the edginess and political nature of irony. There is a multitude of political issues and very controversial public literary and cultural artifacts that Hutcheon could have discussed, but she has chosen instead to concentrate on a single museum display, in a single city, at several years' remove. Is Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, on the other hand, ironic in any important sense? If it is ironic, does it also carry some or all of what Hutcheon herself argues is an integral part of irony—a pejorative edge? Is it fair, then, to claim that the Muslim leaders who condemned the book could be characterized as readers who lacked a sense of irony or play, who illegitimately overstepped a number of important bounds, but who rightly detected a negative judgment of culture and religion on Rushdie's part when they saw it? *That* discussion has an edge: it is politically charged and risky ground. Hutcheon steers clear.

In her work on postmodernism, Hutcheon has never been particularly postmodern herself. Her scholarship is thorough-going, deliberate, and generally marked by a certain kind of exhaustive referential care, but by none of the flash, dash, or daring pyrotechnic wordplay displayed by any of a number of postmodernist literary theorists. She has always written about postmodernism, humour, and play in a style that seems deliberately to avoid such excesses; she does the same thing here:

> this is a book *about* irony, and not an ironic book. . . . [Some] commentators . . . have written about irony in a deliberately and polemically unsystematic and ironized way. Because of both personality and what the French would call my own "déformation professionnelle," I admit that . . . I'm not terribly comfortable with that mode of writing, and so I have chosen a more systematic approach, while acknowledging throughout the artificial and even, to some extent, arbitrary separation of aspects which, in actual fact, work together simultaneously to make irony "happen." (7)

This book seems to me to be simply too safe. That safety is expressed in Hutcheon's determination not to attack any particular theory or theorist, not to be ironic, not to have the edge that she claims that irony must have. The result is an interesting, even a valuable book that could and probably should have been better.

STEVEN D. SCOTT

Jonathan Hart and Richard W. Bauman, eds. *Explorations in Difference: Law, Culture, and Politics.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996. Pp. xiv, 246. $55.00, $24.95 pb.

The eight essays in this wildly eclectic collection, which developed out of a conference of the same title given at the University of Alberta, are divided equally into two sections: "Theoretical Accounts" and "Instances." Ross Chambers opens the "Theoretical Accounts" section

with an analysis of the ways in which identity politics entrench the scapegoating practices of the dominant culture. He argues that we must reconfigure "scapegoating differences," or mediating differences between groups, as "community-differences" among individuals. Unfortunately, Chambers refuses to differentiate among degrees or types of mediation ("a couple of friends" and a "supranational entity" are equivalent communities [43]); and he charges scapegoated groups with the burden of change, thus disabling political reformation before it can begin. Christine Sypnowich also advocates a position that comes precariously close to denying the role of difference in issues of institutional power. She equates theorizing difference with postmodern theory and proceeds to deplore the "postmodern scepticism," political impotence, and philosophical incoherence that inevitably beset any "focus on the inclusion of difference *per se*" (127). Like Chambers, she wants to remedy injustices but the liberal foundations for her proposed solutions are profoundly conservative: "universal ideals" (129), the presumed "impartiality" of justice, and the "emancipatory promise" of the nation-state (125).

Jennifer Nedelsky would support Sypnowich's claim for the ethical utility of rights but argues that rights should "acknowledge and respect differences" (81), rather than subsuming them under a universalist ethic. Nedelsky deconstructs the legal and ideological principle of autonomy in order to enmesh individual rights in collective difference: "what rights in fact do and have always done is construct relationships" (75). Although, as Nedelsky admits, her essay threatens to essentialize relationships rather than individual rights, her position not only acknowledges the mutability of "universal" values, but provides a basis for legal reform which would recognize the "social consequences" of "private rights" (79). In a philosophical context, Christopher Norris also endeavours to integrate public and private realms. In order to counter the implicit proscription of truth-seeking discourse presented by (broadly) "postmodern" theory, Norris advocates a return to the Enlightenment standards of "logic, reason, and reflective auto-critique" (96). His argument that these principles allow critics to distinguish "private" beliefs, which are derived from "ideological persuasion," from "public" beliefs, which are "arrived at through the process of open argumentative exchange" (108) is sensible, but Norris neglects to specify the conditions under which such exchange could occur. Nevertheless, Norris does indicate that a committed understanding of difference would require our dialogical participation not only as "autonomous, reflective individuals," but also as "members of a rational community" (95).

