Ethnography of the Treacherous Interstices


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Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform: Between a Rock and a Hard Place is an exemplary black feminist ethnography. In nine concise chapters, Dána-Ain Davis illustrates the ineluctable interconnections between symbolic and material violence visited on black women by the state and by intimate partners, and the strategies they use to survive despite this relentless violence. Her thematic sites in this exposé of the failing neoliberal state are state surveillance and disciplining of reproduction and mothering; the consequences of the disappearance of work in postindustrial small cities of the United States; and attendant inner-city housing shortages for poor and working-class families, known as “gentrification.”

Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform joins other outstanding work in a number of intersecting areas, including Beth Richie’s Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women (1997); Angela Davis’s work (1997) on the raced and gendered dimensions of criminalization and the prison industrial complex; Joy James’s Resisting State Violence (1996); and work by Dorothy Roberts (1997, 2003) and anthropologist Leith Mullings (1997) that shows the continuing salience and material consequences of antiblack racism and sexism in reproduction, health, and family hygiene. All the aforementioned texts serve as a corrective to nearly two generations of wrongheaded “culture of poverty,” redux. Davis’s text also dovetails very well with emerging black feminist theorization of space, place, and the gendered black subject (McKittrick 2006; Wright 2004), as well as with now classic work that asks whether the singularity of the interstitial suffering of black women can be recognized and confronted and whether, in fact, the black woman can be(come) a subject (Hartman 1997; Spillers 2003a, 2003b). Davis offers an empirical study of a very important aspect of this: the fact that the black women she studies are summarily ignored and mistreated is a glaring indictment of various systems that have failed to recognize and treat black women as citizen-subjects.

One of the most salient contributions of this text is methodological. Davis chronicles “microsteps of welfare policy”: failures from the ideological level to the level of nationwide and local policy and through interpersonal interactions between putative service providers and the women they are to serve. Situated in a shelter for battered women for more than two years, Davis completed her research using case records, in-depth interviews, and field observations, but she also worked as an advocate for the women and involved her subjects in an “interpretive community” in which subjects talked back to the researcher. Davis characterizes this process as being “between objectivity and subjectivity” (p. 8), but this critical shift, no doubt owing to the black feminist commitments of the author, also can be profitably seen as an instantiation of another objectivity, or a radical shift away from “traditional” authority and legitimacy, toward the margins. This standard of ethical engagement demands that, following Faye Harrison (1997), we recognize “ethnography as politics” (1997). Thus, in terms of an anthropological “tradition,” this work represents an important contribution to the emergent school of anthropology for liberation elaborated in Harrison’s edited volume, Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation (1997). Here, Davis has made conscious and laudable scholarly and political moves toward decolonizing anthropology.

Reminiscent of classics of U.S. anthropology such as Carol Stack’s All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community (1997) and John Langston Gwaltney’s Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America (1980), Davis renders the
stories of everyday women with a very powerful everyday-ness. She illustrates how, like many of the respondents, one might be “getting by,” or dealing with the manageable dramas of life one day, and then—often suddenly, but just as often imperceptibly gradually—may find oneself in need of “assistance.” This ethnography disturbingly shows that the assistance may in fact not be forthcoming. For a number of folks, most especially black women, who are represented as already “valueless” in both senses of the word, “assistance” comes along with a complement of degrading practices.

“Ceremonies of degradation” is for me the center of the book. Here, Davis illustrates through ethnographic scenes how quotidian practices of social service workers—themselves underpaid, undertrained, and overworked by a tragically flawed system—make for a demoralizing experience for women trying to get help. Davis points out that the symbolic violence of these ceremonies of degradation also parallel the abusive relationships these women have with their intimate partners, which often have propelled them to seek public assistance in the first place. The surveillance and attempts at control once one enters “the system” seem akin to that in other institutions of discipline and punishment such as slavery and prison. In fact, one respondent astutely comments that being in “the system” is “like being on ‘the inside’ [prison].” Here, racial anxieties over sexual hygiene and reproduction, myths of the “welfare queen,” and superwomen contribute to the invisibility of black women’s suffering. Davis’s comparison of the ways black and white women are treated highlights this. À la Hortense Spillers, therefore, black women are “degendered” while, at the same time, they are seen to possess a surfeit of fecundity and sexuality.

“Theatre of Maternal and Child Care Politics” is another powerfully affecting chapter. It narrates both senses of the word theater. On the one hand, the chapter refers to the place where tragic drama unfolds, such as when women are asked, for example, to leave their infant children with caregivers that they cannot afford so that they can work in the service industry, where they cannot earn enough money to feed, clothe, and pay child-care costs without extralegal strategies. On the other hand, the chapter refers to reproduction and child-care politics, just one theater of battle in the larger war raging between the neoliberal state and the women, children, and families it seeks to make more “personally responsible” through “restructuring” the social welfare safety net.

