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Boon, James A. *Verging on Extra-Vagance: Anthropology, History, Religion, Literature, Arts. . . Showbiz*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999. xxi + 361 pp. including index. $ 70.00, cloth; $ 27.95, paper.

Fabian, Johannes. *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001. xiv + 256 pp. $ 45.00, cloth; $17.95, paper.

Fox, Richard G., ed. *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991. viii + 248 pp. including index. $ 50.00, cloth; $ 24.95, paper.

Greenhouse, Carol J., Elizabeth Mertz, and Kay B. Warren, eds. *Ethnography in Unstable Places: Everyday Lives in Contexts of Dramatic Political Change*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. 448 pp. including index. $ 64.95. cloth; $ 21.95, paper.

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Marcus, George E. *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998. x + 275 pp., including index. $ 62.50, cloth; $ 19.95, paper.

Marcus, George E., ed. *Critical Anthropology Now: Unexpected Contexts, Shifting Constituencies, Changing Agendas*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1999. viii + 440 pp. including index. $ 60.00, cloth; $ 24.95, paper.

The occasion of this review is the publication of two edited volumes that bring together a number of interrelated, open-ended questions for the practice of ethnography and the modes of anthropological knowledge it has generally been held to produce. Carol Greenhouse, Elizabeth Mertz, and Kay Warren's *Ethnography in Unstable Places* presents ten ethnographically situated essays, each of which unsettles the pretensions of any form of inquiry that would begin from the putative stability of social, cultural, or political forms. Each study in the volume takes up situations of intensive and often rapid political or social change; some consider wrenching conflicts that reveal a profound originary lack at the center of contexts once presumed given—the nation-state, the locality, the political, indeed, the social itself. The sites of research range from Israel to the Philippines, Namibia, Germany, and Kent, England, among others. The volume contains a theoretically rich introduction by Greenhouse and two generative conclusions authored by Mertz and Warren, respectively. George Marcus's *Critical Anthropology Now* also presents 10 substantive essays, as well as an introductory essay by Marcus. The subject matter of the chapters in this volume is less classically anthropological than the chapters in the Greenhouse, Mertz and Warren volume. Nongovernmental organizations, David Koresh of Waco, Texas fame, the Bhopal disaster, American military science, and the university press, among others, become sites for sustained anthropological reflection in a manner that queries the relationship between ethnography as a methodological practice and anthropology's claims to knowledge.

Indeed, what strikes this reader upon encountering these two texts is the manner in which ethnographic practice and writing have incorporated and, in some instances, superceded the critiques of the 1980s—best represented, perhaps, in James Clifford and George Marcus's (1986) coedited volume, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*—sometimes, but not always, with interesting results. What also strikes this reader is the two volumes' engagement with another of the texts under review, Richard Fox's *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. This essay will situate these two edited volumes in relation to Fox's 1991 collection, as

well as three other recent collections, by George Marcus, Johannes Fabian, and James Boon, that bring together (mostly) previously published essays from the last decade or so. Marcus, Fabian, and Boon have had different takes on the "crisis" of ethnography delineated in the 1980s, and their work has traveled in rather different circles and along sometimes widely divergent trajectories. As an index of this claim, I note that neither *Critical Anthropology Now* nor the Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren volume makes reference to the work of Fabian or Boon, while both cite Fox and Marcus. This review essay is an effort to determine why that might be the case, and what it can reveal about the current state of ethnographic practice in anthropological knowledge production "after" the *Writing Culture* critique.

Fox's *Recapturing Anthropology* was the outcome of a seminar at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1989, shortly after the publication of *Writing Culture* (itself a product of a School of American Research seminar held in 1984). The latter, readers will remember, knocked over the apple-cart of ethnographic writing by calling attention to the tropes it used to create seamless, realist representations of its subjects and by querying the position of the anthropologist as author. *Recapturing Anthropology* presumably meant to recapture the discipline from the charge of navel-gazing or overly reflexive "postmodern" forms of analysis (often reduced, by critics, to a form of relativism that stops knowledge production in its tracks—if you really want to resist authorial authority, you can't make any claims whatsoever, for they would do violence to the voices and the contexts under investigation). Several of the essays in Fox's volume have, by now, become classics: Michel-Rolph Trouillot's "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness"; Lila Abu-Lughod's "Writing Against Culture"; and Arjun Appadurai's "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology."

