her picture several times in the alumni magazine....She was always wearing indigenous clothes of one kind or another....

– Gish Jen, *The Love Wife*

Before turning to the rest of this chapter, I first want to describe briefly an event at a recent American Folklore Society Annual Meeting (AFS) held in Boise, Idaho. This conference takes place at the end of each October in a different city each year, and, as at any conference, local organizers try to highlight some of the local artistic and cultural specialties through tours, guest lectures or performances, and dining and shopping guides. Having attended conferences in other fields, I have enough means of comparison to state that most conference organizers attempt to select discipline specific sites and activities. Thus, at a textiles conference in Asheville, North Carolina, attendees were taken to the weaving studio at the Campbell School and to see the tapestries at Biltmore, the Vanderbilt mansion. Shopping centered on Asheville galleries, a quilt store, and Earth

Guild, a large craft supply company. At a art conservation conference in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Art Museum and the conservation labs at Winterthur were on the schedule. At AFS, the local draws tend to highlight local ethnic enclaves and regional ethnic histories. It happens that one folklorist friend's birthday falls during AFS, and so we make a point of going out. In 2009, being in Boise, we chose to go to the local Basque pub, since Boise boasts a Basque community, something rare outside of the Basque regions of France and Spain and certain areas of the mountain West in America. We arrived during a late dinner rush, and once we were settled over our wine, I began to look around. Almost all of the other patrons were folklorists attending the conference. Almost everyone who came in while we sat there and had our dinner was a folklorist. Our table, one of the small restaurant's larger ones, was taken over by another group of folklorists as we left. Nor should this be taken as an isolated experience – something similar happened at an African restaurant when AFS was held in Milwaukee. No doubt, folklorists have a penchant for the ethnic and are ready to consume any that might be available. But the story does not end there.

I returned home from Boise early and so did not attend the Saturday night banquet. The banquet was catered by a Basque restaurant which served picon punch, a traditional Basque-American drink. During the weeks following the meeting and banquet, Publore, the listserv dedicated to public sector folklore with over 600 members (only a fraction of whom would have been at the conference), hosted a lively discussion about the authenticity of the picon punch at the banquet in Boise, complete with analysis about what was “wrong” with the punch served and where one might find “the best” or most authentic picon punch in the American West. Thus, after spending the days of the

conference listening to papers about the politics and problems of representation and cultural brokerage and debates in which the idea that authenticity as a false value is taken for granted, professional folklorists and culture brokers spent their nights consuming culture with abandon and showing off their connoisseurship of ethnic difference and then debating the authenticity of the Basque punch for weeks to follow!

Although folklorists have positioned ourselves as cultural brokers, what occurred in Boise and plays out over and over proves that we are also cultural consumers. We may know more about or have the resources, time, and inclination to find out more about the people and cultural objects we consume than someone buying Kyrgyz felt online or at the Santa Fe Market, but we are consumers nonetheless. Indeed, we are cultural consumers par excellence, professional consumers, because it is what we have spent years of our life training and, hopefully, being paid to do. Regina Bendix stresses that folklore is about the *search* for authenticity, not the authentic object nor its location, but the *search* itself, which becomes a commodity fetish (1997). Thus, what the folklorist consumes and fetishizes is both a process and an interpersonal experience, freeing the object, the byproduct of the experience, for brokerage to others. This desire for the authentic experience is clear in the example of the picon punch served at the banquet in Boise: it could not be authentic because it was served inauthentically – ordered specially for a touristic group and served in a non-traditional setting of a banquet rather than ordered by a Basque friend at one of the many Basque bars and restaurants that dot the West.

Further, because authentic experience has become a fetish in the field, it can also never fully be satisfied. Bendix compares it usefully to travel:

It is not the object, though, but the desire, the process of searching itself, that yields existential meaning. Pilgrimage, and its commodified form, travel, are loci of transcendence, communicated articulately in a slim travel diary chronicling 'Travels on the Road.' Its author, familiar with the feeling of disappointment on arriving at a longed-for destination, solved the problem by not arriving at all and seeking the authentic instead in the fleeting process of experiencing in passing (Schmidt 1992). (Bendix 1997, 17)

The folklorist, like the traveler, must keep up the search, must continue to consume in order to maintain a sense of identity. Once the traveler stops traveling, he becomes something else, a resident; once the folklorist stops searching for authenticity and consuming culture through direct contact with others, she becomes something else (a culture studies scholar? A statistician? A curator of antiquities?). This situation of always experiencing, always consuming, and always commodifying the experience becomes endlessly repeatable because each experience, once had, no longer serves its fetishistic purpose, thereby serving to perpetuate folklore as a discipline in a way that pure location of authenticity cannot. As a reified value, authenticity, once located and consumed, ceases to exert any power. However, the search for authenticity is forever shifting, for an authentic experience can always be around the corner and any given experience can never be had more than once. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the theoretical move in folklore in the 1970s from collection to performance.

