

RE-IMAGINING THE MODERN AMERICAN WEST: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art. By Richard W. Etulain. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 1996.

We have witnessed a decade-long debate about how western history should be written, and we inherit a shelfful of titles by authors proposing to “re-invent,” “re-mythologize,” and “re-vision” the American West, each of them understanding the West in different ways. In *Re-Imagining the Modern American West*, Richard Etulain surveys the currents of the “old” and the “new” in history, fiction, and art. It is a daunting undertaking. Although he says he has written a nontheoretical study, Etulain furnishes some useful ideas for handling the intellectual currents of the ongoing dialogue.

The first section on the Pioneer West covers the most recognizable writers and artists—Owen Wister, Frederick Remington, James Fenimore Cooper, Francis Parkman, George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller. But the point at which frontier or pioneer west gives way to writers of the “regional west” is more difficult to define. Etulain uses H. G. Meriam’s idea of “inworked substance” to define the transition to regional writing, and he means the point where writers describe the “interplay over time between people and the environment” (83). Thus, Mary Hallock Foote is a frontier writer, but Mary Austin and Willa Cather are regionalists. Some readers may find that line too finely drawn.

Etulain’s ideas are most interesting in the last section, where he writes about “post-regional” fiction, history, and art. If regionalists are writers who give overriding importance to landscape and to the imprint of landscape on human life, then post-regionalists are writers for whom other issues—gender and race and ethnicity—are imposed upon landscape and sometimes take precedence. The question to be addressed is whether a “post-regional” novel is still “western.” In the post-regional western novel, such distinctions are less secure than they seemed fifty years ago. According to Etulain, “post-regional literature has dramatically broken away from major trends in western fiction before 1950” (159). Complexity and change join the west to America’s other regional literatures, and to national traditions. This is not an escape from judgment; on the contrary, it is a wise reading of western culture and expression.

The scope of Etulain’s book is so large that there are bound to be readers who will take exception to some parts of it. I applaud the author’s narrative that includes painting and photography along with history and fiction, even as I find it difficult to understand why there are only a spare three paragraphs devoted to Mary Austin. That reservation aside, Etulain’s work is a good and useful guide through a huge display of western writing. Most readers will find him an astute scholar and a fair man.

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CULTURE OF INTOLERANCE: Chauvinism, Class and Racism in the United States. By Mark Nathan Cohen. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1998.

It seemed like a good thing to do. I was grounded in Los Angeles due to this past summer’s pilot strike against Northwest Airlines and, despite having lived in Southern California for the better part of a decade, I had never been there. And, indeed, what I saw at the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance helped me get a handle on why I was so disappointed with anthropologist Mark Nathan Cohen’s *Culture of Intolerance*.

Now don’t get me wrong, about either the Museum or Cohen’s book. The Museum, which tells the tragic story of the Holocaust and documents the costs and consequences of

racism and anti-Semitism, makes for a provocative, if deliberately partisan and unsettling, educational experience. Cohen's book, to its credit, shares many of these qualities and concerns. Born out of Cohen's disgust with Herrnstein and Murray's infamous attempt to demonstrate that genetic differences account for inequality and immobility in the U.S., *Culture of Intolerance* argues that human difference and, by extension, social inequality are not rooted in biology but rather constructed in "culture" conceived in the broadest, anthropological sense. Cohen's larger goal is to suggest that *The Bell Curve* represents just one very vulgar and extremist expression of deeply rooted American problems with inequality and cultural diversity. The bulk of Cohen's book, then, is devoted to exposing and (to use a word he wouldn't) deconstructing the belief systems that Cohen believes perpetuate and in fact legitimate many social problems in the U.S. Like the Museum, Cohen is passionate about these important issues, and has produced a volume that invites a general audience to think about them in an intelligent, critical manner. But as much as we need scholarly work that is politically engaged and publicly accessible, I am not convinced that Cohen's conception of social science as a core of timeless knowledge captures the complexities of the phenomena he addresses or offers an adequate rebuttal to the conservative approaches he rightly rejects.

