Perhaps because it was considered a “woman’s subject,” reproduction long remained on the margins of anthropological theory and research. Ancestral status can, of course, be claimed for Margaret Mead and Niles Ne wton’s 1967 “The Cultural Patterning of Perinatal Behavior”; and for Lucille Newman’s series of provocative, brave, and lonely articles on reproductive topics as diverse as abortion, childbirth, and the impact of having a first baby, which she first began writing in the mid-1970s. A decade ago, we were lucky to be able to get our hands on Brigitte Jordan’s award-winning Birth in Four Cultures, published in 1978 by Eden Press, perennially out of print, and now (thankfully!) in its fourth edition. Jordan’s insistence that childbirth had an ecology, and could therefore be studied behaviorally, socially structurally, and historically as well as normatively, dramatically widened the range of tools, personnel, and social relations worthy of anthropological attention and analysis. Collectively, those of us who have worked in the anthropology of birth or the politics of reproduction owe her a great debt: she helped us to imagine a range of questions that could be subjected to empirical and theoretical investigation.

The important work begun in Birth in Four Cultures is clearly continued and transformed in Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge: Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Robbie Davis-Floyd and Carolyn Sargent have brought together a rich array of essays that take their inspiration from Jordan, offering thoughtful and detailed case studies of what she calls “authoritative knowledge.” This concept is elaborated in an opening essay by Brigitte Jordan in which she provides a closely grounded ethnographic account of how medical authority is socially constructed and maintained throughout the messiness of birth in a North American hospital. Jordan offers delicious descriptions based on the “thereness” of participant observation: nurses force
patients into eye contact with the powers of their incantations; second stages of labor are recorded in compliance with ritual exigencies, not rational measurements; doctors' entrances are staged in a manner as grand as the entrada of Aida. Jordan uses her exquisite sense of description to birth a theoretical framework that both grows from and reflects back on the data: authoritative knowledge isn't produced simply by access to complex technology, or an abstract will to hierarchy. It is a way of organizing power relations in a room that makes them seem literally unthinkable in any other way. Antonio Gramsci would, I think, have approved of Jordan's method, for it makes visible the enormous work required to impose a consensual reality across power differences.

And it is this work of constructing and maintaining authoritative knowledge in childbirth that is the focus of all the essays in this volume. In settings as diverse as war-torn Sierra Leone, where medically trained personnel have no choice but to work with indigenous birth specialists; Nepal, where WHO creates a uniform TBA (traditional birth attendant) out of a congeries of local practices and practitioners to the exclusion of the very embedded expertise it hopes to preserve and foster; Oaxaca, Mexico, where indigenous notions of physiology are constantly discredited by government training courses for local midwives; high-tech North America, where active suppression of whatever it is that women might know, think, or imagine about themselves in the birth process occurs. Reporting on the ebbs and flows of authoritative knowledge in childbirth across sixteen societies, the essays in the volume suggest a remarkable range of hegemonic, shared, and contested knowledge formations.

Collectively, such work opens up possibilities for both relativizing the status of Western biomedicine and insisting that its powers be open to sharing and revision in specific local contexts. Moving beyond Brigitte Jordan's insight that the authoritative knowledge of obstetricians and gynecologists should be an object of comparative social investigation rather than unreflective veneration, the work included in Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge will surely inspire the next wave of anthropological investigations. Its rich and diverse ethnographic contributions are at once a testimony to the vivid work now being produced about birth cross-culturally and a force for moving the study of reproductive politics to the center of social analysis.