

## **Strange Distance: Reading Walden in Suburbia**

**Jenny Cool**

### Itinerary

When I began on the train of thought that runs through these pages, I was a graduate student in Los Angeles, California and spent my days videotaping interviews with new homeowners in Antelope Valley, a suburb 50 miles to the north. Each week I shared my work with professors and peers and each week was puzzled by a uniformity in response. Almost everyone spoke in one way or another of my informants' 'bad-taste', 'tackiness', 'delusion' and 'vacuity'. After seeing five minutes of footage, one professor, who no doubt would defend the cultural logic of any number of unfamiliar social practices, exclaimed, 'What empty lives these people lead!' I thought it unusual for an anthropologist to draw conclusions about human subjects on such scant evidence. It seemed that simply showing suburbanites talking about their homes was to pronounce the leaden judgment—'bourgeois mystification'. Almost everyone I knew was already an expert on the self-delusions of suburban homeowners and could pronounce this judgment automatically. My friends and colleagues in Los Angeles and my Antelope Valley informants seemed to be at a strange distance from one another: the Valley folk were far enough away to be seen as 'other', yet close enough to be 'analyzed' at a glance. At the time I first became aware of this strange distance, I was also awakening to the power of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) as a work of social philosophy. At present I want to return both to *Walden* and the strange distance of studying those who are near, defining 'near' as a field encompassing all coeval people. This return is a meditation on what *Walden* has to offer the anthropological

enterprise, specifically, on what it has to teach about studying people we recognize as distinct from ourselves, yet bound with us, both politically (in a global political economy), and epistemologically (as self-consciousness human subjects).

### Definitions & Restrictions

A few announcements before we embark: First, the impetus for this meditation came, not first-hand from *Walden*, but from philosopher Stanley Cavell's reading of that book in his essay 'Portions' (1981). Cavell's essay is the origin of my appreciation for *Walden*, and the locus of my meditation on what *Walden* teaches about the strange distance of studying those who are near. Second, while it might seem that this meditation dwells only on the U.S.A., I begin with the premise that *Walden's* lessons on subjectivity and epistemology are so far reaching that anyone studying his own or another society might gain from them. As Cavell tells it, *Walden* is an epistemological and moral response to skepticism. Epistemologically its 'motive is the recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object' (Cavell: 95). Morally, it seeks to answer the problem of determination, or as Cavell puts it 'the problem of freedom of the will in the midst of a universe of natural laws, by which our conduct, like the rest of nature, is determined' (ibid.:95). As a work of social critique and philosophy, *Walden* transcends its native soil, and speaks directly to the questions of subjectivity, social agency, and cultural critique the first part of this paper will cover.

Though *Walden* is our ultimate destination, let us first go over the grounds for my interest in that book's lessons on subjectivity, epistemology and social critique. At the core lies what I've been referring to as a strange distance. I use this phrase as a working model, a stand-in or variable to denote something I can't yet express any other way. As a variable,

this phrase holds the advantage over, for example, the ever-popular letter *x*, because it touches on a complex nexus of ideas— subjectivity, alienation, agency, false consciousness, domination, resistance, social critique— as it refers to the relation between ethnographers and their subjects. As with any variable, its usage indicates both that something is known or assumed about the entity and its functions, and that something yet remains unknown. In the pages that follow, I will draw from reflections on my suburban fieldwork and my theoretical work in visual anthropology to unpack some of the meanings invested in the term 'strange distance'. This unpacking should serve to illustrate the contours of what is known, as well as what remains unknown or problematic. Finally, I turn to *Walden*, showing it as a work of cultural critique that broaches the strange distance of studying those who are near. In particular, I point to the idea of 'nextness' Thoreau deploys and its value for the practice of contemporary social science. Though I draw on my experience of fieldwork in the suburbs of Antelope Valley, California, this essay is not specifically ethnographic. My subject here is not those who live in suburbia, but those who study it: we who observe and analyze suburban life. For empirical data and ethnographic analysis of my Antelope Valley fieldwork, I refer the reader to my thesis, "[The Experts of Everyday Life: Cultural Reproduction and Cultural Critique in Antelope Valley](http://www.cyborganic.net/~cool/Thesis/thesis.html)," (1994) which is available online at: <http://www.cyborganic.net/~cool/Thesis/thesis.html>