Apropos of arguments over the balance of agency and structure, Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform: Between a Rock and a Hard Place decidedly comes down on the side of structure. The title is illustrative of this. However, as one of her respondents comments, “[s]he is more than that (“case”) file.” Davis shows that each of these women is an active subject, capable of making decisions and choosing moves—even those that are almost imperceptible—within that tiny interstitial space “between.” Here is where this work also profitably relates to Cathy J. Cohen’s theoriza-

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The Relationship of Mentoring to Knowledge Production in Real Time


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Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki’s *Improvising Theory* explores the relationship of mentoring to knowledge production in real time through a focus on process and temporality in ethnographic fieldwork. The book comprises e-mail exchanges over the course of ten months between Cerwonka, a Ph.D. student in political science engaged in fieldwork, and Malkki, her advisor (an anthropologist and experienced fieldworker), with additional commentary (“Afterthoughts”) and reflective, analytical chapters by each author. The e-mail exchange is used not only to document mentoring and learning but also to question some of the assumptions about the relation of knowledge production to theory. In this concentration, *Improvising Theory* redirects the preoccupations about fieldwork method within anthropology in the last several decades—from those concerned primarily with writing and crafting, the ethnographer’s authority, relation of notes to published writing, (post)colonial domination (of the ethnographer), and objectivism—back to more elemental questions (Malkowski and Leach are two of the major inspirations) about what the ethnographer actually does in the field, how he or she reaches decisions about what to do, and what a mentor might say during this process.

And what does the ethnographer do? *Improvising Theory* takes us through the process of contemporary U.S.-funded research, from the initial formal proposal to exchanges during fieldwork to final reflections on what went on and its relation to outcomes (completion of Ph.D., writing book, honorary award). Each learning stage builds on prior ones, but learning is less linear than a spiral process of “fusion of horizons between subject and object,” writes Cerwonka (p. 25), similar to entering what Hans-Georg Gadamer called a hermeneutic circle. “There is a continual ‘tacking back and forth’ between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the plan and its execution, theoretical insights and surprising empirical discoveries,” writes Malkki (p. 182). One takes risks, makes mistakes, and improvises throughout.

Cerwonka, as might be expected of a political science student crossing disciplinary boundaries, writes about debates on positionality and truth, ethics, and the relation of emotions to the knowledge she seeks to generate. She gives us a vivid sense of her highly ambiguous status as a woman doing research among the police, as someone who is superfluous and in the way and who, therefore, provokes...
quite ambivalent reactions. George Devereux’s pathbreaking work on anxiety in the field, and the way fieldworkers are conditioned into a “complementary role,” might have helped to get a theoretical handle on the structuring of learning from (rather than simply adjustment to) these situations.

However, Malkki, as might be expected of an anthropologist, elaborates more on the metaphor of improvisation for fieldwork, drawing explicitly on parallels with jazz performances. Like storytelling, fieldwork experiences are not all of the same quality; they require schooling—that is, periods of submission, practice, repetition, citation, oral skills, and a sensitivity to live audiences. Given the diversity of audiences in anthropology specifically and the academy generally (unlike jazz aficionados), and the widespread loss of faith in academic standards and models, I had wished for a discussion of the quality or significance of the specific knowledge gained from this particular research through the use of fieldwork method as compared to the research methods being used by other scholars at the same time or past kinds of research that sought to illuminate similar theoretical or empirical problems.

Graduate students in the second-semester proseminar at Princeton, for which I assigned the book, were very appreciative of the honest depictions of method and experience and the clearly elaborated theories of fieldwork as a process. Being a mentor like Malkki, I was drawn more to this other side of the relationship. In her part of the exchange, Malkki is always encouraging; diligent; helpful; alternately serious (exhorting Cerwonka to record all addresses and telephone numbers, and opining that “direct quotes are the liveliest”) and that she should “collect as much documentary evidence as you can”), clever, and funny; but, above all, she is supportive. Malkki, in fact, is supportive to the point of being apologetic (for being several days late with an e-mail response), going so far, at one point, to urge Cerwonka to listen to her but also perhaps to ignore all her advice. To what extent does Improvising Theory present a model for good mentoring? Should support be unconditional, and if not, what conditions might call for discipline? Good mentoring is a refined and changing art, and much like therapy, it is as dependent on the needs of the apprentice as on the skills of the mentor. The Malkki and Cerwonka exchange points to several new conditions. One is of dependency on and access to the mentor: the availability of cheap electronic communication in many if not most fieldwork sites and the near-instant message instead of the slower, more mediated (by time, if not language) letter. Another is the changing needs of students, most of whose parents are (upper-) middle-class professionals, with incredibly supportive and close relations with their (helicopter) parents. Perhaps we would better serve our students, or at least some of them, by breaking with both the technological possibility of immediate access (and the attention deficit disorder it facilitates) and with this quasiparental structure of a kind of unconditional love.

