

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JAMES CLIFFORD, *On the Edges of Anthropology*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003. iii + 121 pp.

On paper, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin is confusing; a jagged scar with intersections and fissures, a structure that is nearly impossible to disentangle. Being there, walking in those spaces – tilted floors, disorienting perspectives, stockpiles of history and experiences – is surreal and crammed with meaning. Three axes provide the building's spine: one leading to a 'Stair of Continuity,' the second to a 'Garden of Exile,' and the last to the dead end of a Holocaust Void. It is fitting that James Clifford weaves this architectural masterpiece into the interview responses that comprise *On the Edges of Anthropology*.

Such a thin book would be an unsatisfying introductory text. But, as it brings together five interviews between Clifford and his critics, it serves as a valuable companion to a bookshelf of challenging anthropology. Situating his work within the cultural, political and academic shifts between 1970 and 2000, *On the Edges* fulfills its most important tasks: it allows the author of *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), and the co-editor of *Writing Culture* (1986), to discuss his roots, engage his critics, and provide a thematic and conceptual map for readers of his work.

A few of the interviewers (Gonçalves, Coles, Ribeiro Sanches, Borofsky, and Ota) are more equal to this task of scholarly midwifery than others, and a few of the lesser interviewers succumb to the self-serving habit of styling questions in a way to indicate that they have picked up on a deeper meaning of a particular text. Collectively, a few valuable comments can be culled from their overlapping and, at times, leisurely conversations. Despite the obvious difficulty inherent in cutting a few axes through a body of work that is intentionally fragmented and polyvocal, similar to Libeskind's museum, in this review I will attempt to cut a few axes through Clifford's work.

Mr. Gonçalves provides a worthy first axis, eliciting Clifford's background and influences (Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and William Carlos Williams), but also his own location within anthropology. As anthropology has evolved beyond studying 'the primitive,' as anthropological authority has been undermined, and as other discourses have taken up the study of 'culture,' Clifford wonders what distinctiveness is left to the discipline. His answer - to rationalize his foci, set up the proceeding interviews, and allow for a response to a few critics - is in fieldwork. For an anthropologist who has been heavily criticized for undermining the discipline, it is a markedly traditional (and, for some, possibly reassuring) conclusion.

This component, which could constitute a second axis, is the strongest, as Clifford's position on what constitutes fieldwork has often been the contested terrain of disciplinary boundary maintenance. On the fringes, the work of Clifford has been seen as weakening the craft, and he laments (but certainly doesn't accept blame, nor should he) that in the eighties, 'ethnography' was being used so often that "the term stopped meaning anything" (p. 57). Prompted by a comment from Paul Rabinow, Clifford says that pointing out the ambivalence in his work is fair only if it is understood as being a deliberate part of a "lucid uncertainty, a method" (p. 50).

And finally, our third trajectory: Any set of interviews has the potential to provide signposts of a larger oeuvre for the reader. For all the ambiguity of its subject, *On the Edges* does not mine new depths but simply covers the ideas and themes that Clifford proudly asserts repeatedly: movement, travel, translation, everyday life, and displacement. Each is a theme that he addresses in his more recent work on the Arctic, Americas, Australia and Pacific Islands.

I have never seen it, but it would be quite accommodating to have these interviews annotated, for all of the references inside and outside his work. However, offering a point of reference beyond off-handed comments, which, if anything, extend the reader further into the unknown, would unfortunately be anathema to Clifford's disposition, which, as he states at the end of the second interview, is willing to risk confusing readers for the sake of getting them to generate their own second and third thoughts. Aside from this minor point, however, we are well served by this slim edition. Neither an introduction, nor a deep investigation, *On the Edges* is near-perfectly suited as a middle step. One can only hope that more such collections, that give insight into an oeuvre as complex as that of Clifford's, are on their way.

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