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Jean-Paul DUMONT, *Visayan Vignettes: Ethnographic Traces of a Philippine Island*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 256 pages, $16.25 (paper)

Henry T. Lewis

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See table of contents

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tions are interpreted not only in terms of external interventions and broad structural change, but also within the local context of the life-worlds of the coastal people themselves. The result is a detailed account of how coastal people make and remake their own histories within the overarching constraints presented by external forces and a violently disruptive environment.

Vernooy is interested in the social and cultural construction of meaning: how people attribute meanings to things and events and how these meanings relate to the broader material aspects of personal life and society. He is highly critical of "simplistic materialist and cultural explanations that tend to reduce social realities to the imperatives of one dimension or single driving force" (p.2). He contends, along with many recent feminist and postmodernist authors, that such explanations characteristically have neglected social heterogeneity and have dismissed from consideration the voices of social groups that do not occupy dominant positions of power.

A series of recent histories of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast have stressed foreign intervention and external factors of development, while largely neglecting how various groups of costeños have come to terms with these outside forces in order to shape their own lives and histories. Vernooy's project is to develop an alternative approach to the understanding of coastal history by applying an actor-oriented political economy perspective to regional issues. This perspective entails recognizing the 'multiple realities' and diverse social practices of various actors representing different social groups. It also requires an innovative methodology that can account for the different and often incompatible social worlds of the different actors. As such, it presents a considerable challenge to Vernooy for this study and, broadly, to ethnography in general.

I believe that Vernooy has made an important contribution to the development of an alternative history of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. His efforts should be particularly appreciated by anyone who has experienced the chaos of doing primary research in contemporary Nicaragua or who has seen the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Joan. The book successfully portrays the diversity of life experiences among people in the Bluefields region; it especially gives the reader a good first-hand account of many of the persistent problems against which different groups of coastal people have historically struggled. These include: isolation and market inaccessibility due to an inadequate transportation network; domination by mestizos and other outsiders; discrimination and favouritism based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, or political affiliation; the failure of the state to understand and respond appropriately to coastal wishes and demands; and heightened exploitation of particularly disadvantaged groups (e.g. peasant women) due to the interplay of gender and other socio-cultural, political, and economic factors.

My main problem with the book concerns its organization; in many places it shifts subject areas rather abruptly, causing it to lose much of its flow and continuity. Many of the issues and subjects covered (e.g., non-commoditized relations, social influence of policy making, trade and the informal sector, agrarian reform) are of interest to the development literature, either within Nicaragua itself or at a more general level, but there are few connecting threads to give the reader a clear idea of why these topics rather than others were covered in the book. Moreover, much of the historical information on the Atlantic Coast is contained near the end of the book where it does least good for readers trying to establish a context within which to place the many phenomena and events described earlier. Nonetheless, there is much to recommend in this book, especially for those who have a particular interest in Nicaragua or who have a more general theoretical interest in developing alternative methodologies for ethnographic studies. Particularly for these readers, I recommend this book highly.

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By Henry T. Lewis

University of Alberta

Dumont is an extremely skillful writer, clearly the best in the genre of new ethnography, and the *Vignettes* ("fragmented realities") from the Island of Siquijor are an especially good read. For this reviewer it evoked the humanistic aspects of field studies, experiences of having lived in Filipino (Ilocano) communities, and an increased nostalgia for time, place, and particular individuals.

Dumont provides useful information on agriculture, fishing, kinship, and, to a lesser extent, religion which can be employed for comparative purposes in going beyond his portraits of life in the southern Visayas. The book's "Index" is a reasonably good guide to locating topical information; chapter headings on the other hand provide no guide at all (nor need they) to particular subject materials, seemingly a more or less random organization of the author's "vignettes". Chapters are variously titled "Auntie Diding"; "Two Brothers, a Field, and Fifty Coconut Palms"; "The Just-So Story of a Tilting Umbrella"; "Feeling, Dreaming, Remembering"; each as intriguing as the next but providing no hints as to content.

Since the author clearly accomplishes what he sets out to do, and does so extremely well, it might seem churlish to criticize the assumptions that are at the basis of this book and new ethnographies in general. However, post modernist writing largely derives from and is nurtured by its criticisms of alternative approaches, having become a kind of ethnographic school of literary criticism. Regrettably, writers such as Dumont seem unwilling to accept the fact that they only represent a different point of view, one more blind school of scholars groping at the mammoth complexities and varied dimensions of the human condition. Consequently, it is all but impossible to review the works of the various post modernist approaches without reciprocal critique.

Actually, Dumont devotes much less consideration to the problems of "Western discourses on otherness" and "rhetorical devices" than in his earlier, more polemical work, *The Headman and I: Ambiguity and Ambivalence in the Fieldworking Experience* (University of Texas Press, 1978). In a short "Prologue" of eight pages he reiterates the inherent problems between "ethnographic reality", carrying out research, keeping field notes, and writing texts. He stresses that writing inevitably distorts reality, and that "the apparent coherence of an ethnographic situation is... achieved at the cost of doing violence to the evidence" (p. 3). Degrees of "violence" aside, all scientists, of course, not just anthropologists, distort and disturb the realities they observe — as do post modernists.

Dumont emphasizes that writers of ethnography do not, cannot, truly "(re)present" reality, and are unable to escape being "trapped in the conditions of production of their texts" (p. 5). Since we can't tell it like it is, he argues — though this reviewer assumes that only the most egocentric ever thought they could — that we should eschew attempts to produce logical, coherent explanations of what people do. His objection is that all texts are *ex post facto* interpretations derived from "fragments of experience" but within which "characters cohere on paper much better than the people ever did in actuality" (p. 5). But, of course, generalizing from "fragments of experience" is basic to all forms of scientific inquiry.

Ethnographers ask questions, observe what people do, record impressions — all of it a record of "impressions" — organize it, think about it, and, in the process of constructing texts, analyze it further, simplify enormously complex conditions, ask new questions of the data, and in the end make it cohere, with it being inescapably different from what the researcher saw in the field, personally experienced, and put into fieldnotes and diaries. Only the most intransigent conceptual realists, including pure empiricists, would have problems with this. Even uncut, ethnographic film has the same conceptual problems, plus a few of its own, especially in terms of how it distorts and disturbs the people it portrays in abstract, celluloid form.

To paraphrase R.B. Lindsay, a physicist, science is a game in which we pretend things are different in order to make sense of them in terms of mental processes peculiar to us as human beings, even though the subjects/"objects" of our "game" are human "others". At the same time, of course, anthropologists are interested in different things, have different perspectives, and follow different agendas from those of the people we study. The same basic problems of "otherness" would exist even if the ethnographer were to do fieldwork among a clutch of his or her own colleagues.

What the writers of the new ethnography provide, at least the best of them like Dumont, are excellent descriptions of "dialogues" and "interactions" — highly personalized travelogues without "real" pictures. That they do not easily lend themselves to ethnography, or that they are essentially anecdotal, is beside the point since that is their particular variant of the "game".

However, new ethnographers are not the moral measurers of all things written anthropological; for them to believe they are is to fall victim to what Nietzshe called "the dogma of immaculate perception". And, while they have raised important questions about how ethnographers know what they know, they have as yet provided no epistemological breakthroughs or final resolutions to the study of others or even of ourselves.