Reviewed by Daniel Cohen
Wood and Water magazine

Anthropologists usually study cultures from the outside, claiming that this gives them a distance essential for scientific work. Against this it can be argued that one cannot understand cultural meanings if one is not fully participating. Tanya Luhrmann, in *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, followed the traditional approach in her study of magic and the occult in Great Britain. Susan Greenwood takes the braver course of maintaining a creative tension between studying from the outside and participating from the inside. Her account includes reports of her own experiences and feelings as a student of high magic and of Wicca and feminist witchcraft, her later reflections on these, as well as accounts of her discussion with other practitioners.

The book has its origins in a PhD thesis, and in parts is hard reading when it is addressed to anthropologists and uses their technical language. Even here, it is fascinating to observe her challenge to the profession with her claim that “[T]his deliberately participatory approach is essential to an understanding of contemporary Western magicians’ otherworlds, and as such is a valuable tool of research and should not be contrasted with ‘scientific truth’ or seen to threaten the anthropologist’s objectivity.” She uses the word

Reviewed by Douglas Ezzy
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This is one of the most stimulating and rewarding ethnographies of contemporary Witchcraft I’ve read. Greenwood has worked hard, and it shows in the quality of her findings and analysis. Her writing is clear, insightful, and draws on a sophisticated theoretical framework. She describes herself as a communicator between the worlds of academia and magical counterculture. She is clearly widely read both in the academic literature and the magical texts, more than competent in both worlds, and skilled at revealing one to the other.

The book was originally a PhD thesis in anthropology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Covering High Magic, Wicca, and Feminist Witchcraft, Greenwood draws on extensive fieldwork and participant observation. It appears she was initiated into each of these traditions and her discussions covers each of the traditions equally. After an introduction to her research there are two chapters that introduce High Magic and Witchcraft respectively. The following three chapters examine more general themes that run through the practice of magic and the experience of the otherworld. She discusses: healing and identity, the role of power in magical identity, sexual identity and politics, and understandings of good and evil.

A smattering of her conclusions provides a sense of the value and sometimes provocative nature of her work: “I suggest that magical... continued next page
identities are structured through a psycho-spiritual interaction with the otherworld, rather
than constructed from social discourses of the ordinary world” (p. 118). “I suggest that most
people become involved with magic because it is associated with the acquisition of power” (p.
135). “Only feminist witchcraft offers a practical political model for women’s empowerment
in the socio-economic world” (p. 177). Each of these statements, somewhat baldly stated here,
are supported drawing on extensive extracts from interviews, notes from participant obser-
vation, rituals, and notes from Greenwood’s own magical work. While I do not agree with
all the conclusions, the book made me think about the issues in much sharper focus.
I was fascinated and thrilled to read an academic monograph that takes spiritual experi-
ence and the otherworld seriously. Young and Goulet’s collection, Being Changed,
opened up this intellectual space for me some time ago, and Greenwood begins to map it out. Reject-
ing a Western rationalist view of magic, Greenwood argues that spiritual experience should
not be explained away, but accepted as a source of knowledge. She provides a thoughtful cri-
tique of previous ethnographies that have failed to respect the beliefs and experiences of
the otherworld (such as Luhrmann’s Persua-
sion’s of the Witch’s Craft).
Greenwood’s approach is truly ground
breaking and I applaud her courage and insight
in presenting the argument that spiritual expe-
rience should be taken seriously. Like other
recent innovations in research methods, I
know I will have trouble convincing my col-
leagues to take this seriously. The hold of ratio-
nalist Enlightenment method is still strong in
academe. However, as the number of studies
like Greenwood’s grows the distanced pseudo-
objectivity generated by the rationalist tradi-
tion will increasingly be seen as a methodology
that systematically misunderstands spiritual

