BOOK REVIEW FORUM

James F. Weiner, *The Lost Drum: The Myth of Sexuality in Papua New Guinea and Beyond.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. Pp. xxi, 199, illus., bib., index. US$49.95 cloth; $19.95 paperback.

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The Tropics of Psychoanalysis in Melanesian Mythology

UNDERSTANDING THE IMAGINARY and experiential dimensions of another lifeworld is no trivial feat. Since the 1980s, James Weiner has steadily advanced this elusive goal of cultural anthropology. *The Lost Drum* is his latest tour de force. Topically, the book analyzes mythic images of the body across Papua New Guinea. More importantly, *The Lost Drum (TLD)* combines stunning literary elegance and daunting erudition to offer four theoretical innovations. First, it broaches the analytic divide between subjectivity and formalism that has beset the development of mythic analysis. Second, *TLD* is the first sustained engagement in anthropology with the thought of Jacques Lacan, and thus expands beyond the neo-Freudian assumptions of psychoanalytic anthropology. Third, Weiner synthesizes two important concepts in Melanesian studies: symbolic obviation and "partible" personhood. Finally, *TLD* explores the relationship between embodiment and language.

Structuralist Cognition

Towards unpacking the intricate ideas in *TLD* and offering provocations, I begin with structuralism. Lévi-Strauss views myth to be emblematic of the

originary mode of human thought (1955), or $F_x(a) : F_y(b) \simeq F_x(b) : F_{a-1}(y)$.
The four binary elements of the formula, each comprising "term" and "func-
tion," do not represent the unfolding of narrative episodes that, along with
indigenous glosses, are merely secondary elaborations. Instead, the formula
models relationships of symmetry and opposition among noncontiguous
mythemes. These mythemes code for an underlying conundrum of social
life that the final operation mediates through an inversion of "term" and
"function" *and* an additional nonlinear "helicoidal step" (Maranda and
Maranda 1971:26). For Lévi-Strauss (e.g., 1976, 1988), this recursion is a
vital attribute of "transcendental deduction" or pure thought (see Mosko
1991). It allows myth to admit and resolve what "the native mind" knows but
cannot state directly: the failure of social order.

Like structuralism, *TLD* also seeks to uncover a universal logic of myth
and human thought. But *TLD* refuses to tether the recursive dimension of
myth to psychosocial restoration, or to privilege form over content and poetic
resonance. Instead, *TLD* embraces a more dynamic view of cultural menta-
tion: the concept of obviation.

Modes of Thought

One premise of *TLD* is that culture, as initially theorized by Wagner (1978,
1986), consists of two symbolic orders. Conventional symbolization such as
kinship "sediments" (p. 33) the systematic knowledge of a community and
thereby forms a stable "ground" for the collective construction of a lifeworld.
Conventional symbols consist of habitual, hence unambiguous signifiers that
point to straightforward signifieds. By contrast, differentiating or nonconven-
tional symbols are tropes that assert unusual and often paradoxical relations
of sameness and difference between signifier and signified, thus deconven-
tionalizing the taken-for-granted notions of a conventional universe. Tropes
are also reflexive: They reveal the process of metaphor itself.