While earlier folklorists focused on studying folklore as reified texts, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, linguists such as Dell Hymes and folklorists such as Dennis Tedlock began to question what we might miss when we record only the words of a folkloric performance. Certainly, the ethnographer could describe the surrounding context, or provide photographs, audio recordings, or, more recently, video,

but none of these, even if taken all together, would give a later audience a sense of what it was to have been physically present. Tedlock, who was concerned primarily with ethnopoetics (how to recreate such performances in print), experimented with finding ways to orthographically note some of the other elements of a performance, such as tone, cadence, and speed (1972). More recently, John Miles Foley has used hypertext as a more technological attempt towards a similar end: “making the reader a part of the audience” (2002, 155). Around the same time that ethnopoetics and other attempts to render folkloric texts more authentically were becoming a major concern in the field, another group of folklorists, collectively referred to as the Young Turks by Richard Dorson, set the study of folklore on its head by insisting that it was less about product than process (Bauman 1978). This retraining of the lens of folklore from text to performance required a renegotiation of what was meant by the term folklore itself, with several new definitions emerging that eschewed terms like “tradition” and “orality” as well as the kinds of ethnic classifications of Newell. Dan Ben-Amos opened the doors of the field wide to include all “artistic performance in small groups.” How this definition, even decades after it was written, is parsed depends largely on who is doing the parsing, and its broadness is somewhat belied by a glance through any recent AFS meeting program, where the oral, the traditional, the ethnic, and the oppressed still retain the bulk of our scholarly interest. Key to the newer definitions, however, is that what makes folklore folklore is that it is a performance. Yet a performance itself is an experience; one moreover that is unrepeatable, since, as Foley and others point out, the precise combination of context, performer, audience, timing, and so on cannot ever be repeated

nor can it ever be fully translated to someone who was not there (2002, 100). In other words, “you had to have been there” (Clifford 1988, 39).

This stance has positioned folklorists as connoisseur consumers of exclusive experience. Because a performance experience occurs only once, no one else can have had it. The folklorist as broker can attempt to recreate that experience for others through representation, but “ethnographies,” Clifford points out, “are fictions both of another cultural reality and their own mode of production” (1988, 81). The products of folklore, the ethnography, the festival, and the exhibit, provide a reference to the experience but like the shadows in Plato’s cave, they are never complete, they never depict what is really there. The folklorist therefore retains the status of having *been there*; they alone gain the desired authenticity and as Bendix calls it “existential meaning” (1997, 17). This connoisseurship of experience could be seen in the Publore posts following the Boise conference, as folklorists began citing various bars around the West that served “authentic” picon punch. More interesting still was the low-level competition apparent in these posts, as each writer laid claim to greater levels of authentic experience, ultimately trumped with a reference to the Star in Elko, Nevada, and the (hopefully tongue-in-cheek) suggestion that Boise’s bartenders should learn how to make “real” picon punch from a YouTube video posted by the Western Folklife Center (Publore archives 2009). But the turn to performance as the subject of our study and the picon punch discussion on Publore reveal that it is not just authenticity that folklorists hope to gain from experience.

After the question of where one might find “real” picon punch was answered, the Publore discussion turned to the correct number of local specialty drinks it was acceptable (even desirable as a way to gain acceptance into the community) for a

folklorist to consume in the field. The discussion, I believe, was largely meant in jest, but as Dundes has pointed out, our jokes say a lot about our beliefs and anxieties (1987). The goal of consuming the local alcohol in the field seemed to be to form a bond with the people with whom one hoped to work by both acting in a local fashion, or showing interest in local traditions, and, more importantly, having a shared experience. That concept of the shared experience, the empathic moment when two or more people seem to truly understand one another, lies at the very center folklore. It is the thing the folklorist most desires, whether it be in the individual interview, as a participant observer in a larger cultural group, or in a storytelling event. Amy Shuman states:

Storytelling promises to make meaning out of raw experiences: to transcend suffering; to offer warnings, advice, and other guidance; to provide a means for traveling beyond the personal; and to provide inspiration, entertainment, and new frames of reference to both tellers and listeners. I understand all of these possibilities as the promises...of storytelling. (2005, 1)

Shuman is writing specifically of narratives, but her comments can be expanded to the field as a whole, to the study of any folkloric performance. Each performance offers us, folklorist and audience, the potential for empathy but only the potential. As novelist Russell Banks remarks, however, empathy itself is a kind of self-reflection which begs the question if this search for empathy is really a search for self, potentially make the postcolonial lens even more appropriate (2004, 327). Further, the empathy sought by the folklorist is of a special kind.