Finally, Improvising Theory poses a number of questions about the nature of science and the new interdisciplinarity of fieldwork method. Because ethnographic field studies are by nature ideographic—that is, focusing on a small number of individuals or groups in time, and not replicable even by the same person—their findings are difficult to generalize and, therefore, will always retain the suspicion of the unscientific. Few scholars would dispute the need for studies in totally unexplored areas of the world, of forms of human diversity about which there is no record, or on topics difficult to approach through more conventional methods. Yet, even in these areas, skeptics remain: Why bother when the research is bound to be anecdotal and personal, arbitrary in what is seen and with whom one converses, and where the distinction between dependent and independent variables is unclear and the hypotheses not fully worked out? The response to these objections has been either to systematize fieldwork in well-intentioned manuals and how-to books—that is, to study things, objects, historical processes, and texts, and call it “ethnography” while avoiding the problems inherent in face-to-face encounters with a few people or a small group—or to insist, as do Cerwonka and Malkki, on learning from the nonsystematic, accidental, and improvisational nature of such research.

The nonsystematic and accidental do not alone, of course, define fieldwork; as Improvising Theory makes clear there is also an accompanying anxiety and ongoing struggle with practical ethics as one engages, and in part submits to, the conditions of others to learn from them. This submission entails constant improvisation: revision of both theory and empirical understandings to arrive at novel ways of seeing. Yet a thinner concept of fieldwork method—not as a set of cultivated practices but as metaphor for simply being there, a metaphor for presence in its relation to knowing—has made this method both translatable and extremely popular across a wide range of academic disciplines. Cerwonka and Malkki make an important intervention here, above all, by laying bare the process of a more classically oriented field research and showing what actually happens when a fieldworker (that she is from another discipline simply by definition) makes her decisions more explicit) submits herself to the rigors and uncertainties of this kind of being there.
Toward an Anthropology of Christianity


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Christianity surely ranks among the most studied and debated phenomena in human history. Although not entirely ignoring it—a near impossibility given the extent of Christian penetration in many areas where ethnographers traditionally carried out fieldwork—anthropologists were slow to focus directly on Christianity as an object of research in its own right. This started to change in the wake of the “historical turn” in ethnographic studies, wherein increasing attention was paid to the regional and global contexts of local societies. The most prominent publications into the late 1990s hitched the study of local Christianity to larger narratives of colonialism and the spread of world religions (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Hefner 1993). Once they started paying attention, however, ethnographers came to the study of local Christianity from a wide variety of perspectives, including the psychodynamics of personal conversion, the rhetoric of sermons, the ordering of gender relations, and the organization of public space, to name a few. Much of the early work on the subject had a broadly empirical aim: to provide a more accurate and fuller picture of the dynamics of contemporary religion in local communities. Most of these authors perceived themselves as expanding the range of ethnographic subjects within regional literatures. The three volumes under consideration here, along with a symposium edited by Joel Robbins (2003), have a more ambitious aim: the development of an anthropology of Christianity.

This is a significant move, not so much because it legitimates the historical and ethnographic study of Christianity within the discipline—that battle has largely been won—but because it suggests that anthropology can provide a unique perspective. Just what that perspective is, however, depends very much on how one perceives the core features of Christianity across time and space, a fraught subject if ever there was one. Although handled in different ways and varying degrees of explicitness, the relationship between anthropology and Christianity as a totality provides the common theme running through these three volumes reviewed here.

The Anthropology of Christianity combines the widest range of approaches to the subject of the three books. Fenella Cannell opens her superb introduction with the question, “What difference does Christianity make?” There are, of course, many ways of answering this question, but most follow one of two general tracks. Theologians and church historians, although acknowledging the rich variety of expressions that Christianity has developed over its long history, take a universalist track, regarding it as a single entity with distinct core beliefs and forms of organization. Anthropologists, in contrast, tend to focus on local perceptions and adaptations, stressing the malleability of Christianity over its systemic features, in effect writing about “Christianities.” Cannell acknowledges this tendency while recognizing that an anthropological answer to her opening question must attend to both general and particular manifestations. Thus, her discussion is wide ranging and subtle but settles on two basic premises. The first is that Christianity is a historically complex phenomenon. Core doctrines and structures have shaped the religious tradition over time and space; yet these clearly have evolved and changed. Hence, “when a locality encounters Christianity, it is never obvious in advance what that ‘Christianity’ is; it can be defined only in reference to its own historical development” (p. 43). It is possible, however, “to speak meaningfully about Christianity” in general—her second point. The continuities reside less in doctrines and practices than in fundamental paradoxes such as the tension between earthly denial and the promise of bodily resurrection, in conflicts engendered by rejection and acceptance of earthly social arrangements as embodying Christian values, or, most generally, in orthodoxy and heresy. Anthropologists are well positioned to study such perennial dynamics as they play out in specific historical and ethnographic circumstances.

