

Ellen FACEY, *Nguna Voices: Text and Culture from Central Vanuatu* (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1988, Pp. 351, \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 0-919813-72-0)

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COMPTES RENDUS/BOOK REVIEWS

Ellen FACEY, *Nguna Voices: Text and Culture from Central Vanuatu* (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1988, Pp. 351, \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 0-919813-72-0)

This is a book more modest in its aims than in its achievements. Ellen Facey presents *Nguna Voices* as a simple collection of 33 oral texts from the small island of Nguna in Vanuatu, an archipelago of 80 islands in the southwest Pacific. She says she wrote the book primarily for the Ngunese themselves, to thank the people for their hospitality during her fieldwork. She separates the texts into narratives of chiefly lineages, accounts of events of various sorts, and tales with non-human protagonists, mostly animals. Full transcriptions of the texts are provided in English and in their original language.

For her other potential readership — folklorists, linguists, anthropologists and scholars with a general interest in Pacific island cultures — she provides brief chapters in which she discusses the ethnographic context of her work, the social landscape depicted in the texts, matters of method, style and rhetoric and the dilemmas of transforming performance into text. She also includes a small number of musical transcriptions and a glossary of more than 1100 items of Ngunese grammar and vocabulary.

The true significance of Facey's book is that she deals in a *practical* way with some issues at the very heart of the new interpretive anthropology. The interpretive approaches of such scholars as James Clifford, Renato Rosaldo and Dennis Tedlock assume as fundamental the idea that we should develop a more dialogical anthropology, a body of ethnography in which the authority of Western observers is dispersed and in which polyphonic processes are at work. Facey comes as close as I have seen recently to writing a monograph that is truly dialogical, potentially meaningful both to a readership of Western scholars and also to her hosts in the field.

Nguna Voices is written simply and gracefully in jargon-free prose. Facey's translations are meticulous but not fussy or pedantic. She keeps her interpretations brief, which is consistent with her whole approach to the topic; at twice their present length, her interpretations would not achieve notably more and she would risk losing the interest of the native portion of her intended audience.

From an academic standpoint, Facey makes several contributions. First, *Nguna Voices* is a valuable addition to ethnographic literature on Vanuatu and, more broadly, the South Pacific. Because of Facey's work, Nguna is one of the very few islands in Vanuatu from which we have a number of carefully transcribed texts. Second, Facey is the first anthropologist to work in Vanuatu (as well as one of the first in the South Pacific) and attempt to use Dennis Tedlock's notational system of "re-presenting" oral narrative. In an unpretentious but convincing way, Facey provides evidence that Tedlock's methods yield interpretive dividends outside the North American context in which they mainly have been applied.

Facey has written a book in which she mutes her own voice so that the voices of the people of Nguna may emerge as vital and clear. She succeeds, perhaps too well. Her self-effacing authorial stance allows her to leave unanswered a number of questions relating to the reflexive context of her fieldwork. Knowledge is a kind of power in Vanuatu; acquiring knowledge entails costs and, sometimes, risks. Why did she gather the narratives in the first place? What is it about the texts that she finds interesting enough to have spent literally hundreds of hours transcribing them? What was her relationship with the storytellers? How did her relationship with the storytellers affect her relations with the broader community in which she lived? What is her preception of the storytellers' perception of her? Why did they tell her their stories? Facey describes these matters briefly but, given her aims, the value of her work would have been enhanced if she allowed her own voice a greater role within the broader context of *Nguna Voices*.

Several years ago, the Government of Vanuatu banned all research in the country, including ethnographic fieldwork. *Nguna Voices* becomes all the more valuable as a document given the fact that no similar research is likely to be undertaken in Vanuatu in the foreseeable future. One reason for the prohibition on research is that some members of the Government feel strongly that Western researchers have returned little or nothing to the peoples they have studied. Indeed, most researchers have sent copies of their published work to members of their host community; however, the Government argues that most of such reports are irrelevant to the concerns of rural people. In addition, in the Government's view, academics write articles and monographs that are too technical for local people to understand. If the people derive no benefit from researchers, why then should researchers benefit from their associations with the people?

Facey's monograph is scholarly, creditable in an academic sense, yet it never loses sight of the fact that even ethnographic research that lacks an "applied" dimension can be accomplished within a framework that benefits

directly the people studied. *Nguna Voices* is a model of ethical scholarship in anthropology and folklore.

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Edward D. IVES, *Folksongs of New Brunswick* (Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 1989, Pp. 194)

Although an emphasis on context has shaped folklore studies for more than a quarter of a century, folksong collections are still likely to present texts with little regard for texture and context. This is partly because the business of collecting songs often falls to musicians who, like folklorists of past generations, are primarily interested in the song themselves, while many folksong scholars now focus mainly on context, disdaining the song collection as an outmoded form.

As a result, the folksong collection that presents both the baby and the bath water is rare. I'm not sure Edward Ives will take it as a compliment to find himself in this particular metaphor, but in *Folksongs of New Brunswick*, he gives us both. The reader of this work finds not only the texts and music of the songs, but also a detailed and affectionate representation of the singers and what the songs and their singing meant in the lives of these men.

This book is of course the result of many years of acquaintance, often genuine friendship, with these singers. As such, it serves as a welcome reminder that no amount of theory can substitute for solid fieldwork. But even knowing that Ives' focus is on the male tradition, it is disappointing to see no women singers were included, especially since he went so far as to mention Marie Whitney Hare, an outstanding New Brunswick singer.

Jennie Lynn-Parish's attractive art work for this book is strikingly similar to the 'nouveau art' designs Frank H. Johnson created for John Murray Gibbon's *Canadian Folksongs Old and New*, which first appeared in 1927. It would be nice to think that Lynn-Parish drew upon Johnson's work for inspiration, continuing an artistic tradition in the presentation of *Canadian Folksongs*.

Looking at the songs themselves, it is amazing to see how solidly the repertoires of these singers remained entrenched in nineteenth century lumbercamp tradition. In this purity of tradition, the iron hand of Louise Manny shows beneath Ives' velvet glove. Without her insistence that these songs alone be