

American Literary Studies. A Methodological Reader.
Ed. by Michael A. Elliott and Claudia Stokes. New York:
New York UP. 2003. 349 pages.

There was a period not too long ago when books on literary theory and method were all the rage in the American academy. Since the nineties, however, the genre seems to have gone into decline. One reason may be that American literary criticism has run out of theory imports, but another may be seen in the ultimate sterility of the genre, at least as it was developed in surveys and readers aimed at the college market: the assumption that one can first outline a theory and then apply it like a manual to the interpretation of a particular text. To avoid such sterile schematism, the book under review has come up with a refreshing idea. Instead of surveying familiar theoretical positions one more time, the editors have asked twelve prominent scholars, who represent a cross section of different approaches within the field of American literary studies, to select a (previously published) essay "that they felt employs a thoughtful and instructive method of interdisciplinary American literary study" (11), and to comment, in a brief three- to four-page introduction, on the essay's importance as a model of interpretation. In this way, the editors hope "to sharpen debates about the goals and practice of interdisciplinary literary studies by bringing into the foreground the methods by which such scholarship is produced" (4).

The result is an uneven but nevertheless interesting collection of essays. Not surprisingly, some choices are more convincing than others, a few remain puzzling, and what is perhaps the greatest drawback: there seems to be no coordination whatsoever among these choices. In the first section of the book, "History and Literature in America,"

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's well-known feminist essay on early American culture, "Domesticating Virtue: Coquettes and Revolutionaries in Young America" (1988), stands alone against a phalanx of dazzling recent examples of race and gender studies which are, however, rather similar in argument and approach: Laura Romero's essay "Vanishing Americans: Gender, Empire, and New Historicism" (1991), Laura Wexler's study of post ante-bellum photography, "Seeing Sentiment: Photography, Race, and the Innocent Eye" (2000), and Lauren Berlant's essay on diva citizenship, "The Queen of American Goes to Washington City: Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, Anita Hill" (1993). The second section, "Culture," begins with a rather odd choice that seems to have surprised even the editors, an essay by Roy Harvey Pearce from 1962, "Mass Culture/Popular Culture: Notes for a Humanist's Primer," which is a plea for a humanist cultural studies that is full of good intentions but badly dated. Politely, the editors write: "The three selections that follow Pearce's offer more specific examples of what such scholarship—proceeding from a convergence of American literary and cultural studies—might offer" (13). The reference is to W. T. Lhamon's essay on minstrelsy, "Dancing for Eels at Catharine Market" (1998), Paula A. Treichler's analysis of public representations of AIDS, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification" (1999), and Ann duCille's angry attack on the fetishization of black female writers and critics in current critical discourse, "The Occult of Black Womanhood" (1993). The final section on "Nationalism Reconsidered" is the most motley of all, with essays on the public sphere in early and contemporary America (Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," 1992), on the interpretation of traditional Indian narratives (Elaine A. Jahner, "Traditional Narrative: Contemporary Uses, Historical Perspectives," 1999), on different possibilities of reading a Chinese border-crossing novel (Sauling C. Wong, "The Stakes of Textual Border-Crossing: Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach* in Sinocentric, Asian American, and Feminist Critical Practices," 2000), and a concluding essay on the issue of Americanization (Rob Kroes, "Americanization: What Are We Talking About?" 1996).

Many of these essays are impressive in their own way, but not all appear to be equally useful as illustrations of a

