CHAPTER 1 Introduction
Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique

Holger Jebens

_Cargo cults might be very like omnivorous but servile chameleons. They gobble up positivist and mechanistic social theory and have plenty of spit left over; they are very good at appearing as any one might imagine them to be._

—Kenelm O. L. Burridge

In Western writings on Melanesian cargo cults, authors point almost routinely to the vastness and heterogeneity of the relevant literature. Indeed, from the “invention” of the term “cargo cult” itself in 1945 (Lindstrom 1993: 15) until the present day, the phenomena labeled by it have exerted a remarkable attraction on “the West,” that is, on academia as well as the general public. Doug Dalton gives one reason for this fascination in stating that the topic “raises the most basic issues regarding assumptions about the interpretation of history and cultural difference,” which, in his view, “need to be understood and debated in contemporary post-colonial anthropology” (2000a: 292). As Lamont Lindstrom (2000: 294) and others have stressed with reference to Lévi-Strauss, cargo cults are “good to think.” They are, one might add, good to think with and good to think against, not only for “us,” but also for their alleged adherents.

As is the case with other topics in the history of anthropology, however, the fascination with cargo cults has been subject to change, being more fashionable at some times than at others. Thus, the late 1950s and the 1960s, in particular, saw a proliferation of “cargoist” writings, among them now classic accounts by Peter Worsley (1957), Kenelm Burridge
(1960), Theodore Schwartz (1962), and Peter Lawrence (1964). Academic interest then seems to have decreased during the 1970s and 1980s, only to reach a new peak again during the decade just past, when various new monographs and special editions of journals have been published. Thus, Joel Robbins, in this volume quite rightly claims that there is “more careful writing about cargo cults in general and there are more detailed ethnographic accounts of specific movements now than there were throughout the 1970s and 1980s.” Testifying to this recent revival of the Western fascination with cargo cults is the present collection of essays.

Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique addresses a very lively and ongoing debate in contemporary Melanesianist anthropology, which builds on and to some extent goes beyond earlier discussions on how to define, categorize, and understand the phenomena known as “cargo cults.” On one hand, some authors plead quite convincingly for the abolition of the term itself, not only because of its troublesome implications, but also because, in their view, cargo cults do not even exist as an identifiable object of study. On the other hand, and perhaps no less convincingly, some scholars argue that it is precisely its troublesome nature that makes the term a useful analytical tool and should therefore be welcomed rather than rejected. By delineating and substantiating the various key issues and positions in this debate, this collection underscores and refines the contemporary reevaluation of cargo cults. The context for doing so has been set by recent “cargoist” writings that have articulated and propagated self-reflexivity. Analyzing Western texts and attempting to apply the term to elements of Western culture itself, however, proves to have the paradoxical effect of shifting our attention back to the ethnographic reality in which the people with whom we work talk about cargo cults in their own way and articulate their own views about the West.

Indigenous and Western discourses, like the images of “us” and “them” that are expressed in their contexts, are here perceived to be mutually influencing and to represent categories of the cultural Self and Other. In arguing for a comparative approach with respect to these discourses and categories, the concluding chapters in this collection seek to develop an attitude of anthropological critique and what Robbins calls “a comparative anthropology of critical practice.”

I

If an increasing focus on self-reflexivity can be discerned in recent “cargoist” writings, it is best understood as a reaction to earlier explanations
that have viewed cargo cults as “protonational” attempts to resist colonial oppression by obtaining Western material goods, as local examples of a supposedly universal “Search for Salvation” (Strelan 1977), or as expressions of culturally specific orientation and value systems (cf. Burridge 1960, Lawrence 1964). What these different explanations have in common is that they all reduce these phenomena to just a few of their respective aspects, which are often generalized in their turn into features of Melanesian culture at large, thus constructing a kind of “cargo culture,” so that seemingly diverse cultural formations, such as economic ventures, the building of Christian parishes, and political movements, all become “like cargo cults.” At the same time, however, the reductions in Western interpretations can be demonstrated to reflect predominant dispositions of Western culture itself: when cargo cults are believed to be primarily about removing material inequality by obtaining Western goods—at least this is what the term implies—the concomitant prevalence of economic metaphors in Western texts might well result from the fact that, as Otto (1992a: 6) puts it, in the West “the economy has become the primary locus of cultural innovation.” In a similar vein, where cargo cults are perceived to be primarily about obtaining salvation, it is hardly surprising to find this view coming from theologians, or that explanations favoring culturally specific orientation and value systems have mainly been authored by anthropologists.

