

Review

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Cultural Institutions of the Novel, edited by Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. Pp. vi + 440. \$21.95 pb.



The critical scope of *Cultural Institutions of the Novel* is challenging and provocative, as are the individual essays this anthology includes. The "institutions" to which the title refers are not just the "literary" institutions of academia and the publishing house, which imply a kind of stasis of privilege, prestige and importance, but are the cultural (aesthetic, ideological, political) forms of "knowing" that have produced the novel and the ways of understanding the history of it, as well as what that history occludes. "Institution" thus has a more active sense: that of "instituting"--an action which powerfully breaks tradition, or which formulates a "novel" one. Many of the essays in the anthology are interested in a dynamically "constructive" version of the genre, and the genre as a construction of critical institutions (cannons, curriculums, literary histories, etc.). The critical approaches surveyed enable an account of not only the work novels perform in the production of

culture and (trans)cultures, but how novels are produced out of cultural/political struggles.

As the logical extension of this nexus, the work of the anthology, as the editors point out, must acknowledge the novel's transnational mobility: "the global dissemination of novel reading and novel writing has, however, made 'the' novel a discursive site where the relations among nations are brokered" (3). Therefore, the horizon of inquiry is global: for example, Michelle Burnham's interesting discussion of the interrelationship of British and American "sentimental" novels in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; James A. Fujii's engaging examination of the Japanese cultural investment in canonizing Natsume Soseki's *Kotoko* as a "modern" novel for a modern Japanese "nation-state;" Susan A. Andrade's insightful readings of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, which reference the 1929 Igbo's Women War in Nigeria. What is interesting about the range of literature covered is that it does not fall into the eclectic's trap of "sampling." For a reader who knows little (if that much) about the novels of the July Monarchy in nineteenth-century France, for instance, the essays were historically comprehensive, reader-friendly and yet

remarkably complex in their analyses. Since the editors' set out the global implications of the "novel" as institution--its form as an exchangeable commodity for diverse populations within and between nations, its popularity as a self-reflective cultural identity that seems exchangeable, and its use as an exchangeable "national" or "transnational" identity (3-5)--the "global horizon" of the essays seems integrated.

This global discursive perspective of the novel as institution, as well as the institutions it creates, recognizes the "heteroglossic" nature (for lack of a better term) of the novel genre, unexaminable by unitary teleological and ontological theories of the "rise" of the novel. But it also recognizes, and lauds, a "heteroglossia" of novel criticism. This is the direction for novel studies that the editors, Lynch and Warner, envision: rather than an "Enlightenment narrative of the novel's vertical 'rise'" that is "normative as well as descriptive," a narrative which even fairly recent studies of the "origins" of the novel employ (5), the editors strive to develop "narratives of novels' horizontal displacements," ones that go beyond the "historical and cultural" studies that examine how power relations engage race, class, gender, and sexuality (2). Since, in the final analysis, "novelism" (defined in the last essay as "discourse of and about novels") becomes heteroglossic, I want to pause for a moment to review this crucial term that emerges in many essays in the anthology.

"Heteroglossia" is Mikhail Bakhtin's term for "multi-voiced, multi-styled, and often multi-linguaged elements," (*Dialogic Imagination* 265) which are centrifugal forces of "decentralization and disunification," and are described as primarily powerful social and historical forces which gives language its context (272). In the midst of heteroglossia, Bakhtin asserts a weaker centripetal force, a "unitary" force working towards "concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization" (271). In utterance, these two forces intersect, and that intersection is dialogic. The novel was "historically shaped by the current of decentralizing, centrifugal forces" (273), and because it was "consciously opposed to literary language," which Bakhtin calls "the linguistic center of the verbal-ideological life of the nation and the epoch," the novel was "heteroglossia that had been dialogized" (273). It is not surprising, then, that Bakhtinian theory on the discourse of the novel plays a major part in an anthology concerned with the novel as a "(Euro)institution," whereby the novel informs nation-building and eurocultural "imperialism."

Heteroglossia, as a critical term and discursive practice, helps to illuminate the cultural and social forces at work in instituting the "novel" in the British and American canons as a means of ideological reinforcement of "nationhood," and how that ideological reinforcement, reinforced again by the critical narratives we as scholars tell about the novel's "rise" or "fall," "expansion" or "growth," helped the novel spread internationally, creating hegemonic discursive systems based on eurocentric aesthetic/cultural values. The term also encompasses a way to read literature, or rather, a reading practice which places readers in positions of resistance to the dominant ideologies of "identity." Many of the essays, particularly Bridget Orr's "The Maori House of Fiction," shows clearly the usefulness and necessity of this kind of critical enterprise. Orr's piece is compelling scholarship that not only discusses the emergence of the "Maori" novel since the 1970s (a

novel form in contradiction with Pakeha [Eurocentric] modes of analysis and aesthetic understanding), but also discusses the ideological and political contestations to the dominant cultural and political hegemony in New Zealand that the Maori novel poses. Orr's essay is careful to emphasize that these novels are enactments of political positioning by the Maori; acts that do not racially integrate the two (or more) groups, and that do not assimilate the Maori under Pakeha monologism. Instead, she suggests through her readings of *The Matriarch* and *Potiki* that the Maori novel mobilizes a plethora of generic forms rooted in a mixture of Maori and Pakeha culture, which establishes a range of reading positions--some of which are positions of resistance to a dominant and oppressive hegemony present in its political, legal and economic institutions. Though unsettling to the power structure in New Zealand, the effect of producing a kind of literature that challenges the "aesthetic ideology" of the Pakeha, while criticism develops a knowledge of the discursive and reading practice of the Maori that runs counter to European aesthetic ideologies, provides for a powerful Maori communal identity and knowledge: "the function of cultural production suggests that novels might be understood as communal possessions--treasured objects, displays of skill, and sources of knowledge binding people together--but also as challenges to non-Maori, occasions for debate and even for revenge" (82). What Orr points to is the way in which aesthetic/discursive production and criticism can work in "dialogue" to produce sites of ideological, political and (might one dare to hope for?) economic resistance on the part of the Maori to the structure of oppression.

