

Humour, Homes and Gardens: Martha, Feminism and Anthropology

Kalissa Alexeyeff

In 1991, while studying at La Trobe University, I first encountered Martha's writing. We read 'Reflections of an anthropologist who mistook her husband for a yam' and 'Better homes and gardens' in an Honours elective subject, and I still have the paper version of 'Reflections' in my possession all these years later—Martha's first draft from the 1989 Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania conference, held in San Antonio. Both texts transformed my ideas about what could be meaningfully written about in academia and changed the course of my life forever! These works are also indicative of the imprint Martha has made on feminist anthropology and, perhaps remarkably, given its hyper-masculinist tendencies, her influence and leadership in the field of Melanesian anthropology.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the academics in humanities and social sciences at La Trobe University included a heady mix of Marxists, both homegrown and European. We were taught by pot-smoking phenomenologists and a range of feminists, including eco-feminist (Janna Thompson in Philosophy), radical feminist (Adrian Hearn in Legal Studies) and feminist film critic (Barbara Creed, who introduced us to such alarming cultural tropes as *vagina dentata*). Psychoanalysis, via Freud and the Frankfurt school, was popular and postmodernism was also beginning to make its mark. Lecturers smoked during class and supported our activism over actions such as the introduction of university fees. Perhaps every undergraduate student feels like this, but it did seem to be a significant period in which we could still change 'the system',

be this capitalism or patriarchy. Certainly, drinking cask red wine during an afternoon tutorial, while discussing Marshall Berman's wonderful interpretation of Marx in *All that is solid melts into air* (1982), made it seem so.

Martha's anthropology class was certainly cutting edge. We read many papers that were still in draft form—Martha's enthusiasm for these new and theoretically exciting works was infectious. One article that nearly drove me to drop out of the class because it seemed simply too difficult was the late Patrick Wolfe's 'On being woken up: The dreamtime in anthropology and Australian settler culture' (1991). In it, he demonstrated how anthropology and colonialism creates 'others' as non-contemporaneous. 'Authentic' Indigenous Australians are located in the 'dreamtime'—a time that is out of place. It is this displacement that served to legitimise colonial rule and its logic of elimination. Martha's careful and methodical elucidation of this argument helped to both blow my mind and encourage me to return for another week of class.

This was also the time of growing critique of the concept of 'culture' and the ethnographic method. We read *Writing culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), which was also reaching peak popularity, in addition to many of the emerging anthropological and feminist critiques. It was both an exciting and challenging time. I remain grateful for Martha's solid commentary on both the promise and the pitfalls of these critiques of objectivity, the crisis of representation and reflexivity.

Martha's 'Reflections' is a perfect example of this balance, in the way it utilises a reflexive style to demonstrate the political purposes of humour. In this article, Martha discusses joking as a form of 'ritual clowning' that encompasses teasing, parody and burlesque and its function as 'gentle forms of castigation' and a style of social incorporation. On Tubetube, joking is 'a feminine social grace' (Macintyre, 1992, p. 142) that is connected to skills of hospitality. Here, I digress slightly to note that I like to think of Martha as 'Jane Austen of the Pacific'—a vigorous commentator on injustice, in possession of searing insight into oft-overlooked details of social interaction.

Martha is also a bit racier than Austen. This was evident, for example, when she recounted her attempt to explain her Freudian interpretation of some local myths to her key informants. She selected a story in which the protagonist is 'a small hairy yam with a voracious sexual appetite'—

an obvious phallic symbol, or so Martha thought. The old men thought this to be hilariously far-fetched, and an older female relative scoffed in ridicule. Martha recounted:

I should have realised that her mischievous smile disguised a plot. She had me at last! My rigid celibacy, had (as she'd predicted) warped my mind. Deprived of sex for months on end, my disturbed mind could no longer distinguish between yams and penises. If I squatted while weeding in a garden she would make some comment about my hoping for my lover to emerge. If I was in a group peeling yams, I was most expressly *not* to be given the small elongated hairy yams—goodness knows what I might do with them!

... the joking was a means of managing my alien status, of incorporating me with laughter at those points where my behaviour or ignorance revealed my relationship as fictive. No woman in their thirties would voluntarily remain chaste while her husband and his family were miles away. Well then, I must have secret lovers ... even if they turned out to be yams! (Macintyre, 1992, p. 137)

As a relatively innocent 21-year-old, I recall being shocked that you could talk about sex, let alone joke about it at university. Several years later, during fieldwork in the Cook Islands, I again recalled the significance of this work as I explored the use of humour to articulate relationships. These commonly involved inverting forms of social power between chiefs and commoners, men and women and locals and outsiders (from colonial officials to present-day tourists). Highly sexualised forms of joking were also particularly popular in same-sex interactions. Although I honed my ability to appreciate sexual innuendo, a particular 'drinking song' still makes me blush, to this day. It was sung by older women sitting in a church hall, industriously weaving mats. The song's lyrics referenced the resident pastor and attributed to him some highly unorthodox sexual predilections. The women's mirth was amplified by his proximity in the adjoining building and presumably by the women's public status as village and church leaders.