### The Strange Distance of Suburban Fieldwork

As mentioned, my meditation on this strange distance began during my research into homeownership in Antelope Valley, California. In the summer of 1990, I set out with a colleague to study the vision of life marketed by tract housing developers and that bought and lived by the residents of these 'new home communities', as they are called. We were in

an ethnographic filmmaking workshop and chose this field project because it was consistent with our interest in contemporary, industrial society. Also, the model homes displayed to market tract housing fascinated us cinematically.<sup>1</sup> The problem as we then conceived it was, how do people make these uniform houses their own. Do they adopt the developer's decorating suggestions; and, if not, is there some other logic to their home furnishing? At the time I was reading Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1983) and came to this subject matter with the thought that our study would yield a concrete critique of a society where social relationships are mediated by things. I came away from this six-week study with an unsettling discovery—not about the people and housing of the Antelope Valley—but about the strange distance of studying those who are near.

The initial study had two foci. The first was the presentation of life in the Antelope Valley made by developers in the architecture of tract houses; names of neighborhoods and home models; decor and furnishing of display models; and in the accompanying sales literature. Second, we explored the way residents lived in these tract houses: we spoke to people about why they chose their homes and were given extended, video-taped 'decor-tours' through three dwellings, the owners guiding us, explicating their choices. Though the concrete details of this analysis were delightful, as structural analyses so often are, my most profound insight came from the automatic verdict of 'false consciousness' that sprang from colleagues and friends alike who saw video of suburbanites talking about their homes. This same verdict rang forth from the literature on popular taste, cultural reproduction and suburbia. One finds traces of it, for example, in Adorno's and Bourdieu's<sup>2</sup> work. Anthropology had instilled me to be mindful of 'other' cultural logics, yet

everywhere I read that people in consumer societies operate by, are subject to, a logic not their own (Cool 1994).

The strange distance between the facile judgment of bourgeois mystification (itself perpetuating of the fields it purports to examine) and its object (the norms of participating in modern consumer society) continued to haunt me. I went on to center my research on the question of whether Antelope Valley's new homeowners are indeed 'mystified', passively adopting the tastes marketed to them by developers, and this inquiry led to my critique of some of American society's dominant self-understandings. Still, my restlessness about the relation of social critics to the people they study persisted. Whether in an off-hand remark, or a systematic description, the problem was one of instant, unconscious judgement, of automatic borders, a class divide between intellectuals and their prey. My quandary over this 'strange distance' and the eerie isomorphism of automatic and expert opinion is their deep conflict with the understanding of human agency I have built, both empirically and theoretically from my anthropological work. Attending systematically to the self-understandings of diverse social actors is central to the ethnographic tradition. From Evans-Pritchard's classic explanation of Zande witchcraft as natural philosophy to Levi-Strauss's resplendent account of the science of the concrete, anthropologists have long sought to demonstrate the existence and validity of 'other' cultural logics. It is this sense of agency and self-consciousness, common to all social actors, be they expert or lay, tribesmen or citizens, that made me uncomfortable with so much of the literature on cultural reproduction in consumer societies. At an empirical level, I viewed my informants as subjects with insight into the conditions of their existence, yet, despite this recognition,

felt there was value in anthropological critique. The dilemma: how to challenge the self-understandings of ordinary social actors, without denying their agency and subjectivity?