Cohen review continued:
’magician’ to denote any practitioner of
magic; this usage is deliberately chosen,
but will jar with many pagans. However,
most of the book is of value to pagans,
with its outsider-insider’s account of the
otherworld. She describes the otherworld
as both inner and outer, as associated
with spiritual beings, as involving a shift
of consciousness, and as a time and space
distinct from, but also very closely con-
ected to, everyday reality. She gives
detailed descriptive accounts, both from
her own training and that of others.
Her outsider status enables her to crit-
icise magicians in useful ways; some of
her criticism would apply to mainstream
religions, but we may think we have
solved these problems. For instance, she
remarks that witchcraft’s emphasis on
Nature owes more to 18th century
Romantic interpretations of Nature than
to an engagement with the natural world.
She argues that relying on the otherworld
as a source of morality and ethics can, on
the one hand, lead to a group consensus
that is unspoken and so cannot be chal-
lenged by members, and on the other
hand can bypass all connections with the
wider society. She remarks that “Women
are venerated in most magical practices
(especially witchcraft), but it does not
necessarily follow that high evaluation in
the otherworld translates into equal
status for women in the ordinary world.
The religious aspect of worship does not
equate with the changing the social
world; indeed it frequently reinforces it,
giving gender stereotypes romantic or
even divine legitimation.” All in all, a
valuable but inexpensive book which is
highly recommended.
experience. Her work gives me hope and courage!

Greenwood has a short discussion of the theory of hermeneutics and the social construction of ‘reality’ (pp. 42-44). However, she seems not to have worked this fully through her analysis. To take the ‘otherworld’ seriously, as a genuine site of knowledge, does not require an uncritical acceptance of magician’s talk about the otherworld as some of her earlier statements seem to suggest. Although, in fairness, her analysis is not uncritical. Rather, she privileges the magicians’ understanding of the otherworld. However, it almost seems that the influence of social processes comes as a surprise that not only contradicts the claims of the magicians, but also surprises Greenwood. She argues that despite magicians’ claims, the power and experiences derived from the otherworld are shaped by this worldly concerns with status, power, and identity claims. This signals a tension at the heart of the book between the desire to respect the otherworld, as an experience that cannot be explained away by social processes, but at the same time her findings that the magicians who participate in the otherworld are profoundly shaped by social and political processes.

I’d argue that all worlds, mundane and alternate, are socially and culturally constructed. As I see it, the ethnographic move (sociological, anthropological, or hermeneutic) is to understand reality as always and already constructed. The problem with Western rationalism is not simply that it has tried to explain away other realities, but that it has ignored its own mythological character, setting up a false dichotomy between objective truth uninfluenced by social factors and subjective experience that is socially constructed. Greenwood takes the first step, arguing that alternate realities should not be explained away. Given the simplistic and culturally insensitive approaches of past ethnographers, this is a huge and immensely important step. However, I’d argue we need to go further and reject the false dichotomy. Rather than trying to present the otherworld as an unproblematic reality, and then problematize it, I’d begin with the expectation that practices, knowledge, and experiences of the otherworld will be shaped by the social background of the magician, by politics, power games, and identity processes. The key question is how the otherworld and the social world interact.

I felt a little uncomfortable with what she describes as a fundamentalist flavour in some of the magical schools. I was not sure if she was really talking about fundamentalism in the sense of a closed mind, high symbolic boundaries, and a narrow social group, or whether she was using the term to describe her experienced difficulty with the requirement to believe in order to participate. It is nearly impossible to participate in any social group without participating in their symbolic world. Even more so when participation requires such intense personal reflection and work with symbolic worlds. The suspension of disbelief is quite different from fundamentalism. Maybe magical groups do have fundamentalist tendencies, but I think the term needs to be used with care, even though it is only a relatively minor aside in the book.

The book contains a wealth of suggestions and ideas for new directions for research. It sets a high standard and has initiated some searching questions that deserve careful discussion. I hope to see many more like it. If I should meet Susan Greenwood I’d ask her: Did you enjoy your fieldwork? Do you think the academic study of mystery religions is a good idea for those who want to practice them? What sorts of responses have you had from your academic colleagues? I’m sure there would be a lot to talk about ...