Rereading *Recapturing* more than 10 years after its initial publication, and in light of the other books under review here, I am surprised by the manner in which Fox outlines the book's purpose. While the critique of ethnography undoubtedly shaped the seminar and the volume it produced, Fox's introduction actually begins not from *Writing Culture* but from David Harvey's (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity* and the claim that the world—wherever that might be—is now fundamentally "[d]ecentered, fragmented, compressed, flexible, refractive, postmodern" (Fox, p. 1). Fox continues: "Our 'present' appears to be substantially different from the 'present' that our predecessors confronted, even just a short time ago" (Ibid.). The next two pages situate the volume in terms of the materialist anthropologies of Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, the colonial critique of Talal Asad's early work, and Dell Hymes's call for anthropology to stop looking for isolated primitives and join what he called the "modern world" (quoted by Fox, p.

3). There's that "world" again. These turns toward the ethnographic real (for want of a better term) precede Fox's reflection on the reflexive critique of *Writing Culture* and set out the book's project as one of figuring out how to do "work"—the editor's term—in the "present"—also the editor's term.

I am struck by Fox's determination to strike out a middle path between the presumed excesses of postmodernism and realism, and the force with which those two poles seem to have impacted anthropologists of the generation represented in this book. I write, of course, with a sort of naïve hindsight, a distancing move of my own that establishes authorial authority over my object here, namely, these texts and their place in ongoing conversations in anthropology over the relationship between its methods, its forms of writing, and its production of knowledge. Still, that anthropologists should have been attempting to "recapture" their discipline in the late 1980s and early 1990s from the Scylla of realism and the Charybdis[1] of postmodernism says something about the way anthropologists felt that their knowledge practices were running away from them during this time; a period, not coincidentally, of retrenchment in the academy, the ascendancy of "scientific" methods among major funders for anthropological research, the end of the Cold War, and so on. Historians of the discipline will note the profound impact Richard Fox would later have on the discipline, when, under his directorship at the turn of the millennium, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research aggressively pursued precisely the kind of empirical yet theoretically informed and critical anthropological projects represented in the Marcus and Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren volumes.

At the same time, *Recapturing Anthropology* left anthropology with a couple of options: keep doing the same kind of fieldwork in the same kinds of places, but get reflexive about it; or start doing the same kind of fieldwork in new kinds of places, places that aren't easy to see on a map, and get reflexive about that, too. The Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren volume does the former; the Marcus volume does the latter. In the 1990s, I am not sure whether anything really happened to occasion a questioning of the *form* of ethnographic fieldwork itself, or the assumption that fieldwork generated new knowledge about local, situated contexts (except, perhaps, in the work of figures like Marilyn Strathern). It is as if anthropologists in the 1990s were seeking a few new tools to add to an established tool kit, not throwing away that tool kit in favor of an altogether different knowledge-generation machine. Hence, Appadurai's "ethnoscapes," which he proposed in the Fox volume and later translated into other sorts of "scapes," afforded the anthropologist a new optic to bring into resolution phenomena of the late modern or postmodern world—flows of finance, for example, or of media images. Is it that all anthropologists needed was a new technology for looking at things, so that they would see "things" they had previously

missed? Obviously, my own encounter with these books leads me to question the entire empiricist frame implicit in this question.

Indeed, a reading of the three single-authored collections under review (by Boon, Marcus, and Fabian), suggests other technologies and tool kits. I am intrigued by Marcus's invocation of "complicity" in *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*, and the manner in which the convergence or indeed isomorphism of anthropological tools and the knowledge-generating techniques of those they study opens possibilities for a new kind of ethnographic sensibility. New ethnographic subjects—from finance to fascists, to use some of Marcus's examples—bring such complicity to the fore. Complicity forces anthropology to examine what Marcus calls the "ideology of its distinctive method of fieldwork," and, indeed, the "discipline's collective self-identity" (p. 126). This opens the disturbing possibility that disciplinarity is really an identity game—that what anthropologists are about is not so much discovering truths about the world as consolidating a sense of themselves as "anthropologists," a kind of person, a social location whose raison d'etre is to produce more anthropologists. Marcus stays within the confines of the ethnographic *techne*, however, adding to it the now familiar implements of multisited ethnography and strategies that involve "following" various entities as they move about the global landscape—the people, the money, the metaphor, the plot, the thing, etc. (see pp. 90–95).

