Symposium Review of *The Lives of Amish Women*—Karen Johnson-Weiner

Gracia Miller
Sheila Petre
Vlatka Škender

Follow this and additional works at: https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/amishstudies

Part of the Anthropology Commons

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you through this survey. Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

**Recommended Citation**


This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.
Symposium Review of *The Lives of Amish Women*—Karen M. Johnson-Weiner

**Gracia Miller**  
*Homemaker, author, herbalist, and pedagogist*  
*Old Order Amish*  
*Arthur, IL*

**Vlatka Škender**  
*Cultural anthropology*  
*Independent researcher*  
*Düsseldorf, Germany*

**Sheila Petre**  
*Homemaker, author, and editor*  
*Washington Co., PA-Franklin Co., MD Mennonite Conference*  
*Mercersburg, PA*


**INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM**

Who should respond to a cultural anthropologist’s monograph about Amish women? In developing a symposium for Karen Johnson-Weiner’s *The Lives of Amish Women*, the author’s own text provided an answer. Inasmuch as Johnson-Weiner frequently quotes the voices of Amish women, how about an Amish woman offering an unmediated voice? And inasmuch as Johnson-Weiner quotes many plain Anabaptist women authors, how about one of the writers whom she discusses, an opportunity for the spoken about to speak back? And, finally, inasmuch as Johnson-Weiner’s disciplinary home is cultural anthropology, what about a cultural anthropologist who is experienced in Amish research?

And that became the slate, a two-prong approach facilitating the emic view from a couple of plain women and an assessment of the theoretical moorings from the discipline of anthropology. Homemaker, author, herbalist, musicologist, and Amish adherent Gracia “Schlabach”—now Mrs. Lynn Marcus Miller of Arthur, IL, as of October—has published two major books, the widely referenced *Gracia’s Herbs* and *Now Thank We All Our God: A Guide to Six German Hymnals*. She is also a current collaborator with her husband and others on a German school curriculum, the first workbook of the *Regenbogen* series having been released this year. She has published two articles in the *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies*, addressing music and Russian Mennonite schooling in Mexico, developed from her own work as a teacher there.

Sheila Petre is a prolific author/editor, homemaker and mother of seven, and Conservative Mennonite adherent living in Pennsylvania. She is well respected among plain Anabaptist women authors, and has made great contributions to writer networks, best represented in the three edi-
tions of her *Vignettes: Anabaptist Women Writers*, which includes profiles from just over 400 Amish, Amish-Mennonite, Conservative Mennonite, Old Order Mennonite, German Baptist, Russian Mennonite, Charity/Remnant, and other plain Anabaptist writers. She is a frequent columnist in plain Anabaptist periodicals, including *Ladies’ Journal*, from which some of her words were used in Johnson-Weiner’s book.

Vlatka Škender recently completed her doctoral work in anthropology at the Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität in Münster, Germany. Her dissertation, titled “The Narrow Path: Cosmology and Social Reproduction of Amish Society,” evaluates the Amish social and cultural system following Louis Dumont’s theories of individualism and holism. A portion of this dissertation was published in the spring issue of *JAPAS* (Vol. 8 No. 1). She is a philosophical intellectual whose writing precision and theoretical sharpness permits a pleasingly nuanced delineation of Johnson-Weiner’s undergirding theoretical emphases.

As both an academic scholar and plain Anabaptist adherent, I find that this symposium raises more questions than it answers, questions about the utility of theory for understanding gender, complications with the rather fluid category of *Amish*, underlying value systems informing discussions of what should be, the tension between the etic and emic perspective, assumptions about what inherently represents subject matter of interest, representation (and appropriation) of “the other” in popularly oriented scholarship, the indispensability of reflexivity for ethnographic researchers especially when researcher-subject ideological differences are sharp, and the complicated interaction of scholarly interpretive authority and the voices of the people written about. And as this special issue’s authors all attest, and our reviewers affirm, the conversation is just starting.

