

Desperation or dissent? An ethnographic perspective on capitalism, alienation, and transgressive sexuality

Review of Wardlow, Holly. 2006. *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

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If I cannot sway the heavens, I'll wake the powers of hell.
Queen Amata, *The Aeneid*. Book VII, line 365

To students of micropolitical theory, the question of why impoverished women sometimes resort to selling their bodies can present an analytic conundrum. While there is a tempting elegance to reductive explanations—economic desperation, for example—that appear to “absolve” participants of moral culpability, such explanations can serve to not only divest individuals of their agency, but delegitimize motivations that are not strictly monetary and mask the biographic circumstances that sometimes lead the politically marginal to discern salvation in alienation. Well-intentioned theorists have in recent years sought to locate a *vera causa* for the worldwide escalation of “transactional sex” in the neoliberal economic programs that have led to the disproportionate immiseration of women around the globe. Yet, while surely sociologically important, this interpretation falls prey to many of the same reductionist pitfalls and infantilising premises as those it would critique—or so observes Holly Wardlow in *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society*.

In sumptuous yet efficient prose, Wardlow permits her readers a candid glimpse into the lives of Huli (an ethnic group in the Papua New Guinean highlands) women whose lives are enmeshed in, on the one hand, a traditional system of intergenerational social exchange based on bridewealth and the commutation of women’s reproductive capacities into productive power, and, on the other hand, a rapidly modernizing society in which the bridewealth system is increasingly understood as the *commodification* of women’s reproductive capacities—and, indeed, the commodification of women themselves. With the encroachment of a cash economy upon Tari town, the Huli village in which Wardlow undertook her research during the late 1990s, men are increasingly compelled to seek salaried employment in distant regions (cities, gold mines) rather than cultivate their own farmland, leading to a destabilization of pre-colonial conceptions of gender and responsibility. To wit, men are less able and often less willing to fulfill traditional obligations toward their sisters and wives, such as seeking justice in instances of domestic violence or public humiliation, or avenging rape cases by seeking compensation, leading women to feel abandoned and valued only for their monetary worth in bridewealth. Resentment thus drives some women to undertake self-injurious retaliatory tactics such as finger amputation, suicide, and, the focus of the book, “revenge promiscuity.”

This third tactic is easily mistakable for “prostitution” upon a superficial inspection of its characteristics: women who engage in revenge promiscuity, or *pasinja meri* (“passenger women”) in the Tok Pisin creole, may receive money in exchange for sex, be highly mobile and contemptuous of the notion of settling down, and conduct themselves in ways that are frowned upon in New Guinean communities (e.g. cursing, drinking, and experiencing their sexuality as individualistically enjoyable and facilitative of economic independence rather than, as is considered morally proper, concerned strictly with collectively-authored clan reproduction). Yet, as Wardlow persuasively argues, *pasinja meri* are not fundamentally motivated by financial despondence—as is regularly and often uncritically asserted in prostitution research—but are rather withdrawing their reproductive capacities, skills, and labours from male kin whom they feel have shirked their responsibilities. In a society where a woman’s reproductive potential is conceptualized as jointly owned by her husband’s or father’s clan, and which presupposes women’s ancillary status vis-à-vis men, extramarital relations are interpretable as a

particularly visceral form of “theft.” Women who become *pasinja meri*, Wardlow points out, are thus “taking aim at their kin—particularly their male kin—precisely where women can hurt them the most: through disrupting the kin-based traffic in women, appropriating their own sexuality, selling it, and keeping the resources acquired for themselves” (229).

Though revenge promiscuity in the Huli context may not be fundamentally about fiscal necessity, it is ultimately still a monetized gambit, shaped and sustained in subtle ways by capitalist incursions into the New Guinean highlands. Wardlow illustrates this insight with a rich panoply of narratives elicited from *pasinja meri* themselves that are presented to readers refreshingly unromanticized and with contradictions intact. As is revealed in these vignettes, the cost of engaging in socially stigmatized practices can be dire: by severing themselves from their kin network, *pasinja meri* may gain some measure of independence and existential gratification, but they forfeit their homes, families, security, genealogical station, and moral stature in the community. Just because a vengeful act is intelligible as vengeance by the actor does not mean that it is interpreted thusly by its intended targets or perceived provocateurs. Accordingly, Huli *pasinja meri* regularly find themselves caught between untenable alternatives—trivialization, abjection, subordination, exile—in a society wherein pre-colonial ideals concerning morality and gender necessarily chafe against the colonial vicissitudes of wage labour, male absenteeism, female commodification, Christianisation, and HIV/AIDS infection.

Wardlow’s study, though eloquent and robust, is not without minor shortcomings. Firstly and most trivially, her—or perhaps her editors’—utilization of endnotes instead of footnotes makes the reading experience somewhat vexatious: in order to access the provocative insights furnished by these notes, one has to constantly flip back and forth. Secondly, her periodic discussions of UCLA anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s heuristic innovations (“practice theory”) and French philosopher Michel Foucault’s theorizations of sexuality, while intriguing, can strike non-specialist readers as a bit underdeveloped and somewhat tangential to her argument. Additionally, while the focus of her analysis is contemporary, readers who are not expertly versed in Melanesian ethnography may find themselves wishing for a fuller description of the pre-capitalist bridewealth systems from which the current dilemmas have arisen.

Finally, while Wardlow’s challenge to the primacy of “neediness” in traditional sociologies of prostitution works on a number of levels, her informants’ own observations tend to affirm the materiality of their victimization as well as the desirability, after all is said and done, of social conformity. For all of their courage, *pasinja meri* find themselves excluded from the possibility of legitimacy at every turn. Not only are they shamed and pathologized in spite of their valiant attempts to shore up agency, they are, in the end, more, and not less, vulnerable to male violence than their conformist peers. Having been ushered along by charismatic constructions of women who refuse to bow when instructed, readers are left with the discovery that subjective empowerment is a bit of a façade when unaccompanied by the advantages of intersubjective validation and material power. Though it may not have been her intention, Wardlow invests us with a sense of futility and a cluster of insistent methodological quandaries. Is it possible to understand and unpack the motives of individuals without pinning them to either the deterministic vectors of wider structural forces or the mercenary imperatives of modern individualism? How can researchers explore the iconography of stigmatized identities, and evaluate the moral force they have in public imaginations, without minimizing stigmatized individuals’ efforts to define their own destinies? In what ways do the relations that marginalized people form with material goods and services animate their sense-making and self-making practices, and what is at stake when observers fail to apprehend the historical, political, geographic, and gendered dimensions of these relations?

These questions notwithstanding, *Wayward Women* is a poignant and riveting volume whose contributions to the mainstream literature on a vast assemblage of topics—economic development, feminist ethnography, STD etiology, social stigma, domestic violence, self-injury, possessive individualism, transcultural medicine—are sundry. By eschewing clichés and challenging the tyranny of the category, Wardlow demonstrates not only *that* but *how* capitalist economies can engender forms of societal anomie that begin, yet do not end, with the pain and fury of an isolated woman.