

## Culture



**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)**

Julie Cruikshank

Volume 14, numéro 1, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083282ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083282ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Cruikshank, J. (1994). Compte rendu de [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)]. *Culture*, 14(1), 103–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083282ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1994

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

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

University of British Columbia

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,

hunting trips, as well as encounters with beings like "half-whale woman" and with malevolent shamans. A second narrative gives equally personal accounts of encounters with Others: with shipwrecked whalers; with Hudson's Bay Company traders (at Cape Wolstenholme in 1909, Lake Harbour 1911, Cape Dorset 1913); with crew members on ships like the *Active* and *Nascopie*; with film makers, including Flaherty; with missionaries who brought the troubling "first (1901), second (1908), and third (1941) religions times"; and with government administrators whose activities began to change settlement patterns.

Eber's introduction is extremely helpful and her footnotes are discrete. They serve mostly to provide necessary context and references for readers interested in relating Pitseolak's story to a larger Arctic literature. The family photos provide excellent documentation, but also bring to life the many named children and adults whom we see growing and changing over the years Pitseolak carefully photographed them. A genealogy (p.156-7) connects all of them with earlier forbears. Eber provides an index which guides us through both text and photos and is especially helpful because it specifies the relationship of each named person to Peter Pitseolak. The two-page map is invaluable, though it is unfortunate that in this edition, the binding has obliterated some of the placenames where the pages meet.

This will be an excellent addition to any course dealing with either Arctic ethnography or life history. It gives students an opportunity to see how difficult it is to make complex text appear seamless. It also draws attention to Pitseolak's much larger collection of 2000 photographs, now housed in the McCord Museum. Peter Pitseolak's goal was cultural documentation. His family, his translator, Ann Hanson, and his colleague, Dorothy Harley Eber, are all to be congratulated for ensuring that his legacy will not be forgotten.

David H. FLAHERTY and Frank E. MANNING (eds), *The Beaver Bites Back: American Popular Culture in Canada*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993; 356 pages, \$19.95 (paper).

By Ian Chunn

Simon Fraser University

Lester Pearson once remarked, "If you're supposed to be anti someone you resemble so much, it makes for a kind of paranoia." That paranoia may have flagged a little since the 1960s, although vestiges remain in the odd ironic remark in this fine volume of essays, such as Seth Feldman's opening comment to the effect that any discussion of American popular culture in Canada is in danger of inspiring serious one-upmanship as scholars debate whose field has been most co-opted by the Yankee nemesis. Part of popular culture's value lies in the fact that we can enjoy it while we study it, as Thelma McCormack points out, and that has contributed to an explosion of work over the last fifteen years, including intriguing case studies, disciplines in flux, the emergence of intellectual programs such as critical cultural studies, and the examination of the national and international flows of "public culture."

The papers that Flaherty and Manning have assembled grew out of a conference and lecture series at the University of Western Ontario in 1987-88, sponsored by the Centre for American Studies and the Centre for Social and Humanistic Studies. Flaherty was also involved in an earlier collection, in which the editors sought material on the general theme of the ways in which Canadians view the United States; here they have asked the contributors to address some aspect of U.S. popular culture, its impact on Canada, and the Canadian response, if any. The result is a useful collection that is organized around several themes (Communications and Cultural Penetration, American Sports and Canadian Society, Stage, Screen, and Soundtrack, and Merchandising Culture, as well as some concluding Reflections) that cohere well and allow the contributions to illuminate one another. As is typical with interdisciplinary work, a variety of methodologies is used, but all are appropriate for approaching the task at hand.