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### Can Developing Women Create Primitive Art? and Other Questions of Value, Meaning and Identity in the Circulation of Janakpur Art

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Revised manuscript for *Tourist Studies: An International Journal*, 12 July 2007

On the fall 1994 day that I arrived at the Janakpur Women's Development Center, a film team was setting up its equipment in the facility. A documentary was to be made about the Center, located just outside of the town of Janakpur in Nepal's eastern tarai region; it would tell a story of how the development project housed there, which had been underwritten by USAID and UNIFEM, served at once to empower its members and to preserve and promote the otherwise dwindling traditional practice of "Janakpur Art."<sup>1</sup> I myself had come to Janakpur with the intent of conducting ethnographic research focusing on the Center, where Maithil women were earning a living making paintings and other items to be sold as tourist art by drawing on skills, aesthetics, and images used by them traditionally in their homes for occasions of ceremony and festival. Having previously studied Wicca in the U.S. context, a central question I brought with me to Nepal was how the appropriation of traditional imagery of Hindu goddesses might be used for secular purposes of women's empowerment. As is commonly reported (and valued) among anthropologists, once I arrived in "the field," my original research questions were altered by early encounters there. On that first day in October, I watched (as I sat waiting for an audience with the Center's coordinator) while large microphones and lights were maneuvered by the film crew around the facility. And I observed the women who worked there as they were transformed into character actors, en-actors of their own lives. They performed words and actions that would be sown together in a visual and auditory narrative in which (I would later learn when I viewed the completed film) what was deemed good in their lives (family, ritual, art) was preserved while what was deemed bad (women's subjugation, insularity, poverty) was transformed through

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what was portrayed as appropriate development and women's empowerment.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, over the course of my study, I became less interested in the appropriation of goddess imagery and more interested in processes of objectification whereby the women who worked at the Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC) learned to negotiate discourses of development, tourism, and feminism, as they and their families and communities sought to pursue their interests and livelihoods via their engagement with the Center.

In the present essay, I examine values and meanings that adhere to objects made by Maithil women at JWDC. While I trace shifts in those values and meanings as the objects themselves shift contexts, I am equally interested in the meanings and values consumers attach to producers, to themselves and to their relations with one another -- with how they frame differences -- in these varying contexts. I seek out, in other words, the "narrative of origin" (Stewart 1993) for Janakpur Art -- a narrative that, as I will argue, drowns out other less benign stories of global interconnection involving social hierarchy and accumulation. I want to explain how and why changes in pictorial content in Janakpur Art -- shifts that took place over a period of five or six years in the 1990s -- occurred, and what such changes might indicate about the link between Maithil women's lives, development, and tourism. As I will demonstrate, part of the appeal for consumers of Janakpur Art has been that it is produced at a "women's development project" seeking to change (through "empowerment") the lives of its participants. And yet, the project's very successes threaten to displace the producers (and what they produce) from their perceived qualities/identities as "traditional" and "primitive," thereby bringing into

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question the authenticity of the “art” they produce. The conundrum prompts this ironic question: Can developing women produce primitive art?

**I. THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMES**

Objectification

A study of the dialectic between subjects and objects requires a theory of materiality, in this case one that can account for global flows of people, ideas, and things entailed in tourism and development. In *The Empire of Things* (2001), Fred Myers provides such a theory, one that describes the relationship between contemporary structures and processes of globalization, on the one hand, and objects, on the other:

The condition of transnationalism under which most people in the world now live have created new and often contradictory cultural and economic values and meanings in objects—that is, in material culture—as those objects travel in an accelerated fashion through local, national, and international markets and other regimes of value production. These emerging conditions ... offer a critical moment in which to reexamine the ways objects come to convey and condense value and, in doing so, are used to construct social identities and communicate cultural differences between individuals and groups. (Myers 2001:3)

In his formulation of material culture, Myers employs Daniel Miller’s (1987) notion of “objectification” (itself derived from Hegel) whereby “cultural objects externalize values and meanings embedded in social processes, making them available, visible, or negotiable for further action by subjects. Material culture as objectification provides the basis on which subjects come into being, rather than simply answering their preexisting

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needs” (Myers 2001: 20-21). In this process, the alien Other may be appropriated (through encounter with objects) as a mirror for self-awareness and definition. Likewise, the producers of those objects self-understandings may shift as those objects acquire different meanings through circulation. Here the relevant dialectical question becomes “how objectifications of social life are appropriated by the subjects they recursively produce” (24). As I hope to demonstrate, when Janakpur Art moves among different regimes of value, some of whose meanings are contradictory, those who encounter the objects (as producers, consumers, promoters...) likewise enter a flux of identity and value, struggling to find advantageous footings across contexts. (I focus least, in the present essay, on the direct producers of the objects in question, as their subjectivity and objectification are the topic of a separate manuscript in process.)

Modernity, Fine Art, and Its Discontents

Of course, the contemporary condition of transnationalism delineated by Myers above is an acceleration of relations among nations, among people, and between people and things that were set in motion through imperialisms of earlier eras (Appadurai 1986; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Thomas 1991). A brief review of the historical links among modernization in the West, Western imperialisms, and the rise of the art world will be of use in framing the contemporary ethnographic contexts at hand.

The concept and practice of what came to be known as “fine art” (sometimes called “high art”) developed in step with the projects of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization – these taking their ascendant forms in Europe in the mid 1800s when European empires were vibrant.<sup>3</sup> Though in fact integral to it, fine art was understood to

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be a counterpoint, sometimes a counter-ideology, to modernization, defined as it was in terms of non-utility and uniqueness (vs. mechanization, mass production, and the reign of economic value). In this process of modernization, the category “art” “came to stand redemptively against kitsch, the mass-produced, the ‘inauthentic’” (Myers 2001, p. 33). As such, and given its prohibitive monetary valuation, fine art came to be identified with the elite and with elitism; indeed this is an apt example of the dialectical principle of objectification, whereby fine art and elite culture and identity were mutually constituting (and remain so today).

In the United States, where similar but not identical formations of fine art also emerged, several rebellions against the “rare air” of fine art resulted, in part as a way of forging a national identity distinct from Europe (Myers 2001, pp. 42-3). Most relevant to the topic at hand includes the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Arts and Crafts Movement, which, according to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), “affirmed joy in labor, organic Community, and the collapse of distinctions between art and craft” (p. 236). In a utopian yearning for a pre-industrial past, followers of the movement looked to objects of the countryside (of Europe and the U.S.) and to the aesthetics and skills of immigrants in inner-city neighborhoods of the United States (p. 236). Here “craft” (sometimes called “folk art”) is distinguished from fine art in the perceived collective and utilitarian nature of objects thus designated, and the emphasis is on “skill” of the producer (“artisan”) versus “genius” (“artist”). While the Arts and Crafts movement kept such distinctions in place, it shifted the relative value toward those qualities associated with craft. This counter-regime of value ultimately helped serve the development of a market for objects

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deriving from outside the U.S. and Europe acquired by travelers to those other regions, often, as in Nepal, sold in “handicraft” shops, and similarly signaling a nostalgia for “authentic,” pre-industrial culture. Especially when designated as “handicraft,” the emphasis is on the items being made by hand or using only simple tools. In the “third world” context, handicrafts are often assumed to have cultural or religious significance.

A second challenge to the discourse of fine art came from “Primitive Art:” a designation for objects created outside the West and judged inside the West within fine art circles to hold aesthetic/compositional qualities of such value that it can be assessed exclusively on those qualities (though they may not have been produced originally to be circulated as such).<sup>4</sup> The category of Primitive Art entails the decontextualization of objects from their original contexts outside the West to locations of fine art display in the West, where, as with other fine art, such objects are judged on the basis of supposedly universal aesthetics, originality, and singularity (Myers 2002, p. 252). Part of the impulse of Primitive Art -- what Mullin has called “the taste for the objects of colonial others” by elites distraught by the rise of consumer capitalism-- is the assertion of a pan-humanism that is, nonetheless, hierarchical (Mullin 1995, p. 166).