All cultures assign one symbolic mode to innate reality and the other to
human artifice. The former motivates the latter. Yet not all cultures identify
these realms in the same way. In the West, randomness and individuality are
the givens that motivate collective action. Legitimate intellectual enterprises
create the moral rules of society and forge ever-clearer, pragmatic knowledge
of the external world. But in Melanesia, our human contrivances *are* part of
the givens and flows of reality: the collective motivates differentiation. Myth,
then, and other elaborate intellectual constructs, counterinvents the conven-
tional through tropes. Since these metaphors differ from everyday language
—they are akin to a Batesonian meta-language—myth can neither simply
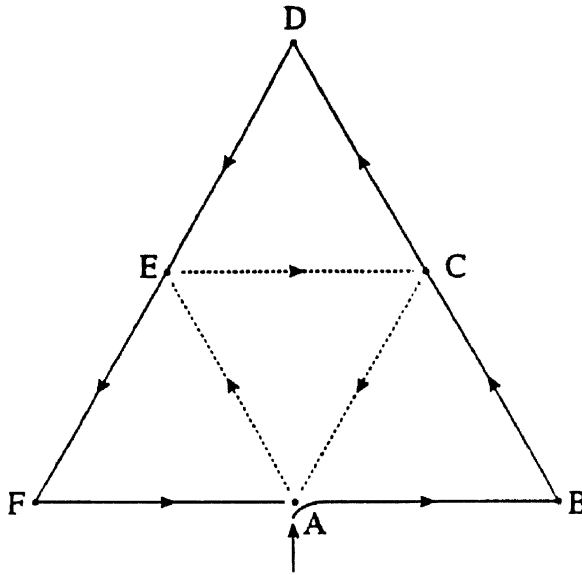express nor resolve paradoxes of social life.

FIGURE 1. **Obviation triangle.** (Weiner, *The Lost Drum,* 39)

TLD, I am suggesting, is a powerful response to structuralism. Yet it modestly seems hesitant about engaging other theories of myth, meaning, belief, and thought in anthropology (e.g., Tambiah 1990; Horton 1993). I wonder how Weiner would answer the debate between Sahlins and Obeyesekere—all the more so since *TLD* concerns the creation of cultural meaning (including the "structure of the conjuncture" that frames the Lake Kutubu oil fields) *and* psychoanalysis.

Obviation

Obviation, like structuralism, applies a universal logic to myth based on binary oppositions, substitutions, and transformations (see Weiner 1988). Yet obviation follows carefully the narrative whereas structuralism breaks it into "unchained signifiers" (p. 152) and, despite Lévi-Strauss's remonstrations to the contrary, reduces meaning to an essential message. In *TLD,* mythic signification is metaphoric: self-reflexive and polysemic.

A myth narrative alternates between episodes of convention and differentiation (Figure 1). (Hence the categories of everyday life comprise only one-half of the mythic vocabulary.) Each modality highlights and "motivates"

the other as in art, figure is to ground. The facilitating modality (ACE) begins the tale and usually corresponds, in the context of the myth (chapter 2; cf. Parmentier 1990), to convention. The motivating modality (BDF) is the differentiating series of images that obviates, "effaces" (p. 39), and "moves against' the conventions of ACE. Each episode asserts some metaphoric concordance that mediates between (1) antecedent and subsequent episodes, and (2) opposite vertices of one or more internal triangles. Moreover, a facilitating triangle can become everted as the motivating triangle of a second tale, and vice versa. As a result, there are four orders of mythic meaning.

First, myth illuminates, inverts, and, ultimately, dissolves the distinction between convention and differentiation. The innate and artifice are revealed to be arbitrary and interdependent. Second, the triangular structures of obviation refuse to yield a secure denouement. Instead, myth folds back on itself to collapse the premises of the opening episode through the "negation of a negation." This recursion, akin to tropic reflexivity, highlights the *limits* of conventional and nonconventional ways of imagining the world. Myth outlines the *contours* of culture rather than illuminates its *core* premises or therapeutically answers its *central* problems. Third, myths "uncover the concealments of conventional thought and action" (p. xvi). Finally, mythic meaning is nonrepresentational or fractal (see also Wagner 1991; Strathern 1991). The embedded triangular structure of obviation, where the entire myth is mirrored by any semiotic path, eschews a center-periphery, or essence-epiphenomenal, model of meaning, social life, and, we will see, psychoanalysis (see below). The recursive logic of metaphor engenders a resolutely prismatic body of interpretation and signification.

Despite the global pattern of obviation and its refusal to anchor myth to a specific problem of social order, *TLD* nonetheless sees myth as exemplifying the culture-specific parameters that "frame" or "ground" a localized social life. Obviation in *TLD* is thus akin to a semiotic theory of psychoanalytic agency since it seeks to "recover" the unstated background or "resistance" that "motivates" meaning (pp. 37–38), and to model future interpretive possibilities for any tale. Yet the epistemic status of the obviational triangles remains perplexing since the Batesonian, *Naven*ized goal of *TLD* is to escape Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness in regard to cultural, mythic, and psychoanalytic interpretations.