—Cory Anderson, *JAPAS* editor

**DISCUSSANT 1: GRACIA MILLER**

I took *The Lives of Amish Women* in hand with great curiosity—and a bit of trepidation. Would I discover new and startling insights about my peers, about myself? Reading the book turned out to be a favorable experience; now I have been asked to share my thoughts about it. But how can I describe an extensive work in a few words? Should I try to speak for all Amish women? I will offer various comments and opinions, with my husband’s approval. My preference, though, would be to discuss my viewpoint in person while peeling potatoes.

My first impression of the jacket is not favorable. Have we here the stereotypical connection between quilting and the Amish female?! But the pieced design and the applique-look lettering hardly look like something my quilter friends would put together. And besides, the four-hole buttons are the type we use on men’s shirts; dress buttons have two holes. My hunch is verified by reading the credits. This background was created with digital tools, not our way, with scissors, needle, and thread. How ironic.

The back-cover blurbs inform me that this “much-needed book fills a long-neglected gap in Amish studies.” Another reviewer says, “At last.” Were Amish women anywhere clamoring for greater recognition? I doubt it. We are occupied—and fulfilled—in our God-given roles to perpetuate our faith and lifestyle. Whether or not the researchers choose to direct their studies toward us is irrelevant.

Of course, no book should be judged by its cover. Before I have read the entire preface, I am persuaded that Johnson-Weiner covers her topic with great skill. Her views are objective but kind, and the book is organized in a logical order. It is not a who-is-who among Amish women, but a book that tells why.

Chapter one, “The Dynamics of Amish Women,” connects past and present with a sweeping look at women in Anabaptist history, in the migration to America, and in the ever-shifting Amish communities. I found the historical references illuminating and also appreciate the author’s treatment of gender roles among our people.

In chapters two and three, “Becoming an Amish Woman” and “Marriage and Ever After,” the reader is led through various milestones of an Amish woman’s life: childhood, school, youth, marriage, and motherhood. From infancy, a little Amish girl is surrounded by role models. She is taught the accepted social norms of our culture and the necessary skills for homemaking. Upon reaching adulthood, she, in turn, becomes teacher and nurturer. Women frequently work and worship together, and, at times, we gather to weep with one
Chapter four, “Events that Bring Women Together,” describes special occasions, from work bees to funerals, and highlights women’s roles.

Our faith is practiced, and it is taught by example. Chapters two and three capture this very well. It’s humbling to think of all the influence imparted by the women in my life: both my grandmothers and one step-great-grandmother, eight aunts, the older ladies in our church district, and the women in our neighborhood. I also owe much to my great-grandmother, Mrs. Levi (Sarah) Schlabach of near Charm, Ohio. On Christmas morning, 1927, a terrible explosion ensued when she attempted to start a fire in the cook stove. By evening, she died of severe burns, leaving three young children. Her dying request was, “Raise the children Amish.” Apparently her concern was real; my great-grandfather with his second wife and their children joined the Conservative Mennonites after these three had reached adulthood.

The expected pattern of marrying and having children does not happen for all Amish females. Chapter five, “Women Out of the Ordinary,” discusses both challenges and blessings encountered by Amish singles, widows, and childless women. I’m rather partial to this chapter, because some of my own experiences fit into this category: many years as a single, now a new bride whose peers are making weddings for their daughters.

If anything, I would say this book depicts singlehood as bleaker than what my single friends and I consider it to be. But then my friends and co-workers are an exceptional group. We’ve had rollicking good times—and cried on each other’s shoulders, too—teaching school in the States and in Mexico, and working on a German curriculum for Amish school children. Together we’ve knotted comforters for relief, picked blueberries, biked miles on the Erie Canal Trail, and assembled a ten-year time capsule that we hope to open together.

Above all else, this book accurately portrays how Amish women and their life experiences are extremely diverse, and why. In chapter one, “The Dynamic Worlds of Amish Women,” Johnson-Weiner describes three broad “paths” taken by Amish communities and refers to them repeatedly throughout the book. Some communities maintain a preindustrial, agrarian lifestyle. Others follow an entrepreneurial lifestyle with home-based businesses, and still others allow a wage-labor lifestyle of working in a factory. Amish differ in their way of keeping house and their outlook toward interacting with outsiders, yet all Amish women have these things in common: “They wear plain dress, speak a German dialect, rely on horse and buggy for local transportation, and most importantly, with their male counterparts, they reject ‘worldliness.’”

