

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 2.1 (SPRING 2006)

Autoethnography and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel

Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels. James Buzard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. vi + 320 pps.

Reviewed by [Terra Walston](#), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

<1> Buzard's impressive new book emerges from a small but growing collection of studies that link the development of anthropology in the nineteenth century to contemporaneous literary works. These include Christopher Herbert's *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (1991), a book to which *Disorienting Fiction* is indebted. But whereas Herbert applies his theory of the nineteenth-century ethnographic imagination to many different kinds of texts, including only one work of literature (Anthony Trollope's *Doctor Thorne*), Buzard's focus is a wide range of fiction, from Walter Scott's *Waverley* to William Morris's *News from Nowhere*.

<2>The centerpiece of Buzard's study is early- and mid-Victorian fiction: Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, all four of Charlotte Brontë's novels, and several works by George Eliot. Buzard chooses these authors to represent the distinct ways in which nineteenth-century novels experimented with doing ethnographic work. That is, each of these works seems to question whether one can best represent one's culture as an outsider – for whom everything is unfamiliar and thus potentially seen objectively – or as an insider who is capable of properly contextualizing every detail. The answer, it seems, is both. For these nineteenth-century writers, Buzard argues, cultivate an oscillating position that can be likened to the modern anthropological Participant Observer, who derives his or her privileged experience from having been accepted “in” a different culture, but who, simultaneously, derives authority from having passed back “out” again. Twentieth-century ethnographers thus draw their authority from an “outsider's insiderness” (10), for they are able to learn cultural codes but also to objectify and analyze them in ways that natives cannot. The autoethnography found in nineteenth-century novels inverts this relation: their narrators and characters pass out of the narratological story-space of the novel, into the discourse-space, and return again. The narrator's “desired position vis-à-vis the fictional world” is, in this way, that of an “insider's outsiderness” (12), a standpoint that assumes social inclusion, but preserves seeming objectivity.

<3>Buzard defines himself in opposition to Herbert who reads most nineteenth-century novels (save Trollope's) as antiethnographic “by virtue of their supposed exalting of individual psyche over social ‘background’ ” (37). In contrast, Buzard finds that narrative accommodates itself to ethnography through a self-interruption that mimics the Participant Observer's two roles. Dickens's *Bleak House* is the most easily explained and most interestingly proven example because the novel famously juxtaposes the outside third-person omniscient narrator and Esther's insider first-person account. The constant shifts between their two positions turn *Bleak House* into a “veritable self-interrupting machine” (121), and doubly emphasize the “discontinuity and incommensurability of narrative discourse- and story-spaces, as a way of giving formal embodiment to the ambivalence residing in the conception of culture [Dickens] reaches for” (121). To study the autoethnographic work of nineteenth-century British novels is thus to study in a highly formalist way the structure of their narratives, a task Buzard undertakes skillfully and convincingly.

<4>Yet, the self-interruption of autoethnographic novels also enables them to define cultures in a way that accounts for (and thus preserves) their difference. Buzard sees autoethnography as a reaction against imperialism's dispersal of a consolidated national identity, formerly defined chiefly by geographic borders. Nineteenth-century texts such as *Jane Eyre* and *Bleak House* challenge imperialism not so much because it is deemed an immoral practice, but because in its spreading of Englishness all over the globe, imperialism thins and disperses Englishness. Autoethnographic novels return focus to the national sphere and stress social cohesion. In tracing



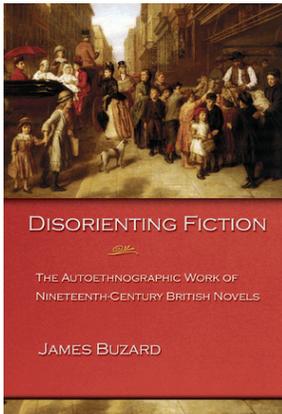
Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 2.1



the combinatory powers of vertical affiliations such as locale and horizontal affiliations such as class these novels map out the kind of abstraction that twentieth and twenty-first century anthropologists might call “culture.”

