BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Robert J. Foster, *Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption, and Media in Papua New Guinea.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002. Pp. x, 202, photographs, notes, references, index. US$44.95 cloth; $22.95 paper.

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To Die For?

THE NATION-STATE AS NORM GENERATES A SYLLOGISM, *viz.*, the international system is one of nation-states; Papua New Guinea (PNG) (or wherever) is a state; therefore PNG (or . . .) is a nation. (If not, it ought to be.) Such logic renders statehood problematic for many places made independent by post-WWII decolonization, especially those characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity, limited shared histories, and little else in the way of the markers highlighted by stereotypical nationalist discourse. How to persuade a citizenry to loyalty to, feeling towards, a sense of belonging within, and community with an entity that is more extensive than, and/or transects, precolonial imaginative, political, strategic, economic, and social orientations, constituting erstwhile others as conationals as against former kin, allies, or heretofore unconsidered others as Others? To use Benedict Anderson's iconic phrase, how might such states develop the imagined communities of the nation? What might this thing, "PNG," be beyond the Third World residuum of an obsolete geopolitical era? The challenge appears one of naturalizing the manifestly contrived.

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Following Anderson's analysis of the nation as "a model . . . eminently capable of being copied and introduced into circumstances wholly unlike those in which it originated," Foster (34) has long reflected upon this as a project for states and their elites, one of making nations out of diverse populations who do not imagine themselves as mutually sovereign, fraternal, or bounded communities (see Anderson 1991:6–7). Such work refutes presumptions that Melanesia is doomed by the insularity of premodern worldviews to the chaos of "weak states." Foster explicitly and implicitly addresses ethnocentric assumptions of intractable locality and tribalism held by First World politicians, media, developers, and others and challenges the continuing stress on the immense diversity of these areas as mitigating against concord and thus against mature participation in the international system. The approach is sustained in this work, as in his analysis of a paternalistic departing Australian colonial power's efforts to instill rationalist, modernist understandings of national currencies and capitalist accumulation or in his accounts of local responses to international depictions of PNG as violent. Several chapters counter assumptions that the nation is unattainable: *au contraire*, it is "clearly present in PNG—not only as a rhetorical figure of speech . . . but also as a frame of reference for staging a whole range of collective and personal identities. This book seeks, first of all, to support this assertion" (4). There is, in fact, much more.

Many scholars now conceptualize the nation as process, practice, and discourse. Such antiessentialist approaches maintain that nations are imagined rather than empirical communities; nations construed as fixed and definite are in fact shifting and ambiguous, always in process of becoming. Few have attended these issues in so nuanced a manner as Foster with his refusal of the moral voice of much writing on nationalism and analyses of the boundless possibilities of these discursive creations. This book reflects this subtle approach, tracing his developing thought from 1992 to the present, with chapters covering everything from postage cancellation marks and injunctions against spitting betel nut—"rendering natural and taken for granted a set of particular and historical premises about social life" and conjoining notions of "collective *and* personal identity" (26)—to what must be the most banal of banal nationalisms as expressed in advertising agencies' persuasions to drink Pepsi or Coke and become real Papua New Guineans in the process.

Foster has long referenced Anderson's germinal *Imagined Communities* (1991) and here continues his engagement with its arguments about the pivotal role of capitalist communication media in the development of nationalism. In earlier eras, Anderson argues, this was facilitated by the

proliferation of newspapers such that simultaneous acts of reading/consuming newspapers awakened readers to a sense of belonging to a shared, particular, nation:

> [E]ach communicant [reader] is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated . . . by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion (1991, 65).

Foster extends this treatment to more contemporary media (especially in Chapters 3 to 5), including radio and television, particularly as employed by the advertising industry, and the ways in which consumption of brand-name commodities might stimulate a sense of nation. He provides a delicious PNG analogue to Anderson's "shared space-time of an imagined national community" in a national fun-run in which "small groups of identically shirted runners [in Shell and Coca-Cola T-shirts sold at Shell petrol stations] together left starting lines in Port Moresby, Lae, Goroko, Mt. Hagen, Rabaul, Daru, and Wewak" (93).

Advertisements serve as important vehicles for a mélange of images of the nation, potential identities and the (post?) modern hybridities of tradition. Foster is less concerned with their seductive content than with their general form, whereby "the social relations of commodity consumption implied by ads entail particular definitions of personhood on the one hand, and of community on the other" (65). His focus is on consumers participating in the construction of advertisements' meaning, so that some commodities come to be qualified "as somehow Papua New Guinean, as embodiments and/or possessions of 'the nation.' They imply, furthermore, that to consume these commodities is to appropriate the quality of Papua New Guineaness as an attribute of one's person" (66).

