JEAN-PAUL BALDACCHINO AND CHRISTOPHER HOUSTON (EDS.) *SELF-ALTERATION: HOW PEOPLE CHANGE THEMSELVES ACROSS CULTURES.* NEW BRUNSWICK: RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS 2024. 208 P. ISBN: 9781978837225

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As a comparative collection on how people change themselves across varying ethnographic contexts – China, Italy, Pakistan, Norway, New Zealand, Turkey, Malta, Britain, and the Solomon Islands – this edited volume is quick to distinguish itself from fusing the ubiquity of this self-centeredness with neoliberalism, however far the latter's global reaches. Eschewing the assumption that, because self-alteration projects are everywhere they must be a result of macro socio-political forces, the volume from the outset takes the position that the omnipresence of self-alteration projects across ethnographic sites and times 'relativize[s] neoliberal trends and programs, rejecting the argument that contemporary projects and motivations of self-alteration are generated solely by global capitalism' (2). While a well-established position in anthropology by now, the tendency to inscribe self-alteration's methodological individualism within global capitalism remains an attractive premise outside the discipline and, as a result, this volume's careful framing is helpful. That said, the volume's Part II engages with the socio-political contexts that serve as motivators or provocations for self-alteration, having already examined self-change rather than 'the ontology of the self' in Part I. The volume also neatly sidesteps the intellectual minefield of *which* self is discussed by simply asserting that while the ontological premises of each case-studied-self might differ, the point is that in each case a different self is sought. This sidestepping is convenient in its avoidance. Rather than address the longstanding anthropological question of whether there is a universal notion of the self (contributor Rapport's methodological individualism notwithstanding), or the cultural relativity of the concept of the self, the editors argue that 'self-alteration is a cross-cultural universal' (3), and methodological attentiveness to self-alteration will offer insight into the *a priori* self-assumed.

Whether or not these projects confirm or deny a knowable, universal awareness of a self is not thoroughly examined, nor is the distinction between these differing, traceable, *a priori* selves and culturally-relative selves entirely clarified. Nonetheless, this is a comprehensive volume that, in four parts, largely takes a phenomenological approach to understanding the fluidity of a self. There are several strengths to the volume. Orsini's contribution on Italian anorexia serves as a valuable reminder and reframing that, for those who engaged in disordered eating practices, this mode of self-alteration offers an agency that biomedical models of disease would rather describe as a received mode of suffering. Similarly, Senay's distinction between the Islamic *nafs* or lower self/ego offers important context to what might look like simple apprenticeship amongst the reed musicians they observe. Another

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key insight the volume offers is Rountree's observation that, amongst Maltese 'New Age' shamans, any self-alteration is conceived as connected to a collective Self. What is not made entirely clear in any of the case studies, however, is whether this linkage of lowercase self to any notion of a collective uppercase Self is instrumental, outside of the explicit desire for revolution – does any awareness of waning public support in governance mean overreliance on the interconnectedness of self to Self to effect material change?

Finally, while some of the contributors note that their respective selves changed as a result of participating in self-alteration practices alongside their interlocuters, the volume admits to largely relying on descriptions of self-alteration as 'unseen' changes or on narrative presentations to validate their existence (18). The volume would have done well to include ethnographic instances in which the altering self is continuously archived – with one of the best personal archival recordings one's online presence. Methodological and ethnographic attention to projects that use digital mediums that include analyzing interlocuters' 'digital footprints' would have strengthened the volume's assertion that methodological attention to the changed self tells us something about the nature of the prior self. There are new anthropological studies that take this explicit focus that are not included in the volume, which is a shame for an otherwise comprehensive comparative collection.