Review of *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and Its Provocation of the Modern* by Kalpana Ram, University of Hawaii Press, 2013. 336 pp., $70 (cloth).

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Fertile Disorder proceeds as a provocative "anthropological gamble" (p. 225) by unsettling a variety of dominant understandings about subjectivity, agency, and consciousness, which have been inherited from, and perpetuated by, Western scholarly traditions, without claiming to be yet another instance of "anthropology as reflexive 'cultural critique'" (p. 226). It interrogates conventional (Enlightenment-based) assumptions implicated in postcolonial Indian "projects of modernity" that have marginalized social practices like spirit possession in order to show that the existential possibilities which possession dramatizes are not "as remote from our experience of 'advanced' modernity as we may suppose" (p. 100). Through the cultural lens of spirit possession as experienced and practiced by Hindu and Christian women living in rural Tamil Nadu, south India, *Fertile Disorder* breaks innovative ground in the fertile field of possession studies. In its masterful integration of social theory, political philosophy, phenomenological philosophy, performance theory, and feminist theory, *Fertile Disorder* cracks opens a new epistemological space in which possession, which Ram represents as a "minor practice" (de Certeau), no longer requires discursive colonization in order to teach scholars (and Indian state intellectuals) something important, even quotidian, about what it means to be a human in the world. At every turn, *Fertile Disorder* resists locating spirit possession within a Western episteme, which "has carved up the field in which possession occurs" (p. 64), and which equates the person with a "self-enclosed, relentlessly conscious, and knowing subject" (86). As Ram asks, if we stop viewing an epistemologically grounded consciousness as *de facto* evidence of authentic human subjectivity, can spirit possession illuminate agency within the context of a destabilized consciousness? If so, what kind of agency would possession spotlight? Finally, how might the agency that presents itself in the purportedly unfamiliar world of spirit possession compare to the agency that is often experienced in the more familiar practices of human life?

Each of the book's nine chapters reconceptualizes agency by (re)contextualizing spirit possession within the framework of moral justice. That is, sundered moral relationships characterized by perceptions of a breakdown of concern and care in intimate dyadic partnerships become a powerful site for making sense of the "spirit troubles" that interrupt and accompany the lives of rural Tamil women at significant junctures in the female life cycle. To that extent, *Fertile Disorder* crafts a sophisticated analytical model of spirit possession and generates hypotheses that "bring the 'exotic' and the 'familiar' into a *shared* framework" (p. 226; italics in original). It contributes a fresh and compelling perspective to familiar scholarly (and Indian state) discourses on spirit possession and is written not only engagingly but also in a way that scholars and students (undergraduate and graduate) will appreciate. *Fertile Disorder* casts a wide theoretical net and will appeal to scholars and students of anthropology, development studies, sociology, religious studies, psychology, gender and women's studies, and global and area studies.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, consisting of chapters 1 and 2, introduces the cultural context of rural Tamil Nadu and the local and regional histories that have shaped and been shaped by spirit possession as it exists and operates within that context; the research methods Ram employed in the field; and the theoretical models she uses to analyze possession as illustrative of de Certeau's idea of a "minor practice" in postcolonial south India. Based on over three decades of ethnographic fieldwork that began in the early 1980s and was carried out in the predominantly Catholic coastal fishing villages of Kanyakumari district, and, from the l990s onward, in the agricultural communities of Dalit Hindus in the township of Chengalpattu (near Chennai), Ram describes the relationships she has been able to create and sustain over an extended period of time with Hindu and Christian women who have experienced possession. She also discusses that exposure to the underprivileged caste and class backgrounds of the women with whom she worked disordered many of her own privileged upper-caste and middle class (Hindu) assumptions about religion, culture, and gender in contemporary South Asia.

The first two chapters draw from the wellspring of postcolonial and poststructuralist critiques and disrupt scholarly understandings of religions as self-enclosed, static, and continuous "traditions." By virtue of its standard representation as a "wild" cultural reserve in (most) Western scholarly traditions and modern Indian state discourses, spirit possession, as Ram shows, refuses the discursive closure that has characterized the often essentializing projects of modernity. The projects that Ram explores in Part I have to do with those associated with the modern Indian state and include family and economic planning, health and medical programs, education, and emancipatory programs of reform and activism as seen in the work of NGOs and Catholic Christian initiatives. Such development and welfare programs typically proceed from a taken-for-granted attitude of improving the everyday lives of rural villagers and manifest in the form of moods and bodily orientations inhabited by a variety of Indian state intellectuals.

