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From the Selected Works of Brian A. Hoey, Ph.D.

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Review of Ethnography in Today's World. Color Full Before Color Blind (Sanjek, Roger)

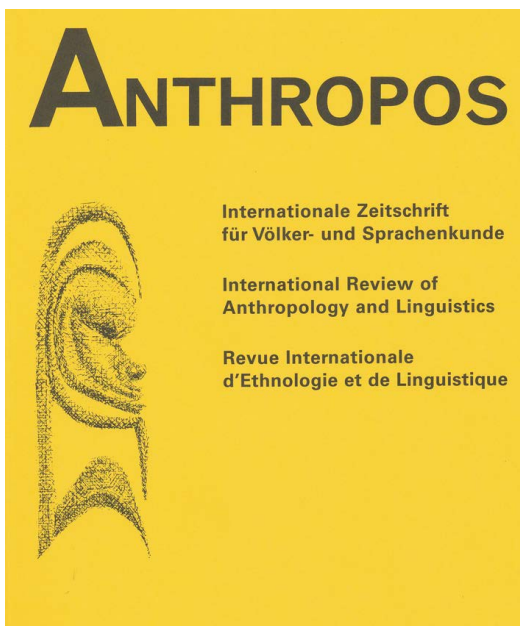
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Hoey, Brian A. 2015. Review of *Ethnography in Today's World. Color Full Before Color Blind* (Sanjek, Roger). *Anthropos* 110(22):656-657



Sanjek, Roger: *Ethnography in Today's World. Color Full Before Color Blind*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 291 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4545-5. Price: \$ 59.95

Sanjek has assembled an eclectic mix of previously published work from the span of twenty years and a variety of sources. With chapters having former lives as varied as encyclopedia entries, in one case, and a confessed “less conventionally academic” invited contribution to a special journal issue, in another, the volume as a whole has a somewhat inconsistent tone and style – at times didactic and at others introspective. In addition to conducting some revision to these earlier works, Sanjek has provided an essential preface to help orient the reader to this heterogeneous collection, a convenient index, as well as extensive, combined notes, and references.

Much of his stalwartly pro-ethnographic book consists of what could best be described as memoir. This makes sense given that one of Sanjek's more sustained arguments throughout the collection is that the anthropologist as both ethnographer and social theorist exerts an autobiographical agency by virtue of how one's past motivates and thus shapes present choices such as what issues to study, how to interpret significance in conversations, observed events, and experiences in the field (at least some of which comes from the unique sociocultural “terrain” of the particular field site itself), and ultimately how to engage with one's scholarly audience and a greater public. Sanjek holds that “ethnography is inescapably lodged in the social worlds of those who use it” (ix), but that this is satisfactory in that anthropologists today work to both reveal and control, not deny their possible biases. In his own case, he asserts a cohort effect associated with coming of age as an anthropologist in 1960s New York

City at Columbia University surrounded by some of the most influential contributors to our field, including most conspicuously Marvin Harris. Theory too, he avows, is autobiographical as it is critical in shaping and molding the ethnographic process – just as fieldwork enables us to develop theory.

Having worked on a project with the late Roy “Skip” Rappaport intended to capture something of these influences in his own life, of which both period and place are coincidentally shared with Sanjek, I especially enjoyed this personal thread as well as our mutual insistence on the importance of their effect on a scholarly and public career. In some ways, the book’s most compelling aspect is as tale of a prominent anthropologist born out of the urban, counter-cultural tumult of the civil rights era who matured to navigate and respond to the theoretical storms and impact of 1980s postmodernism – at least some of which he found agreeable, for example, in calls for more critically self-conscious approaches. Much, however, he decries for lost relevance in part through postmodernism’s most ardent proponents abandoning a tradition of broad contextualization (tracing layers of history and political economy in the setting of complex global flows) and comparative analysis (where an outstanding problem of theory is addressed).