The raison d'etre of anthropology, for Johannes Fabian, is rather akin to Walter Benjamin's famous angel of history gaping aghast at the terror of humanity: "Anthropology emerged, less as a science of human nature than as the study of the damage done by one part of mankind to another (and thereby to all of humanity). If that has indeed been our raison d'etre during the last century or two, we are not likely to lose it in the next millennium"(Fabian, p. 204). Fabian orients his anthology of essays by explicitly asking the question, "Who needs theory?" (p. 1), and provocatively suggesting that understanding the question demands attention not just to the place or role of theory in inquiry—or in solidifying power or authority—but the time of theory as well. As he puts it, "theory happens" (p. 5, emphases removed); it is a practice that unfolds temporally and that in its very unfolding undoes some of the conceptual oppositions that simultaneously animate it (theory vs. method, contemplation vs. action, vision vs. confrontation; see p. 5).

Much of Fabian's critical theoretical intervention in these essays lies in his insistence on the intersubjectivity of objectivity as a temporal and situated praxis. This move allows Fabian to develop the important insight found in *Writing Culture*, which is that the fascination with the form of the representation of knowledge removed from view of the form of the *production* of knowledge (p. 21)—a topic, if you have not noticed by now, that is dear

to the heart of your reviewer. Yet Fabian's vision of theory is nonetheless explicitly a vision; it aims to "show" (p. 7). Fabian notes the etymological associations between *theoria* and the spectacle or festival (p. 6) in a sense that verges on Boon's extravagance but does not quite approach his mind-loosening "anthoreaupology" (see below).

Still, Fabian challenges anthropology to confront its own communicative confrontations with others that produce new knowledge without necessarily "reflecting" it, in the old photographic sense of objectivity, but that nonetheless can gain critical and antirelativist purchase on it. Fabian's challenge to anthropology is to unseat its objectivist and hermeneutic hubris by asking whether some of its time-honored tools are actually good for what anthropologists say they are good for—tools like transcription, interpretation, understanding, or empathy—arguing ultimately for a form of negativity that resists closure in the name of a "habit of distrust in positing and in positivity that goes with taking positions" (p. 100).

The attitude infusing Boon's collection of essays, *Verging on Extra-Vagance*, has none of the curmudgeonly negativity but partakes of the same distrust of positivity as Fabian's. Boon's anthology is a romp through literature, anthropology, philosophy, poetry, museums, kitsch, and more, and evokes list-mania and passion for parody that this reviewer finds difficult to resist. It is an homage to Henry David Thoreau, whose words form one of the epigrams to this unusual book: "I fear lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced" (p. vii). It is also a playful reminder of the serious silliness of academic disciplinarity. The book presents itself to the reader as a rite of writing that demands an almost ritualistic reading, tending toward the extravagance of apparently illogical comparisons and juxtapositionings (Montaigne; the Coca Cola Museum; Balinese foreskins) in order to approach "the truth" of which Boon himself is convinced. This is a text that resists easy summary and, indeed, the very purpose of which is to remind anthropology that its quest for truth modeled on the classical idea that our knowledge should somehow match up with a reality "out there" is hopelessly simple-minded, if not outright misguided. To stay with the metaphor of the anthropological tool kit, Boon's book is anthropological Luddism with a heavy dose of the ludic, "seriocomic" critique, as he calls it throughout the book.

This brings me, at last, to the deadly seriousness of *Ethnography in Unstable Places* and *Critical Anthropology Now*. First, a word about change. The editors of each explicitly orient their books in terms of it. Marcus writes that his volume brings together scholars working "in and on US society at a time of widespread awareness of transformative change" (p. 5). Greenhouse

writes of "the question of how people manage their lives in the midst of dramatic political change" (p.1). Both volumes were completed before 11 September, 2001, a day that many in the United States consider to have "changed everything," in a now-too-common catchphrase. I, perversely perhaps, prefer to view the latter in terms of the Marcus and Greenhouse quotations: everyone was already caught on-guard by the proposition that everything has changed, or is changing, and is supposedly catching everyone off-guard. Change and transformation, of course, were the watchwords of critical materialist anthropology prior to the critique of ethnographic representation. I linger here only because some reviewers or hapless graduate students somewhere will doubtless write that these volumes are now more relevant because of 11 September (nota bene: each of the seven terms preceding this parenthesis belongs in scare-quotes). I would counter that these volumes would have been immediately relevant during Boas's time and that there's nothing unique about the present where "change"—or terror—is concerned.

