

**Joan Nicks and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds. *Slippery Pastimes: Reading the Popular in Canadian Culture*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002. Pp. viii, 347.**

**J. David Black. *The Politics of Enchantment: Romanticism, Media, and Cultural Studies*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002. Pp. x, 200.**

The two titles under review here mark the advent of the Wilfrid Laurier University Press Cultural Studies series – a development that reflects the increasing status of cultural studies in Canada. Indeed, in recent years Canadian historians, particularly those examining popular culture, have turned to cultural studies in an attempt to incorporate a more realistic and active role for the consumers, visitors, and audience members who were the intended targets of mass culture in the modern world. Historians such as Keith Walden, Valerie Korinek, and E.A. Heaman have produced important monographs highlighting the agency of average, ordinary Canadians who came into contact with, for example, the editorial content of mass circulation magazines, or industrial and agricultural exhibitions. In formulating their approaches these authors ventured well beyond the conventional boundaries of historical writing to draw upon the insights of anthropology and cultural studies. Continuing spirited exchanges in a variety of academic journals remind us, however, that discourse analysis remains a controversial and, for some, unwelcome addition to historical studies.

*Slippery Pastimes* contains sixteen articles organized under four headings: Heritage, Television, Music, and Sports. In soliciting contributions, we are told, the editors endeavoured to include scholarly examinations (as opposed to simplistic celebrations) of popular culture topics that highlighted the ambiguous and contingent nature of communication. Indeed, a dominant theme throughout the book is the extent to which the discourses associated with television programs, postage stamps, and Olympic athletes are slippery and malleable, hence the title. Accepting a complex and “plural” notion of audiences, the editors hope to demonstrate that “popular artifacts can be said to ‘slip’ from their originating media moorings, and they can continue to ‘slip’ within and among the diverse user-constituencies within a culture” (p 3). Indeed, many of the contributions emphasize the “multiple meanings” that audiences

could potentially take away from their interaction with these artifacts of popular culture. Most likely to interest historians are the sections on “Heritage” and “Music” – although Jeannette Sloniowski’s examination of the infamous *The Valour and the Horror* debacle in the “Television” section will also appeal to many historians. Sloniowski’s contribution offers detailed insights concerning the role that camera angles and the “voice of God” narrator played in constructing the McKenna brothers’ chosen narratives.

More problematic for many historians perusing this collection, one suspects, is the issue of selectivity. Several contributions here depend upon a detailed deconstruction of a single artifact: *one* Canada Post stamp, *one* magazine advertisement, or *one* episode of a particular television program (in Jim Leach’s essay, for example, it is an episode from *E.N.G.*; in Sheila Petty’s contribution it is an episode from *A nous deux!*). While several authors identify the provisional nature of their studies, one suspects that most historians would prefer to have gained a greater sense of just how representative these particular artifacts are – a concern that no doubt informs current apprehensions about discourse analysis. Nor will this collection fully escape the ire of historians suspicious of detailed semiotic readings of cultural texts. It is likely that Andrew Wernick’s suggestion, as part of his detailed analysis of a Curt Harnett Ray-Ban advertisement, that “the eight s’s in ‘serious sports sunglasses’ embed the model in a snake image that goes back to biblical tradition” will probably amuse as many readers as it impresses (p. 313). Still, the scope of the book is impressive. There are essays on Niagara Falls, Laura Secord, various forms of Canadian music, and, of course, hockey. Moreover, even if one is not willing to embrace all of the potential popular “readings” here, the collection promises to stimulate discussion about the “slippery” nature of communication – and that, for those of us who rely upon artifacts from the past, is a good thing.

J. David Black’s *The Politics of Enchantment* is similarly focused on the nature of communication. It is, in fact, a treatise on how scholars might best understand the nature of contemporary media, particularly the cyberspace world of the internet. In struggling to come to terms with our “information society,” Black explains, academics have sought to draw upon a number of different models – ranging from Daniel Bell’s vision of a post-industrial society to the Marxism-informed scholarship of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Jürgen Habermas.

Common to these seemingly diverse approaches to cultural studies, Black argues, has been a reliance on the rational values of the Enlightenment. Such rational values, he posits, only serve to distance us from the often playful and irrational world of popular culture. The antidote for this affliction, he suggests, is a good dose of romanticism of a very specific type. Black argues that by embracing the optimistic and humble outlook of the early German and English romantics (rather than the conservatism of the later romantics) we can overcome many of the intellectual barriers that stand between us and a more accurate understanding of contemporary media. The end result of this new approach, he suggests, will be a new appreciation of contingency and partial answers in cultural studies. Romanticism here emerges as the “patron saint of loose ends in cultural history” (p. 103).

As this brief summary would suggest, this book is aimed primarily at a cultural studies audience, but Black covers a lot of territory and cultural historians have much to gain by hitching a ride for at least part of the journey. Throughout the text Black embraces and champions the “anti-reifying” qualities of romanticism as a solution to resolving debates concerning the role of language in communication, and the nature of post-industrial society. For example, romanticism is posited as a middle way between notions of “discourse” and “ideology” (p. 66). In Black’s understanding of the nature of communication, developed in Chapter Two, language retains its autonomous and indeterminate meaning without negating the possibility of a shared “truth” arising between two people. As Black explains it, even though “the most conventional of signs is vulnerable to change...We can still order an egg salad sandwich at a lunch counter, and expect to be understood” (p. 68).

This is a timely book. Mariana Valverde has recently encouraged Canadian historians to embrace and incorporate the notion of “contingency” more fully into their studies so as to make room for the slippages and uncertainties involved in communication (see Mariana Valverde, “Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis,” *Social History/histoire sociale* 33, 65 [2000]: 59-77). Black’s explorations of this phenomenon – contingency is a recurring theme throughout the text – are thus a welcome contribution to historians’ debates about the nature and viability of discourse analysis. The material here is dense but it is not unleavened by Black’s sense of humour and his ability to summarize, concisely, complex theoretical arguments. This is a study motivated by the author’s concern to

help make cultural studies more relevant to the world that it studies, an admirable aim for cultural studies scholars and historians alike.

Historians interested in exploring the problematic nature of communication in popular culture have a good deal to gain by reading both books. *Slippery Pastimes* offers a wide range of (mostly contemporary and reasonably accessible) case studies while *The Politics of Enchantment* challenges us to re-examine the manner in which we, as scholars, approach the cultural artifacts we examine. My personal advice would be to draw selectively upon the former and delve deeply into the latter.

Michael Dawson  
University of Northern British Columbia

**Dorothy E. Smith. *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory, and Investigations* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. 307.**

The writing of history is simply not as rote or mundane as it used to be. Parallel with the fragmentation of disciplines and prominence of research in Canadian universities, any historiography in Canada over the past half-century reveals increasingly multifarious perspectives on what and whom to write about, and what argument to use. The introspection imbued in the writing, either conscious or subliminal, has stimulated substantial scholarship into such topics as gender, race, ethnicity, power, communities, and cultures, to name just a few. The result has been a flowering of history in both popular and, especially, academic macro and micro studies, and a realization that anything in the past is open to critical analysis and discussion.

Does this sound roseate? In *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory, and Investigations*, Dorothy Smith argues against the suggestion that these are the halcyon days of academic writing. Further, Smith would contend that all is not well in halls of academe, where certain voices are marginalized and subjectivities denied. Since the universities in Canada have evolved over the past forty years into large bureaucratic research institutes, *Writing the Social* takes on sociological and, by association, socio-historical research and disciplines, uncovering