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Book review: emplaced myth: space, narrative, and knowledge in aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Scott, Michael W. (2003) Book review: emplaced myth: space, narrative, and knowledge in aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea. *American ethnologist*, 30 (2). pp. 331-332. ISSN 0094-0496 DOI: [10.1525/ae.2003.30.2.331](https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2003.30.2.331)

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Available in LSE Research Online: January 2014

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Emplaced Myth: Space, Narrative, and Knowledge in Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea. *Alan Rumsey and James F. Weiner*, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. vii + 281 pp., figures, references, index.

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In this exploration of peoples' relationship to land in Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea, Alan Rumsey and James Weiner propose an innovative analytical strategy for comparativist projects. This strategy, Rumsey explains in his Introduction, is modelled on the way in which the Ku Waru of the New Guinea Highlands inventively pair unrelated entities and categories in order to highlight otherwise unrecognised shared semantic features. The editors of this volume aim similarly to reveal meaningful commonalities by juxtaposing "Aboriginal Australia" and "New Guinea" – two categories that anthropologists have historically employed to construct distinct discursive traditions within their discipline. Accordingly, rather than working from the premise that Aboriginal Australia or New Guinea exemplify contrastive social or culture types, or arguing that they represent the same generalizable structural form, the editors have organized this collection around the observation that thematic elements in the anthropological discourses about each region could be brought into productive relationship. The resulting volume is a richly intertextual but cohesive collection of ethnographic comparisons.

The essays by Alan Rumsey, Jürg Wassmann, Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern, Deborah Bird Rose, James Weiner, Eric Kline Silverman, and Lissant Bolton best exemplify Ku Waru-style "pairing" (p. 4) as a comparative method.

Rather than attempt to cover each of these contributions, however, I give a sense of what this method can achieve through discussion of three representative essays.

Rumsey, who authors the first essay as well as the Introduction, traces the ways in which anthropologists working in Aboriginal Australia and Melanesia have come to focus increasingly on the grounding of cosmology and social identity in landscape. Employing the recent work of other ethnographers, he elicits commonalities and differences among topographic processes in five contexts – two in Australia and three in Melanesia – by mapping them according to Deleuze and Guattari's model of rhizomatic non-hierarchical acentred connectivity. Although Rumsey's examples show Deleuze and Guattari's contrast between rhizomatic and arborescent socio-spatial forms to be overdrawn, he nevertheless urges anthropologists to attend to and develop this contrast as an important, relatively untapped, source of theoretical insight.

Stewart and Strathern take as their point of departure the observation that in both Hagen (Papua New Guinea) and Arnhem Land (Australia) there is an "overall strong identification of people with land, through notions of ancestry, substance, revealed power, and the need to renew fertility by ritualized access to power" (p. 80). Against the backdrop of these phenomena – which other contributors also show to be characteristic of the regions under study – they develop a heuristic dichotomy between two types of mythic narrative. By stressing historical human agency, "creation stories" foster relatively fluid connections between people and land; conversely, by depicting events that establish a permanent state of affairs, "origin stories" foster relatively stable connections (p. 79). Although both types of narrative are recognizable in each context, Stewart and Strathern argue that Hageners foreground creations while the Yolngu of Arnhem Land stress origins. These inverse

emphases emerge as key differences in the formulation of contemporary land claims in the two ethnographic contexts.

Casting the growing anthropological interest in “the role of tracks and traces and the local groundedness of cosmology” as a productive response to the current disciplinary disinclination “to model cultures or societies as totalizing, internally coherent systems” (p.37), Rumsey appears to align himself with that disinclination. Although this position, especially when combined with the method of pairing that Rumsey proposes, can easily lead to decontextualized typological comparisons, Rose demonstrates that close attention to the ways in which two peoples structure their understandings of the cosmos as a whole facilitates a systematic contrast that highlights divergent cultural processes. She achieves this by framing her contribution in terms of the systems of responsibility “that humans hold in relation to nonhumans” (p. 99). The Victoria River District people of the Northern Territory (Australia) regenerate living things through their intentional action in an environment characterized by intersubjectivity and “pervasive mutuality” (p. 114) between humans and nonhumans. In this multicentered world, all life unfolds out of interdependent sites through “relationships of responsible care” (p. 110). In New Britain (Papua New Guinea), however, instead of such relations of reciprocity, the Kaulong face the continual burden of differentiating themselves from a self-perpetuating forest world. This burden, Rose argues, entails a diminished responsibility for most nonhuman species.

Instructive as these theoretically contingent pairings clearly are, the editors seem aware that they may be seen to lack sufficient motivation and replicable criteria of selection. Rumsey thus offers a second rationale for comparison that arguably returns to more traditional notions of socio-spatial continuity. He stresses

geographical proximity, intersecting histories, and cognate mythologies to identify the main insight precipitated from the contributions to this volume: in New Guinea and Aboriginal Australia “there is a kind of spatialization of knowledge that goes hand in hand with knowledge of places” (p. 12). This complementarity between place and knowledge, Weiner further argues in the Afterword, is an important dimension of sociality in the two regions. It is at this general level that the two regions – through an implicit contrast with other regions – are taken to exemplify a particular cultural type. A certain tension inheres, therefore, between a comparative method based on the parallel viewing of analytically heterogeneous regions and one that recognizes a diachronic relationship between them. Nevertheless, *Emplaced Myth* is a success as an example of an increasingly popular type of edited volume framed as the comparison of two recognized ethnographic regions, for it is one of few such collections in which most of the contributors engage intentionally in the comparative endeavor.