
Miriam E. Wells

Reading anthropology for historical purposes is one of those time-honored things—one which I actually enjoy doing. Which is not to say that it always comes easy. I’m still meandering through the rich but difficult work *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination,* by Jean and John Comaroff. They have explored—and not without some humor!—the contemporary (as of 1992) problems in anthropological method and theory, through their work regarding African populations. The fieldwork is embedded within layers of analysis; looking for it is like trying to spot the butter in a cake.

Setha Low’s anthropological excursion in *On the Plaza* is almost from another planet than the Comaroffs’ work. Low’s approach to the Costa Rican plaza is practical in many ways. She begins with a sampling of observations and photographs from fieldwork, which creates a concrete hook for the reader to begin understanding the historical significance of the plaza. Snippets of fieldwork presented from the 1980s to the 1990s also introduce some of the changes in plaza formation local populations have encountered over time, due to political or economic reasons, or even fear.

She does all this even before getting to the traditional introduction. Following this unusual two-part introduction, Low temporarily abandons the contemporary fieldwork and takes the reader through the history of the plaza concept in both European and indigenous American traditions. For this reason, the organization of the book comes across as haphazard at first, because it is neither entirely chronological, nor arranged quite by subject or method of investigation. However, I appreciate her willingness to approach methods separately, rather than piecing them together. Even if the book’s structure suffers a little, I appreciate seeing poetry, memoirs and interviews stand on their own.

Low’s fieldwork methods are both interesting, and maybe foreign to historians, because the fieldwork involves a high degree of interaction, visibility, and reflexivity. Historians still labor under at least the illusion that they can be somehow separate from the work (although that’s changing)—they don’t usually have the same immediate presence and need to explain it. Low does a credible job of identifying the limitations of fieldwork, and maintaining awareness of her role in shaping the story she’s telling. On the other hand, she’s not studying Melanesian headhunters at the turn of the 20th century. Some of the conclusions that arise from her observational data are less than earth shattering, and it seems like the variety of historical and contemporary sources employed in the book are a way of legitimizing the fieldwork.

There were a great variety of sources employed in *On the Plaza.* In some ways, the juxtaposition of many kinds of research was a positive characteristic of the book, although each probably could have commanded a book on its own. Had she made her focus literature about the plaza, for example, and conducted interviews about memory—together these might provide a picture of how memory might be influenced by written culture. But it would have been a different book. Perhaps she herself was not entirely happy with the sprawling nature of the research here, since her later works appear to be more internally cohesive.