"Consumption practices," he writes, "have the capacity to link personal and collective identities in compelling fashion" (117), an argument made particularly clearly in Chapter 5, where he locates PNG within historical and international examples of how something like a school lunch can mark one as belonging or not belonging to the nation. Of such quotidian practices are identities and senses of self made. Here is a repeated theme—the making of identities tied to the emergence of new kinds of persons. Indeed, Foster proffers something of a response to Anderson's question about why people will die for the nation in his account of how "nations become entangled with lived identities . . . aspects of embodied being" (117).

There are ironies upon ironies in this. Perhaps the greatest lies in the crucial place of capitalist ideologies of individualism and freedom in the

emergence of national persons (27–29, 65, 88 *passim*). In PNG, the individual self, although "not the only image available" (89), is apparently in coprocess with developing national identities, and Foster describes the construction of a nation in which "the totality of which one is a member and one's identity as an individual imply each other" (27). It is particularly striking, in a part of the world renowned for models of personhood grounded in collectivities, that the construction of the greater community should be contingent on the avoidance of such forms of sociality. So, this place of partible personhood and community building through elaborate exchange practices and ideologies of reciprocity marks its nationhood through emerging norms of individual personhood and private consumption (e.g., 27, 31, 75). Unlike indigenous production and exchange practices, in which objects mark and create productive, kin, affinal, and other forms of relationship, commodities are, or can be, rendered neutral by their homogenization and divorce from obvious productive and other forms of relationship. They could, as Foster writes elsewhere, "belong to everyone," thus opening the scope of those to whom one may imagine oneself as "related or not related" (1995, 24).

And, in the context of consumption possibilities, "not related" is seductive. In Port Moresby, some people prefer to drink soft drinks alone, an almost secretive consumption. (I am reminded of fieldwork anecdotes about a family who extinguished their lamps when they had store food to eat so as to avoid sharing it with nearby kin.) In doing so, perhaps, like Anderson's newspaper readers, they perceive themselves part of a community of autonomous, discrete fellow drinkers whom they do not know. So, these commercial artifacts sponsor, speak to or of the nation and, in so doing, undermine local ontologies. Without wanting to read too much into Foster's careful argument, I gain a sense here of that more Victorian notion of consumption—of things used up, spent, wasted away. In contrast to classical ethnographic descriptions of transactions answering earlier transactions and instigating future ones, some of these solitary pleasures seem like endpoints, refusals to invest in the further sociality that might be expressed in the alternative act of sharing a soft drink. And when they do share these things, still, "this is not the Melanesia we all know . . ., for the sociocultural contexts in which . . . *Coke* is consumed is often, like the *Coke* itself . . . an artifact of the spread of capitalism and its temporal routines" (161).

Not that Papua New Guineans are incipient clones of Western individuals. Rather, the making of identities draws upon the alternative ideal types of dividuality and individuality. Foster says that "Melanesians enact aspects of both ideal types, redefining in the process conventional possibilities for personal and collective identities" (90). Whatever forms Papua New Guinean images of national persons may take, then, even avowedly individualist

identities are compelled to engage with traditional dividualist understandings, outcomes of "the syncretic tensions between different notions of persons and bodies" (101).

Such practices entail enmeshment in the global political economy. Notwithstanding legislation requiring all commercial advertising to be locally produced (63), the nation often seems to be articulated by the extranational. Advertisements on behalf of transnational corporations (TNCs), which certainly have few if any PNG shareholders, deploy classical idioms of indigenous tradition to "present constructs of 'the nation' and perforce to define the terms of membership in 'the nation'" (63). See, for example, how the Shell oil company conflates itself to the nation by pulling together the red, black, and gold of the national athletic uniform and its corporate logo in an advertisement screened during prime-time news (91–92). Or the ways that soft-drink corporations sponsor cultural events, thereby "[identifying] their products not only with the multicultural nation(-state), but also with modernity itself" (165).

Such features cannot but evoke questions of ideology, of the manufacture and manipulation of ideals, identities, and selves. Of course, people use such meanings and images, appropriating and subverting them in the living of lives, a point that this book makes clearly (e.g., 161–165). Still, I find myself wanting more questions about consciousness, inequalities, experiences of advertisements and other artifacts, and indices of the nation. Foster leaves me uncertain how some, many, or most Papua New Guineans conceptualize their nation. In part this is because of the extent to which he privileges textual analysis—postage stamp marks, spectacular images of massed dancers, law week speeches, letters to the editor, among many others. So, for example, in Chapter 3, "Print Advertisements and Nation Making," Foster asserts his interest in the advertisement readers' participation in meaning-making but relies on his own interpretations of images and content. These are enticing analyses, but I want to know what about them their local readers saw, thought, and remarked upon and how they were incorporated into their social practices and cultural expressions.