Cannell’s concern with the relationship between the particular and general dimensions of Christianity remains largely implicit in most of the individual chapters. The collection includes nine ethnographic case studies and two commentaries. With the exception of a derivative and weakly argued contribution from Harvey Whitehouse, all are original pieces, combining finely detailed examinations of local Christianities with sophisticated and intriguing analysis.1 The approaches are quite varied, but, as is often the case with collections, the authors fail to engage much with each other. Yet commonalities are not hard to find. The most obvious and critical has to do with overall framing. Eight chapters are concerned with aspects of conversion in colonial and postcolonial situations. Although attention is paid to the missionary side, the emphasis here is on local resistance, adaptations, and appropriations of Christianity. This is familiar territory for anthropologists.
Much of the theoretical originality of the chapters lies with where they locate the localization of Christianity: in rituals, in healing practices, in readings of Christian texts, and in language ideologies. The latter provides a particularly productive approach, developed further in the other two volumes considered in this review.

Olivia Harris provides a partial exception to the local focus of most of the chapters. Pursuing a theme developed further by Joel Robbins (2007), she argues that Christianity embraces a characteristic notion of time as a complete rupture with the past, a radical break that “requires converts to renounce whatever they previously held sacred, including close kin ties” (p. 72). In the four centuries since the Potosí of northern Bolivia ostensibly accepted Christianity, considerable tensions remain over whether they are “really Christians.” Much of the concern centers on adaptation of church rituals and doctrines dating back hundreds of years that today are variously seen as evidence of corruption, continuing paganism, or, positively, as the basis of a truly indigenous Christianity. David Mosse pursues parallel themes in a richly rewarding historical examination of the shifting relationships between Catholicism and exorcism amongst Tamils in south India. Encouraged in part by the strategy adopted by 17th-century Jesuit missionaries to graft Christianity to local social conventions, converted Tamils quickly adopted Christian saint cults to Hindu sensibilities concerning the person, body, and healing. By the early 19th century, the official church had come to reject such fusions. Yet the cults continued, out of sight of disapproving priests, in a situation of religious pluralism allowing Christian Tamils to move between individual and “indivial” notions of “person” and “healing.”

Chapters by Cecilia Busby, Christina Toren, and Peter Gow present case studies in which Christianity appears to have been accepted by local communities with little or no conflict. Indeed, according to Gow, the Piro of the Peruvian Amazon wear their Christian identities so lightly that they have “forgotten” that they were converted by Evangelical missionaries in the 1940s and 1950s. He suggests that Christianity in this and other Amazonian communities functions as a new form of shamanism. In contrast, the Mukkuvar of Kerola in India take their Christian identities very seriously, tracing it back to ancient times. Busby argues, however, that they do so in a Pluralistic environment in which belief in the Christian god is understood to be a matter of choice and community, rather than universal requirement. Further, she traces the many subtle ways in which Mukkuvar Christians have accommodated their faith to indigenous mythologies and caste. In rural Fiji, the fusion of Methodist Christianity and cultural orientations toward hierarchy and authority appears complete. Through an intriguing study of children’s participation in Sunday schools and death rituals, Toren demonstrates how ritual simultaneously reinforces Christian orthodoxy and indigenous conceptions of mana, the spiritual foundation of chiefly power.

The remaining chapters are concerned with the ways that local Christians put their faith to work. Eva Keller presents a close, descriptive account of the hyperrationalism of Seventh Day Adventist practices in Madagascar. The other authors take their departure from the work of Webb Keane, outlined in a pithy Epilogue and developed much further in Christian Moderns (2007), by focusing on the linguistic ideologies entailed by Christianity. Keane’s influence is most obvious in Simon Coleman’s dissection of the materiality of words amongst members of the World of Life Church, a Pentecostal congregation based in Uppsala, Sweden. The faith encourages a strong individualism, in which words are understood as gifts and investments, perceived as such by God who will respond in kind. Cannell presents a sophisticated analysis of what might be described as the metatranslation of the Pasion in the Bicol region of the Philippines. Intended by Catholic missionaries as a means to communicate doctrine, locals experience the text as a performance, sung by two voices with harmonic ornamentation that evokes an aura of mystery and spiritual efficacy. The Pasion has thus been subsumed within an indigenous framework focused on healing and power. Danilyn Rutherford also writes of an instance of indigenous appropriation, in this case centered as much on things as words. Pietist missionaries working amongst the Biak in (then) Dutch New Guinea sought to incorporate their charges within a universal community of belief. They appeared successful at first, with converts abandoning their korowar, wooden figures that held the spirit of ancestors. Yet the conversion masked a deeper continuity, as Biak regarded the Bible much as they had korowar: as a mediation “between local communities and a dangerous and alluring outside world” (p. 243).

