In the US, anthropologists who began their careers in the 1980’s were taught that Michelle Rosaldo’s feminist work was pioneering but no longer useful. Some of them disagreed and organized a session at the 1992 AAA meeting to "make a case for a general reconsideration of Rosaldo’s key theoretical ideas, especially those surrounding the public/domestic dichotomy, the self and emotion, social personhood and critiques of essentialism in studies of gender and society." (17). Most of the essays in this volume were presented on that occasion. The authors are mostly young, but some represent the pioneering generation and have worked with Rosaldo (Louise Lamphere, Jane F. Collier, Carol MacCormack).

It is an excellent and timely idea to reconsider some of the many suggestions of 1970’s feminist research in anthropology in the light of more recent theoretical debates. Those suggestions are threatened with oblivion, a fate all too common to women’s work and women’s political struggles. Why have women found it so difficult to communicate their reasons and rebellions from one generation to the next? The answer lies in the very structures that feminist research has uncovered and criticized. But now that circumstances permit many women to have academic careers, and feminist research is circulated and debated, we should be careful not to repeat past mistakes.

A generation has passed since Rosaldo was young. Today’s students are concerned with new issues. My own experience has taught me that when lecturing on the hypotheses of the 1970’s, it is necessary to contextualize them carefully, or they will appear absurd from today’s horizons. But not only should we know what was said, and why, thirty years ago. We should also continue to explore some of the tracks that were opened up but then abandoned when intellectual fads changed.

Seeing that the "linguistic turn" has now dominated interdisciplinary discourses on gender for over a decade, and seeing that there is some impatience with it growing among younger students, the moment is just right for a return. What did the pioneers ask and why? How can their questions be reformulated in the light of later debates? How can we return to politically important issues concerning social and material conditions without falling into old traps of reification and rigid cause-effect hypotheses?

This volume is an important contribution to such a return. It will probably be used in courses on gender anthropology, and it should.

However, I also have some objections. First of all, it does not do what it promises to do. According to the back leaf, "each of the essays derives theoretically and politically useful insights from Rosaldo’s work and sets them in motion for new intellectual and political practices." That is not a correct description. Some of the essays discuss Rosaldo’s work in detail, but they tend to defend her against criticism rather than reformulate her insights for renewed usefulness. There is even a touch of idolatry. Other essays focus more on current issues, usually by means of recent ethnography. These are more interesting to read, but their connection to Rosaldo’s theoretical work is tenuous.

The introduction contains some daring claims about links between Rosaldo’s work and Foucault and Butler. To their credit, the editors have included an afterword in which Ana María Alonso suggests another way of updating Rosaldo’s ideas, discussing the materiality of the body in society and how the public/domestic distinction can to be rethought in the light of recent work on capitalism, state formation and biopower.
Many of the essays do remind us of the theoretical advances on gender that were made already in the 1970’s. Some of them do contribute to our understanding of Michelle Rosaldo’s writing. Especially Alejandro Lugo’s essay achieves this, even though it is also the foremost example of an excessively deferent attitude. The chapter by Jane Collier is an interesting summary of Rosaldo’s main theoretical points and political purposes. Christine Gray discusses the intersections of race, class and gender, pointing to some of the inequities that risk becoming invisible unless different dimensions are kept conceptually separate.

So the volume is worth reading. But it should not be used as a general introduction to 1970’s debates on gender in anthropology. As an overview and re-analysis of Rosaldo’s theoretical contributions, it is ambitious but incomplete.