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James Weiner's *The Lost Drum*, which analyzes representations of male identity in a selection of lowland Melanesian myths, is nothing less than a tour de force. I think that it is just to say that Weiner has moved understanding of the precapitalist logic of masculinity more than a few steps forward. His framework for doing so draws upon Lacanian psychoanalysis and relational concepts of personhood that have been advanced by M. Strathern (1988) and R. Wagner (1991). I want to be absolutely clear that I stand and applaud his luminous achievement: The points I want to raise about the book nonetheless diverge from its avowed methodology, which I find overly static and somewhat tangential.

To begin, I would trace the book's intellectual genealogy back to the canonical Durkheimian contrast between mechanical and organic solidarity (1933). Recall that it is in the course of a discussion of punishment in chapter 2 in *The Division of Labor* that the very dichotomy is introduced. Durkheim more or less recognized that each type of solidarity was not only composed of a different kind of link between individual and society but yielded a very different logic of embodiment: If the one was to sustain body as separate from the other in the face of likeness, the second was to sustain body as part of the other in the face of difference. Legal sanction amid the former type of solidarity was therefore supposed to require repressive, corporeal punishment while the latter was supposed to call for acts of restitution. Society, that is to say, constitutes the body.

However wrong Durkheim turned out to be about the relationship of solidarity to punishment, I think he was clearly right that a solidarity based on likeness yields a different problematic for the body than does a solidarity based on difference. Marilyn Strathern's brilliant insights in *Gender of the Gift* (1988) gained (unacknowledged) theoretical leverage from this crucial distinction and ran with it. When the logic of the body is one of same and cross-sex relationships, for example, of likenesses, rather than boundedness,

creating gender identity demands simplifications—simplifications that Melanesian men found in ritual warfare, leadership, or ceremonial exchange.

The Lost Drum starts with a discussion of Yangis rites performed by the Wama and Yafar peoples of the West Sepik. Weiner observes masked figures engaging in acts of detachment and discarding that create life rather than subtract from it. Here we have, in other words, an initial illustration of the problem of sustaining a differentiation of self from other in the face of mechanical solidarity (see also Meeker, Barlow, and Lipset 1986). And analytically, Weiner's metaphor for unraveling these images is none other than "substitution."¹

The subsequent stories that comprise *The Lost Drum* are astonishing. In "The Origin of the Kutubu People," for example, the action begins with the disappearance of a mother. Reasonably enough, she is replaced by a house, a garden, and by animals. She has a son and a daughter. When the daughter goes off to copulate with a tree, her brother inserts a sharp flint into the bark that cuts her groin as she rubs against it. As a result, men conclude, women came to have vaginas. Weiner makes two points from this frictional tale: (1) it shows that the phallus has a kind of priority over female sexual powers and (2) it shows up "the contours of male signification more generally" (p. 43). Weiner goes on to diagram "the substitutions" in this and other stories. But I would like to know the extent to which such a cosmology of female genitalia is subscribed to by men and women alike (cf. Barlow and Lipset 1997). And if not, how not?

Weiner recognizes that the Melanesian phallus "is" an absence displaced by a signifier: for example, pearl shells, flutes, and bullroarers in the lovely Foi myth "The Origin of Flowers and Crotons." In a couple of Marind-anim tales, a man's penis becomes trapped inside a woman during intercourse. The problem raised in the story is of male disengagement from copulation, as Weiner says it is. Discontinuity, detachment, which is to say head-hunting, castration, and other forms of bodily dismemberment, *therefore* become a source of agency for Marind-anim men. Disjunctive acts—death, but not coitus—create initiates. The phallus is, to be sure, an absence that is displaced by a signifier. But what is missing? And who or what is being covered up?

The inability of Melanesian men to create and/or sustain their own symbolics—in which the self finds a sexually unambiguous embodiment—is legendary in the ethnography of this region. Metaphors for men who are inextricably linked to the other have been singled out and analyzed in article after article and monograph after monograph going all the way back to the conundrum of the *kula* valuables that could only be owned when given away that Malinowski introduced us to in *The Argonauts* (1922). But underlying this ubiquitous image of masculine dependency is a less obvious, but no less

remarkable, unrelated, or salient dynamic, namely that, qua discourse, worldly agency may be said to arise from people and objects in a determining relationship with various capacities and creativity of womanhood, be they sexual, reproductive, or maternal. Men, women, or things who would seek after control in social life, or who would be understood to possess it, therefore must mimic, co-opt, or facilitate “her.” The main point is not just of male dependency but that men and women both find themselves caught in a web cast by a single gynomorphic image. The main question is therefore how to best characterize or conceptualize their relationship to this image. I think that Weiner’s favored metaphors, such as substitution, obviation, or the Lacanian mirror, are far too disembodied and static to be of much service.

