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Comment on James M. Wilce, "Magical Laments and Anthropological Reflections"

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documentation thus brings immortal—permanent—order to the history-thus-far of the transformation of Kaluli cultural forms.

But perhaps Wilce is overlooking the centrality of cultural process—including reproduction with transformation—which has replaced cultures-as-collectibles in Feld’s (and contemporary anthropology’s) professional voice. As the Bosavi woman Hane is, tropically, both “mother” (like a midwife present in earliest life) and “undertaker” to the deceased Bibaldi, so also Feld claims not a static position as a modern collector who both laments the passing of the “traditional” (of which he offers for sale some of the last samples or specimens) but a dynamic position vis-à-vis a community whose cultural forms are ever being renewed and transformed. One would be hard-pressed to see this as a lament; rather, it is a celebration of renewal. If it is interdiscursive with the tropes of Hane’s lament, perhaps the lesson ought to be that the concept of “lament” might be rethought functionally, as much as scholars like Wilce have looked at its structural or formal semiotic modalities. Might we not take lament, then, as the culturally normative, even effective ritual poesis for overcoming and transforming what would otherwise threaten to be, indeed, Freudian melancholia, for the lamenter as for others on whose behalf (s)he sings?

And perhaps anthropological discourse, too, is more than mere lamentation in that older conceptualization and has some performative value in suggesting, even fostering paths of possible transformed vitality for the diversity of local forms of cultural process.

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Wilce draws our attention to the formulaic nature of anthropologists’ ethnographies, both considered as a distinctive genre and as inflected by larger modernist discourses of destruction and loss (which he terms “neolament”). His intriguing discussion of the laments that end many anthropological texts helped me to recognize similar laments that I heard when I conducted interviews in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. The latter examples raise issues about the politics of lamenting modernity and questions about what makes a lament effective.

The (neo)laments I heard were for changes in family and community life. The following comments, for example, were repeated, with only slightly changed wording, by several of my interviewees: “People are apathetic now. Kids come home to empty houses. Parents come home, everything’s in an uproar. Kids go to bed, they watch TV, they’ve got televisions in their rooms, they got games like Nintendo. There is no sense of unity anymore”(“Catlyn Dwyer,” a disabled office manager). For one interviewee who grew up in the mountains of North Carolina (“Jack Allen,” an unskilled laborer), these

changes in family life were related to materialism and a faster pace of life:

Every time you turn on TV, your top stories, you hear something about a child being molested or somebody abusing a child or somebody just—drive-by shootings. And it’s just, to me it’s just, we’ve got away from our basic values, more or less—our home and our families and what’s most important. It seems to me like nowadays it’s just, it’s out there, you know, you’ve got to make a living, you’ve got to make that money, and this is the easiest way to do it, computer games and this, that, and the other. Kids come home and they eat cold cereal or they grab a quick snack or something like that and the parents come in and “Oh, don’t bother me, I’m busy, I’ve got—.” They bring their work home with them and it’s just—to me, that’s not a good society. [. . .] If we could go BACK, I think if we could go back, even though the times and the money and all that—but if we could go back and live like that, I think society would be a lot better off—if they didn’t have all these . . . computers and fast cars. [. . .] My parents tried to give me a better life, I tried to give my kids a better life, they try to give their kids a better life. And by the time their kids get grown, life probably won’t even be WORTH anything, as far as that goes.

“Marvin Frederick,” a factory middle manager, provided very detailed images of the loss of small-town *Gemeinschaft*:

Looking back from today’s standards, back to where we were when I was younger, we were poor. And the things that I think about are the old men sitting around chewing tobacco on the porch and talking about whose garden, who’s got the best garden, who’s got the biggest tomatoes, and things of that nature. And I look at it nowadays, and we don’t even know our neighbors. We don’t know who lives next door. We can’t even decide what we’re going to have for supper without getting into a conflict of “What do you want?” “Well, I don’t know, you decide.” “I don’t want to decide.” My question is how did we get from where we were, when we were poor and enjoying it? I mean, it was fun to sit around and do that. Now, having some money or having a better life, so to speak, how did we get here, and was it worth the trip?

Wilce comments about the “needs of our generation for hopeful . . . instead of tragic endings,” but these modern Americans always ended on a pessimistic note.