### Strange Distance in Visual Anthropology

Several years after my Antelope Valley fieldwork, I returned to the question of the relation between ethnographers and their subjects in an essay about ethnographic film (Lutkehaus and Cool 1999). Here the strange distance comes into play as a strategy for negotiating the epistemological and political challenges to contemporary anthropology. In that essay, Nancy Lutkehaus (my co-author) and I review recent trends in visual anthropology which, we argue, 'are united by the common denominator that each involves a new relationship to the subject of ethnographic film'. The importance of these new and newly conceived relations, is that they make it possible for the films we discuss to draw on postmodern, postcolonial, postfeminist critiques of paradigmatic authority, without eroding the moral, social and epistemological validity of cultural representations made by 'outsiders'. This new relationship to the anthropological subject can be characterized by:

- 1) a 'rejection of the anthropological paradigm that posited the omnipotent authority of the ethnographic observer vis-à-vis his or her distant object of observation' (ibid.:118);
- 2) experimentation with narrative structure and an acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of ethnographic knowledge;
- 3) a shift in subject matter, where anthropologists are increasingly turning to their own societies, away from the so-called exotic Other toward the familiar and near, or to complex inter-connections among social actors on a global stage;

4) a strange conflation of the social distance between observer and observed

Each of these, culminating in the last, is at once recognition of, and a strategy for negotiating, the strange distance on which I meditate. The ethnographic films Lutkehaus and I discuss do not dissolve the strange distance, collapsing the subject and object of knowledge. Nor do they enact the distance automatically, out of habit, assuming the divide between expert and native understanding. Rather, they call up simultaneous connections and separations—multiple and over-lapping—between the subjects who study and the subjects who are studied. By standing in this relation to the ethnographic subject, these filmmakers are able to incorporate critiques of the Enlightenment project of knowledge, while still maintaining the moral, social, and epistemological validity of anthropological representations made by 'outsiders' (ibid.:124-130).

My own film, *Home Economics* (1994), based on my Antelope Valley research, uses this strategy to show the logic and validity of a particular way of life, that of petit bourgeois, suburban home owners, and turns this showing into a critique of contemporary American society. *Home Economics* negotiates the strange distance between academia and suburbia in two main ways. First, the film's subjects are addressed, not described: interviews are conducted and edited as conversations, subjects speak for themselves in real time. Second, despite its observational style of long, uninterrupted camera takes, the film openly acknowledges its own construction, and works to negotiate between the particularities of my informants stories and the generalities of my own argument. The rhetorical purpose of this reflexivity is to avoid the film's being seen in realist terms as 'a slice of life'. By representing the anthropologist/filmmaker (myself) as a voice in dialog

with—but distinct from and *external* to—the film's subjects, *Home Economics* creates a place from which to advance its anthropological critique, namely that home ownership in contemporary, suburban America is often achieved at the expense of the very values a home is said to represent. In the latter half of this essay, I will argue that Thoreau employs similar strategies in *Walden* to advance a similar critique of American society. Before that, however, I will return briefly to the meditation on strange distance to highlight its particular salience to the social analysis of suburbia.

### Strange Distance in Social Critique

As I said earlier, the first strange thing about the strange distance was the automatic judgement of false consciousness that sprang from hipster and intellectual alike. Further, I noted a strange symmetry between this 'gut reaction' and a broad stream of criticism of industrial society that runs through the humanist imagination and is especially prevalent in the literature on suburbanization. The subject of suburbia automatically taps into this wider stream and calls forth the amalgamated freight of criticisms of political economy, industrialization, commercialism, consumerism, capitalism and Enlightenment rationality. Broadly speaking, the common theme is one of empty lives, of isolated and mystified social subjects in a dystopian society. For example, in *The City in History* Lewis Mumford writes of post-World War II suburban development: 'the end product is an encapsulated life, spent more and more either in a motor car or within the cabin of darkness before a television set' (in Kunstler 1994:10). More recently, this theme emerges in James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* (1994):

Eighty percent of everything ever built in America had been built in the last fifty years, and most of it is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading—the jive-plastic commuter tract home wastelands, the Potemkin village shopping plazas with their vast parking lagoons, the Lego-block hotel complexes, the 'gourmet mansardic' junk-food joints, the Orwellian office 'parks' featuring buildings sheathed in the same reflective glass as the sunglasses worn by chain-gang guards, the particle-board apartments rising up in every meadow and cornfield, the freeway loops around every big and little city with their clusters of discount merchandise marts, the whole destructive, wasteful, toxic, agoraphobia-inducing spectacle that politicians proudly call 'growth' (Kunstler:10).

