

Diane E. GOLDSTEIN (ed.), *Talking Aids: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* (Research and Policy Papers n^o 12, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991, p. 145, ISSN 0828-6868)

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locating their analysis within the space of postmodernity, they demonstrate a moral concern with the transformation of society (vernacular or otherwise) from a stage of authentic production to one of simulated consumption.

The spatial turn in cultural analysis forces a reconsideration of constructs central to folklore: community, tradition, craft, restoration, and so on. Books such as these also force the reconsideration of ethnographic practice, and most importantly point out the consequence of replacing engaged fieldwork with engaged textual analysis. Wilson provides a parting shot of those turning to the cultural research of landscape:

We tour the disparate surfaces of everyday life as a way of involving ourselves in them, as a way of reintegrating a fragmented world (p. 22).

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Talking AIDS is a collection of papers originally presented during an ISER-sponsored conference at Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1989. The conference explored the semiotic power of AIDS and its effects on daily life. The health needs of the people of Newfoundland provided the immediate context for conference dialogue; however, comments in the papers printed here reveal little regarding the conditions there. The concerns of this volume are more widely cast. These papers emphasize relationships between the content of AIDS-related messages and the power and authority which privilege and legitimize those messages. Hufford defends the decontextualized focus of such discussion by reminding us (p. 7) that "(i)n an emergency, there is a natural inclination to prefer action to thought" even though "our society's conventional emergency response mechanisms are generally unable to produce adaptive responses to modern kinds of problems". Serious thought must precede action, under these circumstances, especially when — as Crellin notes (p. 80), AIDS as well as AIDS research are

“vehicles of social ideology”, part of the “non-neutral discourse” which surrounds and gives subjective meanings to AIDS in all societies.

The papers by Kinsman, O’Conner, Smith and Goldstein offer specific, explicit examples of AIDS-related social ideologies and their impact on human experience. Kinsman shows how media can recast and distort even the most basic facts about AIDS experience, e.g. equating sex with danger, portraying gay men as insensitive to health needs of their partners, promoting silence by giving voice to fear. O’Conner examines assurances of HIV-related treatment and cure offered through vernacular (a.k.a. “folk”) health care systems, to show how “scientific” medical discourse promotes belief in the culturally familiar even as it attempts to supplant it.

Smith looks at the content and significance of the messages promoted through AIDS-related legends, jokes, graffiti, photocopied and computer-based texts, and other forms of contemporary folklore. His examples show how information from such sources reinforce homophobic, misogynist, and racist perspectives and play into larger processes of power, authority and control, whether speakers intend this outcome or not. Goldstein’s examples suggest that a “...responsible folklore of AIDS (can do) something which we, as AIDS educators, do not seem to be able to do on our own — it makes it cool to be in the know, and perhaps in the future it will make it cool to be safe” (p. 132). Again, it is the power and authority which underlie AIDS discourse, not just the messages contained within the discourse itself, which need critical attention.

One area of discourse is disregarded in this volume: the AIDS-talk, and associated politics, of PWAs (People With AIDS), their partners, families and friends. In fact, with very few exceptions, the “talk” highlighted in this volume come from persons who are not members of those categories. And two papers (Clark, Dancy) largely restate issues which others developed in earlier sources. Still, these are minor disappointments, compared to the rich examples of critical research which the papers in this volume offer to folklorists and other researchers interested in understanding the cultural construction of AIDS in contemporary society.

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