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Prestige, 1880-1995, and: The Culture Concept: Writing and
Difference in the Age of Realism, and: Regional Fictions:
Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American
Literature (review)

Nancy Glazener

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approach allows for an intricately composed picture of transatlantic literary and political formations, but its narrow focus on a single text risks limiting its portability. All of these texts attempt to lay the groundwork for future approaches, offering methodological models that call attention to the unanswered questions facing students of transatlantic culture.

Matt Cohen, Duke University

John David Miles, Duke University

American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880–1995. By Phillip Barrish. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press. 2001. x, 213 pp. \$54.95.

The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism. By Michael A. Elliott. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press. 2002. xxviii, 239 pp. Cloth, \$60.95; paper, \$21.95.

Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature. By Stephanie Foote. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press. 2001. vi, 218 pp. Cloth, \$55.00; paper, \$24.95.

These three studies, each the first book of a promising scholar, offer interesting innovations in the tradition of realism studies laid out by Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988) and Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters* (1993). Kaplan and Brodhead connect realism closely with the interests and concerns of dominant political and social groupings, but both emphasize the complexity and contingency of that dominance as well as the intricacy of its literary effects. Following these examples but advancing significantly into new materials and questions, Barrish, Elliott, and Foote all presume that realist fiction is involved in important social or political contests (variously defined) but home in on the overdeterminations, contradictions, and displacements of the literary texts they examine.

In Barrish's *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige*, the key contests are "[i]ntersecting struggles over cultural status among different middle-class fractions" (4). Barrish's central project is the tracing of a range of textual moments in realist texts organized around a display of tastes—usually a competition between tastes. By emulating Pierre Bourdieu's attention to the complexities of taste without pretending to be able to chart these tastes securely on a social map, Barrish can note the many and flexible ways in which characters and historical persons invoke the rhetorical move of being "realer than thou" (129). His commentary on these moments is wonderfully illuminating, as when he identifies the bid for superiority embodied in a "'meta-taste' [as] a taste for tastes" (30) in Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and when he marks the peculiar kind of distinction

embodied in the tendency for certain realist texts to linger over the contradictions and discrepancies in the characters' lives and views.

The weakness of the approach is that Barrish doesn't really explain what the correlations that he finds across texts might mean. His terminology frequently points toward historical phenomena (status categories, class fractions, particular episodes in the construction of masculinity) that seem to be treated both as textual effects and as something more. For example, the class fractions battling over realism are never precisely identified: the main axis of struggle seems to be an unsurprising one between the cultivated people who acquire "realist taste" (17) and the members of the same general socioeconomic stratum who resist it. The tracing of textual correlations at the expense of plausible historical accounting culminates in a perplexing final chapter that credits the American reputations of an assortment of recent theorists (Trilling, Guillory, De Man, Copjec, and Butler) to the ground they share with American literary realism, since they all claim to be rejecting something less real or authentic on behalf of something more so.

Elliott's *The Culture Concept* and Foote's *Regional Fictions* both focus on regionalist American fiction, which seems poised to become the new central category and archive around which realist texts and problematics can be organized. While Elliot doesn't specifically identify his canon as regionalist—he mainly invokes "realism," as his subtitle suggests—the main literary examples he considers all fit Brodhead's model of regionalism as "a work of ethnic imagining" (Brodhead, 177). Foote attends to this ethnic imagining directly, characterizing regionalist works by their shifting, exploratory contrasts between "the stranger" and "the native" (19): "the dialect-speaking regional type is an uncanny shadow version of an incompletely understood and assimilated ethnic subject" (179). Even though many regionalist works examine long-established communities of Americans coded as white, Foote argues that the "stranger-native dialectic" (40) refracts contemporary political debates about domestic assimilation, citizenship, and international imperialism. Her approach brings together an attention to the historical workings of capitalism—especially the "radically unbalanced cultural landscape" produced by uneven capitalist development that made rural dwellers objects of nostalgia or condescension for urban dwellers—with an attention to the struggles over racial and ethnic identities that shook the late nineteenth century.

Elliot argues that in the late nineteenth century, a new conception of culture—whose full-blown form as "cultural particularism" emerged in the work of anthropologist Franz Boas—was emerging in both literary realism and ethnography, serving in both cases to mediate and organize the texts' relationships to political struggles around race and ethnicity. Elliott argues (against Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*, 1995) that the emergent culture concept was not simply reducible to race. His argument is somewhat weakened by the fact that he focuses primarily on lit-

erary works by authors whose race or ethnicity was central to their reception: African Americans Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar and Native Americans Charles A. Eastman, Zitkala-Ša, and Francis La Flesche (these latter having received little critical attention), with Zora Neale Hurston capping the argument. Although he offers a reading of Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Elliott emphasizes Basil March's role as a consumer of the artifactual literature produced by subcultures rather than as an individual embedded in a culture himself. A look at Veblen's or Wharton's work might have shored up the case that dominant groups viewed even themselves according to this concept of culture.

Elliott wants to reclaim a sense of the political openings offered by the new conception of culture (in contrast with hierarchical diagnoses of the progress from savagery to civilization), specifically in the case of James Mooney's respectful and influential account of the Sioux ghost dance religion in 1896. Elliott also usefully specifies two limitations to the culture concept: its focus on (presumptively unified) cultural moments, which precludes the analysis of historical change, and the tendency to present individuals as loyal bearers of culture rather than agents who might be at odds with it. The final chapter, suggesting that Hurston's fiction significantly surpassed both these limitations, is especially impressive, but it also suggests that Elliott might productively have formulated his study around a particular set of intersections between literature and anthropology, only some of which involved literary realism.

Foote's study offers many pleasures. Among them are the responsibility with which she employs politicized language and the astuteness with which she has assembled the set of texts she examines. Her discussion of Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* as a reversal of regionalism's usual vantage point (in that Ware is the native informant who loses the interest of his cosmopolitan friends when he becomes more like them) is a high point; another is her unfolding of the politics of dialect (a feature of regionalist writing that Elliott also illuminates). *Regional Fictions* keeps in view authorial motives (including the negotiation of markets), contentious regional histories, and the instability of language itself; it brings together works by Frederic, Garland, Jewett, Atherton, and Riis and culminates by presenting novels about New York's Tammany Hall as embodying "the ideological operations of regionalism" (179) as marked by its central textual practices. Although it would have been helpful for Foote to explain more specifically how the various conceptions of ethnicity that she traces in regionalist texts compared with the conceptions that guided contemporary political discussions, *Regional Fictions* is a landmark study whose rigor and breadth will challenge and inspire anyone working on realism.

Nancy Glazener, University of Pittsburgh