While these accounts have a certain resonance with my own critique of suburbia, I find in them a disturbing contradiction. What is the point of social criticism when the human subjects presented therein seem so remote from, and unworthy of, improvement? What is the harm of a spiritually degrading human habitat, if the people there are automatons or manikins? To be fair, neither Mumford nor Kunstler were engaged in social anthropology, but since I was, this paradox concerned me, leading me to reflect on questions of the determining power of culture verses the freedom of social agency. In this context, the strange distance represents an inherent challenge of social criticism—how to resolve the activity of social subjects (meaning makers who constitute the world from a word) with their passivity (subjects constituted by processes of subjectification)? *Walden* surmounts this challenge via a variety of literary and philosophical moves that deliver both a critique of political economy and some compelling strategies for negotiating the variety of breeches, gaps and problems I have discussed in connection to the strange distance.

Walden Proper

I turn now to *Walden* and the proposition made at the start of this essay about the value this book holds for contemporary anthropology, in particular for the questions of subjectivity, objectivity and cultural critique I have already raised. To flesh out this proposal, I first discuss *Walden* as an important work of social philosophy with specific relevance to anthropology. Next, I sketch the critique of the Protestant Ethic and of Lockean political economy that *Walden* advances. Finally, I reflect on a set of ideas Thoreau speaks of as 'nextness' in terms of the strange distance characterized in the first part of this essay.

*Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* was published in 1854 nine years after the experiment in deliberate living it recounts, but only in the twentieth century did it come to be regarded as a classic of American literature. Appreciation for the book focuses mainly on its value as literature and personal inspiration, rather than as a work of social critique and philosophy. It is also well known as a source of quotable gems. Given the book's popular appeal as the autobiographical journal of a naturalist and individualist who 'never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude' (Thoreau: 180), I expect a few raised eyebrows at bringing the work into an anthropological context. Yet the questions of custom, necessity and human nature that *Walden* explores have deep epistemological relevance to the practice of anthropology. It was, as I said, an essay by Stanley Cavell that first made me aware of this relevance. Cavell reveals *Walden* as 'a work of systematic philosophy—at least a work which acknowledges the centrality, and perhaps the present impossibility, of such an enterprise' (Cavell: 94). Further, Cavell recognizes in Thoreau's work an important revision of (extension to) the Kantian idea of

the thing-in-itself, Kant's expression for the object considered independently of its cognitive relation to the human mind. As Cavell explains:

I am convinced that Thoreau had the Kantian idea right, that the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental (or we may say, grammatical or phenomenological) preparation; that we know just what meets the *a priori* conditions of our knowing anything *überhaupt*. These *a priori* conditions are necessities of human nature; and the search for them is something I think Thoreau's obsession with necessity is meant to declare. His difference from Kant on this point is that these *a priori* conditions are not themselves knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally; historically Hegel had said... Epistemologically, [*Walden's*] motive is the recovery of the object... a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object (ibid.:95).

Thoreau grapples with these epistemological questions in deceptively simple and prosaic language, yet it is precisely his everyday approach, the appeal from ordinary language, which makes his work so anthropologically relevant. In *Walden* Thoreau creates a sometimes satirical, sometimes lyrical, critique of his society's habits of being and modes of perception. The territory he covers is akin to that of the anthropologist who, just as Thoreau, investigates how we live and what we live for. Readers should not be fooled by Thoreau's liberal use of first-person singular pronouns, he intends to reveal more about the reader than himself. His 'simple and sincere account of his own life' (Thoreau: 46) turns out to be a profound reflection on his society and a working through of his philosophical ideas.

