

## Culture



# Philip JEYARETNAM, *Abraham's Promise*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996. 178 pages, \$10.95 (paper)

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Volume 16, numéro 1, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084121ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084121ar>

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### 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)

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### Citer ce compte rendu

H. Bodden, M. (1996). Compte rendu de [Philip JEYARETNAM, *Abraham's Promise*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996. 178 pages, \$10.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 16(1), 125–126. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084121ar>

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Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1996

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monde globalement « en contact ». En ne considérant pas l'anthropologie comme une discipline mais plutôt comme une approche du fait humain, nourrie par les comparaisons d'ordre diachronique (histoire) et synchronique (ethnologie), Todorov permet justement le recul nécessaire à un éventuel repositionnement disciplinaire en continuité avec l'ensemble des sciences humaines. Dans *La vie commune*, toutefois, l'idéologue prend le pas sur le chroniqueur et le commentateur ; le propos y est plus topique, l'auteur cherche plus directement à suggérer sa vision des choses. Au plan énonciatif, ce dernier ouvrage sur l'altérité (n'oublions pas qu'il s'agit d'un essai) pourrait sembler moins fondé que les précédents, mais cette impression se trouve atténuée par son insertion dans la démarche à long terme de l'auteur.

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Philip JEYARETNAM, *Abraham's Promise*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996. 178 pages, \$10.95 (paper).

By Michael H. Bodden

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On the opening page of Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise*, the novel's aging narrator, Abraham Isaac, a Latin tutor of Tamil descent and Christian faith, states:

History is written by survivors...Yet now that I near that full measure of my days I have discovered the flaw fatal to this happy scheme of things: longevity alone is not enough. He who captures the minds of the young is in truth the victor (p. 11).

Thus begins the fascinating narrative of Abraham Isaac's life, set against the background of

Singapore's recent history. The tale begins in the late 1930s and encompasses the years of Japanese occupation, the end of the colonial period, the rise and consolidation of power by the People's Action Party (PAP), and Singapore's current economic boom. Like many others of its genre, this novel presents history through the lens of an individual's perceptions, and illuminates the life-account of an individual character with the light of actual historical developments. As can be guessed from the passage quoted above, one of the work's central issues is how, and with what ideas, one may capture the imagination of the young and thereby shape Singapore's future.

Abraham Isaac is constructed ideally to bring together the personal and the public histories of struggle, fought out on the battlefield between past and future, which many Singaporeans have experienced in the last fifty years. He is both a teacher and a father – the shaper of Singapore's future elites, as well as a parent who desires to bequeath a personal legacy to the future in the form of his son.

The very structure of the book accentuates this dialectic between the personal and the public. The first three-quarters of the novel are comprised of a series of recollections triggered by – and juxtaposed to – Abraham's sessions with his final Latin pupil, the son of a prominent Singaporean-chinese family. As Abraham wonders whether his last student will care about and master both Latin and the liberal, humanistic values which Abraham seeks to reveal to the youth as a vital part of his study of the language, he is also spurred to remembrance of the ideals, struggles, loves, and disappointments of his life. His proud, but uncertain and unsettling narratorial reminiscences gradually reveal a character marked by both public political fortitude, and a lack of courage in personal matters; by selfless devotion to work and principle, and a cruel self-absorption that wounds those closest to him.

As a teacher, Abraham ponders whether Latin, or English, or indeed a liberal education, inherited ironically from Singapore's former British colonial masters, and the ideals which he feels it includes – moderation and restraint, a love of knowledge for its own sake, firm adherence to truth and principle, and belief in a progressive, egalitarian, socialistic society – can have any value for a generation brought up under an authoritarian government obsessed with political control and

increasing material wealth. Yet Jeyaretnam's narrator does not simply collide with the dominant trends of Singapore's political and economic development since independence. He must struggle also with his own deeply ingrained beliefs, acquired from his family background, about gender roles, caste and class distinctions, and codes of manly honour. All of these clash with his modern, liberal political and social ideals.

The final quarter of the book plunges him into a last attempt to come to terms with his past and future in the private arena in which traditional norms are both strongly present and most immediately challenged – the turmoil of his failed marriage, and his relations with his son, which parallel those of the biblical character after whom he has been named. Ultimately, the shift in the novel's focus, from the public/personal to a more exclusive attention to the personal, suggests at least a partial, provisional retreat from public idealism into a sphere of personal compassion and pragmatic accommodation to the limits of what is possible under Singapore's current system.

This is a compelling, thoughtful and timely novel that raises many issues relevant not only to contemporary Singaporeans, but to a much wider global audience. It will prove useful material for examining how all of us carry the baggage of the past into our decisions about the future. How we cope with the gaps between our ideals, the current state of society, and the awful burden of trying to shape the latter more to the former's image is another of the questions addressed in this novel. Not least vexing is how people adjust to the difficult intimate relations with those close to them who, more often than not, mischievously refuse to conform to expectations.

Joanne RAPPAPORT, *Cumbe Reborn: An Andean Ethnography of History*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994. 245 pages, (paper).

By Mike Evans

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*Cumbe Reborn* is a rich treatment of the long-term struggle of a number of indigenous communities in Colombia to reclaim lost lands. The product of collaborative research, the monograph details the context and meaning of a series of land

invasions (*recuperación*) that began in the 1970s. In addition to the value of this book as a case study of indigenous Colombian consciousness and resistance, the monograph comes face to face with a number of issues of current interest in anthropological history.

One of the most significant areas with which the book deals is debate around the notion of "invented traditions," and the implications of this notion for how history is to be understood. One of the most contentious problems in the invention of tradition literature has been where and how to look for the sources of innovation in tradition. Are innovations of tradition the result of external influences – that is, are they reactions predicated on the opposition to, or inversion of, externalities – or, can shifts in what people hold to be tradition be viewed as governed largely (I dare say essentially) by autochthonous processes? In this, her second monograph on history-making among indigenous peoples of the Andes, Joanne Rappaport answers this question with what might look like an appeal to the obvious; that is, the answer is both. What is remarkable is the care with which Rappaport has produced an ethnography of history which deals effectively with the historical influences of colonialism, and an encapsulated people's reaction to it, without diminishing or delegitimizing the agency of these people.

Rappaport has done this by embracing an antihistorical, but not ahistorical strategy – a process very similar to the one employed by the Nariño people of Columbia with whom she worked (p.176). Instead of searching for what "really happened," Rappaport follows Greg Dening's advice that we look to the complex and multiple processes of memory which make the past meaningful in the present, rather than detaching the past from the present through violent renderings of local histories.

Again, what is impressive here is the subtlety with which Rappaport works. She insists that we recognise the interplay between oral and written history. This demand, at least in the context of this study, leads to description situating the work of indigenous intellectuals in colonial documents and policy, as well as the more straightforward anthropological practice of reading history-making from local social and cultural processes. In this way she erodes the artificial separation between colonial and indigenous structures of memory and action.