Amish women themselves are intrigued by how women in other communities are different. They discuss things like how each other’s coverings are made, the pleats in the dresses, and the typical wedding menu. I must confess that Amish diversity is of even more interest to me just now than usual. After our wedding this fall, I migrated from Lyndonville, NY, to Arthur, IL, my husband’s home community. Lyndonville is a small New Order Amish settlement in western New York with two church districts (founded 1998) while Arthur is an Old Order community with 30 districts, established 1864. I often find myself making comparisons between the two, and also comparing Arthur to the much, much larger Holmes Co., OH, where I spent my growing-up years. What is same between all these places? What is different? Has my own identity changed?

To be sure, much more is same than different. Yes, there are some cultural differences. But as far as non-use of electricity, household furnishings, clothing, patterns of worship, and the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, the differences between my three “homes” are minimal. This goes to show how much Amish women can have in common, despite distance and affiliation. Too bad the book’s coverage of Arthur, Illinois, is limited mostly to quotes from an older source (Nagata, [1968]1989).

The author obviously knows many Amish women on a personal basis. Time and again she shares first-hand accounts, from helping with household tasks to celebrating a special occasion. I especially like the IPA transcriptions of conversations. But it seems to me the book (including the photos) highlights women among Swartzentruber Amish and women from Lancaster County in a way that is disproportionate to their number among the greater Amish population.

Another concern I have is that readers could be misled by the author’s personal accounts unless they are reading very carefully. The section “After the Ceremony: Preparations for Life” mentions in a single sentence that “most young people in most progressive communities are aware of menstruation and reproduction” (p. 89). Yet the
author goes on to recount eight conversations with Swartzentruber Amish who were mostly uninformed before marriage. By far, more space and many more details are devoted to the uninformed than to the informed, even though the majority of Amish are informed. On the other hand, few researchers have had such extensive interaction with Swartzentruber Amish. This shows the level of trust built between the author and her friends.

Any book about the Amish written by an outsider is prone to pat classification in some areas. For example, it may seem like a foregone conclusion that communities having an agrarian lifestyle are traditional, those with a wage-labor lifestyle are progressive, and the entrepreneurial ones fall somewhat in between. In some ways, so-called progressive groups are much more intentional with Amish belief and practice and so-called traditional ones are traditional by default. It should also be made clearer that entrepreneurial and wage-labor communities also include families who make their living from the land. It may also seem logical to rank Amish affiliations from one “pole” to the other (p. 93). But in reality, differences are not so cut and dried. One must be part of it to explain, “Yes, but...”

Many books about the Amish describe the New Order groups with several too-general sentences drawn from other sources. The Lives of Amish Women is no exception. Still, this book is a slight improvement over Johnson-Weiner’s (2010) New York Amish: Life in the Plain Communities of the Empire State. There the state’s New Order settlements are lumped with the car-driving Beachy groups and summarily dismissed.

Chapter six, “Homemakers and Breadwinners,” could serve as a yeast, a starting point for more studies of a specific type. A personally conducted survey of ads in recent Busy Beaver papers and Plain Community Business Exchange shows the extent of salesmanship among Amish women, with the primary clientele being Amish women. Many of the products are health-related, such as essential oils, nutritional supplements, and body-care products. Amish women have also been producing natural home remedies, selling safer feminine hygiene products, and compiling countless cookbooks, many with a slant toward healthier eating. I believe a greater interest in health among our people has also made it easier to talk about more sensitive subjects of women’s health, such as treating endometriosis.

In chapter seven, “Reading Amish Women,” the key sentence is, “For most Amish women, the absence of broadcast and digital social media makes print sources especially significant.” I only wish the author’s analysis of magazines read by Amish women would include Home Life, which would help capture another set of perspectives. It is published in Holmes County since 2015 and is edited by a minister’s wife in the Andy Weaver affiliation.

