

## Culture



**George E. MARCUS (ed.), *Perilous States: Conversations on Culture, Politics, and Nation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; 381 pages, \$18.95 U.S. (paper)**

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glosses to particular events. One understands and sympathizes with the author's methodological commitment to avoid imposing analyst's constructs over her informants, but is not her exclusive focus on personal meanings ultimately an analyst's construct of another sort? Perhaps the best example of this is in the dialogues, which are presented in a breezy, idiomatic, English style which retains barely any trace of having been expressed in a language based on thought patterns and ontological assumptions different to European ones (indeed, for all the author's candor in revealing the circumstances of the data collection, the question of what language the dialogues were collected in remains vague).

Warkentin's Fofu appear directly intelligible to the reader because the author has focused exclusively on those elements of personal life which lend themselves to immediate intelligibility. But in so doing, she has placed their social existence so far in the background that the reader has difficulty in discerning the outlines of it. Such a study makes one aware of how much traditional ethnography depicts the forest and not the trees; by going to the opposite extreme, Warkentin has presented a very up-close picture of the trees, but has conveyed little sense of the forest.

George E. MARCUS (ed.), *Perilous States: Conversations on Culture, Politics, and Nation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; 381 pages, \$18.95 U.S. (paper).

By Brian Freer

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The late 20th century rendezvous of anthropology and cultural studies continues in *Perilous States*, a volume of ethnographic conversations which are framed in terms of a formidable set of concerns regarding the cultural and political implications of the trajectory and reconfiguration of contemporary nation-states, and explored through dialogue at sites ranging from Eastern Europe to Argentina where contributors with previous fieldwork experience return and encounter unprecedented transformations. *Perilous States*, first in a series scheduled to appear annually until 2000, suggests that sojourns and permanent relocations to the "postmodern", exemplified in texts *de rigueur* such as *Writing Culture* (University of California, 1986), need not encumber the development of ethnographic fieldwork styles

and forms of reportage designed to operate reflexively within the flux and emergence of boundaries in the shifting terrain of social and ethnic identities confronting the enterprise of social analysis. Conceptually, the series, *Late Editions: Cultural Studies for the End of the Century*, seeks to examine thematically relevant problematics, anchored in time, by documenting intersections and lacunae of global transformations as experienced through cultural processes.

In the recent anthropological past, "fieldwork" operated as a referential category in discourse relating to the conduct of research. The volume temporarily silences this conceptual referent as it seeks to secure intellectual space within the realm of cultural studies by providing an anthropologically mediated response to overly textualist approaches described by Marcus as "short on access to the diverse situations of its own contemporary global concerns and commitments" (p.2).

The volume asks contributors to participate in "engaged conversations" (p.6) and Grant's account makes fine use of this approach in his dialogue with Russian members of the Union of Writers regarding the reconstruction of Russian nationalisms in the context of a re-emergent imperialism which continues for one writer "because Russia for them is not a place where Russians have lived since the beginning of time, Russia for them is the places that Russia has conquered" (p.48). The pieces by Milun and Coplan on Hungary and South Africa respectively, also explore contemporary perspectives on history, but they do so from the point of view of public performance artists. Both of these accounts offer powerful commentary on art's potential to transform routine modes of political discourse in ways which blur distinctions between subtle criticism and direct action.

The breakup of the Soviet Union is the setting for Baizer's account of the emergent political roles of shamanism in Siberia and Fischer and Grigorian's conversations with Armenian politicians. These contributions offer perceptive ethnographic commentary on contemporary social movements through their sketches of unlikely politicians who have discovered ways of linking the past to the present in scenarios unimaginable a few short years ago. An Armenian politician with a Ph.D. in art history illustrates this predicament by noting "None of us are professionals . . . We are transitional people. In five years the government must be staffed with professionals" (p.115).

The conversational format of this volume is utilized by Beck, Fischer, and Papagaroufali and Georges as a means for U.S. academics to converse with counterparts and consider the role of the scholar in the post-Cold War. Although these discussions often fail to extend their dialogic potential to include the centre in critiques of historical representation and perspective, they do begin to suggest an increased linkage between advocacy and academia that might have been framed more boldly as a means to better address North American scholars. However, this connection is there to be drawn out in a nicely crafted narrative by Beck in his conversations with Nicolae Gheorghe which evokes the marginalization of Gypsies in Romania by weaving Gheorghe's life-history through a personal narrative which highlights their mutual intellectual interests surrounding the process of ethnic identity in terms of his commitment to community action. The contributions by Holmes and Taylor provide a stark contrast to Beck's account and, in the process, pulls his analysis into tighter focus as they explore, respectively, the ideological manifestations of the new European Right and the narcotics of forgetting as among the many consequences of Argentina's Dirty War.

While this volume eschews the larger questions surrounding the disciplinary status of anthropology by identifying itself with the amorphous arena of cultural studies, it is a sign that the critiques and debates of the past two decades can provide a basis for social analysis.

Peter PITSEOLAK and Dorothy Harley EBER, *People From Our Side: A Life Story with Photographs and Oral Biography*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993; 163 pages (paper).

By Julie Cruikshank

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Peter Pitseolak took his first photograph sometime in the 1930s. Asked to photograph a polar bear by a white man who was afraid to approach it, Pitseolak calmly replied, "If he starts to move, you may shoot him" (p.12). Soon after that, he acquired his own camera and began documenting the day to day experiences of his family during the 1940s and 1950s. On hunting trips, he wrapped his camera in caribou skin and secured it on top of the igloo until

each film was finished so that films would not be subjected to dramatic temperature changes. With the help of his wife Aggeok, he developed his own films on the sleeping platform in their igloo, and then printed them later in his small wooden house in Cape Dorset. When he later began painting with watercolours, he sometimes worked from his own photographs.

But Pitseolak was also a writer. Dorothy Eber first met him in 1971 when she was in Cape Dorset recording biographical data about graphic artists from the region. During her visit to his home in 1971, he produced two notebooks in syllabics in which he had been recording information about Cape Dorset for years. "These are old and wise notebooks," he told her. A year later, he mailed her a lengthy manuscript, also in syllabics. A collaboration developed between Pitseolak, his family who acted as interpreters, and Eber who recorded more than 150 hours of intensive interviews during the last year of his life. The resulting book, originally published in 1975, was soon out of print and has now been reprinted with a new introduction 20 years later.

This orally narrated life story, published with many of Pitseolak's photographs, is a marvellous first person document of seventy-two years of Arctic life from 1901 to 1973. His reason for preparing it, he says, is because memory is so transient: "People my age can never remember what I can never forget" (p.72). His title, *People From Our Side* situates his life on the northern shore of Hudson Strait, specifically on Foxe Peninsula, southwestern Baffin Island near Cape Dorset. The "other side" refers to Arctic Quebec, and his story begins with the lives of his father and grandfather who regularly crossed and recrossed those waters during the late nineteenth century.

There are many reasons why this book is so compelling, but one is because it challenges simple ideas about what an "event" is and how causality is constructed.

"My story is not in sequence though it seems that way . . . it is not one thing after another" (p.66), Pitseolak tells us early in his account. Two narratives seem to be interwoven here. Centrally, this is a personal narrative about daily experience connecting named people with named places. It gives readers finely grained glimpses of Arctic camp life between 1900 and 1950 — stories of family life, childhood travel, celebrations, hunger, birth, death,