Such appropriation is semantically and politically complex. In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford sought to delineate the system whereby objects collected from non-Western sources are classified and valued in Western contexts either as cultural artifacts (ethnographic objects destined for scientific collections) or as works of art -- what Hart has called “intensely fetishized object[s] of occasional exchange and high seriousness” evaluated for aesthetic qualities and destined for the art market (Hart 1995,

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p. 138). Clifford demonstrated that “traffic” occurs in this system, whereby artifacts may undergo recategorization to and revaluation as fine art (Clifford 1988, pp. 222-4). The problem with Primitive Art as concept is that it depends on the very quality that it purports to eschew: cultural Otherness (and thereby collectivity as opposed to individual genius); it is therefore, never quite, fully, fine art. Therefore this form of traffic results in strange detours and and difficult jams, as we will see in the case of Janakpur Art (cf. Myers 2001).<sup>5</sup> As we will also discover, the social life of JWDC products adds a “third element,” a *women’s development* regime of value, to James Clifford’s “art-culture system” model, resulting in yet more congested traffic patterns on the roads of objectification.

Tourism, Development, and the “Tourist Art” Souvenir

Tourism is an enormous and complex global industry in which the ideology of the primitive and the notion of authentic culture play important roles.<sup>6</sup> According to the World Trade Organization,

The value of goods and services consumed by tourists and tourism-related firms exceeds U.S. \$1.2 trillion annually and accounts for nearly four percent of gross world product (GWP), making travel and tourism one of the largest industries in the world in terms of value added (World Travel and Tourism Council 1999, 2002). It is also among the world’s largest export industries (World Trade Organization 2002, World Tourism Organization 2002). (Gladstone 2005, p. 1)

International tourism continued to expand through the first half of the first millennial decade; 2005 was marked by over 800 million international tourist arrivals, beating the

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World Tourism Organization's own forecast. The World Tourism Organization points out that in many destinations, "visitor expenditure on accommodation, food and drink, local transport, entertainments, shopping, etc., is an important pillar of their economy, creating much needed employment and opportunities for development" ([www.world-tourism.org/facts/menu.html](http://www.world-tourism.org/facts/menu.html) accessed 07-11-2007).

While often promoted by developers as a means of development and empowerment of ethnic groups within poor (variously called "underdeveloped," "undeveloped," "less developed") nations, the "ethnicization" of disempowered groups within nations can have depoliticizing effects that serve powerful interests allied with the state (cf. Ferguson 1994; Notar 2006).<sup>7</sup> In such cases, a kind of commercial multiculturalism through tourism may substitute for political claims on the state articulated through the prism of class, caste or racial redress (Myers 1995, p. 66).<sup>8</sup> And a related process of appropriation of made *objects* into nation-building projects occurs in post-colonial nations of the so-called third world that have turned to their own internal, often politically and economically subordinate cultural groups as tourist attractions (Bruner 2005; Dicks 2003; Errington 1998; Lanfant et al 1995; Phillips and Steiner 1999; Ryan & Aicken 2005; Sayyad 2001). And yet, as Myers (2002) is also careful to point out, cultural groups subordinate to the state and other more dominant cultural groups within it may also exert agency in this process, attempting to gain appreciation of their cultures and therefore political agency by drawing attention to the cultural accomplishments, including art. In attempting to garner some control over the content and circulation of their identities through objects they make, however, cultural groups

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and individuals may find themselves fighting the marketplace tendency regarding consumption of difference to attach only briefly to any particular cultural “flavor of the month” (Myers 2002:228), a problem that along with a reduction in tourism levels in Nepal has left JWDC sales at a rather stagnant level for a number of years.<sup>9</sup>

Just as Primitive Art became a discursive counter-point to fine art (that while appearing to criticize and position itself outside of fine art, in fact reinscribed its relations), closer to the ground one recognizes particular niches of global tourism, each appealing to those with different degrees of contentment in modernity and attachments to notions of authenticity. These tourism niches map onto political and ethical orientations (e.g., in regard to racism, imperialism, and environmentalism) and class identities (e.g. “mass tourism,” travel “on a shoe string” and “chic traveling”) (cf. Errington & Gewertz 1989; Silver 1993). As I will discuss below, my research has shown that consumers of JWDC wares on the whole demonstrate particular political and ethical motivations, which they in turn *construct and perform* as aspects of their identities, through their consumption, even as they reproduce, thereby, class and national hierarchical formations.

Why do tourists take objects from their travels home with them? In her work on objects people collect and fetishize, Susan Stewart argues that the souvenir will not function without a supplementary narrative that both attaches the object to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins (Stewart 1993, p. 136; cf. Errington 1998, p. 4). Edward Bruner, too, has addressed the theme of the narrativization and what he calls “metanarrativization” of objects, particularly in relation to tourism: “The tourists’ object

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is to hunt for experiences that will make prime stories in which the tourist is a main character, so as to dramatize and personalize the tour and to claim the journey as their own.” Bruner echoes Stewart in his view that photographs and souvenirs “perform the key function of providing tourists an opportunity to tell those stories to significant others (Bruner 2005, pp. 23-4). Bruner emphasizes that individual tourists’ stories are embedded in metanarratives of, for instance, authenticity and racial hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> Thus while the self-representations tourists make in the consumption and display of souvenirs from their travels abroad may be embedded in ideologies of individuality and distinction (Bourdieu 1984), those very self-representations and the touristic and consumptive practices themselves take part in narratives and discourses of global scope and macro structure.<sup>11</sup> Although some souvenir objects are not marketed to consumer-travelers for that purpose (e.g. a rock picked up on a hike, a carpet entering global circulation only late in its “social life”), some are, and these latter may take the form of “tourist art,” decorative sometimes useful objects made to signal the culture that its buyer has encountered in her/his travels and understood to be created by people of that culture. Often unabashedly mass-produced (though often marketed as “handmade,”) and relatively inexpensive, tourist art is considered inferior to fine art due (in circular fashion) to these very qualities and other issues of “framing” such as location of sale and materials used.<sup>12</sup>

**II. JWDC AND THE RISE OF JANAKPUR ART**

Tourism in Nepal and Janakpur

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Nepal has become one of those places where some go as tourists to be treated like kings and others to experience travel “on a shoe string.” As mentioned, in post-colonial nations, transnational tourism often plays a central role in state revenues and private economic development, and yet despite the promise of tourism development, particularly in developing countries, tourism has been characterized by uneven development, unequal incomes, and profit extraction rather than sustained development and community benefit (see, for instance, Reid 2003). This is certainly the case in Nepal, where tourism had, by the end of the 20th century, become the second biggest source of foreign earnings, and where tourism and craft production has come to be seen as one of the major avenues of economic development.<sup>13,14</sup> Nepal is considered by the international development world to be technologically primitive, and to be engaged centrally in solving problems that point to its close relationship with the land: agricultural productivity, deforestation, soil erosion and flooding. Ironically, in this context craft production has come to be seen among developers as one of the major avenues of economic development (Teague 1997, p. 175).

In the tourism industry and (consequently) among many in the first world, Nepal is known as a “mountain destination.” According to a recent overview of tourism in the region, “As a tourist attraction the Himalayas are today well augmented by opportunities for wildlife watching and, for Nepal alone, the presence of over fifty recognized ethnic groups. For less adventurous visitor groups, especially for other Asian visitors, major religious sites are a primary attractions [sic]”. (And many Indians, especially, come to Kathmandu to gamble.) The vast majority of tourists stay within the Kathmandu Valley

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when they visit – a situation that can only have been augmented since the acceleration of the Maoist-State military conflict in the countryside – although the regional spread of tourism in Nepal has been a goal receiving policy attention (Simmons & Koirala 2000, pp. 257-8). It has been imperative, then, that JWDC get its products to Kathmandu in order to access the tourist market.