Walden & Anthropology

Thoreau's language in *Walden* is frequently anthropological and distinctly modernist in its juxtaposition of the culturally remote with the culturally familiar. He makes reference to the Chinese, Sandwich Islanders, inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, Indian Brahmins, New Hollanders, Roman praetors, Phoenicians, Englishmen in India, and Irish Americans who built the railroads. In the same breathe, he speaks of 'you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England', 'my townsmen', and the inhabitants of Concord, Massachusetts, the township in which Walden Pond falls (ibid.:45-47). *Walden* achieves its full brilliance as scripture, social philosophy, and cultural critique through this deft and powerful conflation of subjects. *Walden's* harmonies, its homilies, make known the constructed nature of the social and defamiliarize the familiar in explicitly ethnographic ways. For example, Thoreau writes that the privations Indian Brahmins endure are 'hardly more incredible and astonishing' than the labors he witnesses daily in 'shops, and offices and fields' (ibid.: 45-47). He compares the local customs of material accumulation and estate auctions unfavorably with the Mucclasse Indian custom of annually burning worn out clothes and goods in a ritual of purification known as 'the busk' or 'feast of first fruits' (ibid.: 111).

Thoreau's critique is that 'men labor under a mistake...commonly called necessity' and that the laboring man 'has no time to be any thing but a machine' (ibid.:47-48). *Walden* represents the author's attempt to get at true necessity, what he refers to as 'a necessary of life'. Thoreau's transcendental method of critique is to subvert his readers' common sense understandings with his own uncommon sense. In the guise of simple narrative and personal reflection, he works to expose American society's notions of economy as

uneconomical by 'dramatizing the mysteriousness of ownership' (Cavell: 90) and by using ordinary language in surprising ways. As Cavell puts it, 'Thoreau is doing with our ordinary assertions what Wittgenstein does with our more patently philosophical assertions—bringing them back to a context in which they are alive' (ibid.: 92). The result of Thoreau's writing is intensely anthropological because it reveals that what passes for the natural order of things and people is not natural, but socially constructed. Thoreau's panoply of examples and juxtapositions (e.g. southern slavery with its northern variant 'where you are the slave-driver yourself') from past and present, near and far, remove the stupor of assumed meaning in much the same way anthropology has traditionally done. A number of anthropologists and historians (Clifford 1981, Marcus and Fischer 1986: 111-164, Holston 1989:6-16) have written about techniques of defamiliarization as core to the discipline. As Holston puts it, if 'anthropology has traditionally been concerned to familiarize the alien, the exotic, and the marginal, this very process presupposes a complement: that the familiarization of the strange will defamiliarize the familiar by breaking it open to new and unexpected possibilities' (ibid.:6). The effect of Thoreau's writing is indeed to break our ordinary assumptions open to unexpected possibilities.

### Walden & Political Economy

I have alluded to the critique of Lockean political economy Thoreau puts forth in *Walden's* first and longest chapter, 'Economy'. In this chapter, Thoreau's presents wry, often humorous, reflections on property, the mysteries of ownership, the buying and selling of Concord farms and the relative merits of Penobscot Indian wigwams versus English-style houses. It is in connection with this last comparison that Thoreau defines his concept of cost, writing: 'the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required

to be exchanged for it' (Thoreau: 73): a formulation that, Cavell observes, puts in mind Locke's 'so-called labor theory of value' (Cavell:90). Here Thoreau critiques political economy and its assumptions of progress by comparing the costs of ownership of 'savage' and 'civilized' dwellings. He writes 'it is evident that the savage owns his shelter because it costs so little', but that 'civilized man' can afford neither to own, nor rent, in the long run, because of the amount of life he must exchange for housing. Thoreau calculates: 'An average house in this neighborhood costs perhaps eight hundred dollars, and to lay up this sum will take from ten to fifteen years of the laborer's life, even if he is not encumbered with a family'. Then concludes: 'Would the savage have been wise to exchange his wigwam for a palace on these terms'? Thoreau's point is not to reject the benefits of industrial progress. He asserts quite plainly that he thinks, 'civilization is a real advance in the condition of man'. Instead, he aims to show the sacrifices by which this condition has been obtained and suggests we seek out ways to enjoy 'the benefit of the improvements of centuries' that are less costly in terms of human life. In this Thoreau's critique is kindred to the broad stream of criticism I discussed earlier as common to my own work and much of the literature on suburbanization (Thoreau: 71-75).

