rural households, plantation and mine workers, urban manufacturing and trading employees. This literature has grappled, not least, with how to describe a class, many of the members of which have not been separated from land, and how to understand the politics that follows from such conditions. Are households best described as a semiproletariat, subjected to capital as a form of productive labor through the state? Or are they non-capitalist producers, peasants, engaged in petty commodity production? Are full-time, urban-dwelling workers a proletariat when they still have some attachment to rural smallholdings? What of the unemployed, whose numbers have exploded over the last three decades in both towns and rural areas? Are these a reserve army of labor or a relative surplus population, awaiting another international upturn to be drawn into the capitalist economy as wage workers? Or are the unemployed permanently so, and thus a threat to the order required for accumulation, a ragged lumpen-proletariat set to explode into anarchy as they might be considered to have done elsewhere in the country, including on Bougainville?

In a perverse manner, chapter 6 is the most indicative of the book’s lack of substance. Here the account shifts to a supposed national level where the intermediate strata, preoccupied with status and with only slight connections to accumulation or productive labor, “had become committed to changing the nature of distinction” (121). A court case about compensation in the Highlands and a film about marital relations involving Mount Hagen and Port Moresby “couples” are used to discuss how the intermediate stratum understands and defines appropriateness. Such an ending, full of petty squabbling, is especially appropriate for an account that tells so little of consequence about capitalism or class in Papua New Guinea.

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The Telling of Class in Papua New Guinea

We begin Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea thus, “This book is our telling of the way that class inequalities in contemporary Papua New Guinea have been convincingly, and with telling effect, told. It is about the contexts and processes, both ‘traditional’ and ‘modernist,’ within which many relatively affluent Papua New Guineans were conveying to whole categories of their countrymen that the latter lacked viable and legitimate claims on significant resources” (1). We have tried, hence, to impart the ways that (culturally and socially positioned) Papua New Guineans have been talking to themselves and to others—including to us as anthropologists—about their lives, especially as they contend with new and changing definitions of worth and relationship.

To the extent that we have imparted these ways of telling about difference, we have told much—and in an experience-near manner—about a range of often conflicting Papua New Guinean views concerning the nature of their social world(s) and how it (they) should be dealt with. In our view, to repudiate these various tellings as trivial and inconsequential is to repudiate
the experiences and understandings of those whose tellings they are. To be deaf to such tellings would be a deafness to Papua New Guinean lives: It would be a deafness of sensibility—an impoverishment of empathy—regarding the way these lives are led, are contended about, prove satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Of these three reviews, two (Smith’s and Zimmer-Tamakoshi’s) are attuned to both the substance and nuance of Papua New Guinea experiences and understandings—are listening to tales told—and one (MacWilliam’s) is not.

MacWilliam’s deafness is troubling because it is consequential: Tellings of difference—of class happenings—matter, and not only to Papua New Guineans but to those of us living often better positioned lives elsewhere (and we stress throughout our book that “our” lives and “theirs” are connected systemically). The aspect of class that matters greatly to them and to us concerns fundamental moral issues pertaining to relative worth: whom one associates with and in what ways. That class concerns such issues is, in our view, a primary (though not exclusive) reason why class should be a matter of analytic concern (especially in a place like Papua New Guinea with a strong tradition of [male] egalitarian values). In other words, class matters in substantial measure because class injures and demeans and because class confuses—by insinuating and obscuring. What we sought to do in our book is to convey these class happenings with full subtlety. E P Thompson has been significant to us in this regard, not because he attributes class differences largely to productive relations (which we venture he would not do if he were to confront the Papua New Guinean socioeconomic scene); rather, he has been significant to us because he thickly describes the social life of inequality.

Such an understanding of class as lived experience, importantly, enables us to understand what the links are, in particular places and at particular times, between differential access to resources (whether productive or other) and the ways that social life is conducted. After all, the manner in which inequalities are justified and understood constitutes an important aspect of how they are instantiated and perpetuated. In this regard, we find ourselves theoretically located between those who emphasize that capitalism has a global reach and those who stress that production, distribution, and consumption are variably shaped and interpreted in diverse cultural contexts. We insist, therefore, that in talking about class in Papua New Guinea (or elsewhere), one must attend not only to who has access to what resources and why; one must also attend to (far from fixed) cultural expectations—of worth, morality, and what life should offer—that constitute much of the significance of these resources.