Amish themed-novels. I was in my mid-teens when Beverly Lewis’s earliest best sellers came onto the scene. I kept abreast with her titles, and those of other authors whose books rapidly flooded the market. (I am on Wanda Brunsetter’s mailing list.) But not because I found them titillating; I read them analytically. My wishful plan was to correspond with authors, one by one, to point out their mangling of our dialect, their highly improbable plots, and other inaccuracies. Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s The Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Fiction (2013) gave much fuel for my dream.

Eventually, though, my files with lists of authors and clippings from book catalogs became utterly, hopelessly bulging. After a discussion with my now-husband, it seemed much wiser to direct my efforts in more positive ways, closer to home, to help spread the word among us about the follies of this type of literary fluff. (They are mentioned in our Ordnungs church as something to avoid.) The bulging files were tossed. And I now have recorded a true and accurate Amish romance story in dozens of our letters between New York and Illinois.

My mouth dropped to discover Johnson-Weiner has supplied Amish-themed fiction to Amish women. Treasonous!

Chapter eight, “Change, Diversity, and Amish Womenhood,” highlights the constancy of change and diversity. This is more real than ever. The year 2020 has been a remarkable year for Amish women. Not only did coronavirus disrupt our pattern of worship but it thrust thousands of Amish moms into the homeschooling role. The news of the kidnapping of 18-year-old Linda Stoltzfus from Lancaster Co., PA, affected Amish women everywhere; she is still missing, which causes many hearts to be heavy. And we watch the devel-
opments in Washington, the prospect of a female Vice-President.

*The Lives of Amish Women* provides good information for anyone interested in the Amish. It can also be valuable for our people. An outsider’s perspective can help us see ourselves better and realize where we have room for improvement. Thanks to Johnson-Weiner for her work.

**DISCUSSANT 2: SHEILA PETRE**

I’ve always been curious about the lives of Amish women. And of Mormon women, Greek Orthodox women, Sunni Muslim women, Hindu women, and even of Mennonite women, into which category I fall. Nor is my curiosity limited to these sects: I wonder about childless women, transgender women, women in government, women who design Afghan patterns or English gardens, women who work in morgues or synagogues.

When I began reading *The Lives of Amish Women*, by Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, I anticipated having my curiosity satisfied. And to some extent, Karen does that. She has participated in events within Amish communities for many years and draws on this knowledge and the words they have shared with her about their lives. In eight well-footnoted chapters, she explores the lives of Amish women from her place outside them. Beginning with “The Dynamic Worlds of Amish Women,” she proceeds through “Becoming an Amish Woman” to discourses concerning their marriages, their events, their outliers, their careers, their reading material, and finishes with a summary of her view of their womanhood.

Johnson-Weiner makes a case for the diversity of Amish women, pointing out ways one community may differ from others, and the ways in which communities have changed within the nation over the years. I respect her recognition of their diversity more than I do her apparent assumption that her perspective of that diversity encompasses it. I am not an Amish woman, so I felt unqualified to judge which parts of her narrative accurately reflect the Amish community. I shared a few excerpts—about the Bann, courtship practices, quilts, singlehood, and more—with women who are or have been Amish, and learned that even these women do not agree concerning the lives of Amish women. Only one of them, a former New Order Amish woman, said she thought the excerpts sounded accurate of the larger Amish body, though she said none of it was true of the New Orders, among whom “bikinis would certainly never be worn, even in that strange place that is Pinecraft.” An Amish woman from Holmes County, Ohio wrote, “You simply cannot pigeonhole thousands of people,” and particularly disagreed with the statistics regarding premarital sex among Holmes County Amish. Barbie Stoltzfus, whose words Johnson-Weiner quotes in her chapter, “Reading Amish Women,” (and who, unlike most named writers in that chapter, actually is Amish), objected to Johnson-Weiner’s generalization about the Bann and Meidung, calling it a personal issue, practiced to varying degrees, from quite harshly to not at all. She pointed out that there was a lot of truth in some of the excerpts but “enough untruth to ruin it,” and finished her response with her characteristic humor: “I enjoyed being negative even though I would have liked to be positive.” An editor who lived among the Amish in Maine asserted that not even Amish women have figured out what Amish women are like, and wondered how an outsider, “a feminist, I’d guess,” could shed any light on the subject.