I have given space to Orr's argument because it suggests a necessary part of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia; that is, the oppositional "stance" inherent in the heteroglossia, and the novel form by extension. But it is oppositional in an expressively political sense. As Terry Eagleton explains, "[Bakhtin] insisted that there was no language which was not caught up in definite social relationships, and that these social relationships were in turn part of broader political, ideological and economic systems...Language was...to be seen...as a material means of production, whereby the material body of the sign was transformed through a process of social conflict and dialogue into meaning" (*Literary Theory* 117-8). The ultimate goal of examining the heteroglossic "nature" of language and the novel is to bring to "consciousness" this social conflict so that it produces a cultural effect--to challenge those systems of oppression--as in Orr's essay. This imperative seems to be missing from the cultural work the anthology as a whole seeks to do as it "institutes" a new critical discourse in which to discuss the novel.

Stepping back from individual essays to look at the anthology's critical framework, "heteroglossia" becomes a more problematic discursive/theoretical term. As previously noted, the editors suggest in their introduction that their project is to "develop narratives of the novel's horizontal displacements." To this end, the frame for the anthology is quite consciously set up as a narrative, complete with a prologue and an epilogue (the novel's origins and the future of "novelism," respectively). Into this frame, the choice of essays set out the new parameters of the critical terrain--one that is "transnational" in context, one that recontextualizes the global concerns of late capitalism into politics of nationhood and national identity, and one that privileges "the" novel and discourses about it as the primary category (as opposed to other phenomenological categories of race, class,

gender) that incites culture-making. Whatever the provocative intention, the effect of this structure generates another critical monologue. As one reads through the introduction, prologue and epilogue (and indeed some of the essays in the three middle sections), one gets the feeling that what is at stake in the anthology is not so much the "institution" of the novel, but the direction the institution of criticism *about* the novel will take. This is not necessarily a negative, in my view, since the discipline of literary studies does need to examine its own investment in its disciplinary institutions and power, and this anthology goes a long way in doing just that. Homer Brown's prologue "Why the Story of the Origin of the (English) Novel Is an American Romance (If Not the Great American Novel)" interestingly argues that these two discursive "institutions"--the novel and criticism about it--have, in a sense, constructed each other, and continue to do so. But if so, the object of the anthology becomes hermeneutically sealed.

The danger presented by the anthology's new critical terrain is in reifying "heteroglossia" as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. In other words, heteroglossia becomes the dominant critical "narrative" which drives the production of knowledge (or the industry of scholarship) for sake of the production of knowledge without the political imperative the underlines the concept in the first place. When Clifford Siskin's otherwise brilliant epilogue claims that if the novel is "tied to a particular way of knowing," then "novelism is inextricably linked to modern disciplinarity, and that link is an important basis for the novel's ongoing institutional power" (426). No doubt, but within this framework "knowing" becomes equally dangerous, equally suspect and, ultimately, equally disempowering. In the end, the volume writes another "form" of literary history--one whose defining "feature" as a text is: "heteroglossia [which] enacts truth as a multiplicity of voices" (439). While creating a space for new knowledge wrought through a dialogue of and about critical institutions on the one hand, on the other, the anthology sets the terrain of "multiplicity" as an end in itself.

Even more interesting, or disturbing (depending on one's position on the political spectrum of literary studies), is the apparent awareness of the irony that "knowing" the link between institutionality, disciplinarity and writing presents to the reader:

The collection of essays that you now hold in your hand, as both the form for a new literary history and another example of novelism, has the potential to work in both ways. It can speak through the single title with one voice, even as it conveys different messages. I raise my own voice, then, in order to identify and participate in the institutional changes that are signaled...by the appearance of this book. (439)

The anthology, by giving the "last word" to Siskin, ends with the rather ambiguous suggestion that scholarship, no matter how accurate, "correct," useful in fostering understanding or knowledge, always-already participates in fostering discursive institutions, in which "knowing" is a virtually impossible task, and working for "cultural" change beyond discourse becomes a cynical notion. All we, as scholars, can do is create new narratives, and choose from among the "multiplicity of voices." But, is this enough?

The push to extend the novel's critical purview beyond an Enlightenment narrative of the "growth" and "perfection" of mankind and beyond enlightening ourselves to the "universal truths" of humanity is necessary and even admirable in the context worked out in the anthology. However, must literary studies also forfeit the notion that producing knowledge about material formations, such as the novel, can work to improve, or rather, change the (imaginary) relations to the relations of production?

My ultimate criticism of the anthology's theoretical/critical framework does not diminish the book's accomplishment to "rethink" the ground on which the novel, and its history, firmly sits in cultural institutions. The selection of a diverse set of essays from a variety of theoretical perspectives, which crosses spaces of historical periods, national and racial boundaries, is an important contribution to the field of novel studies. It raises pertinent, political questions about what we have been doing, are doing and should be doing by studying "the" novel, the discourse of the novel and discourse about the novel.

Works Cited

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