In Ireland, the word *craic* describes a particular sense of serendipitous communality. It is a difficult word to define for there is no real English equivalent. It is found most typically in answer to questions like “how was your night out?” or, among musicians, “how was the session?” and in phrases such as “it was great craic!” or “mighty

craic.” It encompasses the idea that the event was fun, but it involves more than that – there was laughter and the conversation flowed freely, with everyone participating and enjoying themselves. More than anything, craic implies a sense of spontaneous fellowship, that feeling that one gets that turns an ordinary party into a good one or a mundane conversation into something special. There can be craic among a large group or a small one. One cannot set out to have craic or plan it or recreate it, it simply happens or does not. Not every night out is great craic, and that is what makes it special. Folklorists are craic heads. We, as a field, spend our careers seeking out and attempting to recreate, however palely, craic. In doing so, we have become possibly some of the most adept consumers and commodity fetishists in the cultural marketplace, because what we consume, by its very nature, can never be consumed again. We must always keep traveling, in Bendix’s metaphor, keep seeking out more craic, for only through its consumption can we continue to make the kinds of authoritative statements, about picon punch or anything else, that we do.

Folklorists, myself included, are consumers. More than anything, we consume cultural knowledge and we celebrate that consumption by insisting that it is really a form of empathy. Yet the empathy or the craic is what we truly desire, and the knowledge, which points to but can never contain it, serves as a fetish object to bolster us in a belief in our own legitimacy. As folklorists who have studied for years and become specialists in particular ethnic groups or genres, we believe that we possess privileged knowledge, and with it we can cushion ourselves from the kinds of critiques we make of others, including those I put forth in the previous chapters, and from charges of hegemony. As

brokers, we retain a power as the middleman who makes cultural exchange possible, bringing together groups who may not otherwise have met or might have met differently. We become translators, controlling both access and meaning. In this sense, we do reside in a position of power vis-à-vis the people we study and represent. Together, these claimed privileges allow us to argue that better knowledge, better education, greater authenticity will right the wrongs of the past, will bring about cultural empathy, what Amy Shuman claims is the promise of storytelling (2005, 1). But as consumers, our power is curtailed. To acknowledge our position as consumers is to also admit that our position of control and claims to superior understanding, knowledge, or empathy are partial fallacies. Instead, we reside in an unwieldy space, subject to distant and often incomprehensible market forces and the subject of our own critiques.

It may be precisely this sense of the marketplace's unmanageability that makes Noyes so uncomfortable. The village, according to James Clifford, allowed us to see our subjects and our position clearly:

Villages, inhabited by natives, are bounded sites particularly suitable for intensive visiting by anthropologists. They have long served as habitable, mappable centers for the community and, by extension, the culture. ... The Village was a manageable unit. It offered a way to centralize a research practice, and at the same time it served as synecdoche, as a point of focus, or part, through which one could represent the culture as a whole. (1997, 21)

While the village itself may no longer be the actual site of fieldwork, as Clifford points out, as an imaginary, it still holds primacy. Unlike the village, however, the marketplace often is not a real space. One cannot generally go there, and those places that can be visited are "messy." It has no set boundaries or clear population to study. In many ways, the imaginary of the marketplace is the antithesis of the imaginary of the village. Noyes

may romanticize the village for the sense of security it offers. To turn to the marketplace is to relinquish our position of control and to seek meaning in new ways and new places. It is an incredibly humbling move, for it requires us to reject what Bendix calls the “existential meaning” which our work provides. It makes us just like everyone else, subject to the same cultural forces, acting out the same cultural scripts. Bluntly put, positioning ourselves as consumers might call into question whether our century and more of collection and study has been worthwhile. I would argue that it has, but perhaps not in the ways and for the reasons we think. That analysis must be left to a later generation to decide. Yet to embrace our role as consumers and leave the village for the marketplace, or enter the marketplace of the village, also carries with it tremendous potential. Like any human space, it has its inequalities and oppressions – the marketplace is no more fair than the village, but we have the chance at least to approach it with our eyes relatively open already to both its injustices and its potential opportunities.

EPILOGUE

I remain strongly committed to both craft-based aid and the field of folklore. Craft-based aid has much to offer – turning specialized local knowledge into a valuable commodity. In today’s capitalistic world, the possession of a means of production can mean clean water, better food and shelter, and education. The people at the institutions and organizations I discuss, such as Aid to Artisans, 10,000 Villages, and the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, earnestly hope to effect positive change through craft-based aid. Certainly, many of the artists involved benefit greatly through exposure in western markets. Yet, if we are to move towards a more ethical system of global aid, one that does not replicate the colonialist constructs of earlier generations, then those who seek to help must assess their own stake in attempting to fulfill the needs of others.