Indeed, in this book, the author’s scope seems constrained not only by her feminism but also by a bias of otherness. When she describes a published discussion about marriage and singlehood in *Family Life* as “remarkable,” she may reveal more about how she looks at them than how they look at themselves. Few Amish women find their own humanity remarkable; with women everywhere, they describe their lives as “a mess” and “shockingly normal.”

In the chapter “Reading Amish Women,” mentioned above, though Karen is careful—except in her misleading title—to avoid claiming that the words she quotes are by the Amish, the named Amish are eclipsed by Mennonites of many stripes, a German Baptist, and at least one writer who is not Anabaptist. The Mennonite writers may be more important than she thinks they are, since conservative Mennonites in general seem to run a little tighter ship than the Amish do; in some places where Johnson-Weiner attributes a change in mindset to a move away from an agrarian lifestyle, I would see the change also being part of this Mennonite influence.

Despite the disparity in that chapter, many of Johnson-Weiner’s quoted writers are indeed
Amish. She has established correspondence with Amish women from a number of communities, and her quotes from their letters bring a touch of authenticity to these pages. Nor are they the only parts to appreciate. I loved best her deft handling of little scenes she observed in Amish circles: the young mother whose four-year-old helps make pie crusts; the courting couples chatting by the fence under the kindly eye of the barn-raising crew; the box of chocolates open on the quilting frame among the spools and needles—these are the glimpses I treasure, the things about which I am truly curious when I open a book describing Amish women.

Where she diverges from the quotations and first-person observations into simplifying summary; or when she dips into Amish writing from 25 and 50 years ago to uphold some pre-established theory about what today’s Amish may believe, I begin to skim. She gives more emphasis to the mores of gender distinction than do the Amish themselves. Some of the traits of Christianity, such as its ability to work from the outside in as well as from the inside out, Johnson-Weiner credits to Amishness; the Amish would more likely credit it to Christ Himself.

As a book for the general population, Johnson-Weiner’s perspective may be in a measure enlightening, just as a European traveler returning from a month-long visit to the Ozarks, Vancouver Island, and Acadia National Park will have a broader perspective of the United States to carry to his homeland than his neighbor who only spent two days in Las Vegas. This doesn’t guarantee that the perspective is accurate, particularly if he wore sunglasses the whole time.

To whom, then, can this book be most helpful? I propose the Amish woman might find it most helpful. I have often received instruction from a mirror, even a cloudy one, and if Karen is shortsighted, she is also gentle, offering a mix together of positive and negative observations—not all of which may fall into the same categories for her reader. She explores aspects of Amish history of which they themselves may not be fully aware. If an Amish woman, reading this book, can look past hundreds of inaccuracies and simplifications and the pervading bias on these pages, she could find much in The Lives of Amish Women to both chasten and encourage her.

And of course, if she doesn’t wish to be chastened or encouraged, I suggest that she would like to read the book for the same reason I did: curiosity about the things she holds in common with people living in cultures other than her own.

**DISCUSSANT 3: VLATKA ŠKENDER**

Hierarchy is dead, long live hierarchy – this was my incipient (and, arguably, very unfeminist) sentiment after recounting Johnson-Weiner’s inspection into the lives of Amish women. Encompassing eight chapters, spilling frictionlessly across some three hundred pages, this book is an ethnographically compendious account on the social cultivation, valuation, and – could it be? – emancipation of the Amish female(s).

Though judging a book by its covers is generally ill-advised, some referential precognitions emerged upon encountering this patchwork-covered hardback: the archetypical and assuaging symbolic representation of the Amish – notwithstanding the quilt’s visual superior, the ubiquitous horse and buggy – subtly insinuated Gertrude Huntington’s *e pluribus unum* model-parable of Amish society; the title, as evocative as it is enfoldng, suggested an amiable narrative on Amish women’s lives awaits the reader. Both premonitions passed muster.