These are two sides of what Sanjek refers to as the “anthropological triangle” serving as an operational system of knowledge construction of which ethnographic fieldwork itself is another side and without which, all three aspects interacting, descriptive works of people and place cannot be said to be truly ethnographic. Sanjek traces ways in which, at times, in the past century and a half anthropologists have variously stressed or neglected different sides of the triangle – noting, for example, how Franz Boas (in the United States) and Bronislaw Malinowski (in Europe) each declined to provide a larger context to their studies in order to create an “ethnographic present” rather than an ethnography of the present.

Some chapters are more deeply autobiographical, while others effectively intermingle personal accounts of fieldwork and formative experiences that shaped Sanjek’s four decades of scholarship together with practical tips for the conduct of ethnographic fieldwork. There is also an insightful discussion of important early figures in the field of anthropology such as Boas and Malinowski. Sanjek has claim to both lineages, though he describes being inclined toward social anthropology by way of Malinowski as Sanjek came to differentiate between what he characterizes as focus on meaning as contained “in people’s heads” (in cultural anthropology) versus meaning as constructed from social arrangements and language use in interaction (in social anthropology). While Sanjek’s fieldwork ranges from research in Ghana and Brazil to the United States, most tales shared here relate to influential studies of racial change and immigration conducted in the Elmhurst-Corona district of New York City beginning in the 1980s in which he observed how a neighborhood was meaningfully shaped at least partly into an inter-racial political community in ways thought to mirror larger social transformations.

The book’s subtitle speaks to Sanjek’s fieldwork-derived recognition of the importance of inclusive political action, which forms another thread throughout the book. His demand for fully acknowledged inclusivity extends as well to a critique of what he terms a “hidden colonialism” of anthropology, which has (at times) privileged “lone stranger” accounts that deny essential multiracial partnerships and teams in the ethnographic enterprise. Sanjek emphasizes how his New York City fieldwork entailed a team of researchers purposefully composed to mirror diversity of the study population – a fact that stands in contrast to what he describes as the discipline’s poor record of training and professionalizing ethnographers of color.

His late 60s dissertation research in Ghana on ethnic relations among residents of a city block in Accra was clearly instructive both in terms of choice of topic and setting for this later stateside fieldwork, which was a long-term commitment of many years. In this later project, we see how he favored participant observation, naturally occurring speech in action, and use of archival sources over interviews and questionnaires, or what he somewhat astutely calls “instrument-mediated quests for culture.” Accordingly, he attended literally hundreds of meetings, hearings, public rituals (such as ethnic festivals and protest rallies), religious services, and social events while amassing well over a thousand pages of fieldnotes. Fieldwork does indeed, as Sanjek stresses, generate more fieldwork. A major theme of the book is, in fact, how he sees growing global urbanity threatening this sort of “wide-ranging ethnography,” to which he adheres – perhaps leading to a retreat to interviews alone away from vital, direct participant observation of human life as lived.

Despite some revision to these works individually, they are not always well connected collectively. The reader undergoes jarring transitions even when attentive to overarching themes and assistance from the author’s guiding preface. It suffers some from what I call the Dagwood sandwich problem in that, like that famous cartoon snack, many layers of ingredients are stacked with only a few sturdy toothpicks to hold it all together. Fortunately, in Sanjek’s book we have some very worthy toothpicks. While there are many lessons for the anthropologist in training, the manner in which this material is presented may not lend itself well to use as a course text – though I can easily imagine it being rewardingly mined for individual chapters on an ad-hoc basis. For the rest of us, the book is a poignant reminder that ethnographic research produces results that can be obtained in no other fashion and with which we must actively engage in contemporary social issues so as to contribute to the defining public discourses of our time.

Brian A. Hoey

Sissons, Jeffrey: *The Polynesian Iconoclasm. Religious Revolution and the Seasonality of Power.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2014. 160 pp. ISBN 978-1-78238-413-7. (ASAO, 5) Price: £ 53.00

Les missionnaires sont souvent perçus comme ayant été les principaux orchestrateurs du changement religieux