Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

   Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship. by Kath Weston

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and relate them to the spiritual rather than the political sphere. In such a context, Stewart argues, the Christian Orthodox marriage ceremony can be understood both as a religious mystery of martyrdom and triumph, and as an institution in which such complementary roles are reconciled.

The second part of the book deals with the *exotika* themselves: ogres, mermaids, horned goblins, vampires, demons, spirits water nymphs, bogey-men, blood suckers, and many other forms and types. Paradoxically, it seems, just as beliefs and practices in these malevolent spirits are scorned and fading, the projects of locally-born university students and the researches of folklorists are beginning to bring them back into public consciousness, helping to re-define and even re-invent local customs. Meanwhile, in Athens, young people frequent New Age bookshops and consult palmists, astrologers and tarot card readers. Stewart was even asked in the village if he knew anything about the mandrake plant, 'the sort of question I had set out to ask the villagers' (p. 131).

The third section of the book discusses three rituals aimed at controlling evil spirits. By associating in this section baptism, exorcism, and protective and curative activities concerned with the Evil Eye, Stewart demonstrates the power of his theoretical framework. What can be defined as a prayer and what a spell is a question of performance in the proper context (p. 243); indeed on Naxos the same word is used for both, blurring any distinction which the Church might wish to make. Stewart cites research which shows that prayers against the Evil Eye have a fairly recent appearance in the Orthodox prayer book (pp. 289-90).

This is a book which will appeal to as wide a variety of readers as the spirits which are described in it. What particularly pleases this reviewer is that the price of the paper-back edition makes it accessible to students; it can thus be placed on reading-lists as a recommended text with some certainty that students will read and enjoy it as much as their teachers.

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In a review article on gay and lesbian life stories, Lewin observes that life history data interpreted as personal narrative leave the transparency of individual experience unchallenged (*American Ethnologist* 18: 786-92). Weston takes up the challenge. First, she addresses the significance of the life story in relation to the lesbian/gay practice of 'coming-out': such narratives draw on genre as well as experience. Second, her field research and interviews with gay men and lesbians in the Californian Bay Area discloses what she calls a collective coming-out story, an interpretation informed by her attention to kinship. The third side to this careful and thoughtful book makes her reflections on kinship a coming-out story for anthropology. Indeed, 'story' is altogether too inadequate a term for the theoretical promise of her analysis.

Working in the Bay Area gives both a community dimension to Weston's enquiries and a historical one. The contexts of sexual identity have changed over the last two decades: homosexuality in the United States is nowadays understood as an identity that infuses the entire self (p. 79), often revealed to have been there all along. Contemporary coming-out stories put self-knowledge back into childhood and thus into the prior context of family life. The question is how to share that knowledge with family members. In constructing this moment of truth, Weston argues, people make the revelation against the background assumption that families are based on kinship, and that in turn is constituted in biogenetic ties (p. 77). Yet such moments also 'test' the relationship between those ties and the social relations built after them. Would kin ties prove genuine? (p. 51). Some individuals only make explicit the isolation from blood kinship their identity seems to entail. But the larger collective story for gays and lesbians is their moving out of cultural isolation 'into kinship'.

In the 1970s gay and lesbian discourse emphasized the diffuse substitute 'kinship' of shared homosexual identity; Weston comments on the 1980s shift to a familial discourse that draws on other aspects of identity, and thus on differences between persons, in the creation of specific sets of relations. The result are families whose members negotiate their shared and differentiated responsibilities by appeal to the family's foundation in 'choice'. The families are culturally recognizable not only in terms of living arrangements but in the desire to reproduce. In so far as such desire looks forward to the creation of a couple's children rather than back to their own origins, from this point of view the conjugal unit is constituted no differently from others. The distinctive choice lies in the kind of procreative partnership that is set up. The gay/lesbian couple seek to displace biogenetic identity from the definition of reproductive kinship.