The conceptual continuity of the Huntington-Hostetler-Kraybill intellectual lineage – as well as the decades-long, congenial relationship between the anthropologist and her informants, corroborating Johnson-Weiner’s ethnographic durability and reliability – are highlighted in the monograph’s prelude; the author’s ambition, however, is to transcend the past “paradoxical” presentations, stereotyping, male bias, and scholarly disinterest concerning Amish women (pp. vii-ix). Inspired by a feminist evergreen – namely, Simone de Beauvoir’s assessment that “women are made, not born” – Johnson-Weiner seeks to understand “how infant females become Amish women by exploring the contexts in which they grow up, the activities in which they engage, the values they come to espouse, and the role they define for themselves” (p. xii; Cf. 40).

Proceeding from Etienne Wenger’s model of cultivating social neophytes, the Amish community is analytically conceptualized as a “community
of practice” – and practices, the author proposes, govern the Amish social architecture (p. x). Curbed by the economic-technological parameters as agents of individualization and modernization, the disparate practices and equally divergent modes of their interiorization stimulate the disjunction of social and gender identities, generating “different kinds of Amish women” (pp. xi, 25, 33; et passim). Thus rooted in a temporal, contingent, and differentializing category, the whole of Amish society is characterized by chronic change and diachronic negotiations of the communal and individual social self – the depictions of which are delectably scattered throughout the text.

Johnson-Weiner’s stylistic aptitude is commendable: the reader’s attention is sustained through a coherent interaction of bounteous documentary and tempered analytical textual components within and between chapters. The first among them appeases the historical palate by contextualizing the social-cosmological contributions, capacities, and circumference of the Amish female within the European and American historical, geographical, and ideological charter. Intermittent egalitarian undertones are subtly placated by their holistic counterparts and an interesting choreography of consonant opposites unfolds: Johnson-Weiner foremostly thinks anthropologically and, to rephrase de Beauvoir, is fully cognizant that men, too, are “made, not born.” “Contraries are the sources of their contrariness,” writes Sahlins (2005, p. 88) in Hierarchy, Equality, and the Sublimation of Anarchy: The Western Illusion of Human Nature, so any analysis of the female necessarily points to the other half of the complementary pair and, all the more, to the social whole which encapsulates them.

Turning her gaze towards the gender-circumscribed and gender-enacting rites of passage steering the social appropriation of the female (Chs. 2 and 3) the author laudably lets her informants convey the Amish courting, affinal, procreative, and child-rearing mores, supplementing them with an occasional (post)modernist rumination (Cf. 39). The rhythmic exchange of the ethnographer’s and the indigenous conceptualizations of social realities are as intriguing as the seemingly incongruent congruencies emerging therefrom. For instance, Johnson-Weiner nominally follows Huntington’s egalitarian paradigm when advancing, but not theoretically expounding, the categorical nonconcurrency of “submission” and “subservience” in the female-male conjugal relationship (p. 93). Academics might find such gaps somewhat vexing – another one being the inattention to the structural importance of “superstitions” for the autochthonous cosmological map (p. 47) – yet understandable given the volume’s orientation towards the general audience. But there is more to this – which brings us, in my opinion, to the most impressive aspect, and segment, of this publication (Ch. 3).

Johnson-Weiner clearly eclipses Huntington’s equistatutory vista of conjugal unity and (recurrently) affirms the hierarchical paradigm, including the concomitant ternary structure of part-whole relationships [God→ (man → woman)]. Could one speak of latent Dumontianism herein? When Johnson-Weiner argues that “the relationship between male and female is hierarchical, with God over man, and man over woman,” she acknowledges that “the principle of this unity is outside them and […] , as such, it necessarily hierarchizes them with respect to one another” (Dumont [1966]1980, p. 240f). When asserting that “hierarchy requires submission at all levels” (p. 96) she points towards the fundamental properties of hierarchy: reversibility and complementarity.

