

Book Review

Irene Portis-Winner. *Semiotics of Peasants in Transition: Slovene Villagers and Their Ethnic Relatives in America (Sound and Meaning)*. London: Duke University Press. 2002. 187 pages. ISBN: 0-8223-2841-0. \$22.95 US.

Reviewed by **Tamara Grivić**

In her book “*Semiotics of Peasants in Transition: Slovene Villagers and Their Ethnic Relatives in America (Sound and Meaning)*,” Irene Portis-Winner presents a significant semiotic study that, unlike many previous semiotic studies limited to the analysis of discourse alone, traverses multiple dimensions of cultural texts. Portis-Winner’s study comprises a three-decade-long fieldwork analysis of transnational and ethnic qualities binding two communities: that of the little peasant village of Žerovnica, Slovenia, and its emigrant population in Cleveland, Ohio and Hibbing, Minnesota. Special attention is also awarded to the question of ethnicity and ethnographer’s or author’s voice in ethnographic studies. The study considers a broad range of polysemous, multi-vocal, and polyindexical values of cultural texts unbound by time-space continuum, which in turn prompt the author to redefine ethnicity as a dynamic entity not limited by “timeless essence” of individuals but rather free of eternal verity too often ascribed to societies.

The complexity that defines ethnic culture and transnationalism is illustrated through a variety of cultural texts throughout the book. These texts range from: official to non-official history of the area and the villagers, everyday life, beliefs, traditions, economy, power and domination struggle, continuous revival and change of traditions and customs, and how they index the significance of signs. Portis-Winner’s study is empirical in nature because it employs a method that involves *finding out* what happens within a cultural text, rather than merely being told. The theme of Lotman’s unconquerable boundary-crossing cultural hero is carried throughout the book as it is uncovered from personal interviews of reflexive narratives, and interpretive, double-voicing, accounts of the extended human sign.

Chapter 1 (3-27) provides a brief introduction to the economic, social, and geographic properties of Žerovnica, as well as of its landscape, landmarks and inhabitants during the first fieldwork study in the 1960s. The question of inner versus outer (non-member) point of view immediately surfaces as the author warns that the immediate peaceful impression of a harmonious village and its inhabitants is positively deceptive. Tension-ridden relations amongst villagers are discussed and traced to the communist rule and its goal to obliterate peasant autonomy and traditions that were considered a threat to the conglomerate whole. The chapter also informs of the pervasive hardship and exploitation of the

peasants, as well as the imminent impact of global modernization on the village structure following the Slovenia's declaration of independence in 1991.

The author's initial impression of a harmonious community changes after she has spent time within the ethnic community and has gained insight into their traditions and practices. Portis-Winner fervently argues that accuracy of an ethnographer's research relies heavily upon his or her ability to become a quasi-member of the group under investigation. She effectively accomplishes this task through a continuous exposure to a variety of ethnic texts, amongst others, modeling her conclusions after many member perspectives. I consider "*Semiotics of Peasants in Transition: Slovene Villagers and Their Ethnic Relatives in America*" a testament to the importance of efficient ethnographic work and applaud Portis-Winner's efforts to provide us with such a valuable study.

The last part of Chapter 1 offers a taste of juxtaposition between the member-perceived vibrant and active life of the Slovene emigrant community in Cleveland, their clearly marked attachments to their Slovene village, and the deteriorating, tension-ridden, and mistrustful community of Žerovnica. An initial introduction is made to the changing semiotic aspects of objects and signs brought along by the migrants to the New World. Portis-Winner argues that semiotic changes, from practical to emotive and aesthetic, serve to reinforce the ethnic identity of Slovene Americans.

Part II (28-74) comprises Chapters 2 through 4. In this section, Portis-Winner provides a rich account of issues pertaining to traditional terminology of culture, society, nationalism, ethnic identity, and transnationalism, all relevant for the understanding of the study at hand. Chapter 3 (43-49) is dedicated to a significant and recurring issue of non-member interpretation of cultural texts and modes of unearthing the communicative objects that are significant in the construction of an inner point of view. Portis-Winner warns about the problem of authorial interpretation of traditions and customs, their usage and changes. She advocates the inner point of view as essential in ethnographic research because it may have different realities and coherence, therefore rendering the uni-dimensional authorial view at best inaccurate and at worst overly simplistic.

