

# **Muskrat Makes the Hat—Hat Makes the Mountie**

19 November 2014

S. Petrina

Fieldwork in ANT

## **1. Conventional Cultural Studies Thesis:**

Extracted from Olson and Goodnight (1994), “Entanglements of Consumption, Cruelty, Privacy, and Fashion: The Social Controversy over Fur:”

The 1980s may be remembered as a moment when the grand debates of the twentieth century imploded. In place of bipolar confrontation between competing global systems, one finds the scrupulous dismantling of cultural hegemonies and the blurring of traditional identities. In lieu of the great narratives that once animated publics by offering salvation, emancipation, or progress, one finds either the banality of staged-for-media events or local, minimalist politics. In place of disciplinary certitude, one finds the rhetoricizing of philosophy and the sciences coupled with the relentless critique of received humanistic tradition. This essay offers a reading of a rhetorical argument that proceeds, like most of the contemporary era, from the ground up, in order to show how objections raised over the use of animal fur for human display complicate understandings of human communication....

The U.S. fur controversy thriving in the late 1980s and the 1990s exemplifies how social controversy sparks public discussion and debate. Speaking on behalf of beings that cannot speak for themselves, anti-fur advocates invent and deploy oppositional arguments to block accepted opinion and challenge the legitimacy of claims offered to support established contexts of communicative reasoning, thereby contesting reigning divisions between private and public space.

## **2. Conventional STS thesis:**

Conventional analyses of the fur controversy position anti-fur activists against pro-fur advocates, or animal rights against human rights, economic rights, and liberty (e.g., Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Olson & Goodnight, 1994). Granted, analyses of oppositional arguments can be productive, especially in terms of democratic process. As Olson and Goodnight (1994) conclude,

how social controversy disrupts the assumptions that keep capitalistic society operating in its usual patterns, assumptions reaching beyond the particular issue or even ecological discourse in general. Capitalism has powerful codes and means of reproduction. However, its very ubiquity creates and connects multiple sites for controversy.... social controversy turns each act of display into a potential place for discussion. (p. 272)

These analyses of the culture and nature of fur tend to be pedagogical in that they rely on fairly standard methods of conflict resolution, controversy resolution or values clarification. Of course in STS, the purpose is not to balance the accounts inasmuch as it involves a symmetrical rendering of anti-fur activists, with postcolonial initiative up

against colonial legacy, and pro-fur advocates. Rather than focusing on the culture of fur, the goal of this article is to describe how biology, nature, and the postanimal are reconfigured through fur.

### 3. ANT Thesis:

Conventional STS analyses of the fur controversy emphasize symmetry between the science of animal rights and the science and technology of trapping, wildlife conservation and the fur fashion industry (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Muth & Jamison, 2000). In these analyses, the controversy does not emerge from oppositional forces, as neither animal rights activists nor fur advocates can claim moral or scientific high ground. A level playing field across sides in the controversy is established but these conventional STS analyses pause at the point of anthropomorphism or precisely that moment where animals and traps may be given agency or animated into action *par* human. For example, Muth and Jamison (2000) conclude that:

animals are experienced as members of the family, they are anthropomorphized as possessing human qualities, and a heavily interpreted and popularized science provides evidence that animals are truly like people. For many people this raises a question: Why don't animals deserve to be treated like people?

Reductions of animal agency to anthropomorphism inadvertently generate new oppositions from the initial— from anti-fur activists against pro-fur advocates conventional STS analyses oppose animals against humans. One tendency is to counter with zoomorphism. Another is to counter animism with inanimism, or subjectification with objectification.

To avoid this reduction and eventual counter to anthropomorphism and animism, an ANT analysis of the fur controversy might conclude that clearly, muskrats and RCMP officers are in cooperation, one having interested and translated the other, one needing the other to create and transform a hat into a national symbol. First jealous of the tail and second jealous of the beaver's ascendance to an official emblem of Canada in 1975, understandably the muskrat will do anything, including cooperate with the RCMP, to generate symbolism and distinction. Having mobilized the Mounties into service, the muskrat is now bound to the nation of Canada, making it nearly impossible to undo a deal for fame. Muskrat may have made the world, the haberdasher may have made the hat, the hat the Mountie and the Mountie the nation, yet the nation now makes the muskrat. Fame and fate are intertwined.

The RCMP's letter and promise to APFA or fur-bearer defenders in August 2014 to change hats fueled the most recent fur controversy. A letter and a promise could change hats but could not transform the national symbolism established by the Mounties' hats. With attention now refocused, the muskrats' and Mounties' biggest fear in this controversy may be the hat raising above the fray and going it alone as a symbol cut loose from its origin and past. The biggest fear may be the faux fur without the chauffer, the Mountie.

When an RCMP officer places a muskrat hat on her or his head, the result is not merely an officer with a muskrat hat on top nor a muskrat hat with an office beneath.

... Muskrat Makes the World—World Makes the Haberdasher—Haberdasher Makes the Hat—Hat Makes the Mountie—Mountie Makes the Nation—Nation Makes the Muskrat