The contributors to The Limits of Meaning also investigate local christianities in a variety of settings, but the volume is more thematically focused than The Anthropology of Christianity. Matt Tomlinson and Matthew Engelke’s introduction provides a stimulating meditation on the centrality of meaning in anthropological discussions of religion, in general, and ritual, in particular. Once meaning becomes an object of concern in its own right, they suggest, attention naturally shifts to Christianity. This is, in the first place, because much of contemporary Christianity seems obsessed with meaning, based on a religious impulse that conflates salvation with bringing the internal faith of the believer in harmony with the higher (if imperfectly understood) meanings of God. Christianity thus presents a potent ethnographic site for investigating the ways people conceptualize meaning, seek to create it, and deal with the threat of meaninglessness. The second reason for focusing on Christianity is because, following Talal Asad’s (1993) critique of Clifford Geertz, anthropology’s obsession with meaning may have as much to do with the discipline’s own Western cultural roots and its desire to translate other religious traditions. As Robbins points out in a lively afterword, the embrace of meaning as an obligation in much of Christianity entails a matching anxiety about “the
possibility of meaninglessness” (p. 213). By focusing on the troubled boundaries between meaning and meaninglessness in Christianity, the volume also encourages us to reflect on how anthropologists have conceived of the project of studying religion in general.

Several of the key features of the Cannell volume reoccur here. Although interested in the general cultural features of Christianity, the contributors view the religion as historically emergent, “not as a stable, singular object” (p. 19). They focus on local agency much more than church and allied authorities, on christianities more than Christianity in general. Only two of the chapters, however, deal with conversion in colonial settings. The thematic concern with the ways people conceive of meaning and respond to threats or breakdowns provides an unusual degree of coherence. The value of the book is further enhanced by the rich detail and accessibility of most of the chapters. The exception is a turgid contribution by James Faubion, a meditation on a few statements recorded from a distraught survivor of the Branch Dravidian cult in Waco, Texas. Faubion’s wordplay is sometimes intriguing, but one is grateful that the other contributors resisted the temptation to experiment with the limits of meaning themselves.

The chapters can be roughly divided into two groups. The first focuses on situations in which Christian leaders reach for but fail to create meaning. Simon Coleman opens his chapter describing an instance where a Swedish preacher flounders in his attempt to have a Pentecostal congregation contemplate silence as a moment “that is full of God” (p. 39). This leads into a subtle reflection on the contradiction between the literalist assumption that a Christian’s word must convey scriptural truth and the often-ambiguous actuality. In sharp contrast, the Masowe Apostolics of Zimbabwe insist that religious faith cannot be expressed through the written word. Individuals have deep personal knowledge of Christianity based on past experiences in other churches and personal study. Engelke gives a poignant example of the problems of cohesion this causes, relating the tale of a prophet whose attempt to elicit the Ten Commandments from a congregation met with silence and failure. Precisely because they promise to connect deeper religious meanings with everyday experience, church sermons elevate the risk of failure. And yet, as Tomlinson demonstrates in a study of Fijian Methodist sermons, failure is as likely to evoke amusement as confusion. Erica Bornstein describes a World Vision meeting in Harare in which the earnest words of a U.S. director evoke little reaction at all, other than polite but apathetic response from the African staff. The talk is laden with meaning and yet bears no meaningful relationship to the actual experiences of its audience. As Bornstein reveals in a compelling analysis, the participants become actors within a theater of the absurd.

The second group of chapters concerns searches for expected but elusive meaningfulness. Ilana Gershon probes the generational tensions created by shifts in church membership among Samoan migrants to New Zealand. Escaping the endless demand for support for family and church in Congregationalist circles, converts to newer Evangelical churches understand their move as a shift from a meaningless to a meaningful religious life. This has less to do with theology than “how best to demonstrate their faith” (p. 149) in a shifting moral economy. Rutherford argues that the Biak’s long engagement with Christianity is best understood as a protracted attempt “to seize the potency of Christian institutions by laying claim to the truth behind official doctrine” (p. 108). The continuity of Biak Christianity thus lies less in doctrine than in the conviction that an external power is behind the forms waiting to be appropriated. She traces a history of the attempts to grasp this secret in the forms of early millenarian movements and the Papuan nationalist movement of the present. Andrew Orta also writes of the historical twists and turns of Christian meaning, in this case in the Bolivian highlands. In a complex but rewarding analysis, he shows how the modern Catholic missionary doctrine of “inculturation” rests on an impossibility: the recognition of indigenous ritual forms as expressions of God’s universal truth. The problem is that current or revived indigenous rituals are themselves historically negotiated forms, incorporating centuries of interaction between the Church and local peoples. Meaning thus becomes a moving target. Orta illustrates his point with an excellent analysis of a revived indigenous ceremony to which missionaries, local church leaders, and lay members bring mixed agendas, producing “cascades of meaning” (p. 185).