method. For example, to argue for a "new attention to the relationship between literature and culture" (128), as in the case of Pearce, is not yet a method, because it does not tell us how this can be done. Wai-Chee Dimock, Werner Sollors, and Arnold Krupat seem to have taken the idea of a methodological model most seriously, with Dimock and Krupat selecting essays (by Smith-Rosenberg and Jahner) in which the essay's methodology is self-consciously explored, and Sollors providing a useful elaboration of Laura Wexler's approach in terms of method. Others, however, seem to have chosen an essay not primarily because of methodological considerations but because they sympathize strongly with its argument and position. Consequently, the brief, three- to four-page introductions often do not read like methodological analyses but almost like letters of recommendation that are determined to lend support to a particular position. When Marilee Lindemann tells us in her introduction that Lauren Berlant "draws from a wide-ranging body of work in critical and social theory, including feminism, queer studies, Marxist cultural theory, and studies of nationality" (96), this sounds more like a praise of Berlant's theoretical wizardry than a helpful methodological suggestion. Christopher Looby praises Lhamon's essay as a "tour de force of methodological integration" (151), but the only help he offers for achieving such integration is the metaphor of the walk. Claudia Tate, too, in her determination to support duCille's argument, emphasizes the great heterogeneity of duCille's "critical practice" and mentions deconstruction, cultural studies, and feminist studies as well as critical race theory as the main ingredients. Again, this may provide impressive evidence for duCille's theoretical versatility, but it is not really a helpful methodological description. In contrast, Russ Castronovo appears to be more concrete in describing Michael Warner's essay as an example of rhetorical analysis but then goes on to provide the following characterization: "Rhetorical analysis is aimed at domains both broader and more specific than the literary. If we are to understand not only fiction but also fictions of the public sphere, we need to deploy methodological tools that do not abide strict disciplinary boundaries" (245). In Paul Lauter's introduction to the essay by Kroes hardly anything at all is said about method but lots of things on how a theory of creolization can counter Frankfurt School

pessimism. Altogether, such comments hardly add up to any "methodology." Even more unsatisfactory for a self-declared "methodological reader," however, is that no relation and comparison between the different approaches is set up. What, at first sight, appears as an advantage of the book—its learning-by-doing approach—thus also has its price: there is no theoretical argument that connects the essays, and hence no chance for a more comprehensive orientation and assessment.

Despite its own subtitle, then, the volume offers not so much a survey of methods but a cross section of impressive interpretive performances with the caveat, however, that, since most of the scholars who were asked to select interpretations work within the paradigms of the new historicism and race and gender studies, we get more similarity than diversity. If there is any dominant methodological suggestion that emerges from the introductions it is to read "widely and deeply in primary and secondary materials" (211), to immerse oneself in a number of fields outside of literary studies, and to link these readings boldly and imaginatively in loosely new historicist fashion. Without ever thematizing the issue, the volume illustrates an interesting shift in the meaning of the term "method" that has taken place in American literary studies in the last decades. Traditionally, the term method implied a rule-governed procedure for gaining knowledge that can be applied and reproduced by others. In this volume, the term method is used to describe any kind of impressive interpretive performance. Texts are recommended not for a particular procedure that can be reproduced by others but for the skillful, often stunning ways in which a variety of fields and approaches are linked together in unexpected ways. Performance thus replaces method, and although the editors do not address the question, their own plan for the book reflects exactly that shift. After all, performance is something that cannot be described and taught as a method; it can only be exhibited for observation and, hopefully, for inspiration. The underlying assumption of the volume seems to be that readers learn best by mimicry.

As a "methodological reader," then, the book must be considered a failure. What we get instead is something quite different, though not necessarily less interesting: a useful collection of recent essays in American literary studies that

were considered "cutting edge" at the time when the selections were made. Their common ground is an emphasis on race and gender as key categories of analysis; with the exception of Pearce and partly Kroes, the two odd men out, all other essays—most of them written in the period between 1988-2000—present advanced, highly sophisticated examples of recent work in race and gender studies. Another tendency may be of even greater interest, however, for many of the essays focus on somewhat unexpected adversaries: They are relentless in pointing out that even approaches considered "progressive" up to then are still compromised by a flawed politics of race and gender.