Using Gramsci's category of "state intellectual" and his theory of "orientations," which "may be conscious, but [may] also contain existential and embodied dimensions that are less than conscious" (p. 17), Ram discusses the planners, priests, reformers, medical professionals, teachers, and demographers, who not only share the language of the established state, but also see with the eyes of the state, to mobilize villagers into a rationalist vision of modernity. Bringing in Foucault's theory of governmentality, but not without challenging its assumptions about governmental hegemony as *only* representational, Ram makes explicit that, in the official practices of Indian state, modernity constitutes a direct function of governmentality as exhibited by the different and collaborative roles of state intellectuals and the set of orientations they share. What is more, state intellectuals' mobilization of rural Tamils into the energies that cling deliberately to national modernizing projects occurs primarily by affective means, and not merely by discursive techniques. As Ram says, "…even among modernizing intellectuals in India, modernity is far more than an exercise in knowing" (p. 35). In this light, the affect of modernity as constituted in rural Tamil Nadu is elicited from within the influential arena of the bodily orientations inhabited by state intellectuals, which, in turn, make it possible for them to accomplish their goals without having recourse to conscious decision-making or strategic choice.

In part 2 of *Fertile Disorder*, consisting of chapters 3 through 7, Ram deepens the epistemological applicability of Gramsci's notion of affective orientations as shared dispositions by exploring the phenomenological conjunctures established between the symbolic and the

psychosomatic in the spirit possession world of Tamil Nadu. The chapters incorporate and synthesize precise analytics ranging from the phenomenological philosophies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, to the social theories of Bourdieu and de Certeau, and to feminist theories of performativity articulated by Butler to craft a more accurate, if still by necessity partial, account of spirit possession in Tamil Nadu. Ram even makes clever, but careful, use of some of the more recent models of the unconscious and infant development as articulated within post-Freudian psychoanalysis to comprehend the intricate relationship between the individual and the psychosocial dramatized by possession. More significantly, as classical anthropology would have it, Ram puts etic formulations in conversation with the everyday emic epistemologies that are "performed" on the ground by spirit possession in rural Tamil Nadu. While a number of emic concepts surface in Ram's fine ethnography, those of *paḻakkam* (lit., "familiarity" and "habituation") and *naṭamuṟai* (lit., "comportment") stand out to this reviewer. Both of these Tamil terms accentuate the significance of the interplay of corporeality and affect in rural Tamil women's experiences of spirit possession and persuasively interface with Ram's use of Merleau-Ponty's concept of "the body of habit" and Bourdieu's reworked notion of the "habitus." To that extent, Ram argues that "[d]emons and ghosts are not discourses about moral injustice. They are terrible and ambiguous creatures that spring forth from mutilated and severed bodies" (p. 96).

Chapters 3 through 7 march confidently ahead with moving vignettes of Tamil women who experience possession as both affliction and cure by capricious and portentous south Indian goddesses like Icakki Amman, for example, who is worshipped in smaller shrines near the coastal villages and in larger temples in Kanyakumari district. Ram's analyses are drawn from the performance-centered genres of life stories, the complaint, and the female lament. The life stories the women told to Ram share many of the same structural and thematic features of the female lament and constitute the bulk of the ethnographic data featured in *Fertile Disorder*. Each chapter poses a signal challenge to a standard western conception of the individual subject. Moving beyond the deprivation model of possession developed by Lewis, Ram argues against prevailing theories of female spirit possession as illustrative of conscious choice and stratagem. Rather, the Tamil women whom Ram knew experience possession as an unwanted and unbidden interruption in the potent life cycle junctures of marriage (chapters 3 and 7) and maternity (chapters 4 and 6). At the same time, the interruption of Icakki Amman and other spirit forces into the rural women's lives may just as well operate as a powerful cultural intervention (chapter 4) in the female life cycle, offering Tamil women a powerful respite from the tragedy, stigma, and uncertainty that infertility, miscarriage, and infant death pose to fragile human lifeworlds.

Against this backdrop, Ram reconfigures agency in a new way to foreground it as an experience of accommodation, likening the agency cultivated and mediated in possession to the quotidian female experience of pregnancy as discussed by Young in connection with western women. In chapter 5, Ram spotlights the worlds of female mediums, who lack the "cultural capital" (Bourdieu) enjoyed by their more respected male counterparts who experience possession in formal ritual contexts and stand within a recognized tradition of knowledge and apprenticeship. The skills that female mediums gain and, over time, harness by attuning themselves to the possessing goddess are spotlighted, as are their relationships with petitioners as devotees of the goddess. Situating the possession of female mediums within specific temporal and spatial contexts, in which the "habitus" of a shared Tamil past are made performatively present in "the body of the habit" (Merleau-Ponty) depicted by the medium *qua* goddess, Ram draws attention

to the processual nature of possession in rural Tamil Nadu (chapter 6). But just as importantly, in chapter 7 she shows that possession as enacted in the divine "courts" of the goddess—i.e., at the village shrines and homes of Hindu and Christian mediums—gives female petitioners, for whom injustice occurs primarily as non-reciprocity in marital, kin, and familial relations, access to a space where they can voice their complaints that they have ceased to matter to those most intimately concerned with their welfare. Spirit possession dramatizes the latent healing potential available to petitioners by allowing them to see and be seen by a goddess who promises retribution in the form of restoring "the missing dimension of connection" (p. 208).