On the surface, such formulaic, frequently repeated comments seem a prime example of what Wilce and the commentators he cites call “failed, ineffectual, or perpetual mourning” because it has no closure. But as observers of cultural politics in the contemporary United States, we can see that some rhetorical criticisms of modern family life, in particular, have fueled very effective social movements that are blocking access to contraception, abortion, and gay mar-

riage. And what should our stance be as commentators upon such discourse, when implicit in all of the above comments, for example, is a critique of families in which both parents have demanding jobs? I would like to see Wilce address the politics of nostalgia and how anthropologists should write about it. I appreciated his final note of hope (in the required optative mood) that “‘wholesome’ mourning . . . can play a role in establishing more egalitarian futures,” but how do we sort the “wholesome” from the reactionary? Our joining as participant observers in such mourning will not necessarily lead to more egalitarian futures.

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Wilce proposes extrapolating a theory developed for analyzing the “traditional lament” to address the laments that texts and other anthropological productions express on the subject of modernity’s destructiveness. The theory for analyzing the “traditional lament” as a ritual act is very suggestive and offers novel clues on how to address a phenomenon which, despite its significance and recurrence, has not generated many analytical essays. The application of this theory to the anthropological literature is, however, much less convincing. Wilce moves parsimoniously from the establishment of ritual as language to the establishment of a model of the anthropological text as ritual activity through the role of the anthropologist in the rituals observed, but he does so at the expense of generalizing concepts, with even the very notion of ritual losing all content in the end. Projecting the ritual of the traditional lament onto all lamentation and the lamentations in anthropological texts onto anthropological production and cultural production in general results in the conclusion that everything is ritual. This is “lamentable” loss for a concept that has been useful for circumscribing very specific phenomena and could continue to be of use if it is not extracted from the intellectual context from which it emanates (e.g., Houseman and Severi 1998; Surrallés 2003)—unless Wilce has a world of pure reflexes, trivialized by constructivism, in mind and is inspired by Nietzsche’s assertion that “we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we talk of trees, colours, snow and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (1975, 283). Perhaps also in a metaphorical sense, Wilce compares the “traditional lament” with the lament over “modernity’s destructiveness” in texts written by anthropologists, two forms of expression whose specificity dissolves—as in the case of the notion of ritual—when they are placed on the same level. His call for anthropological production to be treated as a subject of study is paradoxical and not very original. If there is one thing to be learned from anthropology, it is that alterity is the best

reflection of oneself. Anthropology’s best mirror is a corollary of the work for which it was instituted. One of the most recent “laments” expressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss decades after the publication of *Tristes Tropiques* (see Viveiros de Castro 1998) is his recognition that the anthropology that he helped to develop, like all the anthropology that was practiced at the time, was inherited from a history hinged on the expansion of the West. Anthropology emerged as a discipline in the nineteenth century, the effort of a civilization that was technically superior to all others and sought to understand the societies that it was believed to dominate. Lévi-Strauss believes that this is no longer the case. To illustrate this idea he compares the evolution of anthropology with the evolution of musical composition. Anthropology as he knew it was tonal and has now become serial. Because our society or, rather, the values on which our society is based have become weak and because other societies have followed our path, societies do not possess absolute foundations: they exist in relation to one another like the notes of a dodecaphonic system. The outcome is a different anthropology, just as tonal music is different from serial music (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 120–21). It is a polyphonic and atonal anthropology that Wilce’s mirror, as if still composed in C major, a product of a closed circle of academics observing the peoples of the world, seems to obviate. When he says that turning the concept of ritual toward “ourselves” is not difficult, when he proposes that “we” practice the mourning of destruction, when he talks about anthropological rituals that transform “our” institutional life as professionals, when he refers to Frazer’s tribe, he should specify who “we” refers to. This reflection of Lévi-Strauss reminds us that anthropology has become an instrument of analysis employed by communities whose institutional, geographical, and intellectual origins, thematic interests, and political agendas make it unlikely to be suspected of responsibility for its past and for the constitution of modernity. The “egalitarian futures” to which Wilce aspires are found not in narcissistic reflection about the vestiges of an outgrown anthropology but in the recognition of alterity within the discipline itself as the best way of expiating the destructiveness of modernity, at least as far as intellectual imperialism is concerned.

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Ritual, as Wilce observes, is commonly associated with the nonmodern and the nonrational. Therefore, the suggestion that anthropologists who perceive themselves as modern or postmodern and rational are unknowingly engaging in ritual acts may easily be interpreted as an insult. I am sure that Wilce does not intend to insult those anthropologists, in-