

## Culture



# Richard M. SWIDERSKI, *Voices: An Anthropologist's Dialogue with an Italian-American Festival*, London, Ontario : Centre for Social and Humanistic Studies, University of Western Ontario, 1986. 146 pages, \$8.95 (paper)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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By Sam Migliore  
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*Voices* is a difficult book to review. This, however, is not due to any inadequacies inherent in Swiderski's work. The book contains all the essential elements necessary for a well documented anthropological study. Swiderski presents a review of the literature, theory, detailed ethnographic data, an historical and social context for that data, and emic and etic interpretations. At the same time, the work cannot be classified as "traditional" ethnography. The reason it is difficult to review the book is that Swiderski presents the material in such a way that it contains both the elements necessary for a traditional ethnography, and the elements that pose a challenge to traditional ethnography.

Swiderski, in this well written and well constructed work, examines the annual celebration of the St. Peter's Fiesta by the Sicilian-American community of Gloucester, Massachusetts, USA. He begins the ethnographic account with a general discussion of Gloucester's history, gradually introduces the Italians who emigrated there, and then discusses the origins of the St. Peter's Fiesta. This sets the stage for the description and examination of the 1970 celebration of the fiesta within its historical and social context. In the final chapter of the book, Swiderski returns to his discussion of the history of the fiesta by describing what has taken place in Gloucester since 1970. In this way, Swiderski provides us with: an in-depth discussion of a specific celebration of the fiesta; and, an understanding of the various processes leading to the development of the fiesta and its change over time. *Voices* is a welcomed addition to the ever growing body of literature dealing with North American ethnic groups.

By concentrating on the celebration of a particular religious feast, *Voices* also contributes to our understanding of ritual and cultural performance. Swiderski, following the example of Geertz and others, suggests that the *fiesta* can be regarded as a cultural "text". As a text it can be read to isolate the various themes and symbolic forms inherent in the fiesta, and to draw out the meanings and messages contained in them. Using this type of approach, Swiderski illustrates how the St. Peter's Fiesta is not only a Roman Catholic saint's feast, but also an ethnic festival, a family-oriented celebration, a link to a fishing tradition, a regional festival and, more recently, a tourist attraction.

Swiderski's work, however, moves beyond the process of reading the fiesta as a text. He does not regard the St. Peter's Fiesta as simply a script that can be read and interpreted; instead, he makes effective use of a reflexive/interpretative approach to examine the topic of study. This enables him to treat the fiesta as something that can not only be read and interpreted, but also as something that is experienced. Swiderski allows the reader to witness his interaction with the fiesta and the people engaged in its performance. In other words, he allows the reader to witness his dialogue with the fiesta. He presents the various "voices" that come out of the celebration, and includes his own "voice" in the ethnography. The reflexive/interpretative approach Swiderski employs is in itself a challenge to traditional ethnography.

*Voices* also presents a challenge to the reader. The book seems to invite a reflexive reading. I found myself drawing various conclusions from the text, but then stepping back to rethink in order to determine whether these were the messages Swiderski and/or the *fiesta* were trying to communicate, or whether these were merely the voices I was listening for. I found the book both interesting and informative. It made me reflect back on the times I attended religious feasts in Sicily, and the types of conclusions I had reached. It also made me rethink many of the assumptions I had made. For these reasons I found the book of personal value. I believe the book will also be of value to other scholars; it contributes to our understanding of ethnicity and the interrelationship between ritual and cultural performance. Since Swiderski is successful in presenting an alternative way of writing and reading ethnography, *Voices* will also be of general interest to anthropologists and other scholars. I recommend the book to anyone interested in an innovative way of approaching ethnography.