

Book Reviews

Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy, eds. *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. 558. \$52.95US

At a cultural studies workshop hosted by the University of Winnipeg 25 May 2011, one participant suggested—tongue in cheek—that one sign of the establishment of cultural studies is that the field has a number of “door stoppers” at its disposal. Indeed, there are several anthologies, some of them more than six-hundred pages long, which suffice as able booster seats as well as doorstoppers. So when I received my review copy of Imre Szeman’s and Timothy Kaposy’s *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, the question that immediately came to mind was, “Do we really need another one?”

No doubt having anticipated such a response to their anthology, Szeman and Kaposy point out in the introduction that in focusing on “the theories and concepts ... which have had a determinate impact on the direction and the shape of the field [of cultural studies]” (2), it departs substantially from others. They also suggest that “While there are many existing anthologies of cultural studies available today, for the most part these assemble work done on various cultural artifacts and practices with the intent of showcasing the rich and complex work taking place under the aegis of this term around the world” (2).

A perusal of some cultural studies anthologies reveals that there is no shortage of essays that perform, as opposed to explore the theoretical foundations of, cultural studies. Szeman and Kaposy themselves cite some examples, including Ackbar Abbas and John Nyuget Erni’s *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology* (2004), Pepi Leistyna’s *From Theory to Action* (2004), and Michael Ryan’s *Cultural Studies: An Anthology* (2008), which cover everything from the world of the Yoruba taxi driver to the economy of appearances. This tendency to proffer an exciting yet delectably utilitarian banquet of sorts has provoked the ire of many, prompting Greg Noble to remark that “cultural studies has often been criticized for its imperial desires” (406). When cultural studies anthologies do focus on foundational ideas and concepts, they tend to provide a list of “usual suspects” (that is, the canon), leading to a number of anthologies that ultimately reiterate one another—a phenomenon, which, following George Elliott Clarke, nevertheless reinforces the sense that cultural studies is a recognizable and well-established field.¹

Instead of focusing on the work of cultural studies, or critical reflections about the field itself, Szeman and Kaposy offer a collection of essays under

the umbrella of “cultural theory,” a term they use to describe “a place of critical reflection where insights gained and lessons learned in the study of culture are consolidated into general frameworks and organizing principles for future analysis and investigation” (1). Many of the essays included, such as Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” are predictable offerings for a cultural theory anthology, while others, to borrow the words of Nicholas Lawrence, whose review of Szeman’s and Kaposy’s anthology is excerpted on the first page, are “refreshingly unexpected.” In addition to including some of the more canonized theorists, Szeman and Kaposy include essays that emerge from, are rooted in, or speak to non-Euro-American contexts. Essays by Frantz Fanon, Arjun Appadurai, Roberto Schwarz, Ranajit Guha, and Paul Gilroy are juxtaposed with the work of Herbert Marcuse, Doreen Massey, and Jacques Lacan, offering a sense of the diversity of cultural theory. Significantly, such inclusions highlight the fact that much of the theory that we might call “cultural” originates outside of Europe and North America and has exerted a profound influence on the field. As with cultural studies, cultural theory need not “trace its pedigree to London or Birmingham, New York or Urbana, Paris or Melbourne,” but rather, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat suggest that “one can imagine a more diffuse and diasporized genealogy going back to such figures as Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre in France, Leslie Fiedler and James Baldwin in the United States, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon in the Caribbean [...]” (481; 485). Although many of the theorists Stam and Shohat cite are absent in *Cultural Theory*, Szeman and Kaposy are careful to avoid placing Europe and America at the centre.

For all that, there are some troubling omissions. Edward Soja, whose work on postmodern human geography has been highly influential in cultural studies, is not in the line up, and out of a total of forty-two essays, the anthology includes only five by women. While the absence of Soja may be seen as a means of accommodating other voices on the topic of space and scale, the unevenness in terms of gender is remarkable. What worries me is that *Cultural Theory* may offer the impression that the “hard” work of theory is predominantly a masculine enterprise.

Also troubling is the refusal to engage cultural theories that challenge the persistence of the human/animal divide. Szeman and Kaposy acknowledge important work in cultural studies that “displaces the human from the centre of culture [e.g. work that considers economics and politics]” (3), but beyond their inclusion of Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” they neither acknowledge nor engage theory that defends the value of considering non-hu-

man animals and their often vexed relationships with human animals. Jodey Castricano describes the larger neglect of issues concerning non-human animals a “lag,” all the more surprising given the eagerness to direct critical attention “against sexism and racism in critical feminism, queer theory and race studies” (184). Castricano argues that “the same intellectual work has also produced all-too-familiar forms of hierarchy and exclusion through the marginalizing of the non-human” (184). One wonders why “social life” in Szeman’s and Kaposy’s anthology does not include non-human animals or, for that matter, why it does not direct much attention to how human economics relies on the exploitation of non-human animals. Haraway’s “The Cyborg Manifesto,” included in *Cultural Theory*, suggests that displacing the human from the centre of culture might involve a critique of anthropocentrism. If, to cite Szeman and Kaposy, “cultural theory is that part of the new humanities in which one can find both the conceptual resources for questioning existing modes of thought and those needed to construct the new ones we need for creating more equitable and just futures” (3), then we might also take a cue from that other “usual suspect”—Jacques Derrida—and reconsider our relations with the animal “other.”

Even if it does not engage this question of the animal, *Cultural Theory* constitutes a valuable resource for scholars, as well as a springboard for further discussion. Introductions to each of the six sections, which focus on key concepts, themes, or topics in cultural theory, as well as the introduction to the anthology as a whole, are clear and succinct, and enough bases are covered here to make the anthology appealing to a wide range of researchers. Lists of additional readings, and the inclusion of a glossary of terms, further enhance what is undeniably a welcome intervention in the field. In short, this is not an anthology we will be stopping doors with any time soon.

Heather Snell

Notes

- 1 In conversation with Wayde Compton and Kevin McNeilly, George Elliott Clarke explains: “All anthologies are basically saying that a tradition exists. Whether you are talking about queer and lesbian writing, whether you are talking about women’s writing from the 16th century, as soon as that scholar comes along and says, ‘Here is the anthology folks,’ boom, you’ve got a tradition, you have a canon” (62).

Works Cited

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