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Following Human Hair to Unexpected Places: A Review of Emma Tarlo's *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*

Review by Jenn Porter-Lupu

Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair

By Emma Tarlo

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“Had I become a hair fetishist?” Emma Tarlo asks herself and her reader only eleven pages into her captivating, strange, exciting, and surprising new book, *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*. If you ask yourself that question, the answer is probably a definitive “yes,” but in Tarlo’s case it makes for a passionately-written and extensively researched book that draws together ethnographic encounters in dizzying array of sites from a Chinese wig factory, to a temple in India, to a hair expo in Jackson, Mississippi, to Orthodox Jewish wig shops in Brooklyn, New York, also incorporating 19th and 20th century newspaper ads, chemical and biological structures of human hair, historic and contemporary photographs, and literature, among many other sites and sources. Centering around the trade in human hair, *Entanglement* follows Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, and Gastón R. Gordillo’s *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*, as multi-sited, interdisciplinary ethnographies centered around a thing or category of things. All three have received recent acclaim from the Society for Humanistic Anthropology; both Tarlo’s and Tsing’s books have been awarded the Victor Turner Book Prize for Ethnographic Writing, Tsing in 2016 and Tarlo in 2017, while Gordillo received an honorable mention. Clearly a popular trend in current ethnographic writing, Tarlo demonstrates the vast potential of such an approach by constructing a nuanced and complex, yet cohesive narrative that traces the commodity pathways of human hair (and sometimes also animal hair) into surprisingly intimate encounters.

Tracing hair trades from the 19th century to the present, *Entanglement* follows a commodity that “mobilises hundreds of thousands of people around the world on a daily basis – collectors who scour poor rural and

urban areas in search of this much-valued human fibre, pilgrims who travel hundreds of kilometres to donate it, traders who transport it, workers who move to hair-processing factories in search of labour, exporters and imports who enable its global circulation and distribution” (359). Unexpectedly, hair turns out to be a powerful interlocutor and guide, allowing Tarlo to delve into questions around gender roles, racism, labor and political economy, and materiality, contributing insights to a broad range of discourses. However, while Gordillo’s text has been critiqued for being “at times overly theoretical” (Goldstein 2016, 190), Tarlo leans toward the opposite end of the spectrum, missing an opportunity to engage more deeply with themes of invisibility, agency, affect, and embodiment that are hinted at but minimally discussed in the text. The resulting work is accessible to a public audience and a fun and dynamic ethnography that carries innovative theoretical implications, although with minimal direct discussions of the theoretical concepts on which it touches.

The book begins at a breakneck pace, without a straightforward introduction that presents the rough organization and conceptual underpinnings of the text. The first three chapters, “Strange Gifts,” “Invisibility,” and “Harvest,” dive straight into ethnographic anecdotes in which Tarlo is always narrator and central figure, moving through multiple places and historical moments on each page, while somehow tracing cohesive pathways through relationships and meanings that center these chapters. In these opening sections, Tarlo introduces the hair trade, its historical roots, and its value systems. The next few chapters move slightly slower, centering on particular sets of locales or communities. Rather than setting chapters in specific locations, each section is organized around a theme that touches many sites, histories, and sources. For example, the chapter “Black Hair,” begins at a black hair expo in Jackson, Mississippi, moves to investigate hair extensions and weaves in Dakar, Senegal, returns to Jackson, and concludes at black hair salons in London. Adding to these many locales are insights from youtube bloggers, photographs of 1960s and 70s Nigerian hairstyles, and discussions of natural hair movements during the American civil rights era. Connecting an astounding array of images and ideas, however, results in often frustratingly brief encounters with each interlocutor. We come to understand the broad networks around hair much more deeply than we do any of the individual places or people it touches.

Chapters are each organized around multiple meaningful ideas, resulting in themes that break out of the boundaries of their chapters, and loosely organized sets of connections and moments. Although this can make the book feel at times disorienting and aimless, it overall creates a dynamic and multifaceted perspective on this vast, winding topic, held together by Tarlo’s clear and detailed ethnographic prose. Some moments are, for lack of a better phrase, deeply weird, such as in the opening anecdote in which Tarlo

writes of her friend's donated hair, "I let it out of the bag and stroke it with the reverence it deserves, but something feels wrong. I am caressing the disembodied hair of my friend and she is sitting opposite me, full bodied, tucking into chicken and vegetable soup" (1). Beyond Tarlo's oddly intimate encounters with hair, many ethnographic encounters center around the different types of laborers who engage with human hair. Tarlo visits rural Myanmar, where hair is referred to as a "cash crop," and many earn income by combing through and detangling piles of disembodied hair (234). The value of hair is perhaps best summed up by the supervisor of hair sweepers in a temple in India, who explains, "Hair is more valuable than money... You can find money anywhere, but it is only on a woman's head that you will find this!" (69). To the many people incorporated in this industry, the hair takes on a mystical quality as a valuable commodity that can be grown on the human body, but retains its value by obscuring and hiding the relationships and connections it creates.

A beautifully written collection of moments, people, places, objects, and ideas, *Entanglement* draws you in and takes you on an unexpected journey around a surprisingly rich topic. Recent praise for the book is well-deserved; beyond being a well-written and enjoyable to read, Tarlo's book opens up exciting methodological possibilities for interdisciplinary and multi-sited ethnographic research.

References:

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