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Book Review: Kalpana Ram's Work

Phenomenology in Anthropology and Fertile Disorder

Kalpana Ram & Christopher Houston (Eds.) (2015). *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective* (Afterword by Michael Jackson). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. (330 pages)
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Cost: E-book $34.99; Cloth $85.00; Paperback $35.00

Kalpana Ram (2013). *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press. (336 pages)
ISBN: 978-0-8248-3630
Cost: $34.20

by **Seth Palmer**

The two works reviewed here engage with the topics of embodiment, subjectivity, and experience, all of which are central to both the project of phenomenological anthropology and the domain of the anthropological category known as "spirit possession".

In dealing with these topics of anthropological intrigue, Kalpana Ram's ethnography, *Fertile Disorder* (which focuses on women suffering from "afflictive possession" in Tamil Nadu), and the collection of scholarly essays co-edited by Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston, *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective*, add to the growing interest in phenomenology within anthropological inquiry: an interest which, as Michael Jackson notes in his Afterword, was largely absent at the time of publication of his own edited volume on the same topic more than twenty years ago. That work, *Things as They Are* (1996), was the last major work on phenomenological anthropology, so that *Phenomenology in Anthropology* (2015), then, is a welcome addition to the literature.

If phenomenological accounts are meant to provide a "sense of perspective" (2015, p. 4) on individual human experience, then there can be no question that Ram and Houston's *Phenomenology in Anthropology*, with its inclusion of varied contributions from thirteen different scholars, provides a broad sense of perspective on the state of the field of phenomenological anthropology itself. The volume further endeavours to make several interventions, one of which is the recognition by the editors in their Introduction that social institutions are themselves phenomenological and that consciousness thus cannot and should not be singularly located by anthropologists in a wilful, agentive, human subject. It is here that this volume, they claim, breaks with some earlier works in phenomenological anthropology: "we need to give up the primacy afforded to these domains (choice, will, reflection, and conscious expression) in the definition of experience. Concepts such as inter-subjectivity and embodiment are not simply extensions of older understandings of experience. They also, in very important senses, mark the limits of consciousness itself" (2015, p. 8). In *Fertile Disorder*, Ram similarly critiques the privileging of "conscious expression" within the domains of experience and subjectivity. The argument is apt, since the essence of possession in Tamil Nadu beautifully illustrates the limitations of anthropological analyses wedded exclusively to self-reflection, agency, and consciousness.

While some of the contributions to *Phenomenology in*

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Anthropology are more rigorous than others in terms of theoretical engagement and ethnographic density, part of what may make the volume appealing to specialists in the field is the fact that not one of the major three theorists in phenomenology – Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger – is privileged over any other. Rather, contributors have drawn on the theorists and theoretical traditions that each deemed most appropriate for their own purposes. Some contributors, for example, engage with Sartre and Pierce. Other contributors, such as Csordas and Throop respectively, make important theoretical interventions. Some of the most rigorous contributions explore phenomenological theory as an anthropological object. Timmer, for instance, dizzyingly illuminates how religious and theological crises attached to "wonderment" and historicism rest at the heart of both Heideggerian phenomenological theory and professed biblical connections between Israel and North Malaita by his interlocutors in the Solomon Islands. The final section of the volume is composed of contributions in which four anthropologists consider the production of ethnography informed by phenomenology beyond the traditional non-fictive, authoritative, academic writing genre. Contributors here examine the ethnographic potentialities offered by photography, creative writing and poetry.

This reader was convinced by the utility of drawing from multiple writing styles and media forms in telling ethnographically rich and theoretically rigorous stories; needless to say, this is an argument that has been made for some time now. Other arguments in this section were less convincing, such as the assertion that ethnographic writing on love has much to learn from the literary heights of romance novels; what the seemingly populist argument naïvely ignores is how that genre is, like ethnography, value-laden and emerges from a particular (Western, heteronormative) genealogical trajectory.

Jackson's Afterword – while it engages relatively little with any of the preceding chapters – is both instructive and insightful. Jackson has, after all, as many of the contributors note, played an instrumental role in bringing phenomenology into the anthropological arena.