Christian Moderns is the first volume of a new series in the anthropology of Christianity edited by Joel Robbins for the University of California Press—and what a bold opening statement it is! Like Engelke and Tomlinson, Webb Keane views Christianity not only as an important subject in its own right but as a key entry point to much broader issues: in this case, the anxieties of modernity and, more fundamentally, the interplay between moral agency and the ways people conceive of the relationship between words and things. Beautifully written, Christian Moderns is a demanding work. In part, this is because Keane covers a huge range of historical, ethnographic, theological, and theoretical topics. The book is equally challenging in its somewhat casual approach to the conventions of historical and ethnographic exposition. Although Webb focuses overall on the encounter between Dutch Calvinist missionaries and the people of Sumba in Indonesia within a (roughly) chronological framework, his portrayal of people, institutions, and events is sketchy and uneven. The chapters are aggregations of texts, ethnographic anecdotes, and commentary gathered around the larger themes. Webb’s specific historical and ethnographic insights are often acute and fascinating, yet Christian Moderns is essentially a theoretical treatise, a meditation on the peculiarities of being “modern” and how best to account for them.

The condition of modernity, Webb argues, induces characteristic anxieties about personhood, morality,
the nature of reality. These anxieties, in turn, rest on a particular “semitic ideology”: a set of assumptions about the relationship between words and things that exist in dialectical tension with a “representational economy” that bears on people’s notions of “agency.” The moral narrative of modernity is one of “human emancipation and self-mastery” (p. 6) based on a semiotic ideology that presumes a separation between words and their objects. The project of imposing human mastery over an objectified reality, however, encounters resistance in the form of an irreducible nature in which words and things can never be entirely separated and in the form of alternative semiotic ideologies that presuppose no such separation. The expansion of modernity has thus been characterized by two twinned processes. Borrowing from Bruno Latour, Keane refers to the first as “purification”: a sharpening of the “proper” relationships between human agency, categories, and things. Motivated by the moral imperative of emancipation, purification “requires an opponent, that which is to be purified” (p. 77). This gives rise to “fetishism”: “an imputation directed at others who have purportedly confounded the proper boundaries between agentive subjects and mere objects” (p. 77).

Because they are based on fundamental assumptions about reality and because they are morally charged, purification and fetishism play out simultaneously at several registers ranging from overt narratives of mastery over nature to fraught confrontations over seemingly consequential matters such as the sharing of food during ceremonies in remote Asian communities. Although there are any number of entry points for the larger concerns posed by Keane, his choice to focus on the encounter between Dutch Calvinist missionaries and the people of Sumba is apt and effective. Christian Moderns is, as noted early, remarkably wide ranging. The first third of the book is dedicated to locating Protestantism” both in its characteristics as a global movement and in terms of its history, particularly Calvinism. Among other riches, these chapters include a fascinating discussion of the mutually reinforcing emergence of notions of “religion” and “culture” as distinctive entities, a process Keane traces through the texts of missionary ethnographers working in Indonesia. The core chapters of the book, collected under the title of “fetishism,” focus mainly on the missionary encounter in Sumba and the experience of conversion. Keane notes that religious conversion “can involve the introduction of a new semiotic ideology that transforms the conceptual and practical relations among words, things, and persons” (p. 176). He thus traces the confrontations and compromises between missionaries and Sumbanese over attitudes toward marapu (ancestral spirits), the Christian god, and associated rituals as surface expressions of contrasting assumptions about the workings of words and objects and, through them, moral agency.

Two short chapters conclude the book with observations on Sumbanese “purifications” as revealed in shifting understandings of cultural icons, ritual speech, sacrifices, and money.

