Book and Media Reviews
“symbols of . . . timeless feeling,” and her analysis dissipates into grandiose comparisons of bowls and canoes with comets and stars, an oddly ephemeral conclusion to such a well-grounded volume (308).

The book ends with chapters by Peter Hempenstall and Aletta Biersack summarizing the volume’s themes. Both are complimentary but offer critical insights and suggestions for future work. For example, Hempenstall points out that a consideration of Christianity’s role in social transformations was “conspicuously absent in any systematic examination” at the original symposium and reflected in the chapters here (321). Biersack concludes her comprehensive overview with a well-considered list of “lessons” from the volume that also point to future possibilities.

The volume’s strength is its vibrant heterogeneity married to sure expertise—here are well-established scholars investigating the depths and nuances of topics they have spent decades thinking about. Its weakness is that by traveling on such well-trodden paths some of the contributors find it difficult to locate new paths, new directions toward unexpected endpoints on our scholarly maps. Or, to put it bluntly: all of the arguments in this volume are worthwhile and valid, but few of them push us to places we haven’t visited many times before. In its own way, the book serves as a double mirror of the anthropological tradition, pointing to the numerous ways that anthropologists’ and others’ attempts to make sense of the “past” have played a role in shaping Pacific pasts even as the book itself attempts to contribute, once again, to the meanings that tradition is believed to offer.

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In this book, anthropologist Paige West leads us on a global journey from a small Gimi-speaking village in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, through processing plants in Goroka, to the port of Lae, and ultimately to coffeehouses in New York, Hamburg, Brisbane, and Sydney, providing a formidable discussion of insights and ethnographic observations of the Papua New Guinea coffee industry and its place in the larger world of global commerce. In doing so, West helps us see the unexpected complexity of all aspects of the coffee industry: production, exporting, marketing, and consumption.

This book is a rich blend of careful theoretical discussion, academically sound analyses, informal personal reflections on incidents in fieldwork, and the resulting relationships the ethnographer develops. West foregrounds the discussion that constitutes the primary focus of each chapter and then reviews it at the end. At first this rhetorical approach might seem too elementary for such a project—too
much like a five-paragraph essay by
a first-year writer—but readers will
soon appreciate it for the guidance it
gives. So much is happening in this
book at so many levels that it is essen-
tial to have a quick-witted and patient
guide to tell us what we are now see-
ing. West is that guide.

West uses her years of research and
her connections with people in various
areas of the coffee industry to help us
see her perspectives on many aspects
of that industry. In all cases, she cleverly complicates the issues we might otherwise imagine to be fairly simple: certification schemes are shown to be more problematic than some real-
ize, and much of coffee advertising relies on “fantasy formation” about “chiseled warriors in Bird of Paradise
headresses” (39) that suggests an “enforced subsistence primitivism” (60). “These chronotopic fantasies,”
she writes, “are grafted onto cof-
fee from Papua New Guinea by . . .
people and organizations engaged in
specialty marketing. The images and
fantasies . . . also endure in, and are
perpetuated by, coffee marketing and
certification, through the physical
and ideological layout of coffee shops
across the world, through the discurs-
vie production of ‘middlemen’ who
are out to rob authentic natives of
their income, and in the rhetoric about
saving the lifestyles of indigenous
peoples living in ‘stone age’ conditions
through the helping hand of capital-
ism (even though it is capital’s evils
that are forcing the inevitable march
towards modernity)” (64). Thus, West
critiques the double-edged sword of
marketing strategies that stereotype
Papua New Guinea and its coffee
producers as exotic, primitive, and
impoverished, and she helps us see the
much more nuanced realities of the
cultures and economics involved.

In the section “Village Coffee,”
West contrasts coffee as a crop with
the ubiquitous sweet potato of the
Highlands. She shows how sweet
potatoes are intertwined with Gimi
notions of marriage and of life itself,
whereas coffee, much more recently
introduced, has no such deep connec-
tions to daily life: “Coffee’s planting
and then use (as it has no use value
for Gimi) [who do not drink coffee]
do not work to make a woman part
of her husband’s family in the same
way as sweet potato cultivation does.
Additionally, with sweet potato the
(re)productive capacity was female.
Now men take part in (re)productive
capacity through coffee production”
(121–122).

A reader expecting a distant and
mechanical discussion of the processes
of coffee production and of the social
forces behind the global economy will
be surprised: like any good ethnogra-
phy, this book is as much about people
as it is about social and economic
theories and conceptual frameworks.
Within the first few pages we learn
about West’s friendship with a Gimi
family in Papua New Guinea whose
daughter Betsy died of malaria, and
we soon hear about West’s grand-
mother and her coffee habits. Because
of the nature of this book, dealing
with large corporate entities and
potentially proprietary information,
some people are not named but are
identified as “Mr. Nebraska,” “a
Dean’s Beans employee,” and “a Lon-
don coffee shop owner.” Yet far more
prevalent are the personal sketches
and encounters with West’s friends:
missionary pilot Les Anderson; Sam of Maimafu who tells tales of the “big city” Goroka; and Atticks, of Goroka, a coffee buyer who was once stuck for three weeks in Maimafu when the weather was bad and no plane could come to retrieve him and the coffee. Her narrative abounds with tales of expatriates such as Ravi and Anu Savarti; Madu Namdu, the Indian manager of an export company in Goroka; and Angella and Shannon, wives of expatriate coffee company employees, whose tales are interwoven with concerns about family safety and racism. Other expatriates include Bruce Matton, Dorian Hempsted, and Ed Johnson, and their stories are told with careful attention to a colonial past. Readers soon share West’s amusement with the ironies of Seventh-Day Adventist missionary pilots (who do not drink coffee) having to explain to their American denominational constituents why an important part of their flying duties in New Guinea involve transportation of coffee beans.

West’s encounter with Patrick Faden, a Papua New Guinea truck driver who jokes that he is Black Irish, leads to a fine example of an ethnographer admitting to a planned part of a study gone wrong. Faden’s refusal to let her accompany a shipment of coffee beans from Goroka to Lae because of his concerns for her personal safety means that her book in one sense is missing the perfect chapter. Yet this honest admission is in fact an even better ending to the story than the imagined one. She must fly to Lae, and there she has a rare experience of being “stood up” at the Nazdab airport. This leads to reflections on the intertwined community that one develops in years of fieldwork and how “naked” one feels when out of one’s own community.

Clearly, From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive is not only about the intertwined worlds of coffee production, it is about the process of ethnographic observation and about the human relationships involved in any of these enterprises. This fine study could be useful in anthropology courses, area studies of Pacific culture, and courses on food studies, as well as a satisfying accompaniment to many hot cups of coffee.

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Sun Come Up tells a story about an attempt by the world’s first climate refugees, the Carteret Islanders of Papua New Guinea. In the absence of state aid, the movie traces their efforts to organize their own resettlement in the context of progressive damage to their ancestral atoll islands by rising sea levels. Sun Come Up offers a compelling case study of the Janus-faced nature of capitalism, which, on the pathological side, has produced the greenhouse gases that are causing the sea levels to rise, thus threatening the cultural autonomy of people