This is an issue of ethnographic depth—I find myself wanting more with each glimpse of people's lives. For me, the data are somewhat too widely spread, lightly contextualized. What does drinking Coke or smoking Gold tobacco mean diversely or uniformly? How are they located in ontologies and daily practice? How might, say, the drivers and few PNG consumers of the POSH travel service's chauffeured cars view the national parliament building pictured in a POSH advertisement (81–82)? There are tantalizing excerpts from interviews about advertisements but these are brief, few, and minimally contextualized. Make no mistake—this is a request for more, rather than a quarrel with Foster's argument.

Foster admits this reliance on texts (106–107), while noting their dual potential: if advertising motifs can be creatively appropriated, signaling limits to ideological manipulation, he also acknowledges the endless possibilities or pressures to remake bodies and selves in more atomized forms, rejecting the "romance of resistance" (Abu-Lughod 1990) that demands consistent ethnographic revelation of indigenous subversion. If this does not substantially engage with issues of consciousness or answer the need for more ethnography, it is a salutary reminder of the complex social actions of texts themselves. And if Foster does not himself provide focussed ethnography, he draws upon a significant and growing body of work by other ethnographers.

Foster briefly returns to the issue at the very end of the book, asking about the scope and suitability of ethnographic methods to understand national and global phenomena. He suggests that anthropologists pursue possibilities for greater collaborative research along the lines of Marcus's multisited ethnography. Such an approach would enable fine-grained interpretations of the kind I seek alongside more broad-ranging arguments of the kind proffered in this book.

Foster's ideas about the relationship between national consciousness and nationalism in PNG remain elusive. He is critical of Otto and Thomas (1997, 1) for distinguishing Melanesian states as developing a "national consciousness . . . a collective imagining . . . [that] may be too dilute politically to constitute an -ism, yet deeply consequential for the ways in which people understand their biographical locations and attach value and meanings to a variety of practices." Yet he only touches on nationalism *qua* nationalism with its exclusive inclusiveness, gendered values, claims of equality informed by competitiveness, and idioms of kinship encapsulating potential violence.

This may be somewhat unfair semantics. What is the test of nationalism? Is it dying and killing for the nation? Going berserk at the winning of an Olympic medal? Standing to attention while the national anthem plays? No, says Foster, who is more concerned with "the various means by which the nation enters into the daily lives of ordinary people as a frame of reference for thinking and acting reflexively" (17–18) than with such "rah-rah" nationalism. He calls on Billig's arguments about banal nationalism's infiltration of consciousness by the insinuation of unremarkable markers of the nation into everyday life, such that the nation becomes a hegemonic frame of reference, a largely unselfconscious, naturalized idiom that may undergird periodic nationalist explosions (19). In such work, hypernationalist consciousness, jingoism, etc., are latent within, rather than definitive markers of, nationalism. My query here is whether Foster follows Billig in seeing such chauvinism as perhaps also quiescent in PNG's banal nationalism.

Further, what might be the social and political costs of banal or other forms of nationalism in PNG? If the nation frames identity making, it implies exclusiveness as much as inclusiveness, others as much as selves, problematizing not only other nations but local groups who do not fit within the imagined nation (e.g., Gilroy 1987). A materialized, consumerist nation implies particular forms of exclusion. Foster highlights the making of different identities far more than the making of economic, status, or other disparities. He observes that commodity consumption "predicates relations among . . . individuals by categorizing them as either fellow consumers, and thus alike, or as consumers with unshared consumption practices, and thus different." In so doing, it "can provide the means for producing simultaneously both a national consumption community *and* subcommunities of consumption" (78–79). However, people find themselves with significantly unequal capacities to consume, excluding some from particular subcommunities and potentially marking others as more or less legitimate citizens. If most can consume a can of Coke sometimes, there are those who cannot, either because of cost or remoteness, and some who can do so less regularly than others. And even fewer can afford the more costly status-linked consumption of the individualist modernity accompanying nation-making in PNG. Such uneven consumption patterns evoke the question, "Who is the nation?"

The answer seems somewhat inconsistent in keeping with the shifting terrain of much nationalist imagination (and perhaps reflecting the different times in which these chapters were written). Sometimes the nation seems to be all Papua New Guineans, as, for example, when Foster insists that "the production of a national frame of reference . . . happens through commodity consumption and commercial media that cross boundaries between town and village, elites and masses" (19). At other times it is "the steadily growing population of school-educated, urban-dwelling, wage-earning citizens" (63), elsewhere (85) "metropolitan Papua New Guineans."