Folklorists, through both their scholarship and brokerage, can help to open dialogues within and between groups of people. Folklore has the potential to create positive change at the ground level, because of its focus on daily lived experience. If we as folklorists are to help our field not only remain relevant but progress and flourish, however, then we must, as Barre Toelken argues about folklore itself, be “dynamic” as well as “conservative” (1979). As in aid, we must similarly question the assumptions that lie behind our interests in specific groups or forms. We must be vigilant not to imply through the methods and products of our work that folklore remains the sole province of “primitive man,” as it was conceived at the inception of the American Folklore Society by Alfred Nutt and G.L. Gomme (1886). In both global aid and folklore, we must be willing to turn our critical lenses upon ourselves and explore how “the traditional,

unofficial, [or] non-institutional part of culture,” to borrow from Jan Brunvand’s definition of folklore (1978), influences the official and the institutional, how our work is put to use, in ways that can have very real effects on individuals.

As I write this, in the middle of June 2010, 70,000 Kyrgyz troops and “peace keepers” have moved into the southwestern border city of Osh in hopes of quelling the ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks that has left at least 200 dead, thousands wounded, and an estimated 200,000 people displaced. The violence lasted for days, spreading from Osh to nearby Jalal-Abad and through the villages that surround them. At this time, no one is sure what sparked the violence or why it reached the proportions it did. Reasons range from a fight in a casino that spread to the city as a whole to an operation funded and organized by someone or some group outside of Kyrgyzstan – Russia, the former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev (ousted in an April revolution) or his supporters, or some unknown third party¹³². As James Kirchick argues in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, Russia, Bakiyev, and the surrounding Central Asian dictatorship states all have something to gain from Kyrgyzstan remaining in turmoil¹³³, making an

¹³² While no clear rationale for the violence has come to light in the weeks following, the history of Osh itself may shed some light on the events. Osh is an ancient Silk Road city on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border and close to Tajikistan, which has always been inhabited by people from various ethnic groups. It sits in one of the most fertile valleys in Central Asia, and thus the land around it is highly prized. Before the Soviet era, cities like Osh were often their own sultanates, whose borders were in constant flux with the alliances and movements of surrounding nomadic groups. In 1990, the Soviets redistributed land around Osh, giving land to Uzbeks that had historically belonged to ethnic Kyrgyz and sparking a series of deadly riots. The Soviet military was brought in to restore order. Since independence in 1991, the city has remained calm. Osh’s importance as a trading city has continued, with Uzbeks considered to control the markets. Yet in recent years, following the United States’ war in Afghanistan, it has also become a center for the opium trade. Thus, while we may never know what set off the recent riots, a history of colonialism and neo-colonialism has worked to foment ethnic divisions.

¹³³ Bakiyev clearly stands to regain his presidency. He is from the city of Osh, and the revolution that deposed him was not supported by the ethnic Kyrgyz who live there. According to Kirchick, Russia has been trying to reassert power in Kyrgyzstan since the US opened the Manas Transit Center, which serves as a supply center for the war in Afghanistan, outside Bishkek in 2002. Many people both in and outside of Kyrgyzstan believe that the revolution in April 2010 that ousted Bakiyev was influenced by Russia and the

organized attack not only plausible but likely (2010). Reasons, however, make little difference in the lives of those who have fled or for those who have died. I never traveled to Osh. My field sites were all in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan, because that is where most of the feltmaking is centered. Everyone I have been able to reach among my friends and contacts have assured me that they are well, and that the violence has not spread to the north. All hope that it will end soon, and many worry about friends and relatives and what is yet to come. One friend, a young artist and feltmaker, wrote, “lives are lost, there is no peace.... my palms are full of tears.”

Kyrgyzstan, along with many other nations, needs development. Through development, perhaps the kind of widespread sense of disenfranchisement that helped to fuel the June riots may be curbed. What is meant by development, however, must meet the specific needs of Kyrgyzstan as defined by Kyrgyz people. Through folklore, perhaps we can help found a more ethical system of development that does not replace one kind of disenfranchisement with another.

Russian media. By Kirchick’s reckoning, the weaker and more in need the Kyrgyz government becomes through the kind of violence occurring in Osh, the more “pliant” they may become to the wishes of Russia. As for the surrounding Central Asian states, the autocratic leaders of both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Nursultan Nazerbayev and Islam Karimov respectively, denounced the overthrow of Bakiyev as “banditry” and setting an “infectious precedent.” Both are considered dictators, and Kyrgyzstan’s relatively democratic government has long made both uncomfortable. Therefore, they are unlikely to welcome a successful and peaceful democratic coup which might encourage activists in their own countries to follow suit.

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