In the first chapter of *Phenomenology in Anthropology*, Ram engages with Heidegger's articulation of "mood" (*stimmung*) and how it may be used to inform ethnographic work. Finding it productive to attend to moods as phenomenological and affective phenomena, she here focuses specifically on anxiety and what this mood may tell anthropologists about ethnographic trends as they emerge in interlocutors' discourse. Ram's attention to mood – both as an orientation to the world and as an experience that does not define the subject but yet colours the subject's action, movement and language – is thought-provoking and adds a new phenomenological layer to anthropological literature influenced by the affective turn.

In her ethnography, *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and the Provocation of the Modern*, Ram critiques the persistent notion that Western anthropological theories of subjectivity must attach themselves to "mental states and ... ideas, thoughts, and inner emotion" (2013, p. 3). She describes this as a "mentalist" reading of agency, and as such as privileging "the exercise of will, desire, choice, and planning" (2013, p. 3) while ignoring more embodied forms of knowledge. It is of little surprise that Ram should take issue with mentalist readings of experience, given that trance is her topic of inquiry. Her ethnography joins other current, innovative work on the subject, making this truly an exciting time to be a graduate student working in spirit possession studies.

Fertile Disorder could be grouped with several other theoretically innovative works that have recently been published, including the edited volumes *Spirited Things: The Work of "Possession" in Afro-Atlantic Religion* (Johnson, 2014) and *Trance Mediums and New Media: Spirit Possession in the Age of Technical Reproduction* (Behrend, Dreschke, & Zillinger, 2015). Ram's ethnography is among the more rigorous monographs on the topic to have been published as of late. *Fertile Disorder*, which examines the nexus between spirit possession and fertility in Tamil Nadu, is theoretically astute, and perhaps best left to specialists and graduate students in the field to appreciate critically to the full.

In fact, one runs something of a theoretical marathon throughout the monograph, engaging with, among other theorists, Bordieu (habitus), Kristeva (abjection), Butler (gender trouble), Foucault (governmentality), Gramsci (cultural hegemony), Deleuze and Guattari (affect), de Certeau (minor practices), Chatterjee (nationalism), Freud (the unconscious), and Merleau-Ponty (body of habit). One wonders whether the theoretical arguments intertwined with the ethnography could, perhaps, have been deployed more efficiently or systematically – and, perhaps, more sparingly – alongside deeper engagement with the richly textured and temporally deep ethnographic material that Ram's own experience brings to bear on the work. As it is, as soon as ethnographic narratives begin to gain momentum in the text, they seem to be slowed down by theoretical instrumentation. If Ram had truly wanted to illustrate effectively how social theory has been gained "at the expense of magicality" (2013, p. 273), she may have considered allowing the magic of story telling to play a more prominent part in the ethnography.

The question of modernity's (dis)attachment to/from possession, which figures centrally in Ram's ethnography, has been taken up by others, as perhaps most famously by Ong (1987) in her research on female factory workers in Malaysia. Ram, however, distances herself from this work by stating that "I have focused attention on the ways in which possession makes visible what modernity *leaves out* of its adjudications"

(2013, p. 272). These are but two sides of the same coin, however, as Ong's work too attends to what the march towards modernity has missed in the lives of the factory workers. In *Fertile Disorder*, modernity is found in the form of the Indian nation-state that regulates Dalit women's bodies and how we – as social theorists – are to read those bodies that happen to fall into the passionate, temporal space of possession. It is here that Ram's work shines. Is possession indeed what modernity has "left out"? The question is provocative, and Ram provides a most scrupulous examination of its consequences; but the question simultaneously presumes to know exactly what "possession" is and, at times, universalizes the category (see Johnson, 2014). For instance, Ram claims that "modernity leaves out of its formal adjudications ... the world of spirits, ghosts and deities" (2013, p. 272). This may be true in the ethnographic context described, but there are moments when this, and similar arguments about "possession" deployed in the ethnography, create generalizations regarding the category of "possession" and "spirits, ghosts, and deities". In northwestern Madagascar where I work, mediumship and *tromba* spirits are wrapped up in local royal politics that have direct impact on the very "modern" project of national elections.

Curiously, Ram draws from de Certeau's articulation of "minor practices" and applies it to possession practices in Tamil Nadu fishing villages. It is clear from the text that, in Tamil Nadu, class-based forms of difference are able to render possession "superstitious", and thus relegate it to the sidelines of "modern" progress. Possession becomes a "minor" practice insofar as it has been subsumed – although never entirely – by the so-called secular, scientific concerns of local intellectuals attached to the state and its medical apparatuses. It remains to be asked, however, from whose perspective possession is "minor". While Ram certainly does not consider possessed women to be marginal to local life or to her ethnographic work (to the contrary, in fact), it was not altogether clear to this reader what exactly considering possession to be a "minor practice" does for her ethnography and the theoretical argumentation contained therein.