A small number of tourists, however, continue to find their way to Janakpur and to JWDC. The largest tourist group in the Janakpur area is Indian nationals (the Indian border being a mere 10 kilometers away) come on pilgrimage to Janakpur's famed religious sites.<sup>15</sup> (To this writer, many of these pilgrims appear to have very limited spending capacities, given that they often carry and prepare their own food and overnight in very inexpensive venues.) A dribble of Western and East Asian tourists pass through Janakpur on their way to Kathmandu over-road from India, particularly Darjeeling, and another dribble of international tourists come to Janakpur for a 1-2 day stint, some of them having discovered its description in *The Lonely Planet* or other travel reference books. Those books highlight Janakpur's importance as a Hindu pilgrimage site, its clustered villages and rice fields, and the Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC), where (such texts indicate) one can watch the women make their paintings and crafts and also buy their wares.

In the mid-1990s, I conducted ethnographic research on the Janakpur Women's Development Center. There, approximately 50 women from the regionally predominant Maithil cultural and linguistic group had been making paintings and crafts for sale to tourists who visit this highly tourism-dependent country. A nationwide study of

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women's status in Nepal conducted in the 1970s had suggested Maithil women's art in particular as ripe for commercialization (Acharya 1981). This recommendation fit with the global trend, mentioned above, whereby such groups (sometimes called "ethnic" or "fourth world") make themselves or symbols of themselves available for consumption in myriad ways, including through objects indexed to their culture that they produce specifically for sale as souvenirs via street vendors and craft shops.

By design and charter, many activities in addition to craft production have taken place at the Center, including literacy classes, workshops on leadership and domestic sanitation, and other programs intended to empower the cooperative's members, most of whom are, by virtue of patrilineal norms regarding property inheritance and sexual propriety, economic dependents, as well as severely constrained social actors in the public sphere. Historically, the inclusion of women in international development planning and programming has had two basic purposes: first, to enhance the possibility of attainment of national development aims (not specifically concerned with women), and second, to improve the lives of women *per se*. Advocates for JWDC in the 1990s carefully packaged their project to appeal to its primary funders, UNIFEM (the women-in-development branch of the United Nations Development Programme) and USAID (United States Agency for International Development), so that the project appeared to work toward both of the goals mentioned above (Davis 1997-1998, p. 28; Davis 2003).

The official JWDC website, accessed in July 2007,<sup>16</sup> states that its mission is to preserve "the rich artistic heritage of women of the Mithila culture" and to help them "to earn income by utilizing their skills in making fine traditional art and crafts." Further, it

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was formed in 1992 “with the dual aim of preserving/promoting traditional Mithila art and working to empower local women.” (Elsewhere on the website, the word “upliftment” is used rather than empowerment and the Center’s production of “traditional folk art” is said to be “an important vehicle for women’s development.”) From these words alone – preservation, heritage, culture, skill, craft and folk art, on the one hand; artistic, fine, art, on the other; and income, women and empower on yet the other (third hand?), one begins to imagine how promotion of the Center and its objects might traffic across multiple regimes of value!

Maithil Women’s Ceremonial Art

For many generations, Maithil women’s painting<sup>17</sup> has been a form of ceremonial art, one of many related forms practiced by Hindu women throughout South Asia. This practice is generally twofold in its purpose. It serves to attract and house deities -- so they may be present and worshipped at important events, to assure the success of socio-religious undertakings -- and to please the mortal eye.

The stylization used in commercial Janakpur Art draws primarily on images and forms used in five sorts of events: high-caste weddings, during which elaborate painting is done in the room called the *kobhar ghar*, in which the bride and groom will first spend the night together; the annual festival of Diwali, celebrated by all castes, at which the goddess Lakshmi is worshipped (*lakshmi puja*) in order that she might bestow good fortune on the household; additional ritual events in which sacred diagrams make to attract deities (*aripana*) are “written” on the walls and floors of the house; the *sama chakeba* festival, in which clay figures and song are used to enact a sacred story

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involving one of Krishna's daughters; and women's body tattooing, done usually during a women's early years of marriage. In the first three cases, as Mani Shekhar Singh describes, "the diagram is written either by one woman alone or collectively by groups of women from the same family and/or community directly on the walls and the floors of the house. The performance by these women artists transforms the domestic place into ritual spaces, thereby making it receptive to the sacred" (Singh 2000, p. 411).

Of the five forms, that of the *kobhar* is perhaps the most interesting in its abstractness and yet interpretability.<sup>18</sup> Its meanings, centering around women's procreative capacity and connection with natural and supernatural forces, have been interpreted by Carolyn Henning Brown, who argues that contrary to phallic and tantric interpretations given by foreigners and local Brahman priests, the *kobhar* is organized around the metaphorical principal of the pond. It entails messages about women's fecundity (as distinct from copulation and the male "seed") and women's power in perpetuating the patriline (Brown 1996; also see Davis forthcoming). Among *kobhar* images, beyond the central, abstract figures, are culturally recognizable portrayals of the moon and sun (both of which are deified), household deities, brides and grooms engaged in wedding-related practices, parrots, peacocks, bamboo stands, flowers and other flora and fauna, which together conjure up meanings of auspiciousness and fecundity. *Lakshmi puja* paintings, completed on the outer walls of Maithil homes, also include an array of natural forms. Women of higher caste households tend to paint large figures such as blooming flowers and pregnant elephants, sometimes with human riders aboard.

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Lower caste paintings tend to be less colorful and less elaborate, often consisting of a series of handprints of women of the home and repeated splotches.

Maithil women friends and acquaintances have told me of the enjoyment they find in making images in the context of weddings and Laxmi puja, which are enjoyable events in their own right. As one friend confided, “When I am painting [in the *kobhar* room], I concentrate on god and the auspicious event to come, and I am happy.” Maithil women tend to be aware of particular other women in their families and communities whose work is viewed as particularly skillful. Good painting is measured in terms of its representational correctness, as well as its aesthetic qualities. The representational correctness is related to ritual effectiveness, while aesthetic achievement is appreciated both for its ability to please and therefore attract favor of the deities and for its ability to please the mortal eye, as well.

Using the past tense to indicate the historical depth of these practices (rather than their disappearance), Carolyn Brown Heinz (earlier Carolyn Henning Brown) contextualizes high caste Maithil women’s painting in regard to the circumscribed power and influence they wield:

Janakpur Art was imbedded in a social environment in which objects and images had specific powers and functions, and interacting with them changed something: one’s body, one’s future, other people’s responses. As women, the domains in which they could act were limited by *purdah*, but tremendous powers resided in the household with them. Whether as a daughter worshipping Gauri to bring a husband like Siva, or as a wife worshipping *kula devi*, the lineage goddess, and

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incarnating her to bring offspring to her husband's family, there were powers which women controlled. Mithila arts was a powerful visual discourse of Brahman and Kayastha women; it was reflexive, about themselves, their powers as women, and their mystical connection with the goddesses.... (Heinz 2000, p. 404)

In concurrence with Heinz, I have argued elsewhere that in Maithil women's domestic paintings and folktales one finds expressions of women's agency, influence, and insight (Davis forthcoming).

Developing Women and Feminist Tourists

While some objects produced at JWDC are sold to visitors on the premises (which helps ensure their authenticity, cultural and development-related) as well as at occasional exhibitions abroad, most are sold at craft shops in the Kathmandu Valley.<sup>19</sup> The primary clientele for these shops consists of first-world sightseers and expatriates, and international development professionals working in Kathmandu. Beginning in the early-1990s, the products—ceramics, paintings, weavings (discontinued in the mid-1990s), decorated mirrors and boxes, greeting cards, screen-printed household textiles and t-shirts, and felt bags and jackets -- were displayed in the shop windows for view by passersby (Davis 1997-1998, p. 27). Prior to such an encounter, potential consumers in the 1990s might have encountered murals commissioned from JWDC members displayed in a number of locations in Kathmandu. These sites—ranging from the main lobby of the United Nations Development Program building to a government ministry to hotels and banks, and even to a pizzeria and beauty salon—in fact represent a nearly complete array

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of sites understood to constitute development and modernization in Nepal. JWDC and its wares might also be encountered in a number of texts, including a documentary aired on PBS, U.N. Women's Organization calendars, articles in airline magazines, descriptions in the Janakpur section of Nepal travel guides, and other popular and scholarly publications (Davis 1997-1998, p. 32-33).

