

WORKS CITED

- Bernheimer, Charles (ed.). *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Higonnet, Margaret R. (ed.). *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Wellek, René. "The Crisis of Comparative Literature." *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

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Nicholas B. Dirks, ed. *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. Pp. vii, 308. \$49.95, \$19.95 pb.

This volume of eleven essays evolved from the last of a triptych of University of Michigan conferences conceived, in the late 1980's, as interdisciplinary interventions into the definition of three pervasive and slippery terms: history, power, and culture. *In Near Ruins* collects writing from the fields of history, anthropology, literary criticism, and communication that, according to editor Nicholas B. Dirks, "present a set of allied but different approaches to problems in cultural analysis that work to demonstrate, rather than explicitly advocate, an engaged, interdisciplinary, political, theoretically self-aware position on the state of culture" (ix).

Dirks's introductory essay, which shares the volume's title, sketches a kind of history of cultural theory through an exploration of the ruined Villa San Girolamo in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Dirks draws upon Burke's notions of the sublime and picturesque, Benjamin's conception of "horror," and Adorno's conception of "despair," to interpret the ruin as a trope for culture itself. In some ways, Dirks's history-of-culture, like his forwarding of the trope of the ruin, is the type of totalizing gesture that cultural theory "at the end of the century" has come to challenge. At his essay's conclusion, Dirks describes our compulsion to return "to the ruins of culture": "We stroll across the dilapidated ramparts, we climb the devastated staircase, we sift through the sandy pieces of shard, we back up on a grassy knoll until we can see the grandeur and beauty of the prospect" (16). Dirks's privileging of the individual, the critic, the "we" who somehow exists outside of culture, regarding "culture" as something merely to "stroll through" and observe, is ultimately, like Ondaatje's novel, romantic, and even disturbingly nostalgic. Although most of the essays in this diverse volume do not specifically address the dilemma of the theoretical position of the cultural critic, they do attempt to engage with, figure, and problematise "culture" more productively, as construction and process.

This more complex vision of culture is evident, for example, in Michael Taussig's suggestive essay, "Viscerality, Faith, and Scepticism:

Another Theory of Magic." Taussig re-examines the relationship between Franz Boas, the "founder of modern American anthropology," and his shaman "informant" and collaborator George Hunt, in order to trouble a conventional anthropological emphasis on the concealing of "trickery" (221). In Taussig's paper, faith comes to be defined by its interdependence with scepticism. This interdependence has significant theoretical and moral implications: it leads Taussig to a consideration of "reality" and "magic," "good" and "evil" in which the "very notion of the trick . . . seems to sabotage binary logic" (251).

Although he discovers different implications, John Pemberton, like Dirks, focuses his discussion of culture on the image of the ruin. "Disorienting Culturalist Assumptions: A View from 'Java'" charts the course of Javanese culture through the incredible history of the Palace of Surakarta. In Pemberton's reading, the Palace's cycle of ruin and reconstruction reflects the construction of Javanese "culture" itself, which is defined from the outset in the context of Dutch colonisation. Interrogating notions of "tradition" and "authenticity," Pemberton reminds readers that culture is a historical, political "product" that is always in-process. While Pemberton addresses "culturalist" assumptions, Gyanendra Pandey challenges historians, opening his essay with the assertion that the "relationship between culture, nation, and history is closer than historians have generally been willing to acknowledge" (19). Pandey's investigation of what he calls "the new Hindu history of India" concerns the debates that continue to rage around the interpretation of nation, and the ways in which competing cultural "claims" work to reconstruct narratives and events of the past.

Culture is established as an always troubled process/product of interpretation in E. Valentine Daniel's "The Limits of Culture." In this challenging essay, Daniel defines what he calls the "counterpoint" of culture: "something that resists the recuperative powers of culture; it runs parallel without ever crossing the dialectic" (69). Daniel's example of such a counterpoint is extreme violence. He explores the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (as he experienced it in the 1980s), recounting one particularly horrific "event" described to him by two Tamil brothers. Traumatic encounters with pain, "evil," and the Other, he writes, expose for a time the fallible workings of the "semeiotic process of incorporation" (88). In "Mourning the Japanese Thing," Marilyn Ivy focuses upon Japanese rituals of death and grief, and, like Daniel, upon the role that the other plays in the formation of culture. Taking up Slavoj Žižek's notion of the "nation thing," Ivy examines how Mt. Osore, a site traditionally described as the final destination of spirits of the dead, functions in contemporary Japan as a complex expression of the cultural loss or "lack" that informs the creation of national-cultural identity.

In "Check the Technique: Black Urban Culture and the Predicament of Social Science," Robin D. G. Kelley challenges constructions, by American social scientists, of the "so-called" African-American "under-class." Kelley protests the essentialising of black urban culture as a "culture of poverty" by reconsidering expressions of black urban masculinity, such as the notion of "soul," and contemporary rap music. These and other popular cultural forms have been seized upon by the (predominantly white) ethnographic imagination as "authentic" examples of black urban culture. Kelley calls for a recognition of aesthetics—an acknowledgment of black urban culture and forms of expression as sources of "visceral and psychic pleasure" (58).

Two essays in this collection are concerned with the limits and definitions of pleasure. Both Lauren Berlant, in "Live Sex Acts [Parental Advisory: Explicit Material]," and Laura Kipnis, in "Fat Culture," address the issue of what is denied, hidden, or criminalized in the formation and "protection" of American subjects. Drawing upon nineteenth-century views of gender and sexuality, Adela Pinch's "Rubber Bands and Old Ladies" begins with an exploration of how the Victorian old lady continues to inform discussions of culture. Pinch then demonstrates that the "women's culture" described in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* functions as an instance of "the gendered nature of mid-Victorian, middle-class identity formation." In Pinch's engaging reading of the novel, the rubber-band treasured by Cranford's narrator becomes a colonial/industrial commodity, a sexual fetish, and even a symbol of "woman's flexible conceptual place" (165) in discourse.

It is the possibility, or rather the impossibility, of any "flexible" discursive positioning which engages Marjorie Levinson in the volume's concluding article. "Posthumous Critique" begins with a quotation that challenges Dirks's vision of "the ruin" and the critic's relation to it: "'A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably'" (264). Levinson describes her deliberately ambivalent paper as a type of "thought-experiment" that attempts to come to terms with a project of materialist critique in a "Wittgensteinian universe." Given the vastness of "culture" as a subject, especially within an interdisciplinary context, the many strong essays in the volume form a surprisingly cohesive and informative collection.

MARLO EDWARDS

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Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, eds.
Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1994. pp. ix, 349.

Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures opens, fittingly enough, with a memory. The year is 1972, the location