For example, in her inquiry into the gender and race politics of the new historicism, Romero argues "that in our own time scholarship on the alleged feminization of society itself participates in the imperialist nostalgia of the discourse it analyzes" (57). In its reliance on a Foucauldian narrative of how power has shifted in modern times, new historicist analyses of American ante-bellum culture have encouraged us to regard the feminization of culture as a symptom of a larger feminization of power—and have thus unwittingly perpetuated long-held cultural stereotypes: "Neither the poststructuralist upheaval that divides the cultural analysis of the 1960s and 1970s from that of the 1980s nor the feminist critiques to which these analyses have been subjected have altered the basic narrative: normalization is still women's work" (58). Also focusing on the role of the culture of domesticity in American cultural history, Wexler argues that after "the abolition of slavery and throughout the post-Civil War period, photography was part of the master narrative that created and cemented new cultural and political inequalities of race and class by manipulating the sign 'woman' as an indicator of 'civilization'" (68). By concentrating on the culture of domesticity as a culture of empowerment and separating issues of gender and sexuality from those of race and class, white feminist criticism completely ignored such forms of dominance, thereby sanctioning, as Sollors puts it in his introduction, "the 'externalized aggression' toward different classes and races who could not easily participate in the culture of domestic ideals except as its objects" (64). In her angry, boldly anti-P. C. essay on the fetishization of black female writers and critics as icons of "hyperstatic alterity," duCille

also targets white feminists: "The colonial object is furthered not only by the canonical literature of the west, but also by would-be oppositional feminists who continue to see whiteness as so natural, normative, and unproblematic that racial identity is a property only of the nonwhite" (219).

In these and other arguments, the book, in substance, captures a particular moment in American literary studies in which a new-historicist type of cultural poetics was combined with a radicalized form of race and gender politics. Both have their starting point in the claim that power works most effectively not through open force but through cultural representations. However, Michel Foucault and the early new historicists failed to examine the historical conjunction between racial and gender politics and can thus be accused of having contributed, in their own way, to cultural regimes of "normalization." One consequence of this critique is another radicalization in the analysis of discursive power effects. In often dazzling linkages and stunning argumentative somersaults, power effects are discovered where even the most progressive critics have overlooked them until now. Thus, Wexler argues that not only particular interpretations but already the institutional fact of a "comparative dearth of critical attention to the social productions of the photographic image is a class- and race-based form of cultural domination" because it "distorts the history of the significance of race and gender in the construction of the visual field" (67). The fact that the postslavery pictures of the photographer George Cook gave blacks a certain dignity must be considered the actual power effect, for, as Wexler puts it, "I would hold, in fact, that this trajectory of white supremacy in Richmond is why the Cook photographs, including that of the nursemaid, bear no visible relation to the hardly distant violence of slavery but only allude directly to the impressive dignity possessed by their subjects. Such respectful and innocuous images would have been much more useful than deliberately damaging images to support the claim of white domestic virtue that circulated throughout the south during the Reconstruction era. The need was to establish that slavery *did* the violence" (82). In Wexler's view, however, it is precisely this construction of a dignified black subject that does the violence.

In Walter Benn Michaels-fashion, the new historicist who must be considered the doyen of the "It is precisely the other

way round"-argument, what looks like progress is thus only a new and more cunning device of securing domination even more effectively. Thus, for Warner, it is precisely tolerance towards minorities that constitutes a "minoritizing logic of domination": "The very mechanism designed to end domination is a form of domination" (252). The reason is that this kind of liberal recognition is still based on the assumption of a marked difference and thereby contributes to the maintenance of an "asymmetrical privilege" (251). This, in fact, is the normative base of the radical cultural critique of many essays in the book: a radical egalitarianism that can speak in one breath, as Berlant does, of the "continued and linked virulence of racism, misogyny, heterosexism, economic privilege, and politics in America" (98), because all of these constitute cultural hierarchies and thus asymmetries in power and recognition. In their introduction, the editors state: "We hope to sharpen debates about the goals and practice of interdisciplinary literary studies by bringing into the foreground the methods by which such scholarship is produced" (4). Could it be precisely the other way round, namely that most of the scholarship they present in this volume is not "produced by method" but by a particular cultural politics that draws on method in rather eclectic fashion for support of its radical critique of American society?

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