

Culture



Anastasia SHKILNYK, *A Poison Stronger than Love*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985. 275 pages, U.S. \$5.95 (paperback), \$30 (cloth)

Joan Ryan

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[See table of contents](#)

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Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

Anastasia SHKILNYK, *A Poison Stronger than Love*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985. 275 pages, U.S. \$5.95 (paperback), \$30 (cloth).

by Joan Ryan
University of Calgary

This book, sub-titled, *The Destruction of an Ojibwa Community*, is a powerful and painful one. Written with excellence and with insight and understanding, it is a careful documented case study of destruction.

It is this theme of documented destruction which is so painful to acknowledge. We know the general statistics, we know the exceptions, but we often become seduced into believing that conditions are improving for Indians in Canada. This book leaves us no room for escape from the preciseness of the specific case. Statistics become real people in this book and the fact that some of the destruction is self-imposed does not free us from recognizing the contributing factors which emanate from colonial policy, good will badly executed by bureaucrats, and the never ending complacency of the uninformed and uncaring Canadian public.

One looks for methodological flaws in the book hoping to find some errors. But there is nothing wrong with the methodology at all. It is carefully set out and accurate both in the provision of general statistics and in this specific case.

The forward of the book, written by Kai Erikson, provides the mental framework which is useful for interpretation of the hard data which follows. He talks of "the slide into dependency and humiliation" (xiv) caused by the relocation of the reserve, mercury poisoning, and the loss of spiritual connection with the land. The full implications of these traumas are evidenced in the book with the provision of statistics on violent deaths, suicides and a roster of other data showing that people ceased to care about themselves and ultimately could not care about each other...or their children. The abuse of alcohol, as a means of escaping personal despair, only added to it.

An interesting analytical concept emerges within the forward: that of thinking about such traumas in the same framework as major disasters. We all understand the impact of major disasters, such as earthquakes; seldom do we think of loss of self and loss of fundamental ties to land and thus to identity, spirituality and culture as comparable psychological and

spiritual "disasters". The concept is useful because it allows us a measure of the effects of decisions (like relocation) on the collective psyche and soul. As one reads on, it becomes clear that no amount of economic development can restore that sense of belonging to the land, drawing from it, identifying with it and gathering strength from it. Indeed, one becomes hard pressed to imagine what might be done to restore such communities to some semblance of security when their history is anchored elsewhere in a place of the past and the present offers no guarantee for any future.

Although both Erikson and Shkilnyk posit that the major disasters which were felt at Grassy Narrows were unique, I do not think they are, except in the sense that people experience such events individually. We know that similar disasters are being experienced by the Cree of Lubicon Lake and that many communities have had, and will continue to have, such experiences. Whether the "poisoning" is caused by pulp mills, oil spills, cruise missiles or multinational resource extraction, the effects will be the same. An examination of many cases in Canada, and in aboriginal locales throughout the world, yield the same result: the lives of indigenous peoples everywhere are at risk.

This raises the question, then, as to whether aid comes too late and in inappropriate forms. The data Shkilnyk produces indicate that all the funding and thought that went into remedies for the Grassy Narrows people failed. This raises some uncomfortable questions for those of us who plod along in advocacy roles regarding application of community development theories and practices. What signals of disasters can we identify sooner? What interventions make sense? How can we defeat colonial and racist policies on the scale necessary to ensure survival of small groups of indigenous peoples? What would inform public policy and who can be made accountable? What are the factors that make it possible for people at Alkali Lake, B.C. to stop adding to the disaster by becoming sober and taking control again while the Grassy Narrows people continue to kill themselves and each other. What vision of the future is necessary to convince the youths of these groups that they must find the strength to break the vicious cycle of self-destruction and challenge imposed destruction?

The book raises more questions than it can possibly answer. They are painfully challenging questions.

A start might be made, again, by ensuring as many people as possible read this book. It should be required reading for any course on development, Native issues, Canadian studies, etc. However, the real efforts toward making people cognizant and accountable should be directed to the federal government. The vision of self-government is only that: a vision. Until it becomes a reality, based on public acceptance of the Charter, with mechanisms and funding in place to ensure a chance at successful implementation, not much will happen to stop the destruction of communities like Grassy Narrows.

Yet, we also know that the spark for survival, the willingness to fight powerlessness and self-destruction must be lit from within. As Shkilnyk notes in her postscript (p.242):

It may well be that Grassy Narrows also represents a microcosm, greatly magnified and concentrated in time and space, of the destruction forces in our own society... Perhaps what happened at Grassy Narrows then, can serve as a warning that our own survival depends upon restoring a sense of mutual responsibility for one another and ultimately for the fate of the earth.

George E. MARCUS and Michael M.J. FISCHER, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986. U.S. \$9.95 (paperback), \$22.00 (cloth).

by Victor Barak
University of Toronto

George Marcus and Michael Fischer, professors of anthropology at Rice University, have written a book which expounds their position on what anthropology is, how it came to be this way, and what it should become. The very title of the text should be enough to promise something of the breathless for those concerned with the state of affairs of the discipline. Another tantalizing hint of what awaits the anxious reader is provided by the cover: a photograph (without photo credits) and a descriptive caption reading "IGOROT MAN: Brought from the Philippines for Exhibition at the 1904 Saint Louis World's Fair".

Marcus and Fischer assert that anthropology is at a crossroad in its illustrious if somewhat tarnished career. Challenged by new "experiments", but still weighed down by a crumbling and obsolete shell of academic authority, anthropology, we are told, must

resume its once honourable vocation as the discourse which critiques "our" culture from the vantage point of "other" cultures. But the main problem in pursuing such a goal is how to adequately convey the point of view of the "other". This problem is not restricted to anthropology. It is a manifestation of a problem which afflicts all the human sciences at the present time. The problem has a name - the "crisis of representation". For anthropology, the solution to this problem, according to Marcus and Fischer, lies in developing new forms of ethnographic writing. And, we are told, this is exactly what is happening in the present "experimental moment" in anthropology.

Underlying this position is a certain postmodern trend which challenges the authority of all the older master paradigms or "grand" theories of social science, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, evolutionism, functionalism, etc. - all of what Fredric Jameson has referred to as "depth models". The latter are, briefly, theories which seek to explain the underlying causes or generative mechanisms of manifest phenomena. But Marcus and Fischer oppose any form of grand theorizing for anthropology. They advocate, instead, an "interpretive anthropology" whose main concern should be the ways in which manifest phenomena, that is, cultural differences, are described. But their antitheoretical, or a-theoretical, posturing is at the same time grinding an old theoretical axe: relativism.

The revival and defense of relativism in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* is best read as a political response to the widespread neo-conservatism and anti-intellectualism of the Reagan era. Relativism, here, stands for a challenged American liberalism, and in its name the authors mount an intellectual defense under the guise of "interpretive anthropology". Marcus and Fischer tell us that interpretive anthropology is "the explicit discourse that reflects on the doing and writing of ethnography" (p.16), and also "...a mode of inquiry about communication within and between cultures" (p.32). In short, "...interpretive anthropology is nothing other than relativism, rearmed and strengthened for an era of intellectual ferment, not unlike, but vastly more complex than, that in which it was formulated" (p.33). But it is ethnography which occupies a privileged position in interpretive anthropology: ethnography, as the practical embodiment of relativism and interpretive anthropology, challenges all those views of reality in social thought which prematurely overlook or reduce cultural diversity for the sake of the capacity to generalize or to affirm universal values, usually from the still-privileged vantage