

**Konstantinos Retsikas. *Becoming: An Anthropological Approach to Understandings of the Person in Java*. London and New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2012. 192 pp.**

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How readers respond to this book will depend on the preferences they bring to their reading: how they feel about the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and what they look for in anthropological writing. Retsikas presents what he learned about ethnicity, self, space, kinship, healing, and sorcery in East Java, among people of mixed Javanese and Madurese origins, as a demonstration of how fertile Deleuze and Guattari's work can be when applied to ethnographic material.<sup>1</sup> Apart from a certain number of passages at the beginning and end of the book, that ethnographic material appears only in the background, as the foundation upon which Retsikas elaborates his analyses.

The gist of Deleuze and Guattari's work might be summarized as a critique of the long-standing penchant in the Western intellectual tradition of looking "beneath" phenomena to find underlying patterns, regularities, and principles. In place of such "levels" of analysis, some identified as more "superficial" and others as more "profound," Deleuze and Guattari propose an approach that singles out no privileged or generative or explanatory element but, rather, insists on the endless elaboration of connections, relationships, transformations, and, for that matter, divergences. Their famous allusion to "rhizomes" derives from this approach—think of the knobs and sections of ginger root creeping through the dirt in an apparently indefinite and unsystematic growth in all directions at once.

Retsikas finds that this understanding of phenomena helps him make sense of much of the material he gathered in the city of Probolinggo, in East Java, where he did research. He emphasizes particularly people's easy assumption that rather than embodying a static "identity," each individual enacts a labile, multi-faceted, and context-dependent self. That so many of his research subjects have both Madurese and Javanese ancestors—migration from the island of Madura, just across the water from this area of East Java, has gone on for generations—makes them especially ready to acknowledge the congeries of unlike traits every person is expected to exhibit. After all, it is conventional wisdom in Indonesia that Javanese are refined and indirect, whereas Madurese are nervy, brash, and forthright. With reference to the self, Retsikas labels this conception of the individual—now *alus*, now *kasar* (to use the terms Clifford Geertz made famous long ago, and which are still very much a part of everyday discourse in Indonesia), now inclining toward one element of a binary pair (e.g., masculine), now toward the other (thus, feminine)—the "*diaphoron* person." Such a self should not, in Retsikas's rendering, be thought of as *being*, but rather to be caught up in a ceaseless *becoming*, with no point of origin or fixity. This concept gives his book its simple title.

The various chapters ring changes on this theme of a play of contrasting and even contradictory elements inherent in individuals and groups, whether with reference to ethnicity, kinship, healing, or sorcery. I find some of Retsikas's analyses quite arresting.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tran. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

His discussion of the relations between affinity and descent, focusing on the logic whereby the marital relationship is pulled toward the idealized relations between siblings, is illuminating. Sorcery, always conducive to a bit of excitement, gets fascinating treatment as Retsikas shows that its supposed practices hinge on shifting a victim's gender from masculine—closed and resistant—to feminine—open and vulnerable. (Retsikas could, though, have done his readers a favor by linking his account of sorcery more explicitly to the work of others, particularly James T. Siegel, who has written on sorcery in East Java.<sup>2</sup>) Other discussions strike me as labored. In repeating conventional remarks about the contrast between Javanese refinement and Madurese frankness, he neglects the fact that such generalizing comments come into play in some circumstances, yet fall away as people recognize how refined some Javanese are relative to others, and how any individual, whether Madurese or Javanese, is obliged in some contexts to show greater refinement and in others greater frankness. In this instance, Retsikas seems to have taken his own point—that reference to “identity” implies far too solid and unchanging an understanding to make sense of actual people's responsiveness to the shifting constraints of context—less seriously than he might have.

There are pages, not a majority by any means, but definitely a certain number, on which Retsikas's loyalties seem to incline more toward Deleuze and Guattari, or, at least, toward his own ruminations upon their work, than toward the ethnographic material to which he wishes to apply their insights. In other words, his theorizing seems at times to trump the people he is writing about. There is no reason for anthropological writing to read like *People* magazine, a tendency evident in some contemporary writing intended for undergraduates. Yet dense analysis of social life (and much of what Retsikas writes is quite dense) benefits, both in readability and in persuasiveness, when it is illustrated by reference to actual people and their experience. Only then do the stakes in any given analysis really become clear. I found myself wanting to see more appearances, even if only cameos, of individual people Retsikas encountered. Matters start off promisingly, as he describes specific friends. Yet few people appear in the later chapters. And when two Muslim healers receive individual attention, in Chapter 5, Retsikas's discussion moves repeatedly from their quoted remarks to general assertions about Muslim doctrine: what does not appear is how these two men meet up with individuals who come to them for treatment and advice, or how they fit into the specific context of the communities in which they live. The stories each one recounts of becoming a *dukun* (“healer”), for that matter, seem fairly generic. This paucity of ethnographic detail seems curious, since Retsikas tells us that he did his fieldwork living in a small Islamic boarding school. He has apparently written about that in an essay published in 2008, yet we learn nothing about that experience here.

I may only be voicing my own gossip-mongering interest in the details of other people's lives. No doubt many readers will find the sophisticated and expansive analyses Retsikas sets out more satisfying than I have, particularly if they share his excitement about the work of Deleuze and Guattari. However, one irritation I experienced will be shared, I am quite sure, by many readers, and this is no fault of Retsikas but, rather, of his publisher. Retsikas quotes himself telling people in

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<sup>2</sup>James T. Siegel, *Naming the Witch* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

Progolingo that he is Greek. I assume, then, that English is not his first language. If that is true, his command of expository English prose is nothing short of extraordinary. Nevertheless, there are tiny glitches that come up often (e.g., "signaled out" for "singled out," p. 171), glitches that any competent copy editor should have caught. Furthermore, there are sentences that would be perfectly intelligible if only commas had been provided; in the absence of any commas, however, a reader is obliged to read such sentences a couple of times over to make sense of them. Virtually every page exhibits some tiny difficulty of this sort; in each instance, a reader must take a few extra seconds to make the correction in his or her head. No press that has made a commitment to an author and a manuscript should cut corners in the way I have to assume Anthem Press did in this case. It is grossly unfair and should make people at the press feel *isin* (J.), *malu* (I.), and whatever the Madurese equivalent of those words is, that is, ashamed of themselves.