A Companion to Cultural Geography. James S. Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein, eds. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. xiii and 529 pp., maps, diags., photos, notes, and index. $124.95 cloth (ISBN 0-631-23050-5).

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Blackwell sets out an ambitious program for its Companions to Geography series: “The overviews provided in each Companion will be an indispensable introduction to the field for students of all levels, while the cutting-edge, critical direction will engage students, teachers and practitioners.” The thirty-two short chapters in A Companion to Cultural Geography certainly provide a comprehensive overview of the subfield and skilfully introduce many of the key themes addressed by contemporary cultural geographers. Moreover, the chapters are rigorously researched, up-to-date, and reflexive. The writing is, for the most part, lucid, well organized, and accessible, and the stylistic coherence of the chapters suggests a strong editorial hand at play. Junior and senior scholars are included, and while the majority of contributions are by British-based academics, about half the essays are written by scholars located elsewhere, albeit all in the Anglo-academic world. There is unquestionably much of value to be drawn from these chapters, and for those seeking an introduction to cultural geography, this would be a good place to begin. And yet, as a whole, the volume generates some unease, starting with the introduction.

In their very general and very brief opening chapter, editors Duncan, Johnson, and Schein introduce the six parts of the volume and the chapter contents. At no time, however, do they establish their own mandate for the volume or how they have interpreted the Blackwell directive. Why were some issues or themes selected and not others? What rationale guided the organization of the chapters? How were the contributors chosen? Was any effort made to include perspectives from the non-Anglo world? Ironically, then, whereas the individual chapters are at pains to situate contemporary cultural geographical research in its spatial-historical context, no attempt is made to do so with the volume itself. And, in the spirit of the interrogative practices of many of these same concerns—but this piece is not included in this section, but rather toward the end of the volume. Clayton also urges an unsettling of the taken-for-granted assumptions in geographic research, albeit directed at Eurocentric and dominating practices. Placed together, these pieces would have presented a more cogent and powerful critique of contemporary academic practices that could destabilize some of the normative tendencies of a companion such as this.

With respect to substantive issues, the volume provides a good overview of many, if not most, of the prominent themes in contemporary cultural geography, organized within four sections: nature/culture, culture and identity, landscapes, and colonial and postcolonial geographies. Chapter topics range from the social and spatial construction of embodied identities, whether in terms of race (Kobayashi), sexuality (Phillips), or the body more generally (Landzelius), to the complexity of global relations across diasporic communities (Dahlman) and transnational identities (McEwan). Landscape receives particular attention, with chapters on cultural landscapes in film (Peckham) and art (Daniels); on approaches to political, economic, and religious landscapes
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and political dimensions of spatial inscription and territorialization. Across these various topics, common themes resurface such as normativity, identity, difference, hybridity, domination, marginalization, resistance, performance, and the unsettling of binaries—to name just a few. While one’s individual research focus might not be foregrounded in this organization—such as the everyday, the urban, technology, disability studies, citizenship, queer theory, borders, scale, globalization, and so forth—many of these issues are touched upon in passing. No one volume, even at over 500 pages, can be exhaustive. Still, some statement by the editors on the selection and organizing principles—why some themes are highlighted and not others—would have been instructive.

The theoretical traditions from which contemporary cultural geographers have drawn are also well covered, whether with respect to discussions of bodies (Landzelius), class (Duncan and Legg), race (Kobayashi), postcolonialism (Ryan), or diaspora (McEwen). A litany of theorists are included, including seminal figures such as Althusser, Appadurai, Barthes, Butler, Cixous, de Certeau, Deleuze, Derrida, Fanon, Foucault, Freud, Lacan, Latour, Lefebvre, Marx, Nora, Ong, Said, and Spivak. The vast range of theories may well be bewildering, something that Kneale and Dwyer remark is certainly the case vis-à-vis consumption studies. And yet there are also significant gaps in the literature, which some of the chapters seek to redress. As Duncan and Legg observe, class is among the least theorized aspect of identity formation, especially since the 1970s, as other categories of analysis, such as gender, race, and sexuality, have risen to the fore.

Part II provides an explicit engagement with some of the predominant theoretical perspectives that have affected cultural geography, with chapters on Marxism (Mitchell), feminism (Sharp), and poststructuralism (Dixon and Jones); a less-common theoretical approach, psychoanalysis (Kingsbury); and the emergent nonrepresentational theory (Thrift). It is in this section of the volume that the chapters rub up against one another the most, offering interesting access points for debate—although there is no such explicit engagement among the authors. Moreover, the complexities and ambiguities that arise from these theoretical debates are rarely addressed head-on in the more substantively oriented sections of the volume. Whereas Mitchell persists in presenting the real and ideal, the material and the immaterial, as binary opposites, this articulation is not sustained by other contributors. In their chapters on home (Duncan and Lambert) and landscape art (Daniels), for example, the authors seamlessly move between the representational and the material, as if they are on a continuum rather than the binary opposites that Mitchell suggests.

