

## Book Reviews

(The first four are part of this issue's cluster of essays and reviews on World Youth Cultures)

Jonathon S. Epstein, ed. *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*. Malden, ME: Blackwell Press, 1998. Pp. 329. \$61.95; \$27.95 pb.

Anyone who has spent time in a teacher-training program has been exposed to multiple theories and case studies regarding youth behavior, psychology, and learning styles. The best of this scholarship offers insight into the lives of young people with an awareness that such insights can only supplement, rather than replace, experiences with real adolescents. The worst of this scholarship lulls the would-be teacher or social worker into a belief that young people fall into one or two discrete categories where a specific technique, often presented as a cure, can remedy or correct an identifiable problem. While *Youth Culture* is not solely aimed at educators — addressing adults, in general, who work with young people — the majority of the essays fit into the first category of youth scholarship, offering insights into youth culture without pathologizing youth behaviour.

In his introduction, Jonathon Epstein provides a cogent overview of existing theories in adolescent studies, highlighting three important areas of scholarship that influence the essays in *Youth Culture*: early twentieth century sociological work from the University of Chicago; studies of subculture formation coming from the Centre for Study of Contemporary Culture in Birmingham; and recent cultural criticism by Henry Giroux, Douglas Kellner, and Deena Weinstein. Epstein identifies structural and social-psychological alienation, central to subculture formation, as constituting a particularly important part of the theoretical framework for this collection of essays. *Youth Culture* distinguishes itself from previous scholarship by focusing on the “relationship between youth and the commodified society in which they carry out their identity work” (17), and by avoiding typical practices of labeling young people and adolescence as “a social problem” (1). The essays selected for review here reflect the most provocative contributions to Epstein’s stated goals.

*Youth Culture* begins with Henry Giroux’s “Teenage Sexuality, Body Politics and the Pedagogy of Display” in which he argues that although

the controversial 1995 Calvin Klein ad campaign and Larry Clark's *Kids* purport to "represent to an adult world something that [is] real and frightening" about teenage sexuality (38), both texts fail to accomplish any such valuable realism. Rather, they commodify teen bodies and uphold rather than "challenge dominant conservative codings of youth as sexually decadent, drug crazed, pathological, and criminal" (39). Giroux offers Jonathan Stack's *Harlem Diary* as a contrast to the CK ads and *Kids*, in that *Harlem Diary* reflects the complexities of how (in this case) black youth transform the social and economic conditions in which they were produced (51). Giroux's essay is a call to action for "educators, artists and other cultural workers [to] address the challenge of developing pedagogies that teach kids how to use media [as] a mode of self-expression and social activism" (50). While Giroux does not advocate censorship, which he accurately describes as a striving to keep "the progressive social agenda out of the discussion for social change" (39), he does demand a form of public debate about the "limits of public representations, especially regarding children" (39). Whether one accepts Giroux's distinction between "limits" and censorship or not, his essay provides educators and other adults working with teens with a compelling examination of popular culture, which can be adapted to high school and college classroom discussions of media representations of youth culture.

Similar to Giroux, Best and Kellner address the pedagogical importance of "media literacy" in "Beavis and Butt Head: No Future for Postmodern Youth," suggesting that *Beavis and Butt-Head* offers a "diagnostic critique of contemporary youth" (87). The authors contribute to the ongoing debate about the effects of television on adolescents, charging that an "economic and educational system that provides no meaningful life opportunities" is responsible for creating the Beavises and Buttheads of our society and warning that "if today's youth do not develop communicative, technological, and analytical skills they will not have a future at all" (94). The authors offer a valuable examination of the relationship between television and youth culture during the mid-1990s and provide readers with a useful model for examining current shows, such as *South Park*, which have replaced the now-defunct *Beavis and Butt-Head* series as providing "insights into contemporary social realities" (94).

In a shift from visual media to music, David A. Locher's analysis of the failure of the "Industrial music" subculture and Robert Sardiello's examination of "intragroup status stratification" of Deadhead identity offer unique perspectives of identity formation. Locher examines group identity in crisis, noting that a subculture may "fail" to form fully if it lacks "a characteristic style, a set of focal concerns, and a private code of slang" (113). Like Locher, Sardiello complicates notions of subculture formation, examining the highly evolved music

subculture of Deadheads. Sardiello identifies three categories of Deadheads ("Hardcore," "New," and "Stable") and examines how the relationship between "personal identity and social identity" influences one's position within this continuum (138). Both of these essays provide useful methodologies for understanding the complex nature of subculture formation and offer an important historical approach to the role of music in youth culture. Implicit in both essays is the need for further examination of the difficulty in maintaining discrete subcultures based on musical affiliation, particularly in light of the current proliferation of and crossover between diverse music categories.

