

**“Authenticity and National Identity in
Jean Langford’s *Fluent Bodies: Ayurvedic Remedies for Postcolonial Imbalance*”**

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**Langford, Jean M. 2002. *Fluent Bodies: Ayurvedic Remedies for Postcolonial Imbalance*.
Duke University Press Durham and London.**

Perhaps the greatest among many strengths of Jean Langford’s *Fluent Bodies* is that it is so good to think with. Through a deft combination of historical and ethnographic research and brilliant reporting, *Fluent Bodies* dives deeply into a devolving complex of health practices that collectively use the name Ayurveda as a label.

The book follows a maze of contemporary practices, including urban South Asian home remedies based on understandings of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ foods, medicinal herbal lore popular in the countryside, standardized Ayurveda taught in Indian colleges, and eclectic practices geared to an international clientele. In the process, Langford shows, and questions, how Ayurveda is becoming a more coherent thing. Where the term was once translated as “knowledge of life” or “long life,” it is now, tellingly, often translated as the science of life.

Langford finds in the contemporary practices a common thread involving the idea that illness develops through an aggravation or an increase in bodily *dosa*, of which there are three, *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. And a key purpose of much treatment is to “calm or remove” the aggravated *dosa* that is deemed to be responsible for the illness. Understanding *dosa* is no easy task. Often translated as humours, *dosa* are treated sometimes as substances, sometimes as processes, and sometimes as principles, and varieties operate differently. I only just began to get something of a feel for these operations after reading through the dozens and dozens of the compelling examples that Langford reports.

In the first instance, what is especially impressive in Langford’s account is her success in moving beyond a taxonomic approach to analyzing Ayurveda, whether as culture or as ethnomedicine. The book is thoroughly respectful of research traditions in medical and cultural anthropology that have treated Ayurveda as a distinct medical system embedded in a particular cultural matrix that can then be compared to other medical systems embedded in other cultural matrices. Indeed, she initiated the research with the goal of figuring out how Ayurveda is changing taxonomically by adopting the institutional trappings of Western medicine, especially colleges and professional societies.

But through the very openness, thoroughness, and humility of her experiences in participant observation and interviewing, a persistent concern led her elsewhere. People were both using and adopting Western practices and epistemology in ways that seemed to locate them as what Homi Bhabha has called “mimic men” and resisting those practices and epistemology at the same time.

The book became an honest and systematic display of the rifts and ruptures between the enframing of the modern episteme and the health practices that use Ayurveda as a label. My favorite examples of these rifts come from Langford's accounts of educational and professional institutions. She stumbles into huge gaps, for example, between schedules and actual meetings, as when one scheduled lecture did not take place because students were waiting for the speaker in a room outside the lecture hall, waiting for the speaker to walk by, and the speaker, sitting in a faculty lounge, said no students were in the lecture hall to teach. She also documents claims of corruption in Ayurvedic educational institutions, showing how a swift transition from training sponsored by patrons to education legislated by the state introduced a discourse of accountability that is both regularly implemented and regularly resisted.

Reading Langford's account made me both laugh and blush, for I had just returned from interviewing officials in the Ministry of Education in Egypt, which is frequently criticized as corrupt by activist engineering educators. Langford's account of corruption as a rift between modernist enframing and everyday actions helps me resist a modernist urge to get to the bottom of things and instead follow how the image of corruption lives in ongoing struggles.

By documenting rifts and ruptures, *Fluent Bodies* works to avoid locating itself as one among many attempts to describe an authentic Ayurveda, in the sense of understanding persons, social spaces, and knowledge through an opposition between reality and its representations. Working to move beyond an anthropology that offers authoritative representations of cultural realities to an anthropology whose experiences of incomprehension, miscommunication, and raw frustration also "offers rare opportunities to detach from deeply ingrained ways of knowing."

But *Fluent Bodies* does not entirely eschew conceptual framing. Organizing the text is the idea that Ayurveda has become a strategic sign in a variety of political and cultural maneuvers. By systematically displaying the rifts and ruptures between modernist enframing and diverse health practices as strategic political and cultural maneuvers, the text reveals their many power dimensions. Devolving through late colonial and postcolonial experiences, Ayurvedic practices become moves to grapple with, and remedy, imbalances engendered by a modernist image of a world as a collection of nations. In this sense, the focus on rifts and ruptures becomes a strategic analytic device for problematizing modernist framing itself. The contribution is fundamental and fundamentally important.

Because the text is so good to think with, I would like to use it to ask you, Jean, myself, and others on two issues: the discourse of authenticity and the operations of national identity.

