4-2012

Review of The Pastoral Clinic: Addiction and Dispossession Along the Rio Grande

Gilbert Quintero

University of Montana - Missoula, gilbert.quintero@umontana.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umt.edu/anthro_pubs

Part of the Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation


http://scholarworks.umt.edu/anthro_pubs/2

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mail.lib.umt.edu.
What ethnographic account can convey the deepest dimensions of desperation, suffering, and hopelessness? In *The Pastoral Clinic*, Angela Garcia offers a thoughtful composition that sincerely attempts to reveal an understanding of pathological drug use among Hispanics in the Española Valley of New Mexico, a people and place long considered as epitomizing the intractability of heroin addiction. The author’s self-described task is “to give purpose and meaning to an aspect of American life that has become dangerously ordinary, even cliché.” The result is a powerfully written literary engagement that speaks artfully to many issues in the ethnography of drug abuse while at the same time exposing an intimate portrait of pain, inevitability, and personal destruction.

Institutional structures and social arrangements that effectively merge therapeutic roles, responsibilities, and potentials with criminal ones are given special consideration. Judiciary responses to heroin addicts, especially the drug court model, bring together the possibilities of incarceration with those of treatment, thereby blurring therapy and criminal control and creating an interstitial patient-prisoner. These systems contribute to an endless purgatory for addicts where time repeats itself in a cycle of chronicity and relapse.

This book reveals a number of important challenges faced by rural mental health and drug treatment facilities. These range from a lack of stability in staffing to weaknesses in basic infrastructure. In addition, there is little separation of the clinic from the wider community within which it is embedded. As a result, clinical roles are sometimes complicated by familial responsibilities and being a patient offers little real respite from social ties, expectations, and drug use behaviors.

One of the strengths of this piece is its recognition of the singular aspects of the geographic setting and how these features manifest in drug use. Heroin use is inseparable from place as it is historically and culturally understood. Addiction is an expression of loss and mourning for a past and an identity that struggles to continue amid change. This symbolic connection to landscape means that the land is a source of both pain and hope.

The account of intergenerational drug use is one of the most powerful descriptions of this aspect of addiction available. The interdependencies described here are complex—alternatively caring and destructive. The attention involved in managing drug use blurs the boundaries and responsibilities that typically structure relationships between generations. Adults charged with the care of children become socially incompetent and dependent as a result of their addiction. Over time these roles become more intricate and tragic as children move into their own heroin-using careers. This commensurability is a damaged form of nurturing that leads to suffering and, in some cases, even death by overdose.

This book attempts to understand these predicaments by relying on key concepts from a range of intellectual luminaries. Some readers will wonder whether these ideas really help us comprehend suffering that is so complete and so

References Cited


The Pornography of Addiction

Gilbert Quintero

Department of Anthropology, University of Montana, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, Montana 59812, U.S.A. (gilbert.quintero@umontana.edu). 27 XII 11

devastating and that in many ways seems beyond understand-
ing. And although the author attends to a wide range of
literature, there is relatively little thought directed toward a
number of relevant contributions. There is no consideration,
for instance, of the global supply and distribution networks
that Michael Agar considers in his analyses of drug use (Agar
and Reisinger 2001). Heroin is not produced in the Española
Valley. Thus, the suffering depicted in The Pastoral Clinic
has links to personalities and processes that extend well beyond
rural New Mexico. While the author questions the notion of
the “isolated addict,” the analysis does not extend beyond
local social ties. This is too insular and has the consequence
of localizing heroin addiction in a way that makes it seem
like a Hispano problem. Likewise, previous treatments of her-
oin addiction in the Española Valley offered by Trujillo (2006),
Willing and colleagues (2003), and Glendinning (2005) are
not taken seriously. In the end, there is a sense that the author
is attempting to utilize an intellectual canon to come to terms
with damage and pathology, whether it fits or not, while at
the same time leaving relevant voices unacknowledged.

There are also many missed opportunities that are frus-
trating to see from such a gifted and sensitive writer. Chief
among these are the thorny human subjects research issues
that the author must have faced but that are entirely ignored.
The author’s dual role as both a researcher and a clinical
“detox attendant,” for instance, must have presented a num-
ber of dilemmas. What ethical quandaries and practical issues
did the author face? How did she gain informed consent to
utilize information from clinical interactions for research pur-
poses? More fundamentally, how does an anthropologist de-
termine that an addict can give meaningful informed consent
in these situations? The use of addicts’ personal notes and
clinical patient files to create an ethnographic description
makes these questions exceptionally pertinent.

Ultimately, the greatest assumption underlying this work
is never addressed. The author claims to give purpose to acts
and states of being she has witnessed through ethnographic
writing. Some will undoubtedly find this claim to be rather
immodest. How can an anthropologist presume to have the
position, understanding, or authority “to give purpose and
meaning” to anything, much less peoples’ pain and suffering?
There is a risk posed by offering such a portrayal that the
author does not acknowledge, much less explore. Perhaps
accounts such as these are too intimate and we do a disservice
by intellectualizing pain and suffering. Perhaps instead we
should allow those who suffer the dignity to experience their
tragedy without an anthropological observer or other outside
audience. This may be especially true in a case such as this
where no relevant recommendations are made. Does anthro-
pology have anything practical to offer in this situation, or
are we limited only to bearing witness to pain? The explicit
descriptions of addiction are depicted in a manner that
arouses intense emotional reactions but at the same time the
analysis makes these dramas voyeuristic. Here one is reminded
of the stark images of urban addiction offered by Bourgois
(2001), along with his warning not to fall prey to a pornog-
raphy of violence in conveying descriptions of crack use in
Harlem. The Pastoral Clinic does not offer a similar reflection,
even as it balances on the boundary that demarcates a porn-
ography of loss, suffering, and hopelessness.

References Cited
Bourgois, Philippe L. 2001. The power of violence in war and peace: post-
Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society.
Trujillo, Michael L. 2006. A northern New Mexican “fix”: shooting up and
coming down in the Greater Española Valley, New Mexico. Cultural Dy-
namics 18:89–122.
Report: Ethnography of Drug Use, Help-Seeking Processes, and Behavioral

A Broader Perspective on Craft Production
and Specialization
Anne P. Underhill
Department of Anthropology, Yale University, 10 Sachem
Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06511, U.S.A. (anne
.underhill@yale.edu). 27 XII 11
Salt Production and Social Hierarchy in Ancient China: An
Archaeological Investigation of Specialization in China’s
University Press, 2011.

The focus of most publications about craft production and
specialization has been on individual types of objects such as
ceramic vessels. This book usefully broadens the topic of spe-
cialization by considering changes in the production of a key
commodity in many areas of the ancient world, salt. Flad
explains that investigations about salt do not fit easily into
previous discussions about the social organization of pro-
duction. There is significant variation with respect to its
source, method of production, mechanism of exchange, and
value. He shows that although existing models about craft
specialization are useful for understanding aspects of its pro-
duction, analysis of salt production requires a broader meth-
odological perspective. Although salt was a key commodity
in several areas of the ancient world, to my knowledge no
other study attempts to relate changes in salt production with
broader issues regarding social change in a particular region.
The innovative methods Flad employs for analyzing changes
in associated ceramic vessels (for evaporating brine, etc.), in
the spatial layout of production facilities, and changes in other
cultural remains will be of interest to archaeologists and his-
torians. This broad approach proves to be useful for revealing
changes in the economic role of salt production from the late
prehistoric period to the late Bronze Age (ca. 2500 to 221
BC) at the site of Zhongba in Sichuan Province, China, sit-