Weiner next turns to Gimi materials that present a hint. Here, men’s and women’s myths actually engage one another: Children literally “fetch” them back and forth. In a woman’s myth, the first man is pregnant with his own penis and creates the first menses. A men’s story accounts for the origin of flutes. For Weiner, the two stories limit “the range of obviative expansion in other myths” (p. 107). The Foi tales he then recounts, “The Milk Bamboo” and “The Lost Drum,” are also men’s and women’s stories, respectively. The one is about a lost group of women who eventually turn into marsupials while the other one concerns a man whose elder brother’s drum is stolen. The former “provides a ‘female shell’ over the ‘male’ myth” (p. 120). It asserts that women’s autonomy, or what Weiner calls their “domestic capacity,” bounds or defines male embodiment as contingent upon hand drums. A hollow form gives voice that fills or conceals what is otherwise empty, with sadness and anger rather than food or babies. Here, a relationship is made possible by “the holography of mythic language itself, by the manner in which it creates a space of meaning by folding signification back upon itself” (p. 118). Weiner’s metaphor for the relationship between these gendered discourses is “containment.”

The stories about the disappeared women and the lost drum, as well as the two additional Foi myths Weiner goes on to recount, all feature containment: the containment of men by the icon of feminine capacity, the string bag. Hungry boys demand to be given food from a string bag and a headless man stuffs another child he has kidnaped into it. The string bag “anticipates and prevents [the] . . . alienation” of Foi men, an alienation that is not shared by Foi women (p. 128). This Ortnerian (1974) dynamic is no place more strikingly expressed in the book than in the final group of stories about the origins of palm oil and petroleum. Here, palm oil trees are seen as arising from drops of menstrual blood left by an adulterous woman who is beaten and left to sink in a bog, where today petroleum is found. “The owners of these places can be expected to be very possessive of their oil, just as men

are possessive of their oil, just as men are possessive of their women. But if the local men continue to be jealous of the oil and fight each other, the oil will run away just as a woman does . . . because the oil is like a woman” (p. 162).

Weiner clearly recognizes that processes of reproduction from which men see themselves as estranged is a crucial problematic in masculine discourse in precapitalist Melanesia. Yet he veers away from theorizing this problematic. For him embodiment, and culture at large, are rather like images first perceived in a Lacanian mirror; fragmented, unstable, an incomplete, narcissistic mode of representation. It is an external reflection of endogenous flaws and conflicts whose origin must be denied. Wealth objects mirror the body. For Lacan, upon looking at herself in a mirror, what an infant sees lacks integration and completeness. Against this background of contingency, vulnerability, and incompetence, culture offers a means of achieving agency.

But embodiment in precapitalist Melanesia is a shifting problematic of male and female that consists of multiple facets and moments. As such, it shall benefit from multiple methodologies. But one point might be that we ought not stray too far from the social. The emptiness, losses, detachments, and so on, the tropes of separation that continually draw our attention, are exquisitely and dynamically gendered relationships. This is the direction that Weiner seems to acknowledge in the course of *The Lost Drum*. But the metaphors inspired by the Lacanian imaginary throw up something of a roadblock for him, precisely because they eschew the irreducibility of the social. Here, I think, Bakhtin’s view of language and society would be of some use.

Recall that for Bakhtin, language and society never begin; they are given. A mirror presents Bakhtin not with an image of that which must be otherwise denied but a sinister image of loneliness: ghostly and void (Todorov 1984: 95). The mirror is no source of awareness. Only the other is. Meaning, of necessity, presumes a relationship between self and other, a relationship he calls dialogical. There are of course numerous kinds of dialogue. But one frequently overlooked kind need not require a physical interlocutor. In his Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin distinguishes a form of dialogue he calls “hidden,” in which the present speaker responds to a second speaker who is absent: “The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker (Bakhtin 1984:197).

There are other aspects of dialogicality that are not straightforward but nevertheless have relatively interesting significance for the study of gender in Melanesia. One is that they tend toward ambivalence. Dialogical relationships encompass multiple voices that may be contradictory, heretical, or satirical. Although they may be constrained by political inequities, state terror, economic injustices, and the like, they remain, as Bakhtin would say, un-

merged or unfinalized. The teleological influence of Durkheim, while so important for Melanesian gender studies, has diverted theoretical concern from the representation of ambivalent as well as transitional voices (cf. Tsing 1993; Ong 1987).

Some Melanesian objects—drums, string bags, canoes, and the like—certainly mirror the body. And, conversely, some Melanesian bodies certainly mirror these kinds of objects. But more specifically, I would say that both objects and bodies respond to the mother's body, answering its absence, not authoritatively or even very persuasively but ever so conditionally (see Barlow and Lipset 1997; Lipset 1997). After all, the phallus need not be construed like a hollow drum. It is seen as empty because of what Bakhtin would call "the hidden dialogue" with the feminine with which it is deeply preoccupied. "This is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker" (Bakhtin 1984:197). In the thoroughly anthropomorphic world, which is the precapitalist world of the Melanesians, the phallus answers the creativity of woman's towering absence. However loud the voice of male percussion fills the air, drums inevitably get lost. No doubt this is a kind of dialogicality, un-finalized and ambivalent as it is, which Bakhtin might have found most appealing.

NOTE

1. According to this hermeneutic which Bateson, borrowing I believe from Radcliffe-Brown, called identification in *Naven* (1936), actors become replaced by other actors and/or objects.

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