(1) Regarding authenticity, I want to ask you to use the opportunity of this session to reflect on the audience for this book. What sorts of audiences does it imagine? I read it as speaking in the first instance to anthropological audiences, especially medical anthropologists, who have not given up the desire for authentic culture. How does the book address other other audiences?

Fluent Bodies book makes an important admission early on, namely that "it seems we can no more talk ourselves entirely outside of the modern than we can talk ourselves entirely outside of signification or entirely outside of history," with references here to Derrida and Chakrabarty. Would you consider using this acknowledgement to describe what you see as the strategic moves and maneuvers that contribute to the effectiveness of this book? I've had the nagging sense in reading the book that the account depends heavily upon representation for its effectiveness, even while calling attention to the limitations of representation. For example, it has many sentences that assert that "what's going on is not this but that," as well as a number of summary statements that present in straightforward expository language what the account accomplishes.

I raise this issue not to criticize in some logico-empirical move, but to offer a characterization designed to push a bit further the point about authenticity. As I have said, my sense is that *Fluent Bodies* wants to help destabilize modernist enframing by offering itself as an exercise of interpretive resistance. At the same time, one possible interpretation of its effectiveness is that its story replaces one type of representational account, that of authentic culture, with another, that of people strategically improvising political responses to the confrontational turbulence of everyday life. From this point of view, the account gains its force in part by appearing at an historical juncture when readers have moved past assuming a world populated only by nation states to trying to figure out something labeled globalization (By 'readers' here, I mean both academic readers of the text and popular readers of the fields of anthropology and STS). In other words, this account may help free us from categories that now feel rigid, especially typologies, but not from the project of categorization.

As *Fluent Bodies* asserts, I myself see no way out of writing persuasive accounts today without declarative sentences. So by raising the possibility that the text does offer readers an alter-semiotic and, hence, may not escape a modern epistemology of representation and enclosure, I am not suggesting that achieving an escape is what it should have done or is even possible.

Rather I am asking if the very ruptures it finds in the Ayurvedic adoption of, and tension with, the modern may also be characteristic of all engagements with modernist enframing, even in the West and by Western social scientists. In other words, the alter-semiotic of strategic improvisation raises the possibility of seeing that dialogic engagements with the epistemology of representation, whether in science and technology or other arenas of life, may be a lot more interesting and complex than is typically judged to be the case by folks who yearn to break out of the sense of enclosure or confinement. Your account makes me wonder if the image of enclosure isn't all it's cracked up to be, even here in a Western home.

If we're not comparing analytically enclosure with the absence of enclosure, then maybe we're better positioned to query the effectiveness of analytic representations in terms of their links to time and place, e.g., your account is effective in the here and now. How does that work?

Secondly, I'd like to ask you to use this discussion to ask readers of your text, including yourself, to reflect further on its implications for studies of nationalism and national identity. By locating the account historically between an 1836 cannon shot asserting British authority over indigenous medical practices and contemporary struggles with national identity, *Fluent Bodies*, in a way, describing the devolution of maneuvers across a span that includes both colonial and postcolonial moments, beautifully I might add. Your account points repeatedly to nationalist transformations by mentioning contemporaneous events, calling attention to nationalist dimensions of strategic moves, and increasingly quoting documents published under the auspices of government. Yet the connection to nationalism per se, e.g., as emergent movements, etc., remains loose.

Why this looseness? Or better, what are you hoping to accomplish by keeping the connections loose and variable?

I've spent considerable time, for example, ruminating over the image of imbalance. It seems to me that imbalance could not be an issue under a dominant image of empire because the separation between civilization and native/primitive was hierarchical by definition—no room was left to resist by theorizing and enacting balance. The possibility of balance appeared to emerge at the point that the image of the nation scaled up, perhaps because nations live with the constant threat of imbalance. Maybe it was with the nation, then that balance became a conceivable possibility,

hence making the demonstration of equality in mass, weight, or, better, essences one of a relatively small number of potentially effective maneuvers.

My sense is that your analytic preference is to characterize the nationalist moves as just that, strategic maneuvers by people grappling with turbulence, some of which involves the nation state. [Because I haven't reached the conclusion yet, I may be seriously missing the point here] But once this point is made, how else can people use your work? How would you like your account to contribute to others' stories about nationalism, or would you? Is there any value, for example, in exploring the extent to which the maneuvers you describe are patterned in some way?

Or am I just missing the point here? As I prepare for the session itself, I want to take care to formulate my requests for additional reflection in ways that minimize asking your text to do things it was not designed or positioned to do. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you feel me to be making such requests, even in this email. What I'm actually hoping to do is to join with you and others in using this text to improve the sorts of subsequent work we carry on ourselves. Such is one reason for recognizing your book with the Carson Prize.

Congratulations!
More next week.
Warmly,
Gary

Contributions from anthropology?