At a very basic level, Cohen systematically conflates forms of inequality based upon class and the economy with those that originate in race and racism. (Not to mention that such a fundamental source of inequality as gender is almost nonexistent or that empirical support is absent altogether). More fundamentally, Cohen never really articulates why or for whom these various forms of inequality are harmful. The problem here is not just that there are different causes and costs associated with different forms of inequality. The deeper problem is that Cohen's adamant cultural relativism would seem to leave little room for the strident condemnations of inequality, racism, and other forms of "chauvinism" that punctuate the entire analysis. It is not that relativists cannot make normative claims; indeed, much of contemporary critical theory—such as Michael Walzer's aptly titled *On Tolerance* (1997)—is directed towards such ends. But Cohen is oblivious to this work and its inherent complications, and does little to work through them himself.

Even if we grant the general dilemma posed by inequality, it is by no means clear that intolerance is the sole source of the problem—or, conversely, that increased tolerance holds the key to social transformation. More than a few social scientists would certainly insist that indifference and inattention must also be taken into account. Yet Cohen's undifferentiated conception of culture makes it difficult to even articulate the various social structures and institutions here in effect.

Cohen is also intent on defending cultural difference and diversity. This impulse is important and appropriate, and these passages contain some of Cohen's most thought-provoking discussions and examples. But they are not necessarily consistent with his overarching critique of inequality and intolerance. For one thing, this move requires a shift away from the passive language of tolerance to the active language of recognition *a la* Charles Taylor's well-known lecture on the politics of recognition. Secondly, there is the unfortunate fact that diversity has been inextricably linked with inequality throughout American history. The real challenge is to figure out how—or if—meaningful social differences can be defended and preserved without perpetuating social inequalities.

*Culture of Intolerance* offers a number of good and important points but, taken as a whole, fails to ground them empirically or situate them in a satisfactory theoretical frame. This does not make it a bad book; but neither does it make a good piece of social science. For a work that purports to synthesize "basic," "common" and "uncontroversial" scholarly

knowledge, this result is particularly unfortunate for its net effect could be to perpetuate the false belief—held by those who need it most—that social science is little more than watered-down political rhetoric or second-rate social philanthropy. If the philosophers, politicians, and popularizers do it better, what is left for social scientists—however well-intended and ultimately correct they may be?

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CITY CODES: Reading the Modern Urban Novel. By Hana Wirth-Nesher. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1996.

THE NATURALISTIC INNER-CITY NOVEL IN AMERICA: Encounters With the Fat Man. By James R. Giles. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press. 1995.

Cities are spaces where the public and private intersect, often complexly. They are also the place where one encounters the Other. These complementary ideas are the respective groundings for two fine studies of big city novels that build on the foundations of naturalism and modernism to appreciate the sometimes disruptive force of the postmodern.

Hana Wirth-Nesher is interested in the different discourses that result when setting (as opposed to the more usual character, plot, and theme) becomes a novel's principal motivator. Viewpoints in such settings are obvious signals of contrast. At the beginning Wirth-Nesher establishes her case by analogy, letting readers see the difference between two urban portraits (Hopper's *Room in Brooklyn* and Manet's *The Balcony*) and between two narrative perspectives (Fitzgerald's contrast in *The Crack Up* of New York seen from the Plaza rooftop in the 1920s to the view from the Empire State Building in the 1930s). *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* then offers detailed explications of nine major texts (from 1900 to 1972) that emphasize the urban environment differently, centering on the natural, the built, the human, and the verbal. Wirth-Nesher's roster is impressive and each author's contribution is distinctive. Singer and Oz show people disrupted by the urban; Dreiser offers characters constructed by it. Ellison laments the invisibility of self, while James projects it eagerly into new terrain, anticipating Henry Roth's tactic in *Call it Sleep*. Readerly expectations are reversed by Joyce and Woolf, but while *Dubliners* and the *Portrait* find closure in paralysis *Mrs. Dalloway* discovers great enablement in the fact that life can be homier outside the home. Throughout, attention to setting yields exceptionally fresh readings, a reminder that critical dispositions as well as writing styles are matters for development.

That American literary naturalism is still developing even through postmodern times is evident in James R. Giles's exceptionally insightful study. The "fat man" of his subtitle is the minor character encountered famously in the 1893 version of Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, where urban deprivation is fascinating but so repellent that the implied narrator holds the spectacle at arm's length. After presenting one of the best reviews on record of both naturalism's achievements and criticism's response, Giles proceeds with readings of six novels not customarily studied in the same view: *Jews without Money*, *Native Son*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *City of Night*, and *them*. As he makes his way through them, Giles compares and contrasts these works in a way that shows a growing appreciation of otherness among important American novelists. Michael Gold's characters, for example, are victims of external forces, and hence are easily saved;