A Heideggerian Pause

Building on Weiner's extraordinary *The Empty Place* (1991; see also 1992, 1993a), *TLD* employs the contrastive modalities of obviation to elicit a Heideggerian "total life world."[1] This use of Continental philosophy refreshingly

seeks to distance anthropology from analytic traditions that privilege mind over body, caloric pragmatism over the experiential poetry of human life, and Lévi-Straussian essences (1973:58) over phenomenology. One can provocatively situate *TLD* in the famous debate, all but ignored by anthropologists, between Lévi-Strauss and Sartre (see also Abel 1966; Levin 1968–1969), initiated by *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

The central existential affirmation of *TLD* is that Melanesian ontologies deny the distinction between language and reality that is vital to our own conventional worldview. As in the Sepik, for an apt comparison, creation and beingness are toponymic. Names cannot simply point to objects since they form a constituent part of sensory phenomena: Names *are* bodies. The metaphoric flourish of mythic and quotidian poetics corresponds to the actual contours of the world and the "sound-shape of objects" (p. 174). As words and myths halt, stall, and enable other chains of signifiers with substancelike qualities of adhesion, smoothness, and miscibility, so flow the various movements of the Melanesian lifeworld: temporal, spatial, procreative, aquatic, social, sonorous, and so forth. Human life becomes meaningful and real through actions that pause, shape, and encompass these flows.[2] Similarly, as we have seen, *TLD* contends that "the function of bodies of language such as myth is more to cut off or obviate explanatory expansion than to facilitate it" (p. 19).

But these linguistic and bodily processes are not restricted to Melanesia. Rather, orality is the first "form-producing" power of the body, and thus speech is a bodily act on the world (p. 176). Here, *TLD* echoes both the middle Sepik and Genesis (Paul 1977), no less than Lacan.

The Myth of Freudian Signifieds

Structuralism and mainstream anthropology assume the existence of a stable self. By contrast, *TLD* argues along with Strathern and Wagner that the self is fundamentally mutable and incomplete, containing "not some inviolable self-identity but the deposited or introjected traces, both semiological and imagistic, of the others who constitute that person" (p. 13). But *TLD* expands beyond this framework by applying a Lacanian view of language and psychoanalysis to the interpretation of Melanesian myth, sociality, and cosmology. This is the most innovative and controversial aspect of the book. It poses a decisive challenge to psychoanalytic anthropology, which, according to *TLD,* assumes that one can "excavate," to invoke Freud, a unitary and immutable, hence final, kernel of meaning from myth and ritual. But a Lacanian approach to cultural interpretation, like obviation, sees all meanings to be unstable, relational, linguistic, and prismatic.

For Lacanians, the unconscious is linguistic. True selfhood involves a series of developments. External symbolic orders, especially language, rupture pre-linguistic mother-child symbiosis. The child becomes a desiring Subject at the moment of awareness that what was formerly fused to the body and self has now been withdrawn. As a result, the child gains a specular image of its bodily self by gazing at others, who reflect an ideal sense of its self. The body, and self, are thus split (not in a Kleinian sense) and relational. Through language, though, the child labels its loss (absence becomes a presence) and seeks to regain wholeness by "reaching out" to cultural goals and moral expectations (Trawick 1990, 1992), including, in Melanesia, myth. (Could myth, then, be a Winnicottian "transitional object" that arises in a linguistic "potential space"?) As a result, all dimensions of the self, "down" to its innermost id-like parts (to invoke Freud's topographic metaphor of the psyche that, according to the logic of *TLD,* ignores the very recursive property of metaphor itself), are defined by language, loss or detachment, and relationality.