In Part 2, consisting of chapters 8 and 9, *Fertile Disorder* repositions possession within the sphere of social theory (chapter 8) and reconsiders the validity of emancipatory models of freedom and politics as a framework to understand the agency cultivated in female mediumship, and female spirit possession more generally, as resistance to power, or as empowerment, or even as "a radical liberation from caste, class, and gender relations of power" (p. 252).

Chapter 8 discusses the ways that traditional representations of spirit possession in social theory have been accomplished through an unquestioned application of an implied Christian model of possession. For Ram, social theories built on this theological model consider possession to be symbolic of "society" acting in the capacity of an "immaterial" force that enters the world and impinges on individuals who experience invariability of consciousness, and whose "mute" bodies serve as passive "containers." "Agency is made to reside in an immaterial spirit" (p. 230). By contrast, Ram proposes a theory of the "motility of the body," in which the body in movement and the orientations it enacts spatially and temporally via its comportment perform personhood. Spirit possession dramatizes the motility of the body as a moral orientation to the world, where the body of habit and the "body of the moment" (Merleau-Ponty) are conjoined and a less-than-conscious subject generates the improvisation characteristic of innovation.

Chapter 9, the conclusion, returns to the book's vital claim that the agency cultivated in mediumship performs the medium as both an instrument and an agent who gradually attunes herself to a presence who is experienced as "alien, disturbing, afflictive, or simply foreign" (p. 255). According to Ram, to consider as agency that which is created in possession through the slow temporal process of "receptivity" (Keller) and the mimetic incorporating of an other that is initially external (Taussig) into the possessed woman's virtual boundaries directs attention to those aspects of everyday life that "modernity leaves out of its adjudications" (p. 272). Ram argues that the dominant construction of subjectivity inherited by Marxist-inspired feminisms assumes that "nothing less than a liberation both 'full' and 'final'" (p. 271) from a less-than-conscious subjectivity qualifies as "real" agency. She uses Mahmood's (2005) work on female pietism and agency in Egypt as an example of "a quintessentially modern project" (p. 266), which abhors "all that is not chosen, willed, or held in mind" (p. 267). Since spirit possession requires the freeing up of consciousness to generate particular competencies, skills, and understanding, which must be accommodated by a less-than-conscious subject, it is made to be invisible by modernizing projects. And yet, if taken seriously, Ram suggests that "minor practices" such as mediumship and possession potently make visible "fertile" sites not only for disordering habitual categories of thought, but also for revealing "unsuspected dimensions of familiar movements and practices [that may] complicate wider debates over modernity" (p. 276).

In sum, *Fertile Disorder* succeeds in the ambitious task it sets out to accomplish with respect to disrupting the ways that scholars and state intellectuals tend to imagine the modern and to shifting our attention to those unnoticed, and yet all too familiar, quotidian dimensions of life that continue to pierce modernity and refuse erasure. By linking the agency cultivated in spirit possession and mediumship to the everyday practices of human lifeworlds, Ram brings that which has been theorized as "wild" and, by implication, discursively made mute into a shared framework in which possession authoritatively communicates through its own heightened affects important messages about what it means to be human in the world. As Ram shows, while the ways that possession affects the bodies of men and women in Tamil Nadu may be gendered (that is, Tamil women experience possession as unwanted and afflictive, whereas Tamil men receive years of informal training in temples and develop the capacity to be possessed by deity), the agency experienced in possession may be said to illustrate the universal capacity of humankind.

But there remains a lacuna in Ram's fine ethnography. Although her work draws on an impressive swath of scholarship on spirit possession around the globe and untethers views of agency, subjectivity, and consciousness from their traditional underpinnings, the shadow of invisibility of another work on spirit possession in Tamil Nadu makes its presence known to this reviewer: Perundevi Srinivasan's doctoral dissertation (2009) titled, *Stories of the Flesh: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the South Indian Goddess Mariyamman* (The George Washington University). Like Ram's work, *Stories of the Flesh* similarly addresses issues of *habitus*, subjectivity, presence, and power in female mediumship and possession in the context of the capricious south Indian goddess Mariyamman. This goddess receives worship all throughout Tamil Nadu state, rather than, as in the case of Icakki Amman, in its southern regions of Tirunelvel and Nagercoil. Most significantly, Srinivasan connects *palakkavalakkam*, which she translates as "habitual practices," with Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*. Perhaps teasing out the salient distinctions between Srinivasan's use of *habitus* to comprehend *palakkavalakkam* in possession with Ram's usage would have accentuated Ram's claims about the agency cultivated via the "habitus" in possession more persuasively. This lacuna, however, in no way diminishes the value of *Fertile Disorder* to the social sciences and the humanities. It is a commendable work that deserves to be read, discussed, and debated by virtue of the very assumptions it unsettles.

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