Deconstructing the term “cargo cult” as an essentially Western creation and understanding Western interpretations reflecting the predominant dispositions of Western culture itself is to assume that our “cargo discourses” may unwittingly reveal more about ourselves than about those Melanesian ideas and practices to which they were meant to refer to in the first place. While the epigraph to the present volume, which is taken from Burridge’s 1965 review of Lawrence’s “Road Belong Cargo,” could be seen as its prefiguration, this idea has perhaps most prominently been articulated by Lindstrom in his attempt to explain the history of Western writings about cargo cults as expressing not Melanesian, but Western, desire (1993). Because their perception of the Melanesian Other has proved to be deficient, one might argue, Western authors have reacted by revising the perception of their own cultural Self (cf. Jebens and Kohl 1999: 12), and they have done so not only by examining their own writings, but also by applying the term to elements of Western culture itself. Gerrit Huizer, for example, sees “the obsessive pursuit of material accumulation” during the presidency of Ronald Reagan as a “cargo cult unleashed by the bourgeoisie and its charismatic leaders” (Huizer 1992:
Similarly, Michael Rutschky associates demonstrations in the German Democratic Republic prior to so-called reunification with cargo movements (1992; cf. also Kohl, present volume), whereas Roy Wagner refers to contemporary Western beliefs concerning unidentified flying objects as “our very own cargo cult” (2000: 370, 372).

The more Western cargo discourses were dissected, the more the term “cargo cult” turned into a highly contested label, with some authors even stating “a need to reconsider the advisability of its use at all” (Hermann 1992b: 69). Indeed, as particular aspects of cargo cults are generalized into features of Melanesian culture at large, the term tends to lump together different ideas and practices that actually may have very little in common (Read 1958). Accordingly, cargo cults have more or less been proclaimed not to exist, at least not as a group of analytically distinct phenomena (McDowell 1988). Moreover, as Melanesian culture is constructed as a kind of “cargo culture,” the term potentially exaggerates the distance between Melanesia and “the West,” thus falling into the much-criticized trap of “othering” (cf. Hermann, present volume). In addition, authors have long pointed to the negative connotations of primitivism and irrationality derived from the term “cargo cult” first being coined by planters, colonial administrators, and missionaries in order to denote and dismiss whatever they saw as obstacles to their respective intentions. These negative connotations are also characteristic of indigenous discourses in that they can be detected when Melanesians talk about cargo cults themselves. Accordingly, Stephen Leavitt speaks of a “pejorative understanding of ‘cargo cult’ that is codified in Papua New Guinea law (it is illegal to engage in cargo cult activities)” (2000: 322).

The very existence of indigenous cargo discourses, however, can also be employed to argue against those who might be dubbed the “cargo critics.” If we as anthropologists find our hosts and informants appropriating and making their own use of the term, who are we to try to take it away from them? If we eliminate cargo from our vocabulary, how can we understand its role in peoples’ lives? Such an elimination, it is claimed, would mean missing the chances that the term has to offer. According to Dalton (2000b: 352), the “destruction of the category ‘cargo cult’ ... precludes the critical self-reflection and examination of Western culture and social scientific rationalism” that understanding this category as a Western creation makes necessary. For Otto, the combination of “cargo” and “cult” even constitutes “a felicitous conceptual match” (1999: 97) because it provokes us to think about our separation of economy (cargo) and religion (cult) as distinct cultural domains, and it makes sense “that cargo cults concern also our image of ourselves.”
To some extent, “critics” and “defendants” of the contested label both agree that the way we name, describe and interpret “cargo cults” appears to have a great deal to do with our own culture. In Dalton’s view, this is also true of the phenomena themselves, since he sees them as “a parodic enactment” (2000b: 348) through which Melanesians try to make sense of the fact that Westerners claim “to have grasped universal truths which transcend the limits of mortal men,” while they simultaneously “continue to take from those to whom by all rights and proclamations they should be giving” (2000a: 290). “Western culture,” Dalton argues, “is in this way nothing if not extremely confused and therefore also confusing,” and this confusion, by virtue of being enacted through them, is precisely what makes cargo cults “strange” and “odd” in Western eyes. Therefore, in order to comprehend cargo cults properly, Dalton claims that it is necessary to examine “the irrationality of the Western views Melanesians mimic in what appears to be ‘cargo cult’ type behavior” (2000b: 352); in other words, “to investigate the ‘cargo cult’ phenomenon entails studying not only scientific phenomena but also ourselves as subjects.”