When I read in *Walden*: 'Our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them' (Thoreau: 76); it inevitably brought to mind my own work on the social costs of suburban home ownership. If Thoreau is making a similar argument, I asked, how does he negotiate the strange distance of criticizing his neighbors? I came to recognize that Thoreau's strategies for overcoming, or negotiating the strange distance are not all that different from those of the ethnographic filmmakers discussed earlier. Both strategies center on a relation to the subject that enables critical distance,

without sacrificing self-conscious connection. Thoreau does not write as a distant observer and is profoundly experimental in both his literary-philosophical claims and the style in which he presents them. Like the films Lutkehaus and I reviewed, *Walden* is keenly attuned to the complex interconnection of local and global, with constant references to shipping, railroads, and trade, and the lines of technology and communication that orbit the earth. Thoreau's critique of American political economy is no less scathing than critiques that call to mind a sense of mass mystification. 'It is evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live', he tells us, proclaiming that a 'stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind'. 'Look at the teamster on the highway', he admonishes. 'What is his destiny to him compared with the shipping interests'? Yet, Thoreau's critique is tempered by an approach to subjectivity that manages to expose his neighbors' delusions, without denying their agency and capacity for self-understanding. Thoreau is greatly aided in his undertaking by the fact that the subjects of his social analysis and the readers he addresses are one and the same. But this is not his only advantage over the other approaches mentioned. He also constructs certain ideas of 'nextness' that I believe are useful to considerations of the contemporary anthropological subject (Thoreau:47-50).

### Reconceiving Strange Distance as Nextness

Throughout *Walden* the writer develops an idea of nextness which encompasses the relation of the self to the self, the self to others (society), and the self to nature. 'Next to us', Thoreau writes, 'the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are' (ibid.: 179)—which some may call God, but which is that in ourselves

which Thoreau speaks of as the indweller. Cavell argues that in this notion of nextness lies *Walden's* solution to the problem of self-consciousness, 'or the sense of distance from self, or division of self' (Cavell: 107). The condition of having a self and knowing it is an instance of the general relation Thoreau describes a 'being next to'. My argument is that Thoreau's solution can be extended to the strange distance implicit in studying those who are near. This is because nextness pertains generally to the subject of knowledge and its object, regardless of whether that object lies in the natural, social or psychological realm. Thoreau writes of finding himself neighbor to the birds, next to the grandest laws unfolding. And writes, too, of his Concord neighbors and the meanness of their laws. 'The finest qualities of our nature like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly' (Thoreau: 48). As Cavell explains, Thoreau's aim is to awaken us to 'our assessments of our position and of our connections with one another'; specifically, to make us aware of our 'eternal activity in these assessments and connections, and of our blindness to them, to the fact that they are ours' (Cavell: 89). To me this is an apt characterization of one of anthropology's core aims and its strategies of defamiliarization and cultural critique.

Epistemologically, Thoreau's idea of nextness touches not only on problems of self-consciousness, but also on the Kantian idea of the thing-in-itself, the world external to us, which does not meet our conditions of knowledge. Thoreau speaks of the externality of the world as its nextness to me. As noted earlier, Thoreau's difference with Kant is that for him the limits or conditions of our knowing anything at all are not knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally. This, Cavell argues, is Thoreau's Kantian response to skepticism:

A thing which we cannot know is not a thing. Then why are we led to speak otherwise? What is the sense that something escapes the conditions of our knowledge? It is, I think, the sense, or fact, that our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing it (understood as achieving certainty of it based upon the senses). This is the truth of skepticism. A Kantian 'answer' to skepticism would be to accept its truth while denying the apparent implication that this is a *failure* of knowledge (Cavell 106-107, footnote).