Various authors pick up on the increasingly pressing call for alternative forms of academic engagement that push at the boundaries of contemporary practices (e.g., Sharp; McEwan). As Kobayashi remarks, for example, there is not enough political and activist engagement by antiracist scholars that extends beyond the university. Thrift’s appeal for a nonrepresentational geography that is more attuned to the richness of the world, is also a call for more political acts that identify other ways to engage with—or to perform alongside—the world experimentally and that are better connected to awkward moments such as crying. From yet another perspective, Smith proposes axiological grounds from which to reorient a Western worldview to a more biocentric or ecocentric ethical inclusivity. Other authors, such as Scott and Gagen, underline the relevance of academic practices to understanding the shifts in cultural geography. Despite these observations, the volume pays little sustained attention to the actual mechanisms through which the research process or the dissemination of results might facilitate this kind of engagement. Only Dixon and Jones, in their chapter on poststructural theories, include a brief discussion of discourse and deconstruction that attends to methodology. Given the importance, and often controversy, associated with the multiplicity of methodologies employed by cultural geographers, a more explicit statement on methodology might have been included.

Blackwell describes its Companions to Geography series as “blue-chip.” This volume certainly offers that kind of reliable investment. For those who wish to dip into a particular topic or issue, whether students, researchers, or teachers, this volume will surely be of value. But one of my frustrations is precisely with this very reliability. Very few chapters depart from the standard review of the literature and an outline of the debates.
The chapter by Roberts is one such exception. Her exploratory piece considers how an economic geographer working on transportation issues might engage with the landscape tradition, to think of a port not just as an economic hub but also a cultural phenomenon, riddled with security anxieties after 9/11 and subject to an increasing deployment of surveillance and tracking mechanisms. Also, this is one of the few essays where the intersections between various subfields of geography are made clear. Moreover, while the importance of other disciplines to geography is apparent, there is little sense of the relevance of cultural geography vis-à-vis other disciplines, or even to the nonacademic world. For whom is cultural geographic research undertaken and why? One of the problems with a “blue-chip” investment is that its very reliability can encourage stasis, dulling the energy, conflict, and contingency that stimulate new ways of thinking. This companion captures an important era in cultural-geographic research, and whereas the volume avoids squashing the subfield into a new black box, in the final product, the dynamism of this subfield is stifled.

Key Words: Cultural geography, social theory, identity.

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Those readers expecting a two-fisted assault by this superannuated cultural geographer upon this latest set of briefs on behalf of the New Cultural Geography (NCG)—thirty-one of them plus one halfhearted dissent—are in for a mild disappointment. As it happens, I find much to commend and admire in this volume as well as a certain amount of silliness or worse to excoriate.

What strikes me most forcefully upon perusing A Companion to Cultural Geography is how wonderfully and variously the entire geographic enterprise has progressed over the past several decades. Thus, as the author of what, in 1949, may have been the earliest geographic treatment of race in the Americas and of what was assuredly the first manifesto for feminist geography in 1973, I rejoice in the coming of age of these topics as so amply documented here. But gladdening my heart even more is the demonstration of something I have preached and practiced throughout my career: the penetration of unexplored terrain beyond our inherited domain and the straddling of disciplinary fences. What a contrast between our scene today and what one experienced during my graduate-school days in the 1940s! Then the American profession was a small, almost exclusively white, gentle, male affair, an insular, inward-looking one, limiting its curiosity to some—all too few!—deeply rutted investigatory paths, and, with the exception of three or four mavericks, intellectually stagnant.

There is more than a whiff of fresh air in the several bold thrusts into nontraditional areas encountered in this collection. Specifically, we are treated to some long overdue attention to the geography of consumption by Kneale and Dwyer and worthy forays into sexuality, film, art, public memory, and the landscapes of childhood and youth by other authors. But such trail blazing is not always an unqualified success. Nancy Duncan and Stephen Legg’s effort to put a geographic spin on social class seems to be aimless and uninformative, and Michael Landzelius’s argument concerning “The Body” is an unpersuasive straining for geographic relevance—and philosophical correctness—that is painful to behold.

Also worthy of note and a certain amount of applause are excursions into familiar geographic turf—into political, population, and many corners of social geography and, in an exciting report dealing with ocean ports by Susan Roberts, into good old economic geography. All this in addition to poaching on territory long since staked out by sociologists and psychologists.

Then a kudo or two to virtually the entire crew of thirty-five for a patent anxiety over social, gender, economic, and political injustice and their interest in finding means to alleviate the ills of the world. Such good citizenship has been less common among old-school cultural geographers aside from their distress over ecological issues. What is missing, however, is explicit discussion of how best to combine sound social science with advocacy and activism—a topic that merits book-length exploration.

On the negative side of the ledger, we find, on the one hand, gross overkill in coverage and, on the other,