According to McDowell, however, this is exactly where Western authors have failed so far: because anthropology as a discipline is basically about discerning cultural differences by way of intercultural comparisons, interpretations of cargo cults have, in her view, tended to “focus on difference and ignore similarity” (2000: 374). For McDowell, this constitutes a “failure to do genuine comparison” (2000: 378) that not only “allows us once again to distance ourselves from the ‘other’ in ways that imply hierarchy,” but also causes us to “miss an opportunity to use the ‘other’ to understand ourselves as well as to provide an impetus for our own cultural critique, so eloquently called for by Marcus & Fischer (1986).”

Dalton’s and McDowell’s writings can both be seen as typical of much of the recent “cargoist” literature in that, whether interpreting cargo cults as a “parodic enactment” or perceiving a “failure to do genuine comparison,” they concur in stressing—and demanding an elaboration of—the self-reflexivity inherent in the deconstruction of the term and in the concomitant revision of the perception of the Western Self.

II

The first set of chapters in this collection presents three authors who already have established identifiable and influential positions in the critique of Western cargo discourses. Building on his earlier deconstruction of such discourses, Lindstrom analyzes the term “cargo cult” itself, the listings of things allegedly desired by cargo cultists, as well as “four
possible narrative types” within the “cargoist” literature in order to sug-
suggest that there is an “affinity of modes of desire” between Melanesia and
the West and to call for “a genealogy of desire.”

Elfriede Hermann discusses Western “cargo cult” constructions regarding
the Yali movement of Madang Province (Papua New Guinea), which
was described by Lawrence (1964). She focuses on how “cargo cult” has
itself been reconstructed by the inhabitants of Yali’s home village, who
adopted the term in all its negative connotations and now adamantly
deny “cargo cult” in their own regard. Thus, she writes, “The indigenous
activities so promptly dismissed as ‘cargo cult’” appear “rather as reverber-
ations of Western cargo discourses and various Western cultural prac-
tices” and, in this regard, “the Western Self can in no sense be divorced
from the indigenous Other.” For Hermann, however, continuing to use
the concept of “cargo cult” means insisting on such a “Self-Other
dichotomy” rather than to attempt to overcome it. Therefore, she sug-
gests that, if the term must be used at all, it should only be written sous
rature (i.e., “under erasure”). The problematic, if not damaging, effects of
Western discourses are also brought out in Martha Kaplan’s examination
of Fiji’s colonial and postcolonial history. Taking as an example the so-
called Tuka movement, which was “first fearfully imagined and then
made real in colonial perception and then, in many cases, in Fijian prac-
tice and self-definition” before scholars such as Worsley and Burridge had
“reified the category of cult,” Kaplan argues that to move “beyond defini-
tions and reifications” and to replace “an analytical framework using
‘cargo cult’ … by a dialogical account” would allow us to gain a less dis-
torted and perhaps more sympathetic view of indigenous agency.