From a Lacanian perspective, then, as opposed to a Freudian one, sociality is primary. Through language and loss, too, the self is an inherent plurality that paradoxically engenders wholeness. The self is not a unified whole for which moments of fragmentation are potentially pathological. The momentum of human life would therefore "stop," writes Trawick, if our yearning for wholeness was ever fulfilled—if there was "perfect" culture.[3] This way, *TLD* hints at a potent theory of human motivation that is not reduced to materialist trivialities or Freudian psychic drives. Yet, and this is crucial, the sense of wholeness that we aspire to regain is illusory since it was, and remains, defined through detachment. In this regard, *TLD* views culture and human life to be essentially tragic since we can never actualize our most basic psychodynamic and cultural desires. Yet, as I discuss shortly, the view of cultural tragedy in *TLD* lacks an evocative sense of pathos.

TLD synthesizes Lacan's view of the self and language, and the metaphoric self-reflexive properties of obviation, to suggest that the psychoanalytic analysis of culture and myth can never reduce meaning to stable psychic phenomenon such as Oedipality, anality, and Margaret Mead's "womb envy." Since the psyche in this view is introjected sociality, myth and ritual are not projections. Likewise, there is no such thing as an unmediated penis or womb, breast or feces, birth or death—there are only the ever-mediated meanings we attach to these bodily notions that are, again, relational and linguistic, that is to say, social and forever unfolding in a chain of metaphoric or obviational signification. To end a cultural analysis by "arriving" at some psychic phenomenon is a fallacy: It wrongly reduces a relational concept to a singularity, prematurely terminates signification, and neglects the role of language. The Oedipus complex, for example, is no "signified" denoted by myth. Rather, the

Oedipus complex is a metaphoric signifier itself that unfurls into its own world of meaning.

The Lacanian framework of *TLD* brilliantly ties Melanesian selfhood, gender, and social life—which, as we learned from Strathern, are largely constituted through the detachment, circulation, and incorporation of bodily symbols—to universal psychodynamic processes. Likewise, *TLD* offers an equally ingenious explanation for why esoteric "bodies" of language such as myth in Melanesia are replete with images of feeding, sexuality, birth, excretion, and orificial engulfment (see also Weiner 1995). Since the self introjects relationships, "objects, desires, and drives that constitute our experience of the world into the image of the body" (p. 124), the "ways in which bodies of discourse relate to each other thus take the same form as processes of bodily detachment, encompassment, insemination, swallowing, and so forth" (p. 26).

A Derridean Dehiscence

Weiner's synthesis of Lacan and obviation, his emphasis on the *margins* of bodies of discourse, bears relationship to Derrida's midrashic approach to textual indeterminacy and meaning.[4] Like deconstruction, too, and especially Derrida's notion of *différance* (1978), a central thesis of *TLD* is that myth and language are self-referential and recursive yet entail no final signified or terminus to signification. The relationship between conventional and differentiating metaphors upsets any notion of stable meaning, static codes, and, as per Lacan, stable selves. While there is an essential structure to meaning that arises from the binary construction of metaphor (i.e., obviation), there lacks an essential meaning that surfaces to eclipse indigenous exegesis and our own glosses. The possibility of a Derridean anthropology, conjoined to a Lacanian framework, is an intriguing dehiscence of *TLD*.

Sometimes a Drum Is Just a Cigar?

In an insightfully whimsical essay, Doniger ponders the utility of "applied psychoanalysis" for Hindu India where myth and cosmology can hardly be said to sublimate sexuality (1993)! Melanesian myth evidences a similar repertoire of what Doniger calls "manifest latency." Flutes and bullroarers, the Foi drum itself, seem so manifestly tied to taboo desires that the very idea of repression or "latent" meaning seems almost absurd. To some extent, *TLD* concurs by interpreting bodily imagery in terms of language, epistemology, sociocosmological flows, and the relational self rather than "Freudian symbolism." Here, the social is not the psyche write large but just the opposite: The psyche is introjected sociality. Likewise, the prevailing oppositions in

psychoanalytic anthropology between culture/individual and public/private are illusory, matters again of scale rather than kind.[5]