The missionary encounter, particularly in its early stages, sharply sets out the contrasting cultural assumptions of missionaries and missionized and thus provides a powerful point of entry for the study of modernity. Keane is more sensitive than many to the dangers of this framework, especially the tendency to essentialize ideological differences and leave the impression of an inevitable transition into a uniform modernity. He does not entirely avoid these pitfalls, however. Keane provides few details about the actual working of the mission and later church, most critically the role played by indigenous evangelists and other mid-dlemen, instead focusing on a handful of texts written by Dutch missionaries. This, in combination with the earlier chapters on the European background of the mission, accentuates a picture of opposition. In addition, portions of the core chapters on fetishism remind the reader of the Comaroffs’ notion of the “colonization of consciousness” (1991) by implying the transition to modernity is both insidious and inevitable. Such passages, however, occur in juxtaposition with nuanced analyses of both missionary and Sumba experiences and perceptions that present a far more ambiguous picture. Indeed, a key lesson of Christian Moderns is that a modernist semiotic ideology based on an essential distinction between words and their objects compels a certain form of moral agency, but it does not determine social outcomes. When he shifts his attention from texts to ethnography, Keane does a marvelous job of revealing the anxieties, tensions, and compromises that modernity entails both for the missionaries and the Sumbanese. A particularly powerful chapter focused on a speech made by a former marapu priest on his conversion to Christianity raises the intriguing possibility of fusion—or at least a temporary compromise—between the opposing semiotic ideologies.

The three volumes reviewed here reveal the anthropology of Christianity to be a vibrant emerging field. Some trends are clearly apparent: most notably, the disentanglement of indigenous experiences of Christianity from narratives of colonial imposition or modernization. The increased focus on Christianity as a subject in its own right has been accompanied by a thematic shift from issues of power to meaning, morality, and agency. There is also an acceptance that an anthropology of Christianity must attend to both the general and local dimensions of the religion. One wonders whether the shift has gone too far: most of the authors reviewed here have little to say about the coercive aspects of the modern expansion of Christianity. The colonial associations of the missions must remain contentious, but anthropologists no longer can dodge Christianity by labeling it as a “Western imposition” and thus not worthy of serious attention.

NOTE
1. Disclosure: Whitehouse presents his chapter as a response to criticisms I made of an earlier essay, in which he argued that forms of political organization in Melanesia can be understood as generated
by deep lying contradictions between Christian and indigenous “religiosities” rooted in cognitive systems of memory and transmission. He adds nothing to that claim here. Nor does he address my actual criticisms, preferring instead to indulge in a straw man argument.

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Early “Feminists” in Anthropology? Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, Gladys Reichard, and Ruth Underhill


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Catherine Lavender’s study explores the lives, field research, and publications of four prominent female anthropologists who wrote about the U.S. Southwest between 1910 and 1950: Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, Gladys Reichard, and Ruth Underhill. Lavender argues that all four were feminists who sought in their focus on gender, sexuality, and women’s lives to critique patriarchy. They did this first by finding examples of strong women (whom Lavender refers to as “executive women” or matriarchs) whose roles were analogous to their own experiences in a male-dominated society and a male-dominated profession. Second, in examining the role of the man–woman (in Navajo the nádleeh, in Zuni the lā’ mana), they saw these individuals as “exemplars of independence and self-reliance” and “constructed an idealized transvestite homosexual identity” that counteracted their own culture’s prejudices. Third, they tended to idealize the cultures they studied, looking for the pristine and “primitive,” often excluding incidents that indicated how much southwestern Natives were enmeshed in modern U.S. society. Finally, they used their ethnographic material to critique and improve their own society. As Lavender says in her first chapter, “they looked through a window at Native American cultures, fully believing that what they saw through that window were the Native American activities on the other side of the glass. In fact, what they saw through the glass were Native American activities as well as their own reflections” (p. 1). By the end of the book, Lavender is even more adamant, stating that “feminist ethnographers wrote the stories of native American women to preserve and ‘salvage’ their traditions, but they also wrote those stories with an agenda” (p. 187). In other words, “much of what feminist ethnographers published reflects their own worldview, rather than the informants’ worldview” (p. 186).

At first I was gratified by an analysis that brought four of the best female ethnographers in the U.S. Southwest together and that even saw them as feminists. But as I read on, I became profoundly ambivalent. There is much to appreciate in the work of Parsons, Benedict, Reichard, and Underhill that stems from a feminist sensibility and grapples with the issue of how to describe women’s lives in cultures that are very different from our own. But it is also easy to overstake the case. Much of my ambivalence stems from the lack of nuance that Lavender brings to her central argument. She sometimes misses crucial points, exaggerates a bit too much, or chooses a word that is too extreme to convey the subtlety of each anthropologist’s work. To use one example, Lavender takes the orthodox view that Benedict’s writing about Native American cultures as Dionysian (“out of control”) versus Apollonian (emphasizing the “measured ideal”) meant that cultures were “personality types.” In doing so, she ignores Barbara Babcock’s more recent and more nuanced argument that the Dionysian–Apollonian terminology (drawn from Dilthey and Nietzsche) is a literary and semiotic, rather than purely psychological, approach, more in tune with our contemporary interest in key symbols, root metaphors, and master tropes (see Babcock 1993).