The Marcus volume derives from yet another School of American Research seminar, this one in 1994, that brought together some of the original contributors to the *Writing Culture* project as well as professionals from other institutional locations (such as T. David Brent, an editor for a university press). As Marcus tells it, the seminar sought specifically to address the "pessimism" in the human sciences over the outcome of the self-critical turn of the 1980s (p. 6) and, interestingly, whether or not moves toward "cultural studies" could be cashed in for "intellectual capital" in other locations (ibid.). The chapters contained in the volume concern the United States, broadly conceived, and the complicities, as discussed above, that animate much of Marcus's own research and writing. Taken strictly at the level of "ethnography," the volume presents a rather nice account of late twentieth century "American culture," populated by figures as outlandish as David Koresh (James Faubion's chapter) and as mundane as a neighborhood association (Peter Dobkin Hall's chapter) or the fortunes of a high-school class (Sherry Ortner). Americans' fascination with science, and scientists' reception of anthropological work (Paul Rabinow) and Americans' fascination with family values (Judith Stacey) are signal markers on the roadways of this collection of Americana.

Marcus conceived of the seminar, and this volume, as posing questions and demonstrations of "emergent styles of work within the paradigm of ethnographic research that reflect a combination of the influence of the 1980s' critiques, the conception of new spaces and topics for work, and the quite pragmatic responses to obstacles that anthropologists have encountered as they try to practice traditional ethnography while addressing these new spaces and topics" (p. 7). He also conceived of them as "test[ing]. . . the

sense that critical reflexivity has been an insular activity" confined to certain quarters of academia.

Where the volume succeeds brilliantly is in disproving this null hypothesis. Indeed, the ten substantive essays here show how critical reflexivity has been a preoccupation of any number of institutional and personal actors, from bureaucratically-structured review boards of the National Science Foundation (discussed in Donald Brenneis's chapter), to corporate environmental actors confronting Bhopal (discussed in Kim Fortun's chapter), to those responsible for the hyperarchitectures of cyberspace (discussed and evoked in Michael M. J. Fisher's chapter).

Where it fails, except perhaps in Fisher's chapter, is in enacting any substantively different *style* of research from those with which anthropologists and other human scientists are already familiar. The "unexpected contexts" of the book's subtitle are surely here, but the "changing agendas" are captured only in the novel sites of research, not the *techne* of the research process itself. "Another country heard from," Clifford Geertz wrote somewhere.

Synchronicity is a strange and marvelous thing. The essays in *Ethnography in Unstable Places,* save one, had their origin in a 1994 panel at the American Anthropological Association meetings. What can be said about this vintage of anthropology based on a comparison of this volume with *Critical Anthropology Now?* I find the Marcus bottle goes down smoother, yet the Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren one is ultimately more complex. As already noted, the subject matter of Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren's 10 ethnographic essays is, in some sense, rather conventional for anthropology. They concern places far away from the site of anthropological knowledge production and the enduring and painful legacies of capitalism, colonialism, and political upheaval that have been made fodder for anthropological analysis at least since the 1960s if not even before. They also concern dramatic social transitions and upheavals, such as those brought about by the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and the transnationalization of identities and the neoliberalization of the state.

At the same time, as noted by Greenhouse in the introduction, the cases presented in the substantive chapters open up the *analytical* domains structuring social scientific inquiry itself. Attempting to describe and explain these contexts of "dramatic political change" simultaneously effects two important theoretical moves. First, it obviates the taken-for-grantedness of the categories of the social, political, economic, and legal used in analysis by calling attention to the manner in which these categories function as "reified notions" in the contexts under investigation (p. 1). Second, by destabilizing the referents of these analytical categories in the same way as they have been destabilized for actors in the contexts the authors describe,

this move resists closure both ethically and analytically. As Greenhouse incisively writes, "What does crisis teach us that we must not unlearn in more ordinary times? The answer implied by this volume is 'very little,' since there is so much in the current dynamics of change that makes returning to business as usual feel like pretending not to know" (p. 9).

The unique contribution of this important volume, then, is to decenter and unground any ethnographic practice that would claim a privileged closeness to the material, real relations on the ground that traditionally formed anthropology's special claim to knowledge. This is not to say that the contributors' essays are not grounded in rich, empirical data. Rather, it is to point out that, in the process of analysis, the distinction between data, theory, and ethical engagement seems to collapse. In conditions where society "loses any stable referent to empirical conditions, places, persons, or predictable propriety," society itself, and its forms of analysis, "become a genre of performance, narrative, remembrance, critique, and hope" (p. 2).