As Cécile de Barraud summarizes in Kinship, Equality, and Hierarchy: Sex Distinction and Values in Comparative Perspective (2015, p. 233f), “by subordinating one element to another the hierarchical principle introduces a multiplicity of levels, which allows for the reversal of status.” Louis Dumont ([1966]1980, p. 241) exemplified this with the Indian mother who “inferior though she may be made by her sex in some respect nonetheless dominates the relationships within the family.” This logic is not inimical to the Amish system of idea-values, as one informant’s acclamation demonstrates: “Mothers rule the world” (p. 96). The second attribute of hierarchy cannot be emphasized enough; namely, that it decisively does not imply “a chain of beings of decreasing dignity, […] but a relation that can succinctly be called ‘the encompassing of the contrary’” (Dumont [1966]1980, p. 239). After accentuating the correlativity of the male and female part of the hierarchical whole, Johnson-Weiner thus justifiably rectifies the (Western) erroneous interpretation of subordination – confusing humility with humiliation – by articulating its dialogical,
dialectical, and (de)liberative social-cosmological essence (pp. 92-98).

This third, epigrammatic chapter transpires into an expansive consideration of the disassociating capacity the heterogenous economic-technological determinants exert upon the Amish social universe (Chs. 4-6). The multifarious “income-generating opportunities” (p. 183) – comprising subsistence agriculture, entrepreneurship, and intra/extra-communal wage employment – and the proportional technological advancement-cum-surplus of time are coupled with “growing individualism” (p. 178; Cf. 125, 147) in progressive, and commensurate preservation of the holistic paradigm in conservative communities (pp. 158f, 163-165). The social identity, domain, activities, and calendar of the Amish female are considerably influenced by these kaleidoscopic circumstances and further perpetuated by gender identity-(in)forming women’s publications (p. 190ff) circulating the “changing Amish world.”

As this “changing Amish world” rendezvous with the daunting, “ever-changing, tumultuous outside world” (pp. 230, 235), the Amish female, as per Joan W. Scott’s postulate in the last section of the edition, manifests itself as “an unstable category,” consumed by the “ongoing negotiation within a religious framework for an identity that gives life value” (pp. 233, 243, Cf. 39). The prospect of these negotiations? Permanent metamorphosis, for “what it means to be an Amish woman will only become more complex as Amish church communities renegotiate their social and economic relationship with the non-Amish world” (p. 243).

Heteropraxy, change, and identity-(re)negotiations – the three leitmotifs of Johnson-Weiner’s analysis – are comfortably and efficiently situated within the “community of practice” model she employs. Such perspective is principally concerned with the symptomatic, phenomenal, and oscillating features of social reality but it is hardly chromatographic or dismissive of the underlying value-structures and the perduring social praxes attesting the holistic axiom (Cf. 2, 101, 108, 185).

Speaking with Dumont, the community of practice and the community of values models are hierarchically configured, with the first encompassing the latter in the present frame of reference – scholars will enjoy contemplating the merits and demerits of this approach, as well as the delicate interplay of equalitarian and non-equalitarian conjectures (pp. 199, 217, 219, 225, 242f). The pendulum is known to swing in the opposite direction prior to returning from where it started; is it possible, as Sahlins (1966, p. 134) ironically put it, that “what is apparent is false and what is hidden from perception and contradicts it is true”?

Ethnologists will appreciate the author’s commitment to ethnographic methodology and corpora; throughout the narrative, Johnson-Weiner maintains an unobtrusive, participant-observation demeanor, letting the protagonists’ voices unfold and converge with those of Judith Butler or Michelle Rosaldo. Yet this is neither a feminist nor exclusively feminological volume, but an anthropological inquiry into the embodiment of social identity in the female social being. As such, it will undoubtedly serve as a point of departure for Amish gender studies which are gaining momentum. This is a book on practices which equally speaks of values, on negotiating non-negotiables and non-negotiating negotiables, and, lastly, on social integration – not just of the indigenous social novice but likewise of the anthropologist as the cardinal “other,” the vocational “stranger,” into the social entirety (p. 113; Cf. Platenkamp & Schneider 2019).

This is a surprisingly nuanced, polysemic, and cohesive ethnography; I dare say – much like the quilt illustrated on its covers. What, then, does it portray? Heraclitean “wholes and not wholes; brought together, pulled apart; sung in unison, sung in conflict; from all things one and from one all things” (Heraclitus, f.40, in Graham 2010, p. 159).

REFERENCES