The weakest part of the book is the emphasis on “executive women,” a term she borrows from Ruth Underhill’s description of Chona. Lavender argues that Underhill, Parsons, and Reichard cast their major informants in their own image, assigning each a “protofeminist” identity as someone who “acted economically on her own behalf (or on behalf of her family), who resisted limitations placed on her because of her gender, and who took on the role of leader in her kinship group or her tribe” (p. 120). This analysis perhaps works best in the case of Underhill’s portrayal of...
Chona in The Autobiography of a Papago Woman (1936) but is less convincing when it comes to Parsons’s relationship with Margaret Lewis, the Zuni Governor’s wife. Although Lewis and Parsons became lifelong friends, Parsons published little about her partly because she was a Cherokee married to a Zuni and, thus, was not someone whose life could provide examples of Zuni gender or cultural patterns. Parsons also stayed with Wana and her family at Laguna shortly and was hosted by a woman on Hopi Second Mesa who adopted Parsons into her clan. Parsons’s descriptions of these women do not fit into Lavender’s notion of “executive women,” suggesting that Parsons’s work displays the variability among Pueblo women rather than one predominant role.

Lavender’s emphasis on matriarchs and executive women is even more of a distortion when applied to Gladys Reichard’s writing about Navajo women. Like Deborah Gor- don before her, Lavender confuses Maria Antonio, the wife of Red Point, with Deza, the fictional character in her novel Deza, Woman of the Desert (Reichard 1939). Lavender virtually ignores the ethnographic material in Spider Woman (Reichard 1934) and focuses instead on the novel, not fully appreciating that Reichard invented the characters to convey some of her own values and opinions about the changes she observed in the 1930s. She consciously constructed situations and conflicts from her experiences with the Navajo, but these are not ethnographic descriptions of what she observed. In my opinion, the novel, which uses “internal dialogue” to convey Deza’s thoughts, is less successful than the ethnography, which employs external dialogue to give a sense of Navajo family life and Reichard’s interaction with family members. I say this because many of Reichard’s descriptions in Spider Woman echo my own field research carried out 30 years later on a different part of the Navajo Nation.

In contrast to Deza (1939), the central characters in Spider Woman (1934) are Red Point and the daughter Marie, who speaks English and who taught Reichard to weave. Maria Antonio is described helping to dye wool, weaving, and chopping wood. Some of the later chapters recount her illness, discussions over whether to take her to a hospital, and her eventual death. She does not emerge as the center of the family but one of its two respected autonomous elders. As an example of Deza as matriarch, Lavender describes her coordinating the labor of family members during the sheep dipping. It would have been important to compare this with the passage about a sheep dip in Spider Woman (1934). Although Reichard describes Maria Antonio’s ride in the family wagon (with her daughter Altnaba taking the reins), her depiction of the scene at the dip is a communal one with an account of the division of tasks among women and younger and older men. Maria Antonio is not mentioned. Reichard leaves the dip early and reports a conversation with Red Point that gives her information about who participated in activities later that day. Unlike a novel, the rules of ethnographic writing dictate that the author should give only his or her own observations without shifting events and individuals to make a neater story. What Lavender misses in the ethnographic accounts of Reichard and Parsons is a sense of the varied personalities and roles that Navajo and Pueblo women have. Because they were pioneers of the now au courant dialogic style of ethnographic writing, Parsons’s journal articles from the 1920s and Reichard’s Spider Woman (1934) give us the voices and activities of Pueblo and Navajo women, rather than singular leaders or “executive women.”

Many of my frustrations in reading Lavender’s analysis stem from my suspicion that she has spent little time on an Indian reservation or in a Pueblo. The ethnographic project of U.S. anthropology is to describe cultural difference, using the categories of the other culture, not those imposed from outside. Of course, this is a utopian project because ethnographers cannot completely override their own culture’s categories, values, and ways of thinking. Today, following in Reichard’s and Parsons’s footsteps, we are more apt to write about our own positionality and the impact of class, race, and gender on our the interactions, but with the continued aim of describing cultural difference rather than turning indigenous women into images of ourselves.

Certainly Lavender’s arguments have some merit. Parsons and Benedict often used cross-cultural examples to critique their own society. Reichard and Parsons surely felt that treatment of the Zuni lâ’mana and the Navajo nádleeh represented a different and perhaps more “healthy” set of attitudes toward gender and sexuality. As students of Franz Boas, these women were prone to look for the “primitive” and the unchanged. However, even this is somewhat of an exaggeration. Parsons carefully documented Spanish and “American” impact on Pueblo rituals. Reichard clearly felt that “American” ways were having a negative affect on Navajo life, but at least she was careful to separate her own opinions from those of the Navajo consultants she quoted. For me, what is important about the feminist side of these women anthropologists is the attention they gave to women’s lives and the cultural contexts in which they operated. If Lavender had focused more attention on women’s lives and the cultural contexts in which they operated, she would have provided us with a balanced and more convincing portrait of this generation of feminist anthropologists.

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