

## Culture



**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)**

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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.

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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

point of global homogenization emanating from the West (pp.32-33).

For Marcus and Fischer the central value which informs their views is the classic liberal one of tolerance.

What is ultimately exalted in this book is an anthropological version of the bon mot of post-structuralism: a play of differences. It is somehow implied here that the best anthropology can do is document and catalogue cultural difference in the interest of fostering a more tolerant culture at home. It is tacitly assumed that this should be the political mission of anthropology. In their eagerness to foreground difference, Marcus and Fischer seem unaware that the self-determination and emancipation of anthropology's subject peoples is as much (if not more) contingent upon the recognition of their common experiences as of their differences. But this perspective would necessitate a totalizing vision of world history which the authors are loathe to entertain.

There is much to be agreed with in this book. There is a good discussion of the framing and rhetorical devices used in ethnographic writing. There are well written expositions of recent ethnographies. But there is also an eclecticism and lack of theoretical rigor which weakens the project as a whole. Too many important issues are raised only to be superficially treated, if at all. Marcus and Fischer are adept at anticipating challenges to their arguments, but this is not quite the same thing as answering them. The casual neglect of any consideration of feminism in a book which purports to deal with contemporary cultural critique is inexcusable. But there is a final point which must be brought up. In introducing the theoretical scaffolding of their argument, Marcus and Fischer draw on Hayden White's discussion (in his book *Metahistory*) of 'strategies of emplotment' in nineteenth century historical and social theory writing. We are informed that of the three strategies of emplotment - romance, tragedy and comedy - Marx's writing is exemplary of the tragic (pp.13-14). But a reference check will prove to the contrary. White ascribes to Marx a continuation of Hegel's comic conception of history, and that in the final analysis it would not be unjust to call Marx's work, romantic. But surely not tragic. It is just this sort of sloppiness which might make one nod their heads in agreement with Marcus and Fischer that indeed there may well be a crisis of representation in the human sciences.

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Judith VANDER, *Songprints: The Musical Experience of Five Shoshone Women*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988. XX vi + 317 pages, Preface, Appendix.

by Lynn Whidden  
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In her delightful description of "Miss Ross's Hymn" Judith Vander writes, "Songs take on different meanings within different contexts. Cultural contexts yield one set of meanings; at an individual level, within a personal context, another set emerges" (p.87). And indeed, this realization has led Vander to an astonishing wealth of information about Shoshone musical life which contrasts sharply with most studies of plains music which have focussed on cultural contexts such as history and diffusion, performance milieu and practices. Songprints show the complexity of an individual's musical life and the peculiar complexity of a native woman's music thought which necessarily must encompass and rationalize the musics and music behaviors of two very different cultures. Through private taped sessions and careful fieldwork (observation and participation), the author has created an unusually perceptive documentary of the nuances of plains Indian music and for those of us doing fieldwork, her frank preface yields good insight into how she achieved such success.

Following the Introduction, which, for my taste, provides just enough information on the material base of Shoshone livelihood, Vander begins her portrait in print of the first of her five subjects, Emily Hill. The section on Emily, as with the other four persons, begins with her life story, especially those events such as schooling and spoken languages which have shaped her "songprint". Vander's portraits are sensitive, intimate and often poignant.

Even with Emily absent from the scene, her house and her land express her personality and life: the green grass, the trees planted by her and her mother, the garden to the side (fallow now, a casualty of Emily's old age), a cluster of cats sleeping on the cement in front of her door, chickens by the chicken house, the woodshed filled with tools, and, finally, the gate that links Emily's life with the outside world. Even the gate has a care and meaning to it. It is a wooden gate that fastens to a post with a large link chain. Emily attaches one end of the chain to a nail on the post, slips the chain around the top of the gate and fastens it to the nail, then wraps the extra length of chain around the gate board. If she finds the