practices that address that ethos are more fluid and dynamic? This question has important implications for contemporary culture theory.

Next, Goodenough nicely discusses the important experiences within the family and local community that promote needs and concerns involving generosity and respectfulness. But, he does not adequately address the importance of building one’s reputation for bravery and effectiveness through activities with one’s peers, particularly among same-sex peers. He does discuss the importance of effectiveness and bravery in relation to cross-sex peer relations (e.g., romantic pursuits), but not enough attention is given to same-sex peer activities involving contests of skill and feats of derring-do. The latter have long been critical aspects of social experience and fundamental to self-construction in Chuuk. This oversight reflects a weakness in the earlier ethnographic materials for Chuuk, which, with the exception of Mac Marshall’s work, give short shrift to same-sex peer-related activities.

This is a wonderful book and a welcome addition to the ethnographic record for Chuuk. It successfully supports its main theoretical assertions and also provides a resource for Micronesian scholars and for the people of Chuuk.

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Shelley Mallett’s monograph on Nuakatan reproductive beliefs combines ethnographic data with personal introspection about the research process. Mallett suggests other ethnographers assert a scientific neutrality that she claims is not actually felt in the field, and that they dismiss emotional and experiential aspects of research in favor of presenting empirical findings. To counter this trend, Mallett explores the role of her imagination in the fieldwork process, and the role of autobiography in writing ethnography. She opts for making public the processes of introspection and evaluation she went through, refusing to overlook the ways her own assumptions and her experiences, particularly as a woman, contributed to how she gained awareness. The chapters in the ethnography intersperse Mallett’s “intersubjective process of coming to know in the field” (31) with data on topics of pregnancy, birth, and death on Nuakata. She concedes others might label the ethnography “experimental” (x). It is indeed an ambitious enterprise to be both convincing about Nuakata social life and honest about how one comes to make assertions about that life.

The first chapter traces Mallett and her husband’s arrival on the island of Nuakata, Massim Province, Papua New Guinea, in 1993. In this chapter we learn of Mallett’s romanticism...
about field research and her trepidation on arriving at her field site. We also learn she stayed for only three days during her initial visit, and then left for two weeks while the community was supposed to build her a house. When Mallett returned to find the house unbuilt, she lived in a nearby church for five weeks while Nuakatans constructed the dwelling. Further, we learn that Mallett had no language training before arriving and remained insecure about conducting an interview in the local language for some time afterward.

Chapters two, three, and five explore the domain of childbirth, while at the same time still privileging Mallett’s experiences in the field. Mallett admits to romanticizing traditional forms of childbirth but simultaneously acknowledges the potential benefits of biomedical innovations. She was forced to revise some of her assumptions about field research when she learned that the universalism she heretofore privileged—the shared experience of being a woman—was not necessarily how things were viewed on Nuakata and would not automatically open fieldwork doors. Many of Mallett’s introspections involve her coming to terms with theories and theoretical assumptions she brought with her into the field. Her acute intelligence makes her an excellent synthesizer of theory, but at times she overextends this skill to draw conclusions on the basis of thin evidence. For example, she accompanied a health worker on maternal and child health mobile clinic rounds, observing interactions between the health worker and the patient. On the basis of this one observation, Mallett appears confident in making generalizations along the lines of: “[Moses, the health worker,] attempted to convey to women that as a health worker he considered their bodies, particularly their genitalia, as divisible or partible from themselves, their sex/gender, sexuality, sexual desire. Within the clinic space Moses treated maternal or diseased women’s bodies as androgynous and partible—as bodies distinct from selves/persons, distinct from other bodies” (96).

Mallett integrates theory with data most successfully in chapters three and five, where conceptual queries and insights are interspersed with interview results on conception and childbirth. She makes a valuable contribution to the literature here by questioning the inevitable theoretical focus on bodily substances when describing conception in Melanesian societies. Instead, she shows conception theories to be dynamic and syncretic.

In the last chapter, Mallett reports on attending the funeral of a man she did not know; she is wracked with ethical guilt over what she fears was exploitation on her part. Nonetheless, she overcomes these concerns and describes the dynamic formulation of “Nuakatan” beliefs about death. Several concerns arose in this chapter: Why is the informant Wycliffe’s way of knowing privileged over the views of others? Why are so few other informants cited, and why are statements from English-speaking informants given such prominence? The conclusion provides partial answers to these questions. Mallett discloses that she was forced to leave the field unexpectedly due to her husband’s chronic
illness. Readers may thus piece together that Mallett spent just over half a year settled in on Nuakata, and realize that she was competent enough in the local language to conduct interviews without a translator for only several weeks before leaving. One could speculate that reliance on English-speaking Wycliffe’s interpretations occurred in part because Mallett did not have the opportunity to triangulate information, to gather potentially competing viewpoints, or to observe a wider range of events.

Readers are left with the question: Does an ethnography that privileges the field researcher’s experience work as ethnography? On the one hand, Mallett makes valuable contributions to highlighting how a researcher’s subjective experiences can dramatically affect what she sees and how she understands things. The volume drives home the extent to which ethnographic assertions about a community may well be cobbled together from a selective range of statements, observations, and experiences. On the other hand, the end result is that readers know far more about Mallett than about Nuakatans. I found I knew enough about Mallett to be frustrated about what remains undisclosed. For example, I knew she read theory extensively from the 1980s and early 1990s, but not why she explores those older debates at the expense of newer concerns. I wondered why Mallett was so concerned with what sex and gender are, when most scholars since 1990 have turned to the more relevant question, for this project, of how gender does. I knew Mallett was affected by ethical fieldwork issues but did not know why she failed to address scholarly work from contemporary post-colonial scholars, especially on the topic of the impact of her status as a white woman on field relations.

The title of the book promises an ethnography of Nuakata, but the text delivers only partial information and partial descriptions. However much I wanted to remain open-minded about Mallett’s project, in the end, serious lapses in field methods made the ethnographic materials appear unconvincing and incomplete. At the beginning of the volume, Mallett describes an unsettling encounter with a wary health official who thought little of anthropologists. He comments, “Many do not use their research findings to help the people they have lived with and many never return to the places once they have left” (42). Mallett is concerned she is being burdened with the sins of past ethnographers—sins she feels she has risen beyond because she is neither uninformed nor disempowered. Information and power are important, to be sure, but these should not obscure the importance of tenacity and rigor in fieldwork. However clever Mallett’s theoretical weavings, and however poised her writing, the question remains: Would Mallett have remained so ambivalent about the process of coming to conclusions, about the “pseudoscience” of field methods (56), had she remained on Nuakata long enough to feel more confident about knowing what she knows?

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