Weston offers an original argument. She suggests that such families are explicitly based on an enactment of kinship, made culturally possible by the fact that the displacement keeps the relationship within a framework that also contains biogenetic connexion. For gay/lesbian families are constructed not only by analogy but by contrast. 'Chosen families' do not imitate 'blood families' and are not substitutes for them. Rather, she argues, they play out the already existing kinship dialectic between what is given and what has to
be worked at, and play on the fact that the blood tie was never the only symbol for the enduring solidarity of intimate relations. Weston put this move into the context of further contemporary displacements, such as those offered by reproductive technology.

Many of these people are acting out a social constructionist view of the world which already knows that biology has a symbolic status. The interesting finding of this ethnography is that they displace the centrality of the symbol without disputing that it also works (for others, and for themselves in parts of their lives). Moreover, the effect of those coming-out stories, and the detachment from blood families implied, is to expose the selective dimension that is already there in the American enactment of blood relations (p. 107). The author explicitly directs anthropological attention to discussion about the relationship between family and kinship, Schneider's contrast between shared substance and code for conduct, and nature as a contested concept. These people, she suggests, do kinship, not just families, and make explicit the fact that there was always a choice as to whether or not biology is made the foundation of relationships.

This is a reflective anthropology that plays its subject matter back against not the near author of the story but the far authorship of a society able in turn to play back to anthropologists some of the constructs they might have claimed were distinctive about their own theorizing. It is a disciplined and challenging work.

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The Children of God, later known as the Family of Love, and now just as 'The Family', was part of the 'Jesus Revolution' that emerged from the hippie scene in California during the late 1960s. Its leader, David Brandt Berg (1919- ), known to his followers as Moses David, Mo, or 'Dad', espoused a particular brand of revolutionary Christianity which has been, and still is, disseminated to the general public and, with a somewhat different content, to his followers in comic-like tracts known as 'Mo letters', which frequently bear the address of a Zurich box number.

Berg declares himself to be an 'end-time' prophet who receives an on-going flow of special prophecies, including the prediction that Jesus is to return to establish a physical millennium on earth, and to 'lift up' believers who have been saved; and at least some members of the Family, having gone into hiding, can hope to have survived the preceding role of a world dictator who will turn out to be the Antichrist. Jesus's return was originally expected in 1993, but the date is now somewhat later.

As might be expected with a movement led by a prophet with the charismatic authority that has been accorded Berg, there have been numerous changes over the years. Those who joined the movement in its early years tended to be middle-class youths in their late teens or twenties, with males being in a majority by more than two to one; by the late 1980s, around a quarter of the 12,000 members claimed by the movement were in their thirties, but over half were children - most of them born into the Family. The movement has always expected total commitment from its members, who tend to live in secret 'colonies' or communal houses, but the date is now somewhat later.

A typical day will include bible classes and the memorizing of bible verses - as the Antichrist is expected to destroy all the bibles he can lay his hands on, so this is seen as an important investment for the future - but much of the day is also likely to be spent in selling the movement's literature on the streets and witnessing to potential converts - a practice known as 'literessing'. During the late 1970s, another, more radical means of obtaining money and converts was introduced: 'flirty fishing'. Attractive young members (usually female) were enjoined (but not forced) to demonstrate their love to non-members by offering sexual favours. With the spread of the fear of AIDS, the practice was generally dropped in the late 1980s - although sexual sharing within the Family continued.

David Van Zandt, a young American student doing his Ph.D. in the mid 1970s at the London School of Economics, managed to gain access to the movement by feigning a personal interest. After a short time, however, he found the psychological strain and methodological constraints of covert research too great, so he 'left'. Later, he managed to persuade the movement to let him continue his study. The result is an unusually perceptive monograph that allows one to understand why people join and stay in the movement, and why there has been such a fuss made about it.

Van Zandt describes the history and organisation of the Family and paints a vivid yet analytically astute picture of day-to-day life and the control that the 'shepherds' wield over the members under them. Van Zandt's account is particularly illuminating when he describes the on-going processes by which an individual becomes and remains a Child of God - although, as is pointed out, someone joining the movement does so as a fully socialised member of a non-Family society, and many leave when the Family's beliefs and demands on the person cannot be adequately reconciled with his or her previously acquired interests and values.