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ENCHANTING BOOKS, REDEEMING FETISHISM:
THEORY AND PRACTICE IN RELATION TO THE LIFE OF BOOKS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Social Anthropology
at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

ENCHANTING BOOKS, REDEEMING FETISHISM

This thesis is a study of books which seeks to understand them and their place in our life world not in terms of their role as a medium of communication but as enchanted and sacred objects which are active agents in that life world. I show how they work as totemic operators or caste marks (by the way they act to distinguish groups of people), enshrined objects (by the ways in which they are literally handled) and ritual instruments (by the way they act as the focus of the new ritual practices of book reading groups). The thesis seeks, simultaneously, to advance a theory of culture which allows us to take a more generous approach to animism and fetishism and it also advances new methodologies for doing ethnographic research in our own life world. To achieve this it draws on and extends the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold and the philosopher Susan Oyama. The thesis argues that anthropology, in relation to the “Western” (in New Zealand “Pakeha”) life world, should practice forms of reenchanting synthesis rather than the reductive, disenchanting forms of analysis characteristic of some anthropological work. The study is based on data collected in a large community survey, on interviews with members of book reading groups, and on ethnographic materials “given” by the world we live in. The location of the field research is a provincial city in New Zealand but materials from further afield in the “Western” world are drawn on as well.
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