

and the outcomes of their decisions. In short, the peasant ability to work this system, or to flounder in it, was influenced by both state structures and policies and economic forces that cut across the Chinese urban and rural landscapes.

In many ways, *Contesting Citizenship* is about the political will of the Chinese government after three decades of socialist experimentation and the current project of capitalist restructuring. Readers learn that the hukou system has been an institutional structure that has allowed for the care of the urban population, for discursive modes of naming and classifying populations, and for everyday practices of surveillance. Readers also learn something about the cultural politics of inequality in socialist and contemporary China. Solinger reveals how peasant sojourners have had to contend with modes of discrimination and prejudice left over from the socialist era, as well as with all of the new forms of exploitation that have come with capitalism. Her main theoretical contribution is that migration issues are all about the politics of citizenship. How one belongs to the nation depends on how one is classified, but also on how one can work the system to one's benefit. Readers learn that citizenship in China, as with so many other places, is about how marginalized groups are working to empower themselves against powerful regimes and indifferent market forces. Solinger tells this tale with clarity and compassion. *Contesting Citizenship* should be read by anyone interested in questions of labor, international trade, and the place of state socialism in the new global economy.

Tales of the City: A Study of Narrative and Urban Life. Ruth Finnegan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xii + 212 pp., appendixes, notes, references, photographs.

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Recent years have seen "an explosion of interest in the concept of narrative" (p. 4) within the social and human sciences, as Ruth Finnegan notes in *Tales of the City*. Finnegan should provoke reflection on why the recent interest in narrative, which has engaged a number of anthropologists, has had scarcely any impact on the subfield of urban anthropology where narrative (and more specifically the

"life narrative") has figured largely as a feature of methodology. *Tales of the City* is admirable for its deft intercalation of rich ethnographic material with analytical insights drawn from a number of disciplines, but Finnegan's innovative achievement lies in providing a model for the theoretical foregrounding of narrative in anthropological approaches to urban life.

Finnegan posits that narrative plays a crucial role in the organization of knowledge and lived experience. She effectively argues that personal stories not only reflect the reality of urban existence but in "building creatively on the set of accepted narrative resources" (p. 158) the tales of actor-narrators also actively formulate the city's social and cultural constitution. Finnegan analyzes multiple urban stories from a range of narrative registers while focusing on the new city of Milton Keynes, planned in the 1960s and located in southern-central England. She selects from the stories of city planners and academics, for example, as well as from the personal stories of individual lives. In analyzing either abstract or personal stories, her emphasis here is on how stories draw on wider cultural themes and narrative conventions. As Finnegan notes, within any cultural system of reference there are recognized generic conventions about content and delivery, with effective expression and communication built on "shared expectations about structure, style, protagonists, mode of distribution and content" (p. 11). Here, the use of narrative resonates strongly with how anthropologists have used the term culture: the efficacy of narrative capitalizes on the invisibility of its artifices to those employing them, thereby concealing the conventions that enable such narratives to work below the threshold of consciousness.

Among the accounts of 35 individuals living in one of the Milton Keynes housing estates in *Tales of the City*, six are comparatively extensive. Finnegan does not want to reduce their complexity to a single "message" or "definitive list of 'themes'" (p. 56). She argues that the stories are not limited to the unique persons or events portrayed in narration, but carry wider symbolic value for both teller and hearer. The stories draw upon a range of available narrative resources recognized by participants, and Finnegan rather cogently elucidates certain stock conventions and narrative devices that recurrently animate many, if not uniformly all of the particular stories. Finnegan provides

examples of the conventionally expected cultural forms taken as natural narratives—set forms of temporal ordering (such as the naturalness of the family life cycle or certain rites of passage), the recurrence of the self-conscious individual as the determining structural device and authenticator of the truth of more general plots, or the personal journey as heroic.

What scholars understand to be the proper terrain for the study of narrative has become by now ineluctably, if not notoriously, vast. Concomitantly, the potential pitfalls that come with undertaking narrative analysis are legion, particularly in an approach proposing that the conventions of the more “abstract theoretical tales told by academics” (p. 23) are, epistemologically speaking, on equal footing with those of “everyday usage.” For example, Finnegan argues that reflection on the part of the teller-qua-narrator serves “to impart a standing-aside quality to the telling,” (p. 122) adding a “Greek-chorus-like commentary on the development of the plot or the episodes in which she is depicted qua actor in the drama” (p. 122). Such a “standing-aside” disposition is of course intrinsic to any scholarly or indeed analytical enterprise. In this respect, many contemporary approaches to narrative are susceptible to something on the order of the Epimenides Paradox. If all stories, personal and academic alike, draw on certain narrative conventions, then *Tales of the City*, or, for that matter, a review in *American Ethnologist* are no exceptions. In which case, from a certain perspective, the enabling forms and conventions of narrativity are necessarily privileged over the content of analysis or argument. It scarcely bears mentioning that between academic and folk models, academic prose has been rather more generous in attending to folk models. Finnegan, however, is cognizant of such complexities, and is explicitly critical of certain excesses of literary anthropology—most notably the kind of relativism that claims an absolute equality among all theories, stories, and texts. Her claims are more modest in scope, and her argument is decidedly more ethnographic in tone. Finnegan is not engaged by the constructed nature of all accounts but by the actual ways in which specified accounts “are so constructed as narrative” (p. 8). Finnegan distinguishes *Tales of the City* from the prolific facile celebrations of textuality by insisting on viewing narratives as process—“tellings rather

than texts” (p. 169)—requiring full attention to context, delivery, and participants.

Narrative, as Finnegan concludes, is not the whole of life, but certainly an important part of it that, in the context of urban anthropology, has suffered unwarranted neglect. There is no reason to assume that narrative shapes life less in urban habitats than in putatively more autochthonous ones, although the relative paucity of narrative studies in urban contexts would suggest otherwise. In this regard, some of the most interesting questions raised by *Tales of the City* might well be illuminated through their application to a range of ethnographic contexts.

If nothing else, the cumulative work of anthropologists in cities suggests that urbanism (and the same may be said of modernity) becomes a decidedly less familiar object when viewed in the more exotic contexts in which anthropologists have typically worked. Perhaps the most compelling question suggested by Finnegan’s approach concerns how different forms of narrativity are produced within different cultural and social traditions, and their consequences for different forms of urbanism. As concerns about what Setha Low refers to as the “undertheorization” of the city within anthropology (*Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*, Rutgers University Press, 1999) have assumed a certain tone of urgency in recent years, anthropologists working in non-Western urban settings would surely welcome a volume comparing the relation between urbanism and narrativity across a number of ethnographic settings. Finnegan’s potential contribution might well come with the recognition that, along with such foci as systems of distribution, political economy, or the symbolic conveyances of the built environment, the narratives by which people in urban settings tie themselves to their environment are a natural complement to these more established approaches to the ethnographic study of urban life.

Peoples of the Gran Chaco. Elmer S. Miller, ed. Westport, CO: Bergin and Garvey, 1999. vii + 166 pp., illustrations, maps, photographs, index.

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The Gran Chaco is today a region divided among three nations—Paraguay, Argentina,