Similarly, *TLD* refutes the Freudian assumption that corporeality, bodily exuviae, and carnality "project" invariant and stable cross-cultural meanings (see also Weiner 1993b). The importance Melanesians ascribe to somatic emissions results from the role of bodily margins as a metaphor for social rather than erotic intercourse. Sex and shit are relational and localized constructs born of specific forms of sociality rather than nonlinguistic or even prelinguistic psychic drives. Ironically, then, the Lacanian orientation of *TLD* parallels Lévi-Strauss's anti-Freudian analysis of oral and anal images in South American mythology (1988), excepting, of course, the use of the canonic formula and the nature/culture dichotomy.

In short, I am uneasy with the excision of Freudian imagery from cultural analysis (see Obeyesekere 1990).[6] For example, I agree with Weiner (and Strathern) that the important diacritics of Melanesian gender are often androgynous and fluid. But Melanesian men, at least in the Sepik, frequently define themselves in terms of motherhood and "her" nurturing-parturient capacities to a much greater extent that women define themselves through idioms of fatherhood and masculinity. In cosmogonic myth and ritual, manhood is more "partible" than femininity. To some degree, *TLD* admits as much when it suggests that Foi men, lacking uterine "success in corporeal regeneration," instead "manipulate the bodies of words and signifying objects, and the discursive forms which shape them" (p. 158).

For example, the role of mud and excrement in cosmogonic myth and ritual often appears to betoken male envy of female parturition (Dundes 1962). But *TLD* suggests that womb envy, feces, parturition, and so forth are not unitary symbols or projections. They are complex metaphors that must be situated in a social life where the body has particular, perhaps even purely localized, meanings. Yet the body issues any number of substances. Why, then, does cosmogony so often emphasize certain substances over others?

Likewise, in the myth of "The Lost Drum" itself (pp. 113–115), Weiner's analysis seemed to elude all the classic Freudian imbroglios: incest, generational succession, sibling rivalry, autoeroticism, and Oedipality.[7] (Similarly, several salient dimensions of psychosocial and bodily development are lacking in *TLD*, e.g., weaning, punishment, toilet training, bathing, eroticism, and the subtle ethos and kinesthetic interactions between mother-child and father-child, which often engender in Melanesia adult ambivalence, e.g., Whiting 1941.) Similarly, Weiner's use of the phrase "dirty money" (p. 154) evoked for me the Freudian explanation for the filthiness of lucre (in Melanesia, see Epstein 1979; Clark 1995). Several pages later, in fact, we read a Foi myth that traces the origin of petroleum to a gold coin that was dropped from an

airplane into Lake Kutubu, ingested by a European, and subsequently evacuated. In *TLD,* though, the equation shit equals money is an insufficient psychoanalytic interpretation. We need to discern how shit, food, the body, substances, viscosity, orifices, and so forth, form a semiotic system in their own right that, again, is not a projection of fixed psychic phenomena but an introjected image of social process.

Doubtless, Weiner would similarly deconstruct Dundes's argument that the shape and sound of the bullroarer, which *TLD* mentions in direct association with the anal insemination rites of Marind-anim male initiation, is a masculine idiom of parturition in the guise of a "flatulent penis" (Dundes 1976). Still, the bullroarer so commonly occurs in this ritual context around the world that one may be loathe to abandon entirely the notion of some universal psychoanalytic desire that shapes (not determines) culture. True, *TLD* responds by claiming that, although feces and finance are similarly linked in New York and New Guinea, the role of consumption, flow, alimentation, and bodily desire differ so significantly that the Freudian explanation is naive. For us, oil is a metaphor of the body; for the Foi, it is a metonym. The life of the mind reflects the life of the social body. That oil resembles feces is pointless unless we know the significance of defecation and orificial movement in the broader flows of the cosmos. But these flows traverse, as it were, a psychoanalytic topography of remarkable cross-cultural similarity.

