

## Culture



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

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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.

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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

gate unfastened or closed in a different way, she knows that someone has been around. The gate stands guard at the border of her own carefully tended and observed environment (p.9).

The discussion of Emily's songs which follows is equally revealing of Shoshone musical thought because Vander provides a wealth of data which is clearly organized according to song genre: Sun Dance, Peyote, Women's Dance and Wolf Dance, Handgame, Giveaway, Chokecherry, War Bonnet and Euro-American. There are what appear to be meticulous transcriptions of representative songtypes followed by readable music analyses clearly contributing to the meaning of the songs. Throughout the information on the songs of the five Shoshone women, there is notable attention to detail: the text is rich with 1) references to Shoshone folk narrative and belief, 2) the associations among Shoshone speech, song and song words, and 3) scholarly footnotes and well-chosen photographs. Hence, although definitely musically oriented, it is likely that many scholars of native studies would enjoy this book.

Perhaps the most outstanding aspect of the work is the skillful interweaving of the informants' personal statements, of references to scholarly research, and of the author's own comments and reactions, all of which form a satisfying songprint of each female singer. This very density and coherence leads, from my point of view, to difficulty in retrieving information from the text, which brings me to Vander's conclusions. We must be very grateful for the author's cumulative songprint chart showing the types of songs sung by each woman, and for the clear listing of increasing female participation in traditional Shoshone music. There are a multitude of themes running through the text such as Shoshone music aesthetics and changes in powwow music practice; a more substantial synthesizing conclusion would have made this plethora of information even more accessible to readers. Nevertheless, Vander has clearly achieved, even in the conclusion, her purpose of presenting the songs and musical experience of five Shoshone women. Undoubtedly, the onus is on the readers of this intricate, multi-dimensional work to discover their own set of meanings.

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William L. MERRILL, *Rarámuri Souls: Knowledge and Social Process in Northern Mexico*, Washington, D.C. and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. 237 pages.

*by Michael Lambek*  
*University of Toronto*

In this work William Merrill attempts for the reproduction and circulation of knowledge about the soul in a Rarámuri (Tarahumara) community in northwestern Mexico. The aim thus diverges from what we have come to expect from contemporary ethnographies on religious topics. Though there is much subtle interpretation here, this is not primarily a hermeneutic account of the soul in which the anthropologist taxes his interpretive skills to arrive at a nuanced and complex version of another people's reality. Rather, the author relies precisely on what his informants tell him in fairly straightforward terms about the nature of the soul. The problem is that the accounts they provide are far from identical. His object then becomes to evaluate how standardized knowledge is within the community and how diversity is reproduced yet controlled in social life. He means his conclusions to advance our understanding of the reproduction of knowledge generally rather than of the meaning of the Rarámuri conceptions in particular. He argues that in a society such as the Rarámuri in which public forums for the detailed and explicit expression or transfer of knowledge as well as formal controls such as initiation rituals or examinations are generally lacking, the constraints on diversity are two-fold, stemming from the logical relations among the ideas or propositions which constitute the knowledge, and from the practices, such as curing and funerary rituals in which the knowledge is embedded.

This approach is somewhat reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard's classic account of Zande witchcraft (though Merrill might wish to convict E-P of what one could call the homogeneity fallacy). But while E-P was concerned with belief - how can people hold the beliefs that they do - Merrill is concerned with knowledge - how it is that people know what they know, in common or not. Instead of circularity and nonfalsifiability, he addresses flexibility, relative contingency and presupposition. Although Merrill might not agree with this formulation, this shift from belief to knowledge reflects an increased sophistication since E-P's day concerning the conceptualization of culture, particularly through Needham's demonstration that 'belief' is not a self-evident universal category and Geertz's elaboration of the fact (of course prefigured in E-P's emphasis on the social logic of recourse to 'beliefs') that culture is public, non-subjective and worked out in the social realm. Hence it makes sense to shift from an essentially subjective and culture-bound concept like belief to a potentially more objective one like knowledge.

Knowledge is an important concept for anthropological theory at the present time for a number of