The second set of chapters can be seen as answering recent calls for
self-reflexivity and expanding the general framework of the contempo-
rary debate on cargo in at least two ways: by referring to the widespread
phenomenon of Christian millenarianism and by, so to say, pushing the
conventional geographic boundary of existing “cargoistic” literature west-
wards, that is, by also including data from Papua and eastern Indonesia.12
Karl-Heinz Kohl describes the rumors evoked by his presence on East Flo-
res and an indigenous myth that people took to be substantiated by the
picture embossed on the reverse side of a German coin he had shown to
one of his informants. Stressing that “the process of anthropological ‘oth-
ering’ can also have some advantages for the one who has been othered,”
and thus contradicting critics such as McDowell, Hermann and Kaplan,
Kohl views the myth allegedly associated with his German coin as “an
integral part of East Florinene indigenous anthropology,” which leads him
into an analysis of the relationship between money and religion in the
West, as well as to an assessment of the postwar history of Western soci-
eties in general and of the German mark in particular. Interpreting the
development of the German currency as “a ‘money-cult’ issuing from the
very heart of a modern capitalist society,” Kohl concludes, building on
Lindstrom’s insights, that “cargoism was a kind of behavior dominating
Western societies in the first postwar decades” and that it was only the
concomitant and “very similar kind of materialist orientation and desire”
in the West that made it possible to reify diverse (and multifaceted)
indigenous movements as cargo cults.

With respect to the eastern Indonesian islands of Maluku and Halmahera,
Nils Bubandt examines indigenous millenarian ideas and suggests
that they “not only reflect local tradition or Christianity but are also part
of a discourse of mimicry of the ‘cargoism of modernity.’” This application
of the term “cargo cult” to the concept of modernity results from
Bubandt’s claim “that modernity itself is a millenarian project and that
this millenarianism is often turned into a cargo cult of modernity by third
world states.” In eastern Indonesia, however, modernity—and “America”
as its “icon” or “simulacrum”—proves to be highly ambivalent, because,
according to Bubandt, people associate it not only with commodities and
Christianity, but also with violence and destruction. Jaap Timmer pro-
vides another example of the connection between cargo and millenarian-
ism postulated by Bubandt, as he records and analyzes a case of millenari-
an critique that the Imyan of Papua direct against their own government
and church and that, though sharing many similarities with so-called
cargo beliefs, leads to the emergence of a new “tradition of knowledge”—
agama. Here, unlike in the eastern part of New Guinea, local forms of
Christianity play an oppositional role, facilitated by Papua’s continued
incorporation into the Muslim-dominated Indonesian state.

The three subsequent chapters represent a return to Melanesia, the
“heartland” of conventional “cargoism.” This move is introduced by
Robert Tonkinson, who simultaneously continues Bubandt’s and Tim-
mer’s engagement with Christian millenarianism. Drawing a historical
comparison between Melanesian and Aboriginal reactions to the arrival
of Westerners, he identifies millenarianism in general and cargo cults in
particular as a response that is characteristic of Melanesia but absent from
Australia. Tonkinson’s account does appear to have some bearing on the
recent deconstruction of the term, for, if “cargo cult” merely constitutes a
function of the Western imagination, one wonders why this imagination
has not been applied to ideas and practices from Aboriginal Australia as
well. This invites the conclusion that there might in fact be a correspond-
dence between the term and the Melanesian ethnographic reality. It is
the latter that is foregrounded in my own and Stephen Leavitt’s contribu-
tions.

My own chapter documents and interprets indigenous cargo discourses
from West New Britain Province (Papua New Guinea) with respect to
images of Westerners and the cultural Self that are articulated in their
context. These images exert a mutual influence, being as ambivalent as
Bubandt’s eastern Indonesian concepts of modernity and “America.” In
my view, this ambivalence mirrors a basic dialectic of passivity or self-
 alienation, on the one hand, and of activity or self-affirmation, on the
other. Drawing on his own fieldwork in East Sepik Province (Papua New
Guinea), Leavitt stresses the religious and “deeply personal” character of
cargo beliefs, focusing on the fact that Melanesians are known to have
associated Westerners who are often believed to live in a world without
anguish, pain, sickness, hunger, or conflict with their own ancestors.
Thus, Leavitt both claims and demonstrates that in general a “more
enhanced understanding can emerge from the more intimate features of
cargo ideology as revealed in the personal narratives of individual actors.”
Accordingly, he urges anthropologists to ground their interpretations on
single cases, that is, to pay close attention to what specific persons actual-
ly say in equally specific situations.

