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<td><a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/aman.12059_10">http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/aman.12059_10</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Wiley Blackwell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>Final published version</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessed</td>
<td>Thu Dec 13 07:27:27 EST 2018</td>
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modes of life on the verge of disappearance enables certain claims to knowledge, affinity, and belonging in an ecological system of things that matter.

But that system shifts, and to mark this Choy then describes quests for environmental and social distinction. The reader meets plant biologists studying a distinctive orchid species and anthropologists recording what they regard as Hong Kong’s unique cultural life. In both arenas, objects are simultaneously specific and connected to a broader ecological web. Here, Choy shows how situating something within the purview of environmental conservation gives it a particular kind of visibility, and therefore potential invisibility, at many scales.

Choy then traces how transnational environmental activists and indigenous villagers work together, strategically and consciously, to oppose the construction of a municipal waste facility in the New Territories. We glimpse the global cosmopolitanism and deep place attachments that characterize activists’ stories of environmental consciousness and living an environmentalist life. Choy uses these narratives to observe how environmentalists delineate relations among one another, as well as between themselves and other Hong Kong residents.

The book’s final chapter describes the ways that air, brought into social and political life as air-quality politics, again defies conventional universal particulars. This section concludes the book, underlining the inseparability of everyday engagement with socionature and the multiscaled gestures that imbue them with meaning and urgency.

Ecologies of Comparison reminds us of the power of ethnography to move beyond theoretical abstractions and quite simply to see abstractions themselves as powerful social gestures with consequences for human action, socionatural change, and our shared and unshared accountings of loss and gain in a world of rapid environmental change.

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China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music


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Jeroen de Kloet’s ethnographic monograph, *China with a Cut*, presents fascinating insights into the complexity and diversity of rock music in China, focusing on the 1990s until around 2008. Through fieldwork, interviews, and historical comparisons, the author takes us on a journey, from dingy Beijing clubs featuring in-your-face punks to the coffee houses of folk-rock balladeers to the stadiums of pop-rock mega stars. We hear the longing in fan letters and complaining about his life (“I live on a garbage dump!”), de Kloet adopts a common double bias: “In my reading, music was inherently provocative, and China was ruled by a monolithic totalitarian state” (p. 16). He argues that we must move beyond such common binaries (resistance vs. compliance, the State vs. the people) and instead embrace paradoxes that lie at the heart of popular culture and politics.

The book’s title, *China with a Cut*, refers to an unusual path of globalization. In the 1990s, unsold CDs from the West were given small cut in the side to prevent reselling. Many of these *dakou* (“cut”) CDs ended up on the black market and hence opened up an unofficial musical space and also came “to signify a whole urban generation” (p. 20). This dakou generation is represented through ethnography, close readings of lyrics and album covers, and above all the voices of musicians, fans, and producers “to account for the profound multivocality . . . of music cultures in China and beyond” (p. 35).

The book’s core is a comparison of different music scenes. Chapter 1 discusses underground rock, punk, heavy metal, and hip-hop. The author calls these “hard scenes” (p. 28), a term adapted from Arjun Appadurai’s notion that “hard cultural forms are those that come with a set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform” (Appadurai 1996:90). For de Kloet, those links are constituted by a “rock mythology” that imposes a relatively rigid repertoire of styles and, more importantly, ready-made expectations of value arising from sincere, rebellious, noisy males who eschew commercialism (p. 28). Intriguingly, rather than debating whether this or that sound is “authentic,” de Kloet tracks the modes of authentication, and their relative distance from rock mythology, by locating scenes amid other scenes. Chapter 2 considers “hyphenated” scenes less beholden to rock mythology, such as folk-rock, pop-rock, pop-punk, and so-called
fashionable bands. Chapter 3 adds the voices of women rockers and those of southern urban areas, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. Although de Kloet clearly sympathizes with the rockers, he finds politics in pop music’s disruption of rock mythology’s dominance through a valorization of “a surface, transient noise that resonates deeply with everyday life” (p. 138).

The next two chapters shift registers. In chapter 4, de Kloet examines audiences through surveys, interviews, and fan letters to musicians. Music here is a “technology of self” that enables people, in Michel Foucault’s words, “to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1997:225; see p. 140). To me, the fans left the deepest impression, as they shared the challenges of facing difficult expectations of parents, schools, and the state. Chapter 5, through an analysis of industry data and comments of insiders, disputes the notion that rock music in China has become more commercialized. Rebellious himself, de Kloet contends that political censorship of lyrics is “both a limiting and a productive force” (p. 169). Agree or disagree, this will be perfect fodder for classroom debate.

Elsewhere as well, de Kloet makes fascinating arguments, not all of which I agree with, but he gives enough detail that we can contest his conclusions. For example, he finds that “being global sells locally, and being local sells globally” (p. 101), which makes sense (like cosmopolitan Afrobeat vs. indigenous “world music”). But is this an instance of “global” versus “local” or a question of networked localities? If I have a criticism of China with a Cut, it’s that I would’ve preferred more ethnography, a little more sense of how the rock mythology is embodied in musical performance spaces. To his credit, de Kloet chose instead to emphasize the voices of those he met, through more than 100 interviews.

In his conclusion, de Kloet argues that only if we position “paradoxes at the heart of our analysis, can we grasp the politics of popular culture and its complex dynamics in society at large” (p. 196). For de Kloet, this is not just a matter of celebrating contradiction and absurdity but also of seeing the logic and untapped potential within the paradoxes. As such, this is a rich and successful project.

REFERENCES CITED

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Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men


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A book review should not be a love letter, but I do love this book. Decena’s Tacit Subjects draws from in-depth interviews with 25 Dominican men living in New York City who have sex with men. The chapters are organized around concepts that are both theoretical and thematic, such as relationship to family and community or the place of sexuality in one’s life. The subfield into which this book most comfortably fits is a contentious one—the anthropology of human sexuality. Within this field, there are two primary sets of theoretical commitments. The first is a more culturalist position that holds sexual practices and the meanings associated with them to be largely determined by a relatively closed cultural system. From this perspective, scholars often claim that gay and lesbian identities, for example, are a cultural imposition for all but the few societies in which they emerged historically. The second approach to the subject tends to be more materialist and to emphasize the roles of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization in reshaping cultural practices, resulting in (through complicated and varying kinds of mediation) investments among many societies in sexual identities such as (although not necessarily identical to) “gay” and “lesbian.” The work of Tomás Almaguer or Gloria Wekker might be associated with the first position, while that of Gayle Rubin or the late Lionel Cantú exemplifies the latter. When I first opened Decena’s text, I anticipated it to fall within the culturalist position. I was therefore pleasantly surprised to discover that his work in fact achieves a remarkable synthesis, or even transcendence, of the two theoretical “camps.”

To accomplish this feat, Decena introduces the concepts of the “tacit subject” and the politics of “estar.” The tacit subject is a politically ambivalent term used to describe the importance of unspoken knowledge (and precisely its unspokenness) for the maintenance of social relations: “asymmetrical power relations that [people are] invested in maintaining” (p. 21). The politics of estar builds on Rodolfo Kusch’s work to use the Spanish sense of being (“estar”) in a location as part...