Keeping in mind, as Thompson does, that class is not just “a structure,” nor even . . . a ‘category,’ but . . . something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships” (Thompson, as quoted by us on page 2), consider MacWilliam’s criticism of what he calls “terminological vacuousness” in our characterization of “a class of labour.” He refers to literature that has grappled with “how to describe
a class, many of the members of which have not been separated from land, and how to understand the politics that follows from such conditions. Are households best described as a semiproletariat, subjected to capital as a form of productive labor through the state? Or are they non-capitalist producers, peasants, engaged in petty commodity production? Are full-time, urban-dwelling workers a proletariat when they still have some attachment to rural smallholdings? What of the unemployed, whose numbers have exploded over the last three decades in both towns and rural areas? Are these a reserve army of labor or a relative surplus population, awaiting another international upturn to be drawn into the capitalist economy as wage workers? Or are the unemployed permanently so, and thus a threat to the order required for accumulation, a ragged lumpen-proletariat set to explode into anarchy? Aside from the reference to an explosion into anarchy, class happenings seem, for MacWilliam, largely drained of experiential components and, hence, substantially mechanical and reductionist.

With respect to this view, it might be noted that MacWilliam criticizes our use of the term “grass roots,” apparently deaf to its dynamic and multiplex meanings. Although originally a cartoon character (as he states), it has become, at least since the early 1990s, an emic term of reference, both to self and to others, employed in a range of situationally dependent ways. On the one hand, it can be used to convey often wry self-deprecation or to assert moral and, sometimes, hard-nosed political claims; on the other, it can be used to convey disdain or to acknowledge a (frequently) grudging responsibility toward those less fortunate (perhaps by virtue of “inadequate” initiative). Correspondingly, MacWilliam finds little value in our term “incommensurate difference.” However, far from vacuous as he states, it is a serious (and, we think, reasonably successful) effort to capture, in a full, nonreductionist manner, a local sense that the grounds of worth have for some time been (perhaps irrevocably) shifting in ways that favor some rather than others.

These shifts are, without any doubt, thoroughly discernible in Wewak (to be sure, a somewhat economically and politically marginal town). They are, as well, discernible elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, which our last chapter (thought our best by Smith and without substance by MacWilliam) makes clear. We might also mention in this regard, that our current research, no longer at Wewak but elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, at the Ramu sugar plantation, very much confirms our picture of these class happenings: recently, for example, we overheard two “national” managers employed at the company agree that it was better, in part because cheaper, to travel to Indonesia for family vacations in Jayapura than back to their home villages where kin would drain them financially dry. (One might argue with respect to Wewak that, if the tellings of class have become so well instantiated at the periphery, how much more so at the center.)

Moreover, Wewak, as the focus of our study, was (as we made clear) amply justified on ethnographic grounds because we have long-term connections with the “grass roots”
there. (Other studies could, of course, be profitably done elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. We fully endorse Smith’s call for “vigorous discussion and additional research on this vital issue”: we would certainly welcome, for instance, a full revelation about Wingti’s millions from MacWilliam or others.) Wewak was suited to our study, in other words, because it enabled us to provide the thickest record of both the habituations to, and the repudiations of, class happenings among a range of people whose lives intersected in many ways.

This brings up another consideration about both our mode of depiction and choice of focus: we wanted to do more than convey these class happenings in as truthful and as embedded a manner as we could manage. (This manner seems largely to convince Smith and Zimmer-Tamakoshi, who are both not only ethnographers but ethnographers of Papua New Guinea, a telling [disciplinary] difference between themselves and MacWilliam.) We also wished to convey these happenings to a variety of audiences, including the audience of Papua New Guineans. We wanted our renditions of these class happenings to be recognizable in their complexities, including that they be recognizable to the people—both the well- and the ill-favored—whose lives we were attempting to impart. In so doing, we sought to present, not the bureaucratization of academic categories calibrated into rigid typologies, but the subtlety of insinuation, of implication, of ambivalence as these happenings increasingly pervade and constitute daily Papua New Guinean life.

We do not think that everything worth saying about class can be encompassed by attending to such tellings. Nor do we think that our rendition of such tellings is definitive—and we wish to thank both Smith and Zimmer-Tamakoshi for their corrections, emendations, and elaborations. We do, however, insist that not to attend to such tellings would be to ignore crucial questions about the workings of class in differently positioned lives.

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Volumes like this slender book, with their meticulous research and carefully crafted text, make history a valuable tool for analysis of contemporary events. The war on Bougainville was one of the great Pacific tragedies of the twentieth century, and the Panguna copper mine the trigger for it. It is hard to underestimate the impact of the development of the Panguna mine on the region; as Denoon states, Panguna was “pivotal to Australian decolonisation, Papua New Guinea’s independence, the minerals boom that was to transform much of Melanesia, and the erosion of relations between