JWDC's website asserts that the women who work there use "traditional imagery" to make works in various media. Such imagery indeed continues to appear in work emanating from JWDC. Yet, with the shift to commercialization of Maithil painting has come a concomitant shift in meaning and pictorial content. Most obviously, perhaps, there has been a change in materials *with which* and media *on which* the painting occurs. Yet, even the commercial craft items that have no traditional counterpart in Maithil society – items such as table clothes and painted mirrors -- are, however, often stylized or decorated with traditional images such as parrots, hot pepper plants, fish, deities and people.

Why, one may wonder, would tourists be interested in paintings and crafts made by Maithil women? In 1994 and 1995, I distributed a consumer questionnaire to craft shops selling JWDC wares in order to ascertain why consumers were drawn to these objects. I collected one hundred and twelve completed questionnaires, which I have analyzed at length elsewhere (Davis 1997-1998). Respondents revealed themselves to be most interested in three factors they perceived to be linked to the items they purchased: (1) that the merchandise had a cultural-Other quality, (2) that women were both the producers of the artifacts and the beneficiaries of the project through the sales of such

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items, and (3) that they were produced at a development project. In the first instance, the items made for sale at the development center reflect a specifically Maithil aesthetic evident also in women's ceremonial paintings made in their own homes; thus, the objects carry the signification for tourists of cultural authenticity. The products, as souvenirs, offer a little piece of culture that the tourist may take home as a memento and storytelling prompt of their trip to Nepal or South Asia (Stewart 1993). In this case, consumers wanted to buy the items because they understood them and/or their producers to be Nepali, Maithil, or primitive. In the second instance, some consumers indicated that they appreciated the wares for their display women's skill and for the fact that they provide, through their depictions, Maithil women's perspective on their own culture.

Thirdly, Consumers showed an interest in the wares because they have been made under the auspices of a project designed to empower Maithil women economically and socially. JWDC's website and promotional materials at the point of sale in Kathmandu advertise that JWDC is a member of the Fair Trade Group of Nepal, which ensures that a relatively high percentage of sales income returns to project members. The authenticity of their empowering nature is also certified by written information accompanying the products that describes the project; furthermore, the items are often sold in Kathmandu shops that carry only fair trade and development project items. (Some of these shops market themselves specifically as supportive of women and other oppressed groups in Nepal.) As such, the souvenirs provide tourists with an ethical choice – to participate in the empowerment of Maithil women – and thereby to differentiate themselves from that stereotyped (“ugly”) tourist who (supposedly) thinks only of his or her own pleasure and

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status and not of how his or her encounter with Nepali or Maithil society affects the members of that society.

Moreover, survey respondents indicated that they understood women's development to be a problem characterized by a *lack* – of opportunities, resources, skills, and/or self-esteem/confidence. Such a lack was understood to be remedied by educational progress, development projects, and trainings offered under the auspices of development agencies. Respondents also indicated that they thought the producers had low status vis-à-vis their men folk. In other words, the respondents perceived women's development as a matter of sexual inequality in a culturally homogenous society the status of whose members are unaffected by the (equally distinct) society of the consumers themselves. I designate consumers of JWDC products as “feminist” insofar as their purchasing is motivated in part by a desire to reduce perceived sexual inequality faced by the producers.

Purchase of the items appeared to be meaningful for consumers in part because they could demonstrate their ideological commitment to development, and women's development in particular, through their purchasing. One respondent called this act “PC shopping.” Thus, survey respondents forged relations with perceived disempowered “Others” through the activity of an alienated market transaction.<sup>20</sup> The consumers positioned themselves as already empowered and enlightened, ready to help out women they viewed as oppressed through their financial support of a development project (through their purchase). Ideologically and rhetorically, they located themselves *outside* oppressive structures and cultural formations affecting

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their third world “sisters”. They indicated no sense of differential location *within* oppressive systems, failing to examine or articulate the global link between their own purchasing power and desire, on the one hand, and local living conditions of Maithil women, on the other.<sup>21</sup>

Shifts in Pictorial Content through Commercialization

Over the course of time, the assessment of consumer preferences by the project coordinator, manager, and members, based on sales and conversations with consumers and retailers, led to a shift in imagery from more traditional forms to scenes from Maithil women’s everyday lives. From that point in time forward, women were more often represented in the commercial paintings as engaging in ritual, agricultural and domestic work, and child birth. These images also display how Maithil women dress and live, as well as the character of their natural surroundings. Paintings sporting such depictions may have had a special appeal to craft shop customers in Kathmandu, who get, at one and the same time, 1) a facsimile of traditional or primitive art and 2) a souvenir of their trip to a traditional culture, and 3) a “snapshot” (illustration) of women’s lives there.

A second and less complete shift – actually more an expansion than a shift -- in the pictorial content has entailed the inclusion of women’s development imagery, such as the portrayal of girls in school and women riding buses and bicycles. These activities, traditionally prohibited for women, and part and parcel of Maithil women’s restricted mobility, are of the type that indicate to the consumer change in Maithil women’s lives.<sup>22</sup> The linking of these changes to the project at which the paintings are made reinforces the truth-value of both the project’s mission and the authenticity of the portrayal. That is, as

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indexical objects, as depictions, and as items sold to support the development project, the artwork signals the empowerment of women. To the extent that women's empowerment is an ethical concern of consumers, the wares signaling women's development in their depictions go furthest to assure consumers that the Janakpur project truly or authentically does effect such empowerment.

Ultimately, in the 1990s, in their pictorial content (and otherwise) the wares came to display a tension between tradition and modernity that is inherent to touristic and developmentalist representations of Maithil women. While "women's development authenticity" is a concern for those consumers whose ethics dictate that they buy their souvenirs from a (women's) development project rather than from just any tourist shop, the perceived quality of *cultural* authenticity has really been the *sine qua non* of third- and fourth-world crafts sold in tourist markets (Graburn 1976). Such authenticity (in this case, the understanding that the crafts are truly culturally Maithil or Nepali) is cued in myriad ways for the consumer of JWDC wares. The pictorial content of the paintings and crafts – those portraying gods, local flora and fauna, and Maithil social life (particularly ritual and manual labor) – helps seal the signification of cultural authenticity. This is not only because these images do indeed have an organic relationship with Maithil culture, but that they participate in the signification of that culture *itself* as authentic. In tourism industry rhetoric an authentic culture is quintessentially a low-tech, static one in which people live close to the land, in fact, are – from the point of view of the tourist – a part of the landscape, available for tourist spectating/encountering. As I have indicated, development and tourist discourses fit

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Nepal neatly into this category of authentic culture. To the extent that the products made at Janakpur Center display flora and fauna -- and indeed local species of flora and fauna often literally frame the central figure in the paintings -- they enhance the meaning of cultural authenticity attached to those very products. (See Figure 1.) Here we can begin to see a problem with the move toward depictions of women's lives and images of development, in particular; for these images attend less to the non-human and non-technological world, and also tend to swamp with human images even those other fauna and flora that are present. While the consumer's attraction to signs of both tradition and development in the products might be seen as contradictory, the combination of these elements is, in fact, necessary to fulfill the mixed desires of ideologies of consumers regarding such metanarratives as progress and cultural authenticity.

