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Reply to Stacy Lockerbie (Review of *Conception Diary: Thinking About Pregnancy and Motherhood* by Susan Hogan)

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Stacy Lockerbie, *JIWS*, Vol. 9. No. 1. November 2007. pp.319-321 Review of
Conception Diary: Thinking About Pregnancy and Motherhood. Susan Hogan. 2006.
(ISBN-10: 0-9551656-0-1).

Reply to Stacy From Susan Hogan

I pick up a photo of a family group; we are dappled with sunlight and smiling. A child is being held in a woman's arms and another child looks uncertainly at the camera. Today they are all dead apart from the girl, who was disabled by a car accident, and the baby who is me. And so it is that images are unstable containers of meaning, but nevertheless it felt important to conjure up the image of, for example, the long needle sucking up the bits of placenta – a procedure watched nervously on a screen. Will he slip and suck up my baby's leg? It wasn't explicitly supposed to be 'educational', but it needed to be real.

The reviewer notes that the book 'touches on many issues that mark the cultural milieu and changing social environment of pregnancy in the UK', and, as a cultural historian, I feel this summarises my aim well enough. The book is set between the beginning of the invasion of Iraq and the Tsunami. It is not just about my own experience, but my own experience is a spring-board for a wider discussion of fertility and parenting issues. The diary reflects on the fate of babies and mothers around the globe; it juxtaposes images of nurturing a baby with images of global warfare, but I hope as more than mere 'wallpaper' to the unfolding drama. It gives a critique of and commentary on the social mores surrounding pregnancy and birth, and looks at representations of fertility issues in the 'broadsheet' press and on television. I hope it is funny too: there is certainly a lot of irony in it. The reviewer finds my outlook 'bleak', when I thought it was more about the multiple identities we inhabit: the tug and pull between 'infertile woman', lover, intellectual, mum, Emile's mum, Eilish's mum, daughter-in-law with intellectual promise, psychotherapist, cultural historian, inane "funny mummy", and exhausted void – indeed, the visceral tearing between these that can make new motherhood *utterly intolerable* for some women (Hogan 2008).

The book deliberately moves between genres. As a former fine artist, I know that art works can play and tease. Texts under scrutiny are not interpreted in a dogmatic way; rather, texts are seen as open to multiple interpretations: to use Burgin's words, the meaning of the text is generated in the 'space between the object and the reader/viewer – a space made up of endlessly proliferating meanings which have no stable point of origin, nor of closure' (Burgin 1986:73).

A number of views are attributed to me which are representations of the subject, rather than my personal views. Interpretive postmodernist researchers tend to believe that no 'complete' theory or 'final' understanding or 'reading' is possible, and use techniques aimed at producing a polysemous view of culture (James, Hockey & Dawson 1997:2).

Producing a provisional, situated, reflexive yet multi-faceted, account of a particular situation which resists reductive interpretation in its very complexity is surely an apt aim for the post-modern researcher? Perhaps I should be pleased that my in many

ways very insightful reviewer found it ‘disorientating’ or ‘frustrating’ because it is slippery and hard to pin down.

Though I long to remain illusive, tantalising, and indeed ‘disorientating’, I feel obliged to answer the questions raised about ethical issues. I thought it mildly paradoxical that though I never named my mother-in-law, the reviewer, through research, discovered her identity and named her. I note that the reviewer is also an anthropologist and it makes me wonder if anthropologists are particularly guilt-ridden because of their former links with colonial administration, with an agenda to ‘dominate, govern and use’, as Carole Pateman put it (2007). Investigative journalists don’t feel so guilt ridden do they?

In ‘After Writing Culture’ (1997), James, Hockey and Dawson in their jointly written introduction, urge anthropologists towards caution:

‘In the contemporary global context where texts and images not only proliferate but do so beyond the confines of the locality of their production, it behoves us to consider carefully, therefore, the political fall-out of our representational practices’ (James, Hockey and Dawson 1997:13).

It seems to me wrong, for example, that Steve Spencer should choose not to include images of inebriated aboriginals in his case study of representations of the Darwin aboriginal population, because this is already a dominant negative representation of that community. On the contrary, as part of the ‘*reality*’ of life, it should be included in his case study. Anyone wishing to corrupt his message could pull out his image of a bin overflowing with ‘tinnies’ (beer cans) and juxtapose this against a pre-existing image of drunk aboriginals. We cannot keep control of that which we produce. And who is to say that showing the degradation of a disenfranchised community isn’t going to be more powerful in terms of advocacy for their cause?

James, Hockey and Dawson go on to say that outside of academia,

‘the complexities of a text are apt to become condensed into a media sound-bite with all subtlety lost, all complexity reduced and all contradiction dulled...’ (James, Hockey and Dawson 1997:13).

The appropriation of cultural artefacts is not something that is particular to anthropology; it is true of the work of artists, poets, sociologists, psychologists. Would Johann Pachelbel be happy to have his *Canon & Gigue* advertising woolly jumpers or Irish butter, or would Delibes be happy for his *Dome Epais* (Flower Duet) to be associated with British Airways? Or, perhaps more pertinently, would Degas condone his painting of prostitutes as packaging for chocolates?

The producers of culture never have absolute control over how the artefact is understood. This is true of what anthropologists create. The ‘meaning’ of a cultural artefact, (be it an image, or written text, or case study which uses a range of media), is always open to interpretation.

I appreciate I am “telling granny how to suck eggs” here, as I imagine the readership of the *Journal of International Women’s Studies* is familiar with this argument. Just for the record, I did send pages of the text to a number of people to ask them if they felt the content was acceptable, and, because most of my friends and acquaintances are intellectuals or artists, none objected to anything I had said; however, a critical reader did advise me to remove some passages which could have got me sacked or sued, and I am grateful for that advice.

Susan Hogan

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