Chapter 4 (50-74) offers a detailed overview and discussion of theoretical and practical issues pertaining to ethnographic studies over the decades. It spans views and attitudes of many semiotically-oriented scholars from Saussure, Peirce, The Prague Linguistic Circle headed by Jakobson, Moscow-Tartu School and Bakhtin, to Lotman and others. Each subsection of the chapter introduces a new stance of one of the above-mentioned authors with respect to the analysis and attitudes toward cultural texts. Special attention is afforded to the concepts of sign, symbol, and index; polysemy or multivocality of texts; everyday behavior; context (heteroglossia); perception and interpretation of history; as well as the undeniable role of power, which often forces cultural significance onto signs. Portis-Winner substantiates her synopsis with a much-needed critique of the semioticians' attitudes, their respective problems or benefits toward a more wholesome ethnographic study. Reader should be warned that previous

knowledge and familiarity with the subject matter are indispensable in understanding of Part II.

Part III (75-124) includes Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 (77-105) revisits the economic, cultural and geographic landscape of the village. Portis-Winner offers a detailed account of historical events of the Slovene people. She draws on official records, community's view of future, and survey of cultural texts (recollections, beliefs, tales, myths, autobiographies, and changing beliefs and object meanings), to successfully extrapolate the inner point of view. Chapter 5 concludes with an account of a changing value system in the peasant village.

Chapter 6 (106-124) discusses the immigrant community in Cleveland, Ohio, and should be of great interest to a linguist as it addresses the bilingual aspect of Slovene American culture. The immigrant population shows great attachment to their mother tongue, which has undergone phonological, lexical, and grammatical changes under the influence of a new environment. Portis-Winner delineates member attitudes toward the Slovene language over several migrant generations. Much of Slovene American communication is marked by code switching, especially within second generation immigrants. The third generation immigrants however are said to have initially shown embarrassment at their grandparents speaking Slovenian, but later that there was some indication of the younger generation's interest in the revival of the language.

The rest of Chapter 6 elaborates on the survival and upward movement of the Slovene community. The success is ascribed to the traditional values the immigrants brought with them: stubbornness, ingenuity, hard work, loyalty to their tradition, generosity, discipline, honesty and responsibility toward family, kin, and country. Portis-Winner recounts several immigrant narratives, which, she persuasively argues, shed light on the ethnic culture as a part of a larger cultural context. The stories are significant in that they provide reference to the experience and points of view of the Slovene migrant. The indication of transformation is present in a variety of signs, verbal and non-verbal, and may be evidenced in the meaning and significance change for the original signs, the change that points to the similarities and differences between one's ethnic culture and the new environment.

Part IV (125-155) includes Chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 (127-151) surveys the major social and economic changes that bear heavily on the social and psychological state of the two communities in juxtaposition. Portis-Winner shows that global modernization has had an opposing impact on the elder generations between the two communities, while showing much affinity in the impact on the youth. Changes in values and traditions between and within these ethnic communities serve to support Portis-Winner's claim about the dynamic nature of ethnicity, boundaries of which are expanded, crossed, and re-evaluated on constant basis. By analogy, ethnic narrators in this study are seen as human signs indexing ethnicity -- an intertextual and interwoven phenomenon that comprises a complexity of identities. The author further equates ethnic actors

with actors in a theater, both of which, she claims, are able to move from one world to another and therefore become transfigured or transnational.

Portis-Winner concludes the book in Chapter 8 (153-155) with a discussion of polysemous and polyfunctional nature of cultural texts. The two main points that I have derived from her study can be encapsulated in the following thought: 1.) in order for ethnographic studies to be of value, ethnographers must work to unearth the inner point of view and formulate their conclusions after having considered a network of cultural texts, and 2.) every culture and its ethnic identity are amalgams of polysemous and polyfunctional properties of its cultural texts, which are dynamic in nature, and no view of 'society' holds permanently true across time and space. The way(s) in which a tradition is going to be impacted is unpredictable. Some values and traditions may be maintained, others lost, and still many simply altered to reflect and adapt to the changes of the new environment and the new times.

This book provides a comprehensive synopsis of the essential aspects of a thorough ethnographic study. Portis-Winner set out to conduct an empirical ethnographic fieldwork study, which in turn provided her with the necessary experience to help define criteria for a better way of conducting ethnographic research. She accomplishes this by intimately studying two related ethnic groups during a span of 30 years. The longitudinal study affords her a quasi-insider perspective of the ethnic group and provides access to invaluable ethnic sources. This is exactly the strength of her approach and only enhances our trust in her evaluation.

Because of its multi-disciplinary nature, "*Semiotics of Peasants in Transition: Slovene Villagers and Their Ethnic Relatives in America*" should be of interest to semioticians, ethnographers, as well as linguists and linguistic anthropologists. Since the book is relatively non-technical, serving an interesting and comprehensive introduction to ethnographic study, as well as providing remarkable insight into the life of a particular ethnic group, I highly recommend it to any casual reader.

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