Bodies Moral and Grotesque

TLD often and rightly focuses on mythic juxtapositions of bodily orifices and protrusions (e.g., a snake who births itself), which suggest that "the organs of [Melanesian] men and women are always both penile and uterine in our terms" (p. 27). But I detect another recurrent mythic image: a primal, insatiable, consumptive, and parturient maw, the precise somatic icon of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. For Bakhtin (1984), culture is a multisensory conversation between antithetical images of morality and embodiment. The "moral" body encloses sexuality, feeding, and excretion with rules that carefully preserve gendered and morphological distinctions. Conversely, the carnivalesque or "grotesque" body accents the concupiscent excrescences and orifices of the "lower bodily stratum." This hypertrophic body "swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (Bakhtin 1984:317). The dialogicality of these two bodies captures the "contradictory, double-face fullness of life" (ibid.:62; Lipset 1997; Silverman 2001). And this is what is missing from *TLD:* a sense for the ambivalence and folly of the human predicament, which I trace as much to Freud as to Bakhtin.

Like structuralism and obviation, dialogism is dualistic. Yet it lacks a third

mediating or triangulating operation. The symbolics of dialogism is forever in conversation. Like Lacan, Bakhtin understood the "psyche as an irreferential locus of a psychorhetorical struggle" (Daelemans and Maranhao 1990: 236). Like obviation, dialogism emphasizes unfinalizability rather than closure, and polyphony rather than monologism. But the polyphony of dialogism is rather more cacophonous than that of *TLD*. It comments on the contrary dimensions of humanity through emotional intensity and discordant discourse rather than semiotic chains. Dialogism foregrounds woe, laughter, self-mockery, and taboo. In *TLD* there is no sense of moral dialogue within and between selves, genders, and visions of order. We read myths that people presumably invest with passionate belief yet we lack a sense for their passions and pathos. With Bakhtin, myth is not only good to think with—it is good to express, but never to resolve, the eternally unresolvable dimensions of human existence.

Conclusion

TLD seeks to unify theoretically the psychosocial development of language, self, and body awareness; the structure of mythic thought; and the existential dimensions of Melanesian cosmology. This is a grand conceptual undertaking, worthy of being heir to Leenhardt's *Do Kamo* (1979). Its analytic sophistication, philosophical implications, and imaginative scholarship are far-ranging and warrant careful consideration. *TLD* should encourage Melanesianists finally to explore obviation—it may even compel those who obdurately shun psychoanalysis for reasons both trite and cliché to broaden their theoretical purview. Indeed, Weiner's Lacanian perspective is one of the most ambitious theoretical efforts in the history of psychoanalytic anthropology. Despite my endorsement of Bakhtin and what may seem like a retrograde Freudianism, I believe that TLD holds tantalizing possibilities for the development of anthropology and several Pacific debates, from Cook to the Trobriand Oedipus complex, from Sepik art to, further afield, the Balinese cockfight. All told, *TLD* shifts Weiner to the forefront of conceptual originality in Melanesian studies, anthropology, and social thought.

NOTES

1. Yet Weiner's use of Heidegger has generated some debate (Mimica 1993; Weiner 1993b; Gell 1995).

2. Relatedly, chapter 1 suggests that arboreal idioms for human reproduction are common in Melanesia because the self and the lexical properties of myth, like vegetative "dehiscence and caducity," are undiminished when they "drop off" bodily parts.

3. Enigmatically, *TLD* elides Trawick's wonderful analysis of Tamil Nadu social life, where she usefully contrasts a Lacanian approach to anthropology with other current paradigms.

4. Derrida also hints at a bodily theory of language and meaning through his recent *Circumfessions* and, previously, the circumcised glanslike *Glas.*

5. It is surprising to read no discussion of Obeyesekere 1981.

6. In a sense, I seek a rapprochement between Juillerat 1997 and Weiner 1997.

7. For Lacan, the Oedipus complex references not a father figure per se but, rather, the rupturing symbolic-moral-jural order of language and signification that names and creates the self (see Trawick 1992:144). Feminist responses to this oft-dubbed phallocentric view include Rubin 1975, Gallop 1982, and Doane and Hodges 1992.

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