<5>Buzard uses a twentieth-century definition of ethnography which strengthens his arguments, but renders the theoretical grounding of his work more contestable. For his study, “ethnography” is the “study of a people’s way of life centering on the method of ‘immersion’ in extensive fieldwork and raising the issue of how, and how far, the outsider can become a kind of honorary insider in other cultures” (8). Buzard thus runs the risk of applying concepts retroactively, attempting to read a late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century idea of culture back into a particular nineteenth-century time, place, and mode of writing. Indeed, Buzard notes that the pluralistic concept of discrete, bounded cultures, with their own developmental trajectories – as distinct from the idea of one human Culture and one normative trajectory – was only nascent in the nineteenth century. The same difficulty is found in Herbert’s study, which recognizes that the project of tracing the nineteenth-century’s “ethnographic” imagination might be challenged as anachronistic and presentist. Buzard negotiates this potential problem skillfully, however, tracking the historical emergence of the concept of culture. He carefully distinguishes between the “moral apartness” of “pre-ethnographic” nineteenth-century representations and the “inescapable *interconnection*” of “protoethnographic” alternatives (21, Buzard’s emphasis). Still, such historical nuances are sometimes muted when Buzard’s focus shifts to readings of individual novels.

<6>Buzard establishes a chronology for the emergence of ethnographic culture chiefly via his reading of Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (chapter 4), which is taken to exemplify the autoethnographic work of early-nineteenth-century Irish and Scottish fiction. Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (chapter 5) and Charlotte Brontë’s four novels (chapters 6-10) are then seen to represent various mid-century appropriations of autoethnography from the Celtic fringe. In the last two chapters, which focus respectively on George Eliot’s fiction and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, Buzard previews a future sequel to *Disorienting Fiction*. In this way he concludes with a preliminary sketch of a later nineteenth-century autoethnographic trajectory. Still, as Buzard himself admits, his emphasis on formal analysis, in deliberate opposition to historicist criticisms that fail “to substantiate...claims at a level of literary detail” (17), entails extensive close reading of a relatively small number of texts. Historical arguments that rely on “detailed readings,” as Buzard well knows, “will always be open to the charge that examples have been selected for their suitedness to the thesis” (17). Buzard’s examples, however, complicate Herbert’s use of a single work to claim that the ethnographic imagination developed in contradistinction to the narrative forms used in novels.

<7>Still, despite Buzard’s clear conviction of the representativeness of his examples, his study does seem less historically robust than some readers might prefer. His central claim that “thinking about the nineteenth-century novel as a determinedly *self-interrupting* form permits us to grasp its relation to twentieth-century cultural anthropology” is, in a sense, an admission that he is less interested in links between the nineteenth-century novel and *nineteenth-century* anthropology. Victorian anthropology is not wholly absent from Buzard’s text, and in fact, some of the more interesting moments are ones in which he articulates the shift not merely *to* the twentieth-century ethnographic conception of culture, but *from* the more dominant nineteenth-century study of ethnology centered on racial difference. But such references are unfortunately few and far between. Early comparativist anthropology – the backbone of ethnology – with its unilinear scheme of human development is linked definitively to the notion of a singular human “Culture, with higher or lower levels thereof” (6). Buzard notes that in early twentieth-century anthropology, the pluralistic “discourse of ‘cultures,’” was “struggling to liberate *itself*” from this universalizing comparativism (7, Buzard’s emphasis). Buzard recognizes the momentous shift from ethnological universalism to ethnographic relativism and knows its history: he references George W. Stocking Jr.’s authoritative *Victorian Anthropology* (1987) a number of times. Yet, despite such nods, his references to nineteenth-century anthropologists and ethnologists are remarkably scant. It is, of course, not Buzard’s intent to specify the link between nineteenth-century novelistic autoethnography and contemporaneous ethnology. Nonetheless, given the changes in and growing importance of racial discourse over the course of the nineteenth century it is hard not to wish that so learned and far-reaching a study had devoted more time to articulating the connection between the nineteenth-century’s dynamic anthropologic and ethnological discourses of race and the emergence of the culture concept in contemporaneous novels.

<8>That said Buzard’s opening three chapters provide systematic elucidation of and grounding

for this case, Buzard's opening three chapters provide a systematic articulation of the grounding for the specific historical, theoretical, and conceptual claims of his project. His careful readings of novels from across the nineteenth century go a long way toward showing how experimentation with narrative form produces new visualizations of culture, and, moreover, suggests the immense impact that such writing may have had on the anthropology that followed. For Buzard, the mid-Victorian novel's ethnographic work *is* material; it produces and defines the limits of Englishness in the face of imperial expansion, offering up a way in which British multiplicity as represented through the disorienting gaze of a self-interrupting narrator constitutes "an immaterial good" (59). One of the real strengths of Buzard's book is in the way it sees British writers begin to delicately intertwine a discussion of the heterogeneity of the British populace into the othering, and ultimately homogenizing, discourse of imperialism. By his account, the nineteenth-century novel contributed to and conceptually linked a wide range of discourses, including the literary, the political, and the social-scientific. In short, *Disorienting Fiction* is an impressive contribution to Victorian studies whose sequel is to be much anticipated.