This variability matches the unevenness of consumption. Overall, nation-making seems somewhat, albeit not exclusively, urban or bourgeois in character, motored by the readers of newspapers, literate writers of letters to newspapers with their limited circulation, owners and watchers of televisions, and consumers of advertised products. Those he describes as dying in the name of the nation were university students, and the most overtly nationalist text, "a familiar modern instance of nationalism incubated abroad" (127), was written by a student studying overseas. This echoes ethnographies of contemporary PNG class-making (e.g., Gewertz and Errington 1999; Anderson and Connolly 1992), which map urban- and class-based contractions of kin ties and the growing nuclearization of families, attempts

by entrepreneurs and higher income wage-earners to loosen economic obligations, the growth of savings accounts, etc. Nation-making and individuation, then, seem to sit comfortably with class making, a shift to more modernist, capitalist modes of inequality.

Foster notes both the high cost of some consumer products and the budget products that are widely consumed, so it will not do to read consumer citizenship as exclusive to the relatively affluent. However, I wonder about the outcomes of a marriage of nation and consumption that entails constructing not just different but unequal communities of consumption. Consider his analysis of corporate sponsorship of athletics. He notes that the imagery employed in such advertising both ties the corporation's products to the nation and represents the athletes' bodies as autonomous and agentive, granted axiomatic equality by the rules of competition but ultimately ranked as winners (94–95). I would add that it also marks some as losers and wonder whether differentiation into "subcommunities of consumption" marks an analogous stratified consumer nation, presaging a future of failed or unworthy citizens. Certainly, there are other hints of exclusion. For example, discussions about betel nut can construe it as indigenous in opposition to a "Western culture [that] . . . introduced its deadly poisons like alcohol and cigarettes." Simultaneously, though, Highlanders, being "new to betel nut" and thus ignorant about how to chew "hygienically," are imaginatively excluded from the community of proper, disciplined betel chewers (104, quoting call-back radio).

Foster partially addresses these issues in Chapter 6, which considers attempts to fashion transnational subjectivities in response to local perceptions of locality, remoteness, or skin color and awareness of international stereotypes of PNG as a dangerous place. This chapter, written for this volume, highlights the double or divided self of diversely located postcolonial persons who attempt to "fashion themselves as cosmopolitan subjects" (148). In it, he brings together a society that perceives itself as remote and marginal, the Urapmin of West Sepik, and ceremonial nation-making in the PNG leg of the 2000 Olympics torch relay. In both cases, Papua New Guineans engage with the transnational, respectively, the world religion of Christianity and the ultimate global sporting event. Here, he reminds us of the interplay of agency and constraint (which seems muted in the first few chapters) as Papua New Guineans make themselves in conditions not entirely of their own making.

This volume offers far more than I can attend to here—creative tensions between and juxtapositions of tradition and modernity, the sheer materiality of being a PNG national, and implicit questions about shifts between ideology and hegemony, among others. Above all, Foster suggests much about emergent ideas about sociality and cultural practice as tied to the making of a nation. He raises important theoretical questions that transcend

the specific case of PNG to engage global issues of commercialized nationhood. The book addresses fluid neoteric processes, so it is early to make definitive pronouncements about the forms and scope of PNG nationhood, a temptation he avoids. Rather, he provokes questions about modern modes of being, about cultural translations of inescapable global models, and about the contemporary forms of postcolonial, national, and traditionalist discourse in Melanesian states and beyond. I see this as a foundational work, provoking questions for the multisited ethnography of nationhood that Foster suggests. Finally, I suggest that it is important because it demonstrates the ambiguous, contingent, evolving imagined nation of PNG *in process*.

At risk of seeming terminally romantic, it is hard not to be regretful about this commercialized nationhood. Anderson (1991, 7, punctuation changed) observes of earlier nationalisms the puzzle that so many people have been willing "not so much to kill, as to . . . die for such limited imaginings. These deaths bring us abruptly face to face with the central problem posed by nationalism: what makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history . . . generate such colossal sacrifices"? Consider, then, the even more limited, half-aware community of banal nationalism. As Billig (1995, 6, 7) argues "[o]ne point needs stressing: banal does not imply benign." One shudders at the thought that people may some day kill or die for the symbols of the caffeine- and sugar-laced drinks that mark TNC profit-making as much as they do creative bricolage and cultural dialectic.

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