

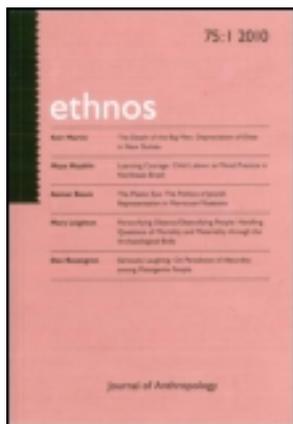
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Thin Places: A Pilgrimage Home

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technologies from textbooks and from the medical tourists who spend weeks or months working in Malawi. They know about them from enclaves of transnational research or private clinics in South Africa. But in their everyday practice there is only a yawning gap 'between clinical reality and medical possibility.' Wendland argues that for some students at least, this disjuncture was 'a major impetus forcing them to reimagine the work, and renegotiate the moral economy of medicine.' (p. 198). For others, of course, the impetus was to go where the technology was materially present.

Wendland knows of what she writes about the working conditions of Queen Elizabeth Hospital. As an obstetrician–gynecologist, she spent an exhausting two days a week examining high-risk mothers and performing surgery. But this double role of doctor and ethnographer was also an ethical problem. To avoid clinical teaching contact with the students she was studying, she went out of her way not to spend time with them in the hospital. Nor did she seek them out beyond. Her material comes from interviews with 31 medical students in different years, focus group discussions, as well as interviews with faculty and 11 graduates. The book is thus heavily reliant on what the medical students told her within the frame of a formal interview. Following the principle of 'interpretive charity', she takes the students at their word. The words are informative and thought-provoking. Each chapter of the book ends with one or two personal narratives that bring the students and their situations alive. Yet, we learn little of their actual practice on the wards, their interactions with one another and the patients, or how they lived when they were not in the classroom or hospital. How are their asser-

tions about 'heart' or their intentions of political activism reflected in practice?

The reader is left wondering whether their 'heart' will hold after they leave medical school, whether they will remain in public health facilities in Malawi, and how the combination of low salaries and high status will shape the family, community, and political lives of these doctors. One can only hope that Wendland will some day give us a follow-up on this excellent book.

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Ann Ambrecht. 2009 *Thin Places: A Pilgrimage Home* New York: Columbia University Press, 296 pps.

Once, at a Quaker wedding I attended, the father of the groom talked about thin places, places where one's nerve endings are bare. People make pilgrimages to thin places ... What the pilgrims encounter – the blessings they perceive – depends as much on their receptivity as on the sanctity of the land they pass through (p. 87).

The book 'Thin Places: a Pilgrimage Home' written by Ann Ambrecht, an American anthropologist specializing in Nepal, is a vivid example of autoethnography, a form of experimental (and controversial) anthropological writing advocated by some and criticized by others. The main characteristics of autoethnography are present in this text: (i) it makes the author's own experience a

topic of investigation; (2) it tells emotional-laden personal stories intended to raise strong emotional responses in the reader; (3) it blurs the boundary between academic writing and literature as a fine art. In other words, these kinds of texts can be criticized as egocentric, manipulative and unclear in terms of genre and the target audience. On the other hand, it can be praised for its sincerity, lyricism and humanism – qualities not necessary for academic texts but usually welcomed by everyday readers.

Those familiar with anthropological texts would recognize the scenario of 'rite de passage' structuring the content of the book: the period of departure from someone's home and social status (Part 1: Departure), being in between (Part 2: Initiation), returning home (Part 3: Return), and celebrating a new social status (Part 4: Birth) obtained as a result of the journey. Ambrecht starts her journey as a PhD student in Harvard, happily engaged to a boy who shares her interest in Nepal, travel and nature – and ends up as a professional herbalist deeply disappointed with academia, and as a divorced single mum. Suffering of different sorts, physical as well as moral, accompanies the protagonist throughout the book, corresponding to the idea hidden in the composition of the book: every subject of an initiation ritual is expected to experience pain and humiliation as she does. The hero's physical tortures include bleeding feet, hunger and cold. Even more important are the moral tortures, such as loneliness, suffering from being separated from the beloved (first from the boyfriend and later, in the American part of a journey, from a toddler-daughter, who is living three days per week with her father, the former boyfriend of the hero), lack of privacy (during fieldwork), the process of a dissol-

ving marriage, and the experience of the death of a close friend.