Whether the context is the Jewish ghettos of occupied Poland (Carroll Lewin), vagrancy law in colonial South West Africa after the end of German rule (Robert Gordon), or the transformation of the legal profession in the former East Germany following reunification (Howard De Nike), the chapters in this volume expose the complicity between ethnographers' and ethnographic subjects' fusion of state, society, and locality as analytic and lived categories of experience. At the same time, such exposure does not carry with it any profound revelatory moment, since analysts' and actors' engagement with and understanding of the states in which they find themselves, and the multiple meanings of the term "state" itself, are always fragmentary, hybrid, and dangerous.

If our ethnographies heretofore have relied on the fiction of the stability of states—political states or states of being—the contributions to this volume shatter the comfortable co-construction of ethnography and ethnographic object. Feminist activists in Israel (Elizabeth Faier) and women activists in a Philippines squatter settlement (Phil Parnell) are like European scientists engaged in transnational collaboration (Stacia Zabusky) and refugee children in Southeast Asia (James Freeman and Nguyen Dinh Hu) in that each is compelled to confront unstable states, including their own states of being, through narrative and remembrance that lack any guarantees or promises of "the reality and stability of states" (p.13). Eve Darian-Smith's chapter on the impact of the Channel Tunnel in Kent, England; Nancy Ries's chapter on the denaturalization of state, society, and economy in "postsocialist" Moscow, and Judy Rosenthal's chapter on Togolese Ewe vodu possessions focus on the performative and creative possibilities afforded by such unstable states.

Elizabeth Mertz and Kay Warren offer compelling conclusions, although

their chapters cannot be said to bring the kind of closure to this text that the term "conclusion" implies. Indeed, Mertz is specifically concerned with taking social inquiry to task for its failure to "confront pain, uncertainty, lack of closure" (p. 360). She argues persuasively that critics of anthropology's reflexive turn who worried the discipline would lose its purchase on "reality" are misguided by the pull of state logics whose function is to "fix" social reality in time and space. Mertz notes that it is precisely "the fixing and unfixing of social realities" that becomes the important analytical and practical problem. "There are numerous examples," she writes, "of times when the insistence on particular, fixed, verifiable 'facts' has obscured a larger reality and, conversely, of broad-scale descriptions that, in glossing over complicated nuances and divergent viewpoints, have failed to capture important truths" (p. 368).

The lesson of this volume is ultimately a self-reflexive one that interrupts the "back to business" modality of many anthropologists tired of the debates of the 1980s and eager to get on with the "real work" in the "present" of the 1990s and early 2000s. In a sense, it is at right angles to *Critical Anthropology Now,* for, taken as a whole, it ungrounds its claims to knowledge even as it seizes upon them.

Both *Ethnography in Unstable Places* and *Critical Anthropology Now* would be fine additions to graduate and upper-division undergraduate classes in contemporary anthropological theory and the anthropology of modern society. The Marcus collection would work well in courses on the anthropology of knowledge and science studies. The Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren volume would make an excellent addition to any course in political and legal anthropology, the anthropology of violence and war, and the anthropology of the state. The other texts under review in this essay would all find a home in anthropological theory classes. In addition, Marcus's *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* would make a good text for a methodology course; Fabian's book, with its substantive focus on colonial central Africa, would work well in African area studies classes.

Ethnography in Unstable Places and *Critical Anthropology Now* are surely books with an attitude. The question for me is the unquestioned –*tude*, the grammatical marker of an abstract state of being, contained within that term and the disposition it names. Grammatically speaking, –*tude* turns a temporary and descriptive quality that demands a subject to qualify (e.g., *altus*, high) into an unchanging, atemporal essence that is a subject in its own right (*altitudo*, height). The work of disciplinarity – anthropology *now*, ethnography *in places*—foregrounds knowledge production but leaves off precisely at the moment it approaches the underlying conceptual practices warranting its relation to the ethnographic real. The only exceptions to this attitude are Greenhouse's introduction and Mertz's conclusion. With Boon,

then, I leave off, "[w]earied by the relatively relativist calling to engage manifold cultures, diverse discipline, rival critiques—identifying with none, friendly toward many, wary of some" (Boon, p. 278). With Fabian, I hope I have been "polemical rather than just belligerent" (Fabian, p. 1). Please destabilize ethnography now; let's go beyond business as usual, extravagantly, and with attitude.

NOTES

1. In Greek mythology, Scylla and Charybdis were two monsters living on either side of a treacherous straight who would destroy ships as they attempted to pass. Scylla was a beast with six heads and vicious teeth who hid in a cliff, while Charybdis sucked ships down in a whirlpool.

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