The concluding set of chapters brings together indigenous and West-
ern discourses as well as the categories of the cultural Self and Other
expressed in their context. This is done by arguing for an approach that is
both comparative and critical, as it takes up McDowell’s insight that
“genuine comparison,” in the sense of not focusing on differences and
ignoring similarities, provides us with both “an opportunity to use the
‘other’ to understand ourselves” and “an impetus for our own cultural cri-
tique.”

Dalton illustrates this combination of comparison and critique when, in his contribution, he views the phenomena termed “cargo cults”
as “the Melanesian physical enactment of historical context, which is
provided by Western colonial culture,” and, by the same token, as “an
accurate mirror of the exploitative self-contradictory ideology of Western
bourgeois culture.” Here, Dalton both elaborates on his arguments against
abandoning the term and sustains his call for self-reflexivity; in other
words, for a thorough interrogation of “the most basic premises of West-
ern culture.”

Ton Otto refers to the well-known Paliau movement of present-day
Manus Province (Papua New Guinea)—in his view “an example of mutual attempts at interpretation between Melanesians and Westerners”—and compares indigenous and exogenous notions of “work,” “wealth,” and “knowledge.” As “Western and Melanesian concepts, values and practices” are used “to mutually illuminate each other,” Otto argues that a “sustained comparative analysis” of this sort can form the basis for “a culture critical perspective” that, in turn, he sees as “an intrinsic part of the anthropological method of comparative-ethnographic research as well as a raison d’être of the discipline as such.” Vincent Crapanzano understands hope to be “an emotionally and morally toned descriptor of an existential stance or attitude” that is common to both Westerners and Melanesians, and he calls for a consideration of its role “in cargoism” at three “never fully independent levels of consideration”: “the linguistic (or grammatical), the cultural (or ideological), and the social structural.” Finally, Joel Robbins compares the anthropological critique of concepts such as “totemism,” “kinship,” and “cargo cult” with millenarian practice in both the Papua New Guinea Highlands and South America as another form of critique. Thus, the anthropology of cargo cults and other varieties of millenarianism becomes “part of a comparative anthropology of critical practice.” For Robbins, however, millenarian critique must not be restricted to one’s own cultural Self, because he assumes that “finding new ways to open ourselves to the understanding of other cultures” would allow these cultures to “critique our concepts in ways that allow us to continually develop them.”

III

The various key positions outlined and developed in the present volume prove to be quite divergent: whereas some authors suggest that, problematic or even damaging for a variety of reasons, the term “cargo cult” should be written only “under erasure” or abolished altogether, others claim that “there is, however, a danger, too, in turning away from the central concept of cargo” (Leavitt) and that, precisely because of its troublesome nature, it could profitably be used for self-reflexive purposes. Nevertheless, other contributors do not appear to be particularly committed to the contested label, because they quite comfortably apply the notion of millenarianism as well—paralleled perhaps by the fact that in some accounts “cult” and “movement” are almost used alternately. This terminological heterogeneity, if not uncertainty or even confusion, appears
to correspond to the equally heterogeneous, uncertain, and confusing ethnographic reality itself that, after all, cannot be claimed to exist in the minds of Western observers alone.

Instead of despairing and banning “cargo” from our vocabulary, which would also do nothing to render obsolete the intellectual concerns that have motivated anthropological interest in them in the first place, we should, rather, attempt to look and listen more closely. In this spirit, several of the essays collected here can be seen as indicating an “ethnographic turn.” They examine “the personal narratives of individual actors” (Leavitt) by following Crapanzano, who sees the “rhetorical analysis of ‘cargo talk’” as “a prerequisite for theorizing cargo cults” (present volume) and who, during discussions at the Aarhus workshop, suggested that by considering the temporary and interlocutory dimensions of these discourses—as well as paying attention to ambivalences, contradictions and interstitials—one would be better equipped to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism and detemporalization that have been characteristic of many earlier “cargoist” writings.