The book is well written and skillfully composed. This is a small wonder bearing in mind the fact that before having been enrolled in a graduate program in anthropology, the author studied literature and writing. If one tries to define which literary trends influenced the author, directly or indirectly, one would note the 'bildungsroman', recognized as a 'novel of formation' it deals with the maturation process of the protagonist of a novel. 'Thin Places' tells the story – the female story – of the young American intellectual going through this process and becoming an adult with an unshaken identity and belief system.

The painful rite de passage is a journey replete with lost illusions. In Nepal Ann is disappointed with the Makalu-Barun Conservation Project, which changed the everyday lives of her Yamphu informants and the sacred landscape of Himalayas. Likewise, in America she reveals the hypocrisy of a well-known couple, back-to-the-landers Helen and Scott Nearing, and 'things that the Nearings had chosen not to mention in their books' (p. 227). However, the culmination of this disillusion in her narrative takes place during the pilgrimage with her informants to the sacred Khembalung cave, which turned out to be an ordinary place despite the difficult and dangerous trip. Nothing special happened there, as Ann did not experience the sacredness of the place, only pain in her bleeding feet.

This personal search for the sacred seems to be the most thought-provoking part of the book, problematic and interesting at the same time. The protagonist of the book confesses, that during her

fieldwork she, 'cared less about the research and theory than about the opportunity it offered to experience life fully' (p. 159), that is, in particular, to understand her 'own views of sacred' (p. 246). She came to the conclusion that 'the sacred not only is present in far-away places, but is a quality we experience when we open to the world around us, to the sacred spring that flows through all our lives, if only we know to perceive it' (p. 179). This essentialist statement might be rooted in an intellectual tradition represented in the works of phenomenologist Mircea Eliade, but it seems that here the author speaks as a native believer who shares new age ideas, rather than as a critically minded intellectual.

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Sónia Silva, 2011. *Along an African Border: Angolan Refugees and their Divining Baskets*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1 + 172 pp.

Despite the perspicacious and pioneering explorations by Arjun Appadurai, Ivan Kopytoff, Marilyn Strathern, Janet Hopkins, and others of what we now familiarly call 'the social life' or 'cultural biography' of things, anthropological understanding of how and why human attributes become invested in extra-human objects, or, for that matter, how and why objective meanings get projected onto human subjects, has reflected a prevailing interest in politico-economic modalities of exchange and value. As if

under the sway of the objects with which it is concerned, the dominant anthropological discourse has tended to be objectivist in character, even when describing the subjective properties of things. Often labouring with an either/or logic, and a habit of identity thinking that all too readily reduces objects and subjects to cultural signs, this discourse repeatedly returns to questions of production or consumption, commodity or gift, reason or emotion, partibility or impartibility, modernity and premodernity. What is so refreshing and compelling about Sonia Silva's book is that she suspends this vocabulary in order to focus on what is at stake for the Luvale-speaking people among whom she lived and worked in northwest Zambia. The result is neither a naïve nor unreflective re-description of their lifeworld, but a meticulous exploration of how various meanings are successively fore-grounded and back-grounded in the course of practical, everyday social life – *a life in which people and things are equally significant*.

For phenomenology, the world *in itself* is neither one thing nor another – or, rather, it can be perceived, thought, indexed, and experienced in many different ways. Rather than seek to define what things may be in themselves, the phenomenologist follows the Socratic method of discovering the truth of things through an analysis of what we say and think about them, and in the ways we interact with them. This entails a methodological first principle of bracketing out or setting aside questions as to whether or not anything 'real' is covered or captured by the terms anthropologists and non-anthropologists deploy in speaking about their lifeworlds – commoditisation, globalisation, value, power, baraka, mana, tapu, and God – in order to explore the extent to which