Off the Walls

In the latter months of my research in 1995, I observed a third and partial shift in pictorial content on paintings produced by women at JWDC. This shift was, according to personal communication with its producers, indicative of a growing boredom among repeat Janakpur Art customers (usually Western expatriots and development professionals) with the current products and a consumer longing for a return to culturally more authentic designs, expressed through simpler coloration and less crowded, traditional imagery -- animals, plants and gods. The Janakpur project coordinator brought to the Center photos she had made of paintings done in the earliest years of the project, for copying by the project's painters. This made for a seemingly odd scenario wherein

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Maithil painters learned (or possibly re-learned or remembered) how to make culturally more authentic designs from the photos. (See Figure 2.)

In the fall of 1995, the demand for what consumers saw as more traditional and therefore more culturally authentic images in Janakpur Art was met through the commissioned production of paintings for an art gallery exhibition and sale staged for the international community of Kathmandu at the Indigo Gallery in that same city.<sup>23</sup>

According to its website,<sup>24</sup> the Indigo Gallery was founded to foster the traditional arts of Nepal, particularly the Newar school of painting ... The gallery has hosted exhibitions of modern painting, sculpture, photos and textiles; it also hosts a series of evening slide shows and lectures on diverse subjects pertaining to the art and culture of the Himalayan region. Since our move into a new space we now carry bronze and repousse works of art, photographs, Wangden Carpets and ethnographic arts.

This is an interesting generic mix (traditional arts, modern painting and sculpture, photography, and ethnographic/didactic work/events) that permits the gallery to remain flexible in a context where self-identified modern Nepali artists are emerging out of a context heavily constructed as ethnographic for those who might find their way to such a gallery.

Exhibition invitees were clued into the special aesthetic charge of the exhibition by its title, "Off the Walls," and by an exhibition announcement card indicating that the purpose of the event was "to create a collection of paintings and ceramics which authentically reproduces Traditional Village Wall Paintings;" or, as worded in the

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sponsorship request submitted at the time to Grindley's Bank in Kathmandu, "We feel it's a journey into the roots of the tradition and will allow people to re-explore this unique art form." Thus the Off the Walls exhibition signaled a retreat in the painting from images of development and crowded portrayals of Maithil women's lives to those images said to be passed down "from generation to generation" among Maithil women in their mud homes and tradition-worn villages. The gallery owner chose a distinctive color and texture of paper for the paintings he commissioned. The paper was a bit thinner than the standard paintings and was characterized by an orangeish-brown color that approximated more closely the color of the mud used for the walls and floors of Maithil village homes. (See Figure 3 a-c.)

The exhibition featured nineteen framed paintings, nine portraying one or two animals, one of flowers, three of deities, two of a lone Maithil woman, one of a wedding procession, one of a tattoo design, and one of a tattoo design combined with an *aripana* design. Further, on the opening day of the exhibition, three of the painters, who had traveled from Janakpur to Kathmandu for the event and who arrived at the gallery an hour or two late, were presented to the opening attendees -- a mix of embassy, academic, development, and expatriot foreigners, as well as cosmopolitan, elite Nepalis, some of them also academics, development and government officials. It was explained to the attendees that the three women were among those who had created the works. The three were gazed upon but were not asked to make any remarks to the other attendees about the work or about their lives.

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The shifts in the content, form, and context of the items displayed signaled a category shift for Janakpur Art from the category of “tourist art” (with an emphasis on the ethics of development/women’s empowerment) to Primitive Art (with its emphasis on cultural authenticity balanced with the “transcendent” values of fine art). This shift was orchestrated by the gallery owner, a man with 25 years in the gallery business, in concert with the coordinator of JWDC, a woman with formal training in art; both collaborators were American citizens and long-term residents of Nepal. Together, they conspired to create a new sort of appreciation and distinction for Janakpur Art and its patrons.<sup>25</sup>

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

##### **Traffic in Culture, Gender in Art**

Clearly, the objectification of Janakpur Art has entailed meeting the demands of a variety of value regimes – that of modernity’s concern (sometimes channeled through development aid) with preservation of authentic culture; that of Western liberal feminists’ dedication to the empowerment of women, particularly third world women (with the concomittent assumption that culturally distinct patriarchal formations are the exclusive cause of women’s low status); that of the art world’s framework of Primitive Art as an alterity to fine art (that is nonetheless to be judged on fine art terms); and finally, the shadow concern of anthropologists that artifacts be understood in relation to their contexts of cultural origin (the so-called “emic” view).

The distinctions between categories of art, artifact, and commodity across which Janakpur Art has been trafficked appear to entail different worlds of value.<sup>26</sup> Yet, these categories are, in fact, interdependent, existing within a unitary (but complicated) web of

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exchange and meaning.<sup>27</sup> For, as Phillips and Steiner note, “The illusion of ‘authentic art’ could probably not persist were it not for the invention of its baser counterparts against which aesthetic merits can be measured and judged” (1999, p. 19). These seemingly imposed inventions have emerged within a complex system of global relations characterized by multiple and historically deep forms of social stratification – based on nationality, class and gender – and mediated through market exchange involving the uneven flow of people, ideas and things. In this ideological and structural context, tourist art (might one say “development art”?) and Primitive Art consumers engage in identity projects in which they demonstrate concern over distinction and ethics.

The discourse of art asserts the oneness of humanity, so when the Other is appraised as having created art, “he” is raised to the station of fully human in fine art discourse. Primitive Art and perhaps ethnic or traditional art brings its maker halfway to the common humanity conceptually constructed within this discourse (and indeed within anthropological discourse). Yet a wrench is thrown into the system with the insertion of “developing women,” which like Primitive Art, in a way, asserts the possibility of a common humanity (reaching toward the “developed” pinnacle) while at the same time asserting devalued difference (not developed). This is not just the cultural relativism of “separate but equal”, but less/lack and civilized/development, as endpoint. The endpoint has its own lack, however, which is authenticity (and perhaps spirituality), which is, again, found in the “primitive.” What ensues is a toggling, whereby Western superiority (its fantasy of Other) and pan-humanism are held, each in one hand.

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In effect, the modernist dichotomous co-construction of “primitive” (timeless, collective, irrational, ritualized) and “modern” (rational, individual, progressive, self-conscious) and their place as groundwork within the discourse of fine art as a modern project is “troubled” (to plagiarize from Judith Butler) by the specter of objects produced to be appreciated for their culturally-specific imagery at a project that asserts through the rhetoric of development that its object-makers are in a process of movement between these terms (i.e., they are *developing* -- progressing, becoming self-aware, becoming implicated more directly in the market economy).

Because the categories are at once slippery and embedded in basic ideological struggles regarding modernity and class, movement *across* categories is necessarily fraught with evident anxiety and confusion. For instance, Myers (2001) points out that while Primitive Art exhibitions emphasize form and aesthetic “by displaying objects on the usual white walls” (p. 40) with little ethnographic information -- despite the fact that the “placed-ness” of Primitive Art is definitional and operates to contradict the felt displacements of modernity (Mullin 1995) -- they tend simultaneously to deny to those works historical narrative and authorship identity that is otherwise constitutional of fine art. For instance, the identity of the individual artist is downplayed, as in the Off the Walls exhibition, where three women were made to stand in for all of the producers of objects on exhibit.<sup>28</sup> This differential treatment preserves the capacity of Primitive Art to act as an alterity (reinforcing the ideological category) of fine art as a modern, Western phenomenon of greater value. In so doing, “such modes of exhibition efface the specific histories and power relations through which non-Western objects became parts of

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Western collections, available for display” (Myers 2001, p. 41).<sup>29</sup> Such historical erasure effects a kind of utopian multiculturalism that draws attention away from class struggle (Mullin 1995) in its domestic/national and transnational forms. And, it helps ensure that the encounters between Primitive Art consumers and their producers will result in the reproduction of distorting ideologies.<sup>30</sup>

It should not be surprising how smoothly gender maps onto the art-culture system, given that within the West itself, skepticism of the full humanity of women has a long history, and how easily we in the West understand women as themselves objects available for aesthetic assessment. Shelly Errington has made an interesting observation about the relationship between producers’ gender identity and the status of work produced as craft vs. art. It is her impression, she states,

... that artifacts made for the market by third- and fourth-world people, often anonymous women, from soft materials and for decorative or useful purposes, become transient craft objects rather than fine art durables. These things are ‘ethnic arts’ or ‘ethnic crafts,’ marketed in glossy catalogs that come to one’s house in bulk mailings or are available in marketplaces in their countries of origin.