'Better homes and gardens' appeared in *Family and gender in the Pacific*, edited by Martha and Margaret Jolly (1989). This book was a landmark publication that challenged representations of the domestic and the so-called 'private' sphere as unchanged by missionary and colonial intervention. In addition to showing how kinship, the gendered division of labour, patterns of marriage, eating, sleeping and child care were

reconfigured during this period, the authors collectively make a case for the consideration of these changes as more than simply indicators of more fundamental economic and political shifts in the public sphere. It is a work that has assisted younger scholars in interrogating further the colonial impact on local understandings of intimacy, sexuality and gender relations.

Martha's chapter in the book examines changes in house style, gardens and trade in relation to missionary intervention on Tubetube. One striking aspect of the work is that it reveals how the contemporary architecture of villages—bush huts, tropical flowers, fruits and vegetables—while evoking untouched paradisaical 'life lived off the soil' (Macintyre, 1989, p. 169), are in fact a recent construction. Prior to missionisation, houses on Tubetube were large communal structures and gardens were insignificant because most subsistence items were imported via the islands' vast trade networks.

The chapter also argues that the burning of local houses by Australian patrol officers and their replacement by homes that Wesleyan missionaries considered more familial did not simply mark the end of a specific architecture, but also ushered in new forms of consumerism: 'on Tubetube the items which people perceive as essential accoutrements of the civilised Christian household are those things they saw first in missionaries' houses; lamps, tables, chairs, crockery, cutlery and linen' (Macintyre, 1989, p. 169). We read precise and appealing Austen-esque detail about the linen too: 'linen (hand-embroidered or decorated with tating)' (p. 169). For those like me, who were unfamiliar with this last term, tating is a handcrafting technique used to make lace edging, doilies and collars.

As I re-read 'Better homes and gardens' for this festschrift, it also struck me how Martha attends to masculinity as a politicised identity. To my mind, this represents an early attempt in anthropology to understand men in feminist terms—that is, as a gendered construct produced by structures and relations of power. Martha shows how men's public roles in maritime trade were severely curtailed and, in some respects, women's economic standing increased. The promotion of horticultural activities by missionaries enhanced women's status as traditional landowners and gardeners, while white traders eroded the men's roles as traders and 'pacification' by colonial administrators meant that they could no longer be warriors.

These two works have had a huge impact on me, because they enabled me to consider the possibility of writing about things I valued, such as fashion, gardens and music, in relation to seemingly more serious

concerns. Both works dealt with subjects such as domestic space, aesthetics and social repartee alongside the political economy. Thanks to feminism, these feminine arts and gendered politics came to be considered politically significant aspects of social life and as worthy of scholarly scrutiny as kava drinking or pig tusks in ceremonial exchange.

Martha's level-headedness, in addition to her curiosity about new ideas and fashions in anthropology and beyond, meant that she was always prepared to encourage people to 'move on' and expand their horizons. This helped when I asked at the end of my Honours year, 'who is this Derrida everyone is talking about?' Martha, always with her finger on the pulse, recommended I undertake a master's degree in comparative literature and critical theory with Elizabeth Grosz, which covered all manner of European philosophy from Derrida and Lacan to Irigaray and Kristeva. In the mid-1990s, it was the coolest degree in town. I went on to write a thesis on dance, femininity and globalisation, aiming in part to pay legitimate attention to the humour and philosophies of happiness that were so important to Cook Islands sociality. Martha was influential here too, suggesting that I undertake this PhD at the new Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at The Australian National University. This place too felt like the spot to be, as it was filled with so many inspiring people, whose ideas were at the forefront of postcolonial scholarship.

Finally, both 'Reflections' and 'Better homes and gardens' are also emblematic of Martha's life outside academia. As those who have been to her home will know, she has the best garden ever. She is also a quilter and a bag maker, she has incredible jewellery, and she is an amazing cook. Martha even makes very realistic marzipan fruit every Christmas. She spreads her remarkable talents through her social graces, the fruits of her garden, her culinary delicacies and her sage advice, in addition to through her very important and inspiring scholarly work.

References

- Berman, M. (1982). *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. E. (Eds). (1986). *Writing culture: The politics and poetics of ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Macintyre, M. (1989). Better homes and gardens. In M. Jolly & M. Macintyre (Eds), *Family and gender in the Pacific: Domestic contradictions and the colonial impact* (pp. 156–169). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Macintyre, M. (1992). Reflections of an anthropologist who mistook her husband for a yam. In W. E. Mitchell (Ed.), *Clowning as critical practice: Performance humor in the South Pacific* (pp. 130–144). Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Wolfe, P. (1991). On being woken up: The dreamtime in anthropology and in Australian settler culture. *Comparative History and Society*, 33(2), 197–224.

This text is taken from *Unequal Lives: Gender, Race and Class in the Western Pacific*, edited by Nicholas A. Bainton, Debra McDougall, Kalissa Alexeyeff and John Cox, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.