The editors' claim that the collection "embodies differences on difference" (19) is attested to in this opening section, which will be of great interest to theorists of the postcolonial. Not surprisingly, these differences are rooted in the perennial (and thorny) growth of cul-

tural identity: "The desire for different individuals and groups to be represented in history, where . . . they have been excluded" (8). While this politicization of difference promises to ground debate in the "theoretical" half of the text, the "applied" essays in the "Instances" section veer off at tangents from this central issue. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine an arena in which the editors' generic claim that the text "is intended to be heuristic" (19) could be implemented: the broad scope of the collection makes it unlikely to be used in a pedagogical context. Nevertheless, many of the essays innovatively chart the familiar topography and political divisions of difference.

In a polemic which recalls disagreements between Sypnowich and Nedelsky, Sheila Noonan opens the "Instances" section by arguing that rights discourse supports "cultural" feminists' attempts to construct motherhood as "the sanctioned and sanitized version of feminist legal theory" and to abject abortion, along with "radical" feminism, as the "exiled dark side" (139) of the law. Despite her problematic association of "masculine jurisprudence" and "cultural" feminism with the appropriation of women's bodies in pornography and rape, Noonan makes a compelling argument to respect difference, to be "wary of feminist theory which promulgates official stories" (157). Claude Denis also examines the ways in which legal discourse produces a "social *adjudication of difference*" (202). Through interviews, newspaper accounts, and court transcripts, Denis provides several readings of a British Columbia Supreme Court lawsuit which dealt with the Salish ritual of "spirit dancing," and ultimately with the scope of Canadian Natives' inherent right to self-government. While Denis's attempts to align aboriginal and Québecois interests are jarring, his analysis of legal obfuscations of difference is interesting, and his conclusion that the court exposed "its constitutive inability to do justice to aboriginal life" (212) is entirely persuasive.

In what is perhaps the least representative of the essays in the second section, Pamela McCallum interrogates the "double character" of the Enlightenment by reading Carpentier's historical fiction, *El Siglo de las luces*, through the lens of Benjamin's construction of allegory. McCallum, in an argument with wide-ranging postcolonial applications, is thereby able to demonstrate how differentiated inscriptions of a colonial context refigure the master narratives of the Enlightenment, and (contra Norris) to expose irreconcilable problems in such narratives. Similarly, Richard Devlin's intriguing account of the 1981 IRA prison hunger strikes argues that the prisoners "reconstituted their bodies as a jural template" (179), invoking an ancient Celtic legal principle in order to expose the cultural contingency of the British rule of law. This argument is uneasily situated in Devlin's interpretation of "postmodernism," a strange alliance between Derrida and Baudrillard, which allows him to employ this theory on one hand ("'postmodernism' . . . allows space for at least a hearing of alternative

and deviant perspectives" [181]) while denigrating it on the other ("postmodernism may devalue . . . our group membership" [190]).

Devlin's suspect employment of "postmodernism" is similar to the editors' strategy of framing the collection's cultural politics with the assertion that "the essays expound a politics of postmodernism" (18). As a unifying manoeuvre, their account of the ongoing debate between Habermas and Lyotard on the legitimacy of totalizing discourses puts a strange spin on the text as a whole: not only does this emphasis elide many important arenas of debate in the text (issues of rights, law and difference, or construction of community, for example) and privilege essays which engage postmodernism directly at the expense of other interesting articles, but it flouts Norris's contention (with which I would agree) that "truth is best arrived at . . . through a process of open dialogical exchange" (109). According to Norris, postmodernist thought is most seriously flawed in its inability to combat injustice and oppression, "since it offers no arguments, no critical resources, or validating grounds for perceiving them as inherently unjust and oppressive" (95). Thus the editors' totalizing insistence on a politics of postmodernism threatens to jeopardize the politics of identity with which they also aspire to cluster the collection; perhaps an account of debates within and/or organizational principles of the conference itself would have supplied the "dialogic exchange" requisite to interline these two projects.

JEFF SCRABA

Gillian Stead Eilersen. *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears—Her Life and Writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996. Pp. 312. $17.95.

In 1990, Craig Mackenzie recognized the need for biographical data on Bessie Head and responded with *A Woman Alone,* a compilation of Head's autobiographical writings. Mackenzie's introduction to this collection expresses discomfort over the uncertain veracity of the information contained in the collected pieces and recognizes the need for a biography, noting that what is known about Head's life has been told by "the author herself" and "she proved to be an unreliable witness to her own life" (ix).

Head is one of those writers whose works intrigue and seem to originate at the juncture where the ineffable and the empirical sometimes conjoin and sometimes clash. Moreover, Head is unquestionably one of Africa's outstanding and most