When Kohl interprets an indigenous myth as “an integral part of east Florinese indigenous anthropology,” Bubandt identifies views about “America” inherent in the eastern Indonesian concept of modernity, images of Westerners in Papua New Guinean discourses are documented (Jebens, Leavitt), or Dalton takes cargo cults to be “a physical enactment of historical context, which is provided by Western colonial culture,” one feels tempted to take up and extend Wagner’s metaphor: just as our interpretations reflect predominant dispositions of our own culture, the phenomena themselves—that is, both the ideas and practices expressed in their context—may function as a kind of mirror. Rather than arguing over how best to name the mirror, one should examine it first and then discuss whether to agree with Dalton in calling it “accurate” or whether Kohl’s reference to a “distorting mirror” is also valuable, in that there may be significant differences between the picture that is presented to us and our own self-perception.15

Referring to Lindstrom (1993), Otto states that “it is not sufficient for an anthropological culture critique to focus only on Western discourses about cargo cults, without being concerned about the ethnographic reality to which these discourses refer” (cf. also Otto 1999: 92–94). Similarly, according to Robbins, critiques of the literature do “lead scholars to go back to the millenarian data themselves.” It may look paradoxical that the “ethnographic turn” that is reflected in much of the present volume is thus perceived as a reaction to, if not as a countermovement against, the
preceding focus on self-reflexivity, but it may be even more paradoxical that, as we focus on the ethnographic reality in general and on indigenous discourses in particular, our view eventually falls back on ourselves. It is clear that the categories of Self and Other cannot be thought of as separate entities because they are mutually influencing, and this is true not only within Western but also within indigenous discourses. Moreover, these Western and indigenous discourses are themselves influencing each other: Kaplan sees “tradition” as a “dialogical battleground” in the “colonial polity,” and Otto discerns “mutual attempts at interpretation between Melanesians and Westerners.” The impact of Western discourses becomes obvious when Madang villagers “reproduce and recontextualize conceptual components of Western ‘cargo cult’ discourses” (Hermann) or when the Fijian colonial government first imagines the so-called Tuka movement and then makes it real in indigenous “practice and self-definition” (Kaplan). The opposite tendency, namely, the impact of Melanesian discourses, is implicit in the critical anthropological attitude that is based on attempts “to use the ‘other’ to understand ourselves” (McDowell) or to cultivate an understanding that allows other cultures to “critique our concepts” (Robbins).

An impact of the sort described would indeed constitute an important factor in developing a “comparative anthropology of critical practice” (Robbins). To provide a contribution of this sort is an aim that not only underlies the chapters that follow but could also make Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique good to think with (or against) in the future.

Notes


2. Accordingly, one of the ideas leading to the present volume was that the phenomena under discussion could be seen as ways of coping with cultural otherness. This hypothesis takes up the well-known suggestion by Wagner—cited here in the contributions by Lindstrom, Dalton, and Otto—that the terms “cargo cult” and “culture” both represent a view of the cultural Other: “If we call such phenomena ‘cargo cults,’ then anthropology should perhaps be called a ‘culture cult,’ for the Melanesian ‘kago’ is very much the interpretive counterpart of our word ‘culture.’ The words are to some extent ‘mirror images’ of each other, in the sense that we look at the natives’ cargo, their techniques and artefacts, and call it ‘culture,’ whereas they look at our culture and call it ‘cargo’” (R. Wagner 1981: 31).
3. See Bodrogi (1951), Worsley (1957), and Mühlmann (1961). In viewing cargo cults as “proto-national” formations of a transitional kind,” Worsley (1957: 255) follows Jean Guiart (1951a), who has termed them “Forerunners of Melanesian Nationalism.” Andrew Lattas’s work (1998) constitutes a more recent version of the “resistance to colonial oppression” type of interpretation,” because for him cargo cults take place within the context of a continuous struggle in which subjugating Westerners and subjugated Melanesians struggle with each other for power (cf. Jebens 2002: 194). See also note 16.

