

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MICHAEL LAMBEK and PAUL ANTZE, eds. *Illness and Irony: On the Ambiguity of Suffering in Culture*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2003, 153 pp.

Although anthropologists recognize the importance of ambiguity for a discussion of everyday life experiences, this phenomenon often does not take center stage in our written works. *Illness and Irony* is a notable exception. Michael Lambek and Paul Antze have put together an intriguing collection of articles that address, through the vehicle of irony, the interrelationships among ambiguity, culture, and suffering. As such, the collection not only makes an immediate contribution to the literature of both medical and psychological anthropology, but also has the potential of leading the way towards the development of a new line of thinking for future studies of illness and suffering.

Given the potential importance of the volume, some readers may be disappointed to find that Lambek and Antze do not attempt to provide: (1) a thorough review of the literature dealing with irony and/or ambiguity in the social sciences; nor, (2) a formal summary and conclusion. These omissions, however, should not be seen as weakening the volume. Although desirable in many respects, I believe that a detailed literature review would only have served to draw attention away from the strong, individual contributions in the book, and to bog down the enterprise as a whole. Michael Lambek's "Introduction," especially when combined with Paul Antze's chapter on "Illness as Irony in Psychoanalysis," is effective in providing the relevant backdrop and context necessary for an understanding of the various aspects of irony and ambiguity addressed in this collection of articles.

The key, underlying premise to the volume is that:

Illness provides a condition (or set of conditions) in which irony rises readily to the surface. It does so in the experience of sufferers, in the theories of those attempting to understand illness, and in the practices of those attempting to alleviate it, whether by prevention or cure. (Lambek, p. 5)

Much of the discussion revolves, directly or indirectly, around the contrasting themes of rhetorical and dramatic irony. Within this context, Anne Meneley focuses on fright illness among Zabidi women, Michael

Lambek addresses a case of "rheumatic" irony in spirit possession, Janice Boddy examines the effects of colonial processes on the practice of infibulation in the Sudan, Lawrence Cohen discusses the place of irony in attempts to understand dementia, while Andrew Lakoff and Paul Antze address issues related to Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis. The aim, however, is to move beyond identification and discussion of specific instances of irony, and its relationship to particular cases of illness and suffering. More specifically, the authors address broader issues concerning the role of irony in: human agency; the experience of suffering (as well as the social, cultural, and historical contexts of this suffering); and, the processes by which people come to terms with themselves and others.

Collectively, then, the articles do an excellent job of examining the interrelationships between irony and larger psychological and sociocultural issues. A focus on dramatic irony (the unrecognized irony of fate in people's lives), however, raises two important concerns for me. First, what possible implications might arise as a result of anthropological interpretations of dramatic irony – i.e., implications for how we may end up representing both research participants and ourselves? Second, how do we avoid generating potentially negative consequences through our interpretations? To their credit, Michael Lambek and Vincent Crapanzano do touch on these concerns in the "Introduction" and "Afterword," while Anne Meneley provides a useful example of how a personal experience of fright illness affected both her field research and her understanding of the relationship between irony and interpretation. For future study, however, the concerns outlined above should receive greater attention.

Vincent Crapanzano's "Afterword" serves as a good substitute for a formal conclusion. Crapanzano skillfully avoids the potential pitfalls of providing the last word in an edited volume. He refuses, for example, to provide the final voice of authority that brings closure to the discussion. Instead, he acknowledges the various themes the contributors have examined, provides a balanced critique that identifies areas that could be addressed to a greater extent, and makes a number of suggestions that leave the door open for future study.

Illness and Irony is the type of book that will appeal to both academics and students interested in health and illness, psychoanalysis, and the study of tropes in culture and narrative. The book would also serve as a useful text capable of generating discussion in both graduate and upper-level undergraduate courses.

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