Both Cavell and Thoreau refuse to view the limits of knowledge as its failure because they ~~both~~ recognize that our primary relation to each other, the external world, and ourselves, is not one of knowing or of certainty. For those who share in this recognition, its relevance to contemporary anthropology is that it recasts the disciplinary mission as primarily persuasive, i.e. rhetorical, rather than revelatory of empirical certainties. In a world where, to quote Clifford Geertz, "the Written At and the Written About...are nowadays...not infrequently the same people in a different frame of mind", "the imaginative construction of a common ground" between anthropologists and their subjects is the basis of "whatever power anthropology has to convince anyone of anything" (Geertz 1988, 144). Many have criticized this view of contemporary anthropology as a chiefly rhetorical enterprise, arguing that it reduces the discipline either to mere textuality, on the one hand, or pure politics, on the other. Yet Thoreau's approach in *Walden*, and in particular his idea of nextness, points the way to another conception of the relation between anthropologist and their subjects—one capable of negotiating the strange distance I have described without requiring an abandonment of social knowledge. In working towards an empirical and historical understanding of the conditions of knowledge among his contemporaries,

Thoreau not only adumbrates epistemological grounds for anthropologically informed social criticism, he also reveals the power of substituting his concept of nextness for the complex nexus I have been speaking of as "strange distance."

My aim in this meditation has been to reveal the epistemological power of *Walden's* concept of nextness and its value to social anthropology at a time when anthropological representation has come in to question on multiple fronts. I have reached the end of the questions and thoughts I have wanted to propose regarding *Walden*, Cavell's reading of that work and the strange distance that has preoccupied my consideration of the contemporary anthropological subject. That matters are left incomplete, threads of suggestion hanging, is the nature of meditations and will not matter if attention is prompted to Thoreau's and Cavell's writings for the insights they offer anthropology. Postmodern, postcolonial, and postfeminist challenges to paradigmatic authority in the human sciences represent not the failure of our knowledge, but its limits. They require neither that we abandon the anthropological enterprise, nor that we relinquish the pursuit of philosophical grounds for inquiry into the social.

## Notes

1. An ethnographic film based on my Antelope Valley fieldwork, *Home Economics: a documentary of suburbia*, is available from New Day Films ([www.newday.com](http://www.newday.com)).
2. I developed this argument for Bourdieu in my M.A. thesis, *The Experts Of Everyday Life: Cultural Reproduction And Cultural Critique In The Antelope Valley*, 1993.

## References

- Adorno, Theodor  
1941 On Popular Music (with the assistance of George Simpson). In *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences IX*: 17-48.
- Bourdieu, Pierre  
1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cavell, Stanley  
1981 Portions. In *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cool, Jenny  
1994 *The Experts of Everyday Life: Cultural Reproduction and Cultural Critique in the Antelope Valley*. M.A. Dissertation. Department of Anthropology: University of Southern California.
- Clifford, James  
1981 On Ethnographic Surrealism. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23(4): 539-64).
- Debord, Guy  
1982 *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit, MI: Black & Red.
- Geertz, Clifford  
1988 *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Holston, James  
1989 *The Modernist City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kunstler, James Howard  
1993 *The Geography of Nowhere*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lutkehaus, Nancy and Jenny Cool  
1999 Paradigms Lost and Found: The 'Crisis of Representation' and Visual Anthropology. In *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (eds.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Pp. 116-139.
- Marcus, George and Michael Fischer  
1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Mumford, Lewis  
1961 *The City in History*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World.
- Thoreau, Henry David  
1986 *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. New York: Penguin Books.