career as professor and government interpreter in her native China, her arrival in the United States as a totally “lost, incompetent, and dysfunctional” new immigrant, her subsequent dual role in the university as competent Chinese teacher and patronized or neglected foreign student in her own graduate education classes, and finally her contradictory identity as an ethnographer of education carrying out ethnographic research back in China, who is “Chinese in the opinion of the Americans and an American in the eyes of the Chinese” (p. 210). In a similarly autobiographical essay, Kiang, a biracial Chinese American, recounts how his positioning as the primary faculty member responsible for the first decade of teaching and course development in Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston (1987–1997), combined with the pressing needs of many Asian American students and his frustration with dominant, assimilationist paradigms about them, dictated his research agenda throughout that time—a multiphase agenda focused on documenting and analyzing the voices, strengths, and needs of Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrant/refugee students.

The book includes an index and is for the most part carefully edited; however one section of the Kincheloe and McLaren chapter, in particular, seems to have slipped past everyone’s eye. Hermeneutics and hermeneutical are consistently and distractingly misspelled, usually as hermeneutics and hermeneutical, and in one subheading as hermentucial; but there are also sentences lacking verbs (e.g., p. 96, bottom, and p. 97, top). Another editorial asset would have been short biographies of the authors. These are minor oversights, however, in what is overall a challenging and enjoyable read. The rich mix of theory, research, and practice makes excellent material for reflection by experienced and novice researchers alike. Though I had not read it with this intent, the book itself has persuaded me to use it in my doctoral seminar on ethnographic research methods.

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The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity.  

Michael Jackson has produced a valuable study of stories and storytelling as these enter into the lives of many different sorts of people—veterans of foreign wars, refugees from wars and genocide, Aboriginal children of the stolen generation in Australia, Kuranko villagers in the north of Sierra Leone, and the general public of his native New Zealand, among others. The subject matter of stories told by this array of humanity varies widely, as would be expected, but there is an underlying theme running throughout this sample, having to do with the appropriation of storytelling as a means of coping with the often disorienting and sometimes
numbing character of human experience. At the source of all these stories is a core
of raw violence, experienced directly or vicariously, but Jackson presents an
ultimately optimistic portrait of storytelling as a path towards redemption.

Written in a style that is by turns rhapsodic and analytical, Jackson undertakes
a meditation on Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, a book that he acquired
and read avidly as a graduate student, and whose arguments seem to have remained
with him, as both inspiration and irritant. The political in this study is a “politics of
experience” (p. 11) deriving from Arendt’s discussion of the private and public
realms and the pivotal role of storytelling in bridging the gap between them.
Jackson’s argument is that people obtain “a sense of agency, voice, and belonging”
(p. 185) through composing their own stories or situating their experiences within
the frameworks of existing narrative. He provides ample illustration of Arendt’s
observation that storytelling links individual perception and experience to
collective memory and ideology. But he supplements this perspective by noting
significant movement in the opposite direction, whereby public belief systems
make available a code for articulating personal experience. Jackson argues that “in
recounting the stories of their lives people tend to construct events according to
cultural stereotypes” (p. 229) such that “individual lifestories” can be “completely
assimilated to normative scenarios” (p. 230).

Much of the book revolves around storytelling in the lives of people in serious
trouble. Jackson identifies a kind of narrative ground-zero, a location so
emotionally devastating that there is no possibility for composing or telling stories.
Referring to Arendt’s notion of “an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” (p.
92), he charts the predicament of survivors and refugees who cannot muster a sense
of meaning and purpose to even begin to articulate their stories. But Jackson
envisions a healing process that will conduct the wounded towards a threshold of
understanding and connection, and storytelling emerges in this design as both a
vehicle for effecting this transition and a marker that such a transition has been
effectuated. “Storytelling is an empowering act,” he tells us, that allows a person to
experience himself or herself “not as a creature of circumstance but as someone
who has some claim, some creative say, over how those circumstances may be
grasped, borne, and even forgiven” (pp. 132–33).

If storytelling is presented as a virtual lifeline to people in distress, it is seen to
have important uses as well for those in less dire straits, since all of us have a
pressing need to find meaning, purpose, and understanding in our lives. This book
features a sustained inquiry into a corpus of traditional narratives present among
the Kuranko and shared, in many cases, with their neighbors and even broadly
among the Mande peoples throughout the region. With a nod towards the structural
analysis of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jackson inspects a portion of this corpus centered
on the problem of generational succession. Beginning with Kuranko narratives he
collected in the field and extending the corpus to include renditions of the
widespread Sundiata epic, he identifies a pervasive concern with the issues that
arise when one generation must take the place of another. Jackson encounters
within this narrative corpus a tendency to diffuse or resolve these issues by
relocating the point of tension from the vertical to the horizontal axis, for example,
from father-son to brother-brother as the nexus of conflict. Like other episodes within this wide-ranging study, this one is anchored to the main argument of the book by showing how these stories exemplify the “unceasing movement between private and public space” (p. 226) and by assessing the role played by storytelling in finding one’s place in a meaningful world. Links to the connecting thread of violence and disorientation are constructed by showing how traditional tales are implicated in brutal realities of the civil war in Sierra Leone, both as prod to action and resource for interpreting the meaning of events.

Jackson presents his book as a meeting of ethnography and philosophy, and certainly both are present in good measure. But the net effect is of a reverie on the search for meaning and purpose in life, drifting easily across temporal, geographical, and conceptual boundaries. The book is constructed on the trope of the journey, with sections on “Displacements,” “Returns,” and “Histories,” recapitulating the customary anatomy of narrative. Scant attention is given to techniques of narrative performance, and little is said about genre as a factor conditioning the shape and scope of narrative vessels. Instead, the focus is resolutely on the content of stories, whatever their medium or provenance, and how that content articulates a process of individual realization within a social imaginary.

This is not a systematic study of the politics of storytelling, but it is a book that delivers to the reader, in graceful and at times evocative prose, profound insights into the human condition with all its vexing contradictions. Jackson has written a powerful testimony to the human spirit, making a good case that “constructing, relating, and sharing stories” is basic to the “reclamation of a person’s humanity” (p. 105) and, consequently, that “storytelling enables the regeneration and celebration of social existence” (p. 58).

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This book, the result of more than thirty years of sustained research on African-Caribbean culture, examines Caribbean culture building through the emergence of free villages in one of the most intensively cultivated plantation areas in Jamaica. It demonstrates that the villages had their informal origins in the proto-peasantry that evolved through the slaves’ subsistence cultivation and marketing activities within the plantation regime. After the abolishment of slavery, the emancipated proto-peasants settled in villages, often assisted by Nonconformist missionaries who obtained the funds necessary to purchase from plantation owners large tracts.