The genealogical legacy of attending to gender in anthropological explanations of spirit possession is not lost on Ram, who references, draws from and challenges those anthropologists and sociologists whose work on the topic has come before. Ram references the argument by Lewis (1966) that possession by female mediums in Somalia is a "marginal" practice within a patriarchal society, one that allows women to express themselves despite being an otherwise "subordinated" population. Ram (2013, p. 84) rightly provides a strong critique of the male chauvinism embedded in Lewis's argument. In the fifty years since Lewis proposed his theory on gender and possession, feminist anthropologists, such as Boddy (1989), have long since asked: from *whose* perspective, anyway, are women (in Somalia, Tamil Nadu, or Northern Sudan) considered to be "marginal"? Ram expands the question of gender outward to consider how the study of "possession" relates to the question of emancipatory and left-liberal politics more broadly. For instance, Ram (2013, p. 269) argues that Marxism often reads that which is embodied as automatically "in the service of power", and she wonders what alternative potentialities might be offered by Marxist thought if it did not presume such a reductive analysis.

Ram's contributions to the literature on gender and possession are two-fold. Firstly, she draws renewed attention to the female medium's body and how it is regulated by the nation-state and biomedicine. Her work on the "health of the nation-state", which is considered alongside women's health in family planning programmes throughout India (2013, p. 23), resonates with older anthropological literature on the body: both the (female) human body and the metaphoric national body. Like Boddy (2007) in her work on colonial Sudan, Ram examines how women's bodies are read, regulated, and controlled by the state, and how experience and perception respectively become key themes in both "afflictive possession" as described by Ram and *Zār* as studied by Boddy. Family planning and, more broadly, Western public health regimes, become both a discourse and a mode of knowledge-production; but so, too, do possession practices, as Ram's *Fertile Disorder* shows. Secondly, also as in Boddy's (1989) earlier work on possession in Northern Sudan, Ram (2013, pp. 114 & 151) examines the phenomenological parallel between bearing a child and bearing a spirit. Ram poses difficult questions about how possession may challenge otherwise straightforward understandings of agency. Again, these are questions that have previously been posed by others, but Ram infuses them with new life and urgency. Nevertheless, despite Ram's critique of "mentalist" readings of experience, relatively little contemporary anthropological literature on possession privileges this shallow reading of agency as she describes it.

At times, Ram's critique seems rather like a straw man argument, one that is not representative of the nuanced, emergent work in the field. It simply is not true that contemporary anthropological studies on gender and possession propose "only two alternatives: either 'false consciousness' or the clear perception provided by the emancipatory discourses of Marxism or feminism" (Ram, 2013, p. 265).

While there is no imperative for Ram to engage with psychoanalytic theory, there has been a deep tradition within anthropological studies of possession to draw from psychoanalysis, the very field that coined the term "consciousness" in the first place (and which goes largely unexplored by Ram). Given that Obeyesekere (1981) famously wrote about mediums beyond what Ram describes as a "mentalist" reading of agency, it is

surprising that Ram barely engages with his work. Ram is ostensibly troubled by Obeyesekere's reading of agency (2013, p. 143), but one wonders if Obeyesekere and Ram are not simply speaking past each other due to their dealing with dramatically different types of female mediums (the mediums Obeyesekere worked with, unlike Ram's, having been very troubled at the onset of mediumship). And, despite her critique of Obeyesekere for pulling from European myths, Ram would seem not to have considered how much Euro-American social theory drives her own ethnographic text.

As do Throop and Csordas in their work, ultimately Ram attempts to "take phenomenology out of a philosophical domain into an empirical context" (2013, p. 6). In this, she succeeds brilliantly. The interplay between the philosophical and the empirical also plays out in Ram's argument that the phenomenological experience of possession is itself an emic practice of theory-production and meaning making for interlocutors. Indeed, throughout the ethnography, Ram succeeds in convincing the reader that, yet again, spirit mediumship provides fertile ground for the blossoming of anthropological theory.

Referencing Format

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