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Women's Place in the Andes: Engaging Decolonial Feminist Anthropology

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***Women's Place in the Andes: Engaging Decolonial Feminist Anthropology.* Babb, Florence.
University of California Press, Berkeley, California: 2018. 304 pages.
Photographs, notes and index included. \$85 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.**

Reviewed by Mary E. Wilhoit, Lyon College

Florence Babb's *Women's Place in the Andes: Engaging Decolonial Feminist Anthropology* is a refreshing and unique collection that puts Babb's writings since the 1970s into dialogue with her more recent work and with contemporary feminist theory broadly. Where some scholars might be inclined to dismiss past publications as the products of a different time, Babb has done something more productive and introspective here, composing new chapters to dovetail with and offer insight into her earlier work and "staging conversations" between her own studies and the contributions of recent feminist and decolonial theorists (220). This initiative, part of what Babb calls the "lifelong process" of decolonizing scholarship, has long involved translating and presenting her findings around the Andes. In this reader it also means reanalyzing a cross section of her ethnographic data in terms of recent work on race, sexuality and epistemic disobedience (221).

Babb revisits her early study of the Vicos development project, her ethnography with market women in Huaraz, her studies of tourism, and her experiences at the 1982 Congress on Research on Women and the later Feminist *Encuentros* in Lima, meetings that bookended major periods of research. This involves a reconsidering of her rich ethnographic data that foregrounds women's economic acumen and resilience, their political engagement and their roles in burgeoning tourist economies. In the commentary chapters flanking her ethnographic selections, Babb also draws on and reviews the work of myriad other Andeanists, highlighting their and her own contributions to disciplinary debates including over the gendered imbalances implicit in discussions of 'productive' versus 'reproductive' labor, the value of studying women's political consciousness in the absence of direct organization and protest, and the changing ways that gender and ethnic identity coalesce to produce economic inequities. The end result is a fascinating (Andean) core sample of layers of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Anthropological theory. From the default focus on men in much modernization theory and in many early Marxist approaches, through discussions of gender complementarity and the dawn of decolonialism, to the rise of intersectional approaches and the growth of popular feminism in the Andes, Babb traces her own, her scholarly peers' and her interlocutors' roles in assessing and contesting gendered experience. Babb's three sections of past selections line up fairly neatly with this timeline, allowing the reader to witness the influences of broader theoretical trends on her own work.

The history presented ultimately brings important epistemological questions to the fore. What does a transnational, decolonial feminism look like today? How can feminist anthropologists best merge the critical economic concerns of the mid-20th century with the focus on identity that came after? And, how can we best balance concern over the impossibility of 'speaking for' peoples elsewhere with acknowledgement that the immersed-outsider perspective may sometimes be what gives anthropologists the unique ability to 'see the forest?'

Babb tackles these issues ethnographically, describing numerous moments in which she presented her work to interlocutors, local scholars and activists, and welcoming the reader to

consider these actors' perceptions of her own research and findings, of the nature of gender inequality, and of the role of feminist thought in their lives. Her reanalyzing of such pieces as her 1976 thesis on the Cornell Peru Project archives from Vicos provides another kind of illustration. Written before the heyday of decolonial scholarship in the Andes, and the accompanying argument that many contemporary gender inequalities are products of imperial/colonial, rather than indigenous, lifeways, Babb's 1976 thesis criticized the applied anthropology project at Vicos for failing to address gender and potentially contributing to the exclusion and silencing of rural women. As a vignette, this chapter captures quite clearly the value of the self-critical, revisiting model. The anthropologists involved in that project, as Babb notes, were deeply well intentioned. And yet, as her examination suggested, anthropologists themselves can inadvertently be the powerful outsiders promoting unequal gender relations. If we avoid subjecting past work to the penetrating, analytical reconsideration our field is known for (which Babb has taken on here), we risk missing precisely this kind of discovery.

Interestingly, the penultimate chapter takes the reader back to Vicos, which Babb returned to in 2006 and 2010, finding the community to now be hosting eco- and agro-tourist experiences. Although the Cornell Peru Project left Vicos in 1962, Babb notes that gendered economic divides appear consistent as women, less likely to be fluent in Spanish, are more or less excluded from working in tourism. Intervening ethnographic selections, ranging across the Andes, are often much more optimistic, as Babb turns to her investigations with market vendors and tourist encounters, working with autonomous and economically powerful women and interrogating the parameters of the informal sector. But even as women's circumstances and scholars' theoretical approaches change, continued instances of intersectional exclusion, like the one above and like those she documents in recent cultural representations including television and film, suggest the labor of feminist scholars remains imperative.

Women's Place in the Andes will certainly be of interest to Andeanists at all stages. But it will also, I suspect, be of interest to scholars of gender generally who are trying to find their own theoretical voices, and who may grapple with the frustrating distance that can seem to manifest between studies of political economy and those of identity and decolonization. Babb invites the reader to consider critiques and praises of her own work in this collection, and does so with curiosity and respect. As such the book ultimately illustrates in a complex, multi-scalar way one of the most important talents of the successful anthropologist, in any part of the world: that of listening.