Great scholars sometimes pen an ancillary gem that runs importantly across the normal grain of their work—think of Lévi-Strauss on the psychic work of symbolism, Foucault on race, or Marx on precapitalist formations. In 1992, Marshall Sahlins published a provocative little piece, “The Economics of Develop-man in the Pacific” (Res 21:13–25), which considered not only the cultural appropriation of so-called modern development, but also the humiliation—and Christian humiliation in particular—that could lead people to devalue their culture and embark on a futile quest—across a cultural “desert”—to pursue external standards of success and “development.” In the present edited volume—its little gem of insight, provocation, and across-the-grain focus—Joel Robbins and Holly Wardlow configure a finely honed collection of chapters by major Melanesianists that critically engage Sahlins’s original assertions.

The watchword throughout is critical application. Whereas Sahlins’s original comments (appropriately reprinted in this book) are as generic as they are brief, the book’s chapters are rich reassessments of his notion using ethnographic cases that stretch from the Solomons to the Sepik. Abstaining from both idolizing appreciation and critical harping in favor of fine scholarship, the book’s contributors illustrate the simultaneous rightness and wrongness—and wider significance—of his initial provocative essay.

In substance, the body of the book provides tight and telling assessments of Sahlins’s characterization, reflected against reassertions of traditional custom (kastom) among Kwaio of eastern Malaita, Solomon Islands (David Akin), and numerous cases in Papua New Guinea, including Christianity among Urapmin, Mt Ok, West Sepik (Joel Robbins); fierce resentment and violent jealousy among Huli, Southern Highlands (Holly Wardlow); ethnopsychology and the cultural construction of dysphoria (eg, unhappiness or disenchantment) among Bumbita Arapesh, Eastern Sepik (Stephen Leavitt); psychodynamics of contemporary shame among Eastern Iatmul, Sepik River (Eric Silverman); modern sorrow and lassitude (les) among Rawa men of Madang Province (Douglas Dalton); modern self-construction among Kewa, Southern Highlands (Lisette Josephides); the politics of shame and the death of moka exchanges among Melpa, Mt Hagen, Western Highlands (Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart); bodily constructions of conjuncture and difference among Ipili, Enga (Aletta Biersack); humiliation, class, and the difficulty of crossing traditional-modern development divides in East Sepik (FrederickErrington and Deborah Gewertz); and violent regional successionism among Lelet in central New Ireland (Karen Sykes).

Given the topical range of the book’s chapters, one might expect them to be variable in quality and
focus. However, the contributors’ topics refract effectively through the shared optic of Sahlins’s original provocation, which is explicitly considered in each case. The editors deserve credit for this coherence as well as for the tight effectiveness of its published presentation—fourteen contributions in 216 pages. The best of the book’s ethnographic chapters, including those by Robbins, Wardlow, Leavitt, Dalton, and a brief contribution by Errington and Gewertz—create fresh implications not only for Sahlins’s original article but also for the critical assessment of his theories of cultural continuity and historical change. Contemporary dimensions of shame, envy, self-criticism, and violent self-assertion come to the fore in important new ways in these chapters—as do the dynamics of Christianity, gender, class, and exchange.

As Robbins effectively suggests in his introduction, Sahlins’s stimulating essay opened up his own work to a challenging reassessment by raising the issue of exactly how and under what conditions cultural constructions of self-disenchantment take place. In this respect, the present volume is a landmark both in the assessment of Sahlins’s notions of cultural change and, equally, in delineating a vibrant forward edge of the contemporary anthropology of Melanesia.

Two features that the volume toys with and that could be expanded in future work deserve mention. The first is how cultural constructions of dysphoria—including shame and humiliation—develop over time by drawing on long-standing patterns (eg, A L Epstein, The Experience of Shame in Melanesia, 1984) while also being newly shaped and often with new intensity through the lens of emergent social and political conditions. As several of the book’s contributors imply, the schism between a disillusioned present and a relational past is not as stark or as dualistic as Sahlins’s original formulation suggests. The insights of Kenelm Burridge’s works of the 1960s—uncited in the book’s substantive chapters—could be productively revisited in this respect.

Second and relatedly, how affective states and social conditions articulate with political economy could fruitfully be investigated more deeply. As Robert Foster importantly suggests in the book’s afterword, the tensions that Sahlins dichotomizes—and that the book’s contributors so effectively put into relationship—confront larger issues of economic and political disempowerment that inform both the marginalization and the frustrations of modernity that are so poignant and pervasive in Melanesia.

The present collection makes the signal contribution of delineating the cultural and affective dimensions of these processes and, what is more, of reassessing through a pivotal lens what is arguably the most significant and influential theory of culture change during the last half of the twentieth century, the theoretical framework of Marshall Sahlins. A small book with a strong focus, this volume has the largest of implications. It testifies well to the ongoing structure of conjuncture within anthropology itself—not just the rebuttals or unintended consequences of previous work, but also the contingencies and new insights that result from what Sahlins might call the risk of anthropological signs in aca-
ademic practice. If these engagements are sometimes more dialogic if not dialectical than Sahlins himself avers, the strength of the present work is not just to foreground this fact but, in the process, to improve decisively on his own great contribution.

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Most of the papers in this edited collection touch on the future of sovereignty and regionalism. In his foreword, the prime minister of Sāmoa, the Hon Tuilaepa Sailele Aiono Malielegaoi, forecasts the imminent end of the current postcolonial era. He predicts this will bring a process of globalization that will carry Pacific Islanders a greater distance from the traditional idea of the nation-state, even as their leaders keep defining their essential interests in relation to the nation. The editor, Michael Powles, specifies that a central theme of the book is the degree to which Pacific people can meet increasing challenges by coalescing in a common identity that will produce greater mutual assistance or even integration.

Part One, “Political and Constitutional Challenges,” comprises five chapters, making the following predictions: Political instability will continue until Pacific countries develop their own political systems; alarmist forecasts by impatient neoliberal economic “missionaries” and “one-size-fits-all” governance advocates will probably be counterproductive (Henderson). Indigenous systems will be able to adjust well to political and economic challenges (Teaiwa and Koloamatangi)—particularly where, as in Sāmoa, indigenous institutions show great durability (So’o). Nevertheless, new forces of economic globalization will continue to cause trepidation among traditionalists (Madraiwiwi). Laws will be most successful when they are based on broad participation rather than on model laws (“insert name of country here”) or regional resolutions that are not successfully implemented (Kuemlangan). All these chapters are consistent with one another in viewing indigenous foundations as essential for successful development in the future, but they would be better if they expanded on exactly what this will mean in specific and practical terms.

Part Two, “Social and Economic Challenges,” consists of seven chapters, making the following diverse predictions: Pacific languages are extremely vulnerable and parents will play a crucial role in preserving them by speaking the languages with their children at home (Hunkin and Mayer). Current and prospective trade policies will have important consequences (Narsey). If the policies of neoliberal “outsiders” such as Helen Hughes are implemented, these will weaken Pacific state sovereignty, citizenship, and rights to land and other resources (Slatter). Adopting some current Australian proposals for a currency union