

## BOOK REVIEWS

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WESTBROOK, DAVID W. *Navigators of the Contemporary: Why Ethnography Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. 152. ISBN: 978-0-226-88751-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-226-88752-4 (paperback).

This is a difficult book to review for an academic journal because of the way in which the author deliberately flouts many conventions generally defining academic literature. David Westbrook is an academic lawyer who teaches at Buffalo Law School in the US and is especially interested in ethnography. Over the past years he has had stimulating conversations about this topic with his anthropological colleagues including George Marcus and Douglas Holmes, and in *Navigators of the Contemporary: Why Ethnography Matters*, Westbrook presents his reflections on these conversations.

Some of these reflections are interesting. To follow an anthropological cliché, as Westbrook—the outsider—approaches anthropology, lacking home blindness, he may reach insights that an insider might not. Westbrook argues, for example, that fieldwork is much more than just a way of accruing data. It is an ‘adventure’ in which anthropologists, usually young graduate students on their first fieldwork assignment, can sow their wild oats, see the world, grow as people and, accordingly, grow intellectually (p. 35). Westbrook pithily summarises the ‘crisis of representation’ which, he argues, anthropology underwent in the 1970s and which still remains unresolved. He argues that radicals embedded in the crisis are inconsistent because they have allowed themselves to become ensconced as professors in the very institutions of power they were challenging (Ch. 7). He also argues that without the concept of ‘culture’, cultural anthropology has no analytical framework and very little which renders it distinctive from other disciplines, though he does not look in great detail at the philosophical questions of whether or not ‘culture’ is a useful category (p. 51). Likewise, his many comparisons between anthropology and law and his suggestions for what careers, other than academia, anthropologists should pursue are interesting (p. 59).

Beyond this point there are a number of difficulties. Most obviously, there is no bibliography and no references. Westbrook justifies this by claiming that to use references would be an appeal to authority, which would not make his assertions any ‘more correct’ (p. 6). Yet there is a difference between merely stating an interpretation to be true because of the words of an authority, and making statements based on empirical facts supported by research conducted by an expert in the area. The lack of references means that readers have no choice but to trust Westbrook’s statements, some of them rather controversial. For example, he asserts ‘virtually all academics, myself included, have little power’ (p. 16), yet makes no additional attempt to back this claim up. This leaves the argument weak.

Westbrook’s other justification for his lack of scholarly convention is to ensure that the text is ‘exciting’, ‘fun’ and ‘accessible’, in particular to anthropology students (p. 31). In reality the text is stylistically flawed and, accordingly, neither accessible nor fun to read. Westbrook makes use of verbose, over-lengthy sentences in which the reader soon gets lost. The text is smattered with jargon and un-necessary Latin, German and French terms which are likely to alienate some readers. Even more problematic is Westbrook’s essential

justification for his book. Instead of a strict argument, the book is simply a series of 'thoughts' which he hopes are 'suggestive' and 'interesting' (p. 6). At a number of points he rejects pursuing a detailed analysis because it would take too long (Ch. 8), which is a surprising argument considering that the book is pamphlet-like with its mere 152 pages. The book reads as a compilation of conversations with anthropologist friends and a bit of thinking about anthropology yet, judging from the lack of references, not necessarily much reading. It leaves one wondering why such a book, and others like it, should be published by a scholarly publishing house from which we would assume certain standards and conventions.

Westbrook dismisses potential objectors to his approach at the outset by proclaiming: 'The reader is not obligated to continue; he can go elsewhere if he wishes' (p. 6). This leaves a reader asking: 'Why should I read the book? Why did you write it?' Westbrook actually appears to share these questions as he rhetorically asks: 'Is a book like this one worth writing or even reading?' (p. 32). To conclude this review with one answer: the book contains some original thoughts worth hearing, but a newspaper article would, perhaps, be a more suitable medium for communicating these than a book.

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COULTER, CHRIS. *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Womens Lives through War and Peace in Sierra Leone*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. Pp. 290. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7512-2.

Emotionally Chris Coulter's *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers* is a difficult book to read. Although ranking conflicts by the degree of violence is a meaningless if not an immoral endeavor, the Sierra Leonean civil war (1991–2002) is often considered one of the most brutal conflicts of the late twentieth century. An ethnography based on people's experiences of these events is likely to push the limits of the discipline's subject matter and method. This is more than welcome, though, since anthropologists have often too easily shied away from studying difficult topics, 'being too slow, too hesitant, too reflective', as Scheper-Hughes and Bourgeois (2004) lament in their *Violence in War and Peace*.

Recent years have seen a rapid growth of research on child soldiers in Africa and elsewhere, and Sierra Leone is no exception. Ishmael Beah's bestselling autobiography *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) has rendered the realities of the war in Sierra Leone familiar to many readers beyond academia. However, relatively few anthropological studies have focused explicitly on women and war. *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers* makes a valuable contribution in this respect. The book examines war and postwar experiences of women in Northern Sierra Leone, mostly abducted by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Sierra Leonean rebel army. Most of these women became 'bush wives' and many also turned into rebel fighters themselves. Coulter (p. 51) estimates that