

Review:

Sarah Delaney

Stacy Holman Jones (1998). "Kaleidoscope Notes": Writing Women's Music and Organizational Culture. Walnut Creek: Altamira, 190 pages, ISBN 0-7619-8966-8, \$21.95

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This work looks at the women's music and organizational culture of "The Club", a "small, nonprofit, nonmainstream folk music venue" (ELLIS & BOCHNER 1998, p.7) in San Francisco. It is indeed a kaleidoscope of lyrics, field notes, dialogue and poetry brought together to illustrate the experience of doing ethnography. [1]

When I started to read this book, I was expecting to gain an insight into the interplay between women's music and organizational culture. I was also expecting a fresh and alternative approach to ethnography, as early on in the book, there is a warning not to expect a traditional approach: " this mysterious feeling, about music and about ethnography, was what drew me to the Club, not the study of organizational culture, not a thesis" (HOLMAN JONES, p.30). [2]

From the outset, HOLMAN JONES lets the reader into her inner processes as she struggles with her own reaction to the Club. This high degree of reflexivity enhances the reader's understanding of the researcher and research process. However, as I continued reading, I felt increasingly frustrated that I was getting very limited information and understanding of the Club. I seemed to be learning more and more about the writer. The excerpt from her field notes after listening to a performance, "it's about many many people. Is it about me? Ain't I a woman?" (HOLMAN JONES, p.33) seems particularly apt. This ethnography is about many women, and some men, but particularly about the author. The book blends a variety of vignettes, dialogues, and field notes with direct quotations. While this blend is very engaging, and often beautifully written, it is very difficult for me to distinguish between direct observation and conjecture. I find myself frustrated at not knowing whether the dramatized sections are grounded in real, observed events, recounted events, or imagined events. [3]

The book powerfully exemplifies frank, open reflexivity, and yet too often seems to get lost at that stage. A confessional approach (VAN MAANEN 1998, chapter 4) frequently emerges frustratingly as a distraction from an understanding of the Club, rather than just an illumination of the bias and process of the study. It is possible to have too much of a good thing, for all that much of this reflexivity is very good. It is essential in ethnography to rigorously examine one's own gaze,

but it is equally important to focus that gaze on who or what one is studying. Even where members of the Club are being quoted, there is frequent confusion as to whether and how much of what is quoted they actually said. An example is the third party dialogues interspersed throughout the book, for example, the telephone conversation between Robert and Hannah 'reproduced' on page 119:

"[Robert] 'When *are* you coming home?

Hannah is silent, not sure how to answer. She pulls at the neck of her new T-shirt, suddenly rough against her skin.

'Rosa called today. She wants to know,' Robert says, his voice cracking." [4]

There is no indication that HOLMAN JONES was actually present and able to hear both sides of this conversation. This leaves me wondering how much of the gestures, change in tone of voice, as well as actual words belong to the people quoted, and how much belongs to the author. How comfortable would the people quoted in such dialogues be if they read the book? [5]

So what sense of the Club emerges in this book? A dynamic idealistic group of people striving for musical excellence and inclusivity at the risk of financial ruin, with some suggested and half-illustrated conflicts among its membership, as well as a lot of beautiful and inspirational songs. HOLMAN JONES' atmospheric accounts of her own interactions and reactions to the Club do indeed make one feel as though one was almost there, but I am left with the feeling that I have now had some very interesting snapshots and reflections about an organization but with much of the ethnography still to be completed. [6]

The engaging narrative flow works well where the author is theorizing, the theories she introduces are incorporated in a very conversational informal style which allows the reader the implicit freedom to dispute and quibble whenever s/he pleases. There is no sense of a pompous or dogmatic discourse. Furthermore, the theories fit naturally with the flow of the work, making them particularly accessible. [7]

One of the themes that emerged was the connection between what occurred within the Club and elements within the music being performed, for example, singer Lina appears to be under male surveillance in the incident where a male member of the audience complains that, because of the position of a monitor on-stage, he cannot watch her hands as she plays the guitar. This is linked to a form of self-surveillance in Lina's song. The point is made that women can be viewed as under a constant male surveillance. This can be observed within the Club, and some women seem also to have internalized this in the self-surveillance referred to. HOLMAN JONES, however, is careful to balance this within the same elegant narrative flow with examples suggesting that perhaps there isn't anything sinister about this surveillance. The reader is in a good position to draw his or her own conclusions. [8]

The book is splendidly rich in its illustration of the internal processes of observing, participating, experiencing and theorizing about an organization. It raises a variety of complex and interesting questions; for example; the dilemma of reconciling the music played at the Club with the organizational culture of that Club. To what extent can the two be identified? What is the interaction between the two? Equally, the issue of labeling, elevating versus ghettoizing women's music. When is women's music just music, and when is music by or about women, "women's music?" [9]

The ease with which HOLMAN JONES deals with the complex processes of ethnography would make the book an invaluable teaching resource. She easily de-mystifies an aspect of anthropology that is seldom examined, still less taught, where the apprenticeship approach is still the dominant approach. Perhaps the key is in the title: "Writing Women's Music and Organizational Culture". Does this mean the process of writing, or presenting the written object? If I am criticizing this book as a product, then I find it incomplete and inconclusive. There is no resolution in any sense of the many threads running through the text. If I am criticizing the work in terms of the process of writing, then many aspects are wonderful, and to be applauded, but two major questions remain: 1) Why do I know so little about the organization, and apparently so much about the writer? 2) Whose voice is being represented? [10]

References

[Ellis, Carolyn](#) & Bochner, Arthur (1998). Series Editors' Introduction. In Stacy Holman Jones (1998). *"Kaleidoscope Notes": Writing Women's Music and Organizational Culture* (pp.6-7). Walnut Creek: Altamira.

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