4. In Lindstrom’s words: “What used to be Melanesian culture becomes cargo cult writ large” (1993: 42).

5. See Hempenstall and Rutherford (1984) and Kaplan (1990b, 1995b). Accordingly, in the 1940s planters and missionaries blamed each other and the colonial administration for causing cargo cults (Lindstrom 1993: 15–25) so that, as Dalton notes, “explanatory emphasis shifted toward the West and away from the Rest” (2000b: 351). In this sense, one might add, the self-referential turn in the interpretation of cargo cults is not entirely without precedent.

6. See, in this volume, the contributions by Hermann, Otto, and me.

7. Otto (1999: 96). Similarly, Lindstrom (present volume) notes that “a combination of the words cargo and cult can make us prick up our ears,” and for Dalton (present volume) this combination “expresses an essential critical nature through the tension between the terms ‘cargo’ and ‘cult.’”

8. Dalton (2000a: 290). Thus, Dalton locates cargo cults neither solely in “Melanesian culture” nor in the Western mind alone, but sees them rather as a kind of “co-production” or, in Stewart and Harding’s phrase, as “an artifact of entwined practices” (1999: 287).

9. Dalton (2000b: 347). In a similar vein, Wagner, having claimed that “cargo cult has grown into something of a Loch Ness Monster,” states the following: “It looks like we will never figure out what it is until we have made some more progress in figuring out what we ourselves might be” (R. Wagner 2000: 372).

10. Thus, for McDowell, not to compare cargo cults genuinely leads to “othering,” just as the term itself does for some critics.

11. Here, McDowell seems to see cause and effect as mutually dependent: the “failure to look at our own culture(s) and its (their) complexities in the light of the ‘other’” is brought about by overexaggerating differences and ignoring similarities, but at the same time this failure also “engenders naive comparison” (2000: 376).

12. Most of the data in this collection, however, come from Papua New Guinea, the Seaboard (Hermann, Leavitt), the Highlands (Robbins), and the adjacent islands (Jebens, Otto). In addition, Kaplan and Tonkinson, whose chapters both have a rather historical orientation, refer to Fiji and Australia, respectively.

13. A comparative approach is already implicit in the contributions by Lindstrom and Hermann, since Lindstrom calls for a “comparative genealogy of desire,” whereas Hermann examines how differences between Self and Other are constructed in both Western and indigenous cargo discourses.

14. A connection between cargo and millenarianism is drawn here by Bubandt, Timmer, Tonkinson, and Kohl, the latter two quite explicitly understanding cargo cults as a form of millenarianism.

15. In this sense, a distorting function is shared by both the phenomena and the term itself because, according to Otto, cited here by Dalton, the “very word ‘cargo cult’ has provided us with a mirror in which we have failed to recognise ourselves” (Otto 1992a: 5).

16. Consider, for example, the images of “us” and “them” expressed in indigenous cargo narratives (cf. my own contribution to the present volume). By contrast, to interpret cargo cults or
millenarian movements as expressions of anticolonial or counterhegemonic resistance seems to presuppose the existence of a fundamental opposition between Self and Other. This interpretation is rejected here by Bubandt and Dalton, on the grounds that it may be the result of a Western projection (Bubandt) or that one rather “needs to adopt a view of Melanesian ‘cultures’ which does not see them as separate from the European global capitalist domination, and sees them as neither its victims nor its resistance” (Dalton). See also note 8. My own position resembles Dalton’s, because I suggest that there is a dialectic of passivity and self-alienation, on the one hand, and of activity and self-alienation, on the other (present volume).

17. Although I agree that there are similarities between Western and indigenous cargo discourses and that the former do indeed have an impact upon the latter, in my view, talking about “reproduction” invites the potential danger of underrating selection, transformation, and creativity in the way Melanesians appropriate and make use of the term “cargo cult.” Thus, missing what might be only apparently similar or what might be “essentially Melanesian” under a “Western surface” would amount to ascribing to Melanesians the role of merely passive recipients of external influences. (I am aware that I am here reversing McDowell’s critique by implying that one should not focus on similarity and ignore difference.)