Mary Celeste Kearney provides one of the most compelling discussions of youth culture in "Don't Need You: Rethinking Identity Politics and Separatism from a Grrrl Perspective." By shifting the emphasis from media to gender, Kearney moves Epstein's project forward, examining the vibrant and largely uncharted territory of the female youth political movement known as "riot grrrls." She notes that in order to understand groups like riot grrrls, we "must move beyond the conventional frameworks on which we have come to depend (music, style, etc.)" (163). Not only do riot grrrls separate themselves from male culture, but they also resist adult culture, particularly "older women who . . . speak for girls in the name of 'women,' 'feminism,' and 'sisterhood'" (148). Kearney identifies the various issues and problems that constitute the riot grrrl movement, while acknowledging her own limitations of analyzing from outside of this system. This essay contributes greatly to our understanding of youth culture by highlighting the experiences, oppressions, and complexities specific to adolescent girl identity.

The final chapter by T.C. Calhoun, J.A. Harms Cannon, and R. Fisher applies the theories of Georg Simmel to amateur stripping in order to "broaden our theoretical understanding of [this] behavior" (309). While the essay offers a fascinating ethnographic study of amateur stripping, the fact that the subjects are adults (ranging in ages from twenty-one to thirty-two) and do not seem to fit the definition of "youth" implied by the introduction and the previous essays needs to be more fully explored. While it is quite possible and even necessary to realize that our understanding of "youth" need not be limited to a particular age group, an essay such as this must qualify how it defines "youth" in order to avoid conflating our understanding of stripping as a tactic used by "youth" of twenty-one with that used by "youth" of fifteen or even eighteen years old.

The majority of the essays contribute greatly to Epstein's goal of rescuing the study of youth culture from pejorative notions of "deviance" by highlighting the various strategies young individuals use to both negotiate the dominant "adult" culture and contribute to that society's larger popular culture. *Youth Culture* is a valuable resource for educators and cultural critics, providing a theoretical perspective of youth

studies that embraces rather than disparages young people. Its emphasis on music, while a bit narrow, provides a methodology for interpreting the multiple and varied youth subcultures and ultimately upholds Epstein's call for a "compassionate and reasonable understanding of what it means to be young in a rapidly changing world" (1).

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Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff, eds. *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. 239. US\$62.95.

In recent years, scholarship on youth cultural theories and practices in diverse settings has become increasingly visible in the field of post-colonial, diasporic, cultural studies, and ethnic studies. Few of the titles in print, however, offer a rubric for one to think comparatively about youth cultures in localized global settings. *Youth Cultures'* emphasis on inter-cultural perspectives sets it apart from much of the scholarship in the field both in its scope and range.

In her introductory essay, Helena Wulff acknowledges the vital contributions of work on youth subculture from the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the late 1970s and early 1980s (particularly Stuart Hall and T. Jefferson's *Resistance Through Rituals* and Dick Hebdige's *Subculture*). She adds that while *Youth Cultures* is intellectually indebted to the work that came out of the CCCS, it also explores a nexus of different questions by "open[ing] up the concept of youth culture from that of spectacular, deviant, oppositional, marginal groups to include all young people" (6). Guided by the notion that "all young people" are active cultural agents who engage in specific and contextual cultural practices, and not merely future adults, this collection challenges the notion that in a postcolonial moment, studies of white working class male youth in England can normatively code the experiences of youth in all settings. Expanding the definition of youth to encompass the cultural experiences of youth outside the metropolitan contexts of urban London, the ten essays interrogate the contours of youth cultural subjectivity in many (primarily urban) formerly colonized settings.

The first two essays "frame" the collection by demarcating methodological concerns central to the study of youth and children. Helena Wulff introduces the importance of developing alternate ethnographic and anthropological strategies for the study of youth, particularly in cases when generation and age separate anthropologists from their subjects. Virginia Caputo's and Allison James's respective articles trace specific angles of the question of generational and age difference as they apply to the theorization of youth culture. Advancing the notion