By contrast, artifacts made for the (art) market by third- and fourth-world people usually named men, from the traditional materials of European art – especially paint and canvas, and the harder materials used for sculpture—for no useful purpose other than to hang on walls or perch on pedestals, are art. Indeed,

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they are art by intention. I call this genre “high ethnic art.” (Errington 1998, pp. 139-40)

In Errington’s framework, externally imposed meanings of femininity -- softness, everyday practicality and domesticity, and lower monetary and symbolic value -- are contrasted with meanings of masculinity -- hardness, transcendence of the practical, and higher monetary and symbolic value.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, the case of JWDC fits this characterization quite well. Its wares are produced by women (the exception being that the main pottery wheel operators have been men, men whose identity and labor is rarely revealed in any of the promotional literature). With the exception of the ceramics (many of which, however, are for domestic practical and decorative uses; e.g., as tableware), nearly all of the products are soft -- made with a base of paper (not canvas) or fabric -- and created for domestic display or feminine uses (bodily adornment, card-writing, table-setting, etc.) according to the logic of consumers’ cultures of origin.

Along these lines, it is interesting to note that of all the items that have been produced for sale by JWDC, it is only those that most approximate “fine art” -- relatively large paintings (in this case especially *framed* paintings) and large ceramic vases (nearly “sculpture”) -- that were selected for display at the Indigo Gallery. (See Figure 4.) Mirroring the discursive logic laid out by Errington, objects produced at JWDC become more masculine as they become high Primitive Art, even as the women who make them are representationally disappeared. That is, the woman-ness of the producers – an important “positive” quality linked with the products when sold at handicraft shops

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advertising their link with empowerment projects – is exactly that which must be muted when promoting Janakpur Art as fine art.

Numerous feminists have argued that the category of ‘nature’ has been above all a *political* category within Eurocentric patriarchal cultures, consolidated especially in Judeo-Christian traditions, in modern mechanistic science and Enlightenment philosophy (Adams 1993). Ecofeminists have unveiled a series of dualisms that construct certain categories of humans – including women and those of non-European descent – as nature, (versus culture in the sense of civilization, or intellectually human) thereby “naturalizing” their domination.<sup>32</sup> “As ‘nature,’” writes Val Plumwood, “oppressed groups have been located outside the sphere of reason, the sphere Western elites have particularly seen themselves as representing. The story of the control of the chaotic and deficient realm of ‘nature’ by mastering and ordering ‘reason’ has been the master story of Western Culture” (Plumwood 1994, p. 74). As part of the deficient realm, women, non-European culture and nature are not only subordinate but also *in service* to European and Euro-American elites (Adams 1993, p. 2). It is ironic that some white ecofeminists have also been among those who have employed “noble savage” discourses, which define third world women as “the ultimate ecofeminists,” that is, as closer to nature than themselves.<sup>33</sup> This latter rhetoric renders invisible problematic relations that so-called third world women, in this case Maithil women, have as ecologically situated people: lack of land, limited irrigation and disease, for instance. It also erases the intimacy between so-called “developed” people and *their* environments. In the case at hand, discursive regimes concerning women and nature render attractive objects that are created “by hand” by

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Maithil women and that depict an intimate relation between Maithil women and their “natural” worlds – even as the labor performed by those women is meant to *develop* them and thereby to move them to the other side of the modern/traditional divide.

Consumption, Agency, and Voice

The depictions in and circulation of Janakpur Art sold in handicraft venues at once distance and appropriate Maithil women for touristic consumption through a double move. The first move is an absolute disruption of identification between the consumer and the producer, who are designated respectively as modern and traditional, developed and undeveloped, empowered and disempowered, technological and natural. The second move entails the bridging of that gap through images of modernization, development and empowerment. This second move is accompanied by the creation of an identity in the figure of the developing woman. What supports the bridge is a market transaction, the purchase of Janakpur Art. As a package, the desire for unspoiled, organic culture, an evolutionist orientation toward civilization, and a capitalist mode of relating have combined with a certain feminist ethics to make women’s development into a literal and figurative tourist site. Alternatively, when the market is reoriented upward and the value of distinction signaled through recontextualization in the art gallery, the meaning of Primitive Art emerges, and authenticity is reconfigured as a matter of cultural difference rather than evolutionary scale.

This interpretation of recontextualizations in the case of Janakpur Art corresponds with Appadurai’s reading of the meanings attached to production and consumption in postmodernity. Appadurai argues that postmodernity has been characterized by a shift

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from what Marx viewed as the fetishism of the commodity to fetishism of production and consumption *per se*. He notes that contemporary ideas about consumer agency, promoted through advertising, act to obscure the real location of agency – or capacity to effect societal change or continuity. “These images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of merchandising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser” (Appadurai 1990, p. 16). According to Appadurai, agency in commercial culture lies not in the consumer (nor in the producer) but actually in the forces of production: translocal capital, transnational earning-flows, global management and faraway workers (1990, p.16).<sup>34</sup> Such have been the political-economic relations of development and tourism hidden in the production of Janakpur Art.<sup>35</sup> The illusion is evident in the desire of tourists who purchase JWDC wares and thereby imagine themselves to be creating a more equitable world, while in fact, by highlighting cultural difference while suppressing their complementary roles in international relations, they help to solidify the balance of those relations.<sup>36</sup> The illusion is also evident in the welcoming of Janakpur Art into the gallery with its simultaneous silencing of its producers —a double objectification.

In fact, these moves require a type of silencing that ironically and disturbingly masquerades as a “coming to voice.” The presentation of silent women is, I believe significant, in that it signaled a kind of cultural authenticity. Their presence may have served to reassure patrons that the objects were indeed made by Maithil women, while also resonating with notions of Hindu/third world women as culturally/traditionally silenced and demure. (As a point of contrast, one of the painters, Manjula Thakur, spoke

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to an assembled group at the opening of a mural she and some of the other painters created in the lobby of the United National Development Programme offices in Patan, Nepal, a year or two prior to the Indigo Gallery event. Her ability to address a mixed audience of strangers signaled “developing woman” very strongly and also resonated with the identity of “artist.”<sup>37</sup> Thus may be understood the silent display of three artists at the Off the Walls exhibition opening. While their presence could have signaled the artistic genius/individual authorship expected of fine art (as opposed to the nameless skill of craft-producers), it might just as easily signal a cultural authenticity “in the flesh” akin to that displayed at turn-of-the-century world fairs, whose very muteness enable the consumer to hear without troubled distortion his or her own version of the world.<sup>38</sup> Masked are the global relations of production – the global economy and international relations that propel consumers to travel to destinations whose operators are equally compelled to be consumed. Neither the direct producers nor the direct consumers are as agentive as might, at first glance, be imagined.

I am reminded of a scene that took place in Kathmandu in 1995. U.S. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and her daughter Chelsea were on a tour of Asia whose purpose was announced as the promotion of women’s rights in the region. As part of their stop in Nepal, plans were put into motion for a visit by the mother-daughter team to the JWDC project in Janakpur, a logistical and security feat that ultimately proved too daunting to implement. In the end, the Clintons did not come to Janakpur, but three of the JWDC members came to meet them in Kathmandu. In an exchange staged for the international press, the American coordinator of JWDC hid behind a tree and translated, so that the

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three Maithil women and the First Lady could be shown conversing in an apparently *unmediated* fashion.

Likewise, the question -- Can developing women produce primitive art? -- is fraught with hidden mediations: mediations of the market, of international relations, of ideologies of modernity including notions of primitiveness and development. In order to maintain these relations and our distraction from them, all must perform their parts, as, for instance, ethical tourists, consumers of distinction, and developing women. In a future article, I intend to explore the subjectivities of women who have been involved in the making of Janakpur Art and to demonstrate that JWDC members performatively deploy gender-ethnic identities in the development, however, of *class* consciousness by which they pursue strategic and practical interests.

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<sup>1</sup> “Janakpur Art” has become the term most commonly used by consumers, promoters, and retailers of the objects (most especially paintings on paper) produced for sale at the Janakpur Women’s Development Center. These objects are understood to be a localized form of “Mithila Art.” While the term “Janakpur Art” is used to indicate objects made by Maithil women in the Nepal town of Janakpur and especially at the first development project designed for that purpose in that town, the term “Mithila Art” came into wide circulation following the earlier (mid 20<sup>th</sup> century) development of a domestic and international market for such paintings originating in the area of Madhubani in the Indian state of Bihar (the same cultural-geographic region in which Janakpur falls) by Indian governmental, non-governmental organization and private parties. The creation and circulation in the early 1990s of the term “Janakpur Art” signaled to potential consumers of handicrafts that the items were made in Nepal and therefore an appropriate souvenir from there.

<sup>2</sup> The film, directed by Robert Burkert, is called “Colors of Change: Janakpur Women Paint the Future.”

<sup>3</sup> On the contradictory position of anthropology in the romance of the primitive and its relationship to the art world, see Marcus & Myers 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Primitive Art is not to be confused with Primitivism, a set of modern European and Euro-American representational conventions inspired by non-Western aesthetic forms commonly fetishized through the “noble savage” trope (e.g. Paul Gauguin).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the development of a market in Primitive Art has been part of nation-building projects, especially in settler nations (the U.S., Canada, Australia), whose definitional

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projects involved distinguishing themselves from the motherland/fatherland in part via appropriations of the 'native' (Marcus and Myers 1995; Mullin 1995; Myers 1995, 2001). Given that such appropriations evolve simultaneous to or following colonization (if not genocide) of these very indigenous groups in question, it is no wonder that the objects that come to represent indigenous peoples (or their imagined qualities) in nationalist projects attract multiple and conflicting significations and valuations. The story of Primitive Art becomes all the more complicated when one looks at the internal and international politics of newly independent nations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elites in such nations linked narratives of nationhood with those of economic "modernization" and "development" in a way that harkened to 19<sup>th</sup> century ideologies linking "primitive" peoples with backwardness. In such contexts, the "primitive within" becomes symbol of the nation, even as it is also reified and contained (Errington 1998) -- objectified literally and figuratively speaking.

<sup>6</sup> In his landmark text, Dean MacCannell delineated the connections between the empirical and ideological expansion of modern society and modern mass leisure, especially international tourism and sightseeing. His argument resonates closely with that put forth by observers of the art world discussed above. MacCannell used the term "tourist" in two senses. On the one hand tourists are actual sightseers, generally of the middle classes, who deploy themselves throughout the world in search of authentic experiences. On the other, "the tourist" can also function as a theoretical model for what MacCannell calls the "modern-man-in-general" (1976, p. 1). The progress of modernity, MacCannell explained, "...depends on its very sense of instability and inauthenticity.

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For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles. In other words, the concern of moderns for “naturalness,” their nostalgia and their search for authenticity are not merely casual and somewhat decadent, though harmless, attachments to the souvenirs of destroyed cultures and dead epochs. They are also components of the conquering spirit of modernity—the grounds of its unifying consciousness” (1976, p. 3). Modern subjects are definitively touristic, in this formulation, in that they look toward (while simultaneously constituting) a more authentic “Other” against whom to measure their modernity and from whom they construct a quasi-ancestral grounding. They exist in a world organized as exhibition and structured through and for a touristic gaze. While this may be an overly unified formulation of modern subjectivity, it is a useful model for understanding large trends in international tourism and its consumptive practices, and it helps explain why wares produced at JWDC might be appealing to those who encounter it at its production site, in handicraft shops, and at galleries.

<sup>7</sup> In the case of China, for instance, Beth Notar demonstrates how the shift from state socialism toward state sanctioned “open” markets was accompanied by a change in depictions on currency objects from those highlighting class identities to those featuring ethnic identities. Thus, she writes, “As part of a symbolic move away from old Communist revolutionary ideals of labor and class, in 1987, the Chinese government had begun to circulate a new issue of ‘people’s money’ (Renminbi, or RMB), one that featured minority nationalities instead of workers and peasants on the smaller denomination notes. The change coincided with plans to lay off millions of workers from

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state-run factories and to market minority peoples for the purposes of national and transnational tourist consumption” (Notar 2006, p. 69).

<sup>8</sup> In the case of Australia, Myers calls this “a *permissible* Aboriginal culture” (1995, p. 66). Similarly, Arjun Appadurai discusses the role of nation-states in “exercising taxonomic control over difference, by creating various kinds of international spectacle to domesticate difference, and by seducing small groups with the fantasy of self-display on some sort of global or cosmopolitan stage” (1990, p. 13).

<sup>9</sup> Myers (2002) cites Terence Turner (unpublished) as suggesting the depressing view that in the context of increased alienation of the control over the production of exchange value in late capitalism, struggle over collective identity and personhood is “the only possible area left for political and social action” (336).

<sup>10</sup> Compare Errington (1998), who argues that the key metanarrative in regard to Primitive Art is “progress.”

<sup>11</sup> Phillips and Steiner recognized that this relation between objects and metanarratives in contemporary tourism has its roots in earlier politics of colonialism and class. In the era of colonialism and under Victorian class politics, the possession of exotic objects emblematic of access to “a world of difference” was imagined to augment its new possessor with enhanced knowledge, power, or wealth (Phillips & Steiner 1999, p. 6). The different kinds of objects that interested ethnologist and modern artist stimulated different kinds of demand. Markets for art and artifact coexisted, furthermore, with a souvenir trade that had greatly expanded in response to the rapid growth of tourism during the Victorian era (Phillips & Steiner 1999, p. 9). Here questions of authenticity

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and commercialism were embedded in struggles of distinction. According to Phillips and Steiner, "...Victorian ambivalence toward the commoditization of folk or non-Western art directly paralleled a discourse of tourism and anti-tourism identity by James Buzard (1993) as a major theme in nineteenth-century literature. 'Anti-tourism,' as defined by Buzard, corresponds almost exactly to the discourse of authenticity that cleaved the community consumers of art commodities into two opposed camps of fine art cognoscenti and populist collectors of tourist art. The irony here, moreover, is that the possibility of evading commoditization was as illusory as the efforts of Victorian intellectuals to identify themselves as 'travelers' rather than 'tourists' (1999, p. 13).

<sup>12</sup> My research follows the social life of Janakpur Art as far as various points of purchase and display in Nepal. Although I have observed Janakpur Art displayed elsewhere – in shops in the United States, on the web, and in my own home, for example – I have not studied the transnational flow of these objects systematically. On the transnational flow of Mithila Art derived in India, see Hart 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Nepal was never formally colonized. Yet it came under heavy influence of the British during Britain's colonization of Nepal's much larger neighbor to the south and east, India. Although Nepal experienced no nationalist struggle to oust colonizers, it shares the experiences of economic and social intervention and dependency made possible by colonial histories and to which Alexander and Mohanty have referred as "processes of recolonization (1997, p. xvii). Although Nepal was never directly colonized, as an agriculturally-based, cultural tourism-promoting, debtor nation with a large bureaucracy assertive in legitimating itself by promoting "development" and responsive to external

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inputs of financial and technological aid and “expertise,” it is appropriate to refer to Nepal’s global situatedness as neo-colonial. Mary Des Chene has used the term “indirect colonialism” to describe Nepal’s past relation with Britain, as well as its present position in the global “aid regime” (1996, p. 269).

<sup>14</sup> In 1990, an Asian Development Bank study projected a total of around 950,000 tourists per year would be visiting Nepal by the year 2010 (Simmons & Koirala 2000, p. 259).

At that point, Indian tourists were accounting for nearly half of annual tourists, with Western Europe second place and North America third. In fact, tourism has featured in the Nepali government’s five-year development plan for the past four decades. In a major promotional effort, the government declared 1998 to be “Visit Nepal Year,” but since the closer of the millennium, internal military conflict and global concerns regarding terrorism has had a dire effect on tourism figures in Nepal and on the many thousands of Nepalese people whose livelihoods have come to depend on it.

<sup>15</sup> Janakpur is known among Hindus as the birthplace of Sita, eventual wife to Rama, as told in the Ramayana epic. In Janakpur, temples, ponds and other sites, as well as events marking Janakpur’s storied history are the focus attention of many Indian visitors.

<sup>16</sup> Accessed via <http://www.catgen.com/jwdc/EN/aboutus.html>.

<sup>17</sup> *Likhiya*, “writing,” is the native term. Because in its traditional practice, a colored liquid or paste is applied with an implement to a wall and primarily pictures rather than letters or words are created, the English word “painting” rather than the direct translation “writing” seems the better gloss.

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<sup>18</sup> *Kobhar* is the Kayastha caste or *varna* term; those of the Brahman caste (priestly *varna*) call the same figure *puren*.

<sup>19</sup> For a period in the 1990s, Oxfam also sold decorative mirrors made at JWDC through its ethnic arts catalogs.

<sup>20</sup> In the case of the Body Shop, Caren Kaplan called this activity “feel-good capitalism and warm, fuzzy geopolitics” (1995, p. 59).

<sup>21</sup> In this manner, women’s development became objectified for touristic consumption and was thereby deployed in self-representations not altogether dissimilar from those promulgated by “Canadian colonial ladies” (Graburn 1999, p. 346) or U.S. elite women patrons of “Indian Art” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mullin 1995). For instance, for the case of “Indian Art” promoted by upper class white women in the U.S. in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mullins (1995) identifies all of the following as important discursive influences: elite responses to the rise of consumer capitalism (specifically “inauthentic taste” and mass consumption), feminist revaluing of domestic arts and promotion of women’s income generation, interest in distinguishing a U.S. national identity, and philanthropy.<sup>21</sup> Among other things, these two cases delineate a kind of feminine imperialism, a role for women in the project of imperialism deemed appropriate insofar as it emphasized women’s concern for the aesthetics of interior decorating in context of Victorianism. The flip side is that their status in imperialist nations enabled them to promote their own strategic interests – sometimes overtly politicized as feminist and sometimes not – by inserting their importance in the uplift of other women (cf. Burton

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1994; Enloe 1989; Jayawardena 1995). As we will see, the emplacement as consumers of tourist art as a tactic of women's uplift is an important precedent to the case at hand.

<sup>22</sup> In the discourses of development and modernity, increases in formal education, mobility, and technology are usually viewed as inherently progressive.

<sup>23</sup> The notion that culturally authentic Janakpur Art has become corrupted through its commercialization as tourist art may thereby (or through other processes of cultural homogenization be "vanishing") contribute to its value/identity as fine art (cf. Clifford 1988:223).

<sup>24</sup> Accessed at <http://www.asianart.com/indigo/about.html> on July 7, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Phillips and Steiner have pointed out that when the distance – cultural, geographical, or temporal – between "artists" and consumers is large, the meaning-making role of mediating agents becomes particularly important. "It is he or she who not only transmits the physical art object from the producer to the consumer but who also controls the important flow of information about the object's origin, age, meaning, and producers... This includes the important information about the status of the artifact as commodity or treasure" (Phillips & Steiner 1999, p. 349). In discussing these meaning making agents, I do not mean to criticize their efforts, which were certainly successful at drawing sympathetic attention to the artists, as well as appreciation of their culture.

<sup>26</sup> Appadurai credits "the state" in controlling the taxonomy of cultural difference; but for the case of Nepal anyway, I would put it slightly differently. While the Nepali state certainly has a hand in this process, it is the state's binational and transnational relationships in the expansion of tourism and development that fuel the production of

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third and fourth world (intra-national) difference and that construct JWDC's wares as ethnic, i.e., as "Maithil" or "Janakpur" art. It is the politicized contest of sameness and difference in the postmodern context of global flows, I believe, that accounts for the apparently contradictory attitudes I assess between the touristic desire for difference and the liberal feminist desire for sameness in "developing women."

<sup>27</sup> Colonial Fiji is an interesting example of stratification regarding identity and material culture, whereby native Figians and their labor were barred from participation in higher regimes of value (Sutherland 1992). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this case.

<sup>28</sup> None of this is to imply that the exhibition producers did not mean to honor the JWDC members collectively, which I believe they did.

<sup>29</sup> As a construction, the binary pair of artifact (or ethnographic specimen) and the work of fine art "has almost always been unstable, for both classifications masked what had, by the late eighteenth century, become one of the most important features of objects: their operation as commodities circulating in the discursive space of an emergent capitalist economy" (Phillips & Steiner 1999, p. 3). In similar fashion, the encompassing ideology of the triumph of industry and capitalism over other socio-economic forms is hidden through the highlighting of the "natural" and "primitive" in modern art, which serves in fact "more as a frivolous or contrastive enhancement to the modern than as an outright rejection of it" (pp. 17-8).

<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that such encounters do not also involve forms of resistance – a subject I address elsewhere (cf. Myers 2002).

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<sup>31</sup> Carol Ivory found a parallel regime of value in the case of objects bought by tourists in the Marquesas Islands, where traditionally men were the carvers and tattooers, while women made bark cloth (*tapa*) used for domestic purposes and men for sacred and ritual activities. Ivory reports that many tourists scoff at the *tapa* made by women, considering it to be an inferior craft, although, according to her, “many of the women are careful and highly creative artists” (1999:330).

<sup>32</sup> Of course, in the language of colonization and its contemporary derivatives, non-white men have also been derogatively associated with nature – as less rational, incapable of self-rule, hyper-sexual, etc.

<sup>33</sup> For subtle, historicized critiques of white feminist thought regarding non-Western women and feminisms, see Alexander and Mohanty 1997, and Grewal and Kaplan 1994, and Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991.

<sup>34</sup> A passage from Susan Stewart’s *On Longing* (1993) provides insight into the workings of the souvenir between processes of production and consumption. In reference to Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, Stewart writes: “This estrangement of labor from its location in lived relations is perceivable in the operation of the souvenir as the souvenir both mourns and celebrates the gap between object and context of origin. It is, in other words, by means of the alienation of labor that the object is constituted. Yet Marx’s model of the process of fetishization focuses upon the inversion by which the self as producers of meanings is seen as independent of that production. We must extend this description a

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degree further in order to see the final stage of this alienation, a stage in which the self is constituted by its consumption of goods (p. 164).

<sup>35</sup> See Ferguson (1994) for a detailed analysis of the depoliticization of development in Lesotho.

<sup>36</sup> Also see Kaplan (1995) on The Body Shop.

<sup>37</sup> Regarding an exhibition of Aboriginal sand painting, Myers (2002:264) draws attention to the fact that the painters' ability to speak English and therefore assert greater control in their own "culture-making" and meaning making about their identities and their work is very significant. Indeed, the line between self-presentation and spectacle is fuzzy in both cases but all the more so for the greater silence in the case of the Off the Walls exhibit.

<sup>38</sup> For examinations of nineteenth-century European and American "world fair" exhibitions as imperial spectacles enabling their publics to envision the colonial order as natural see Coombes 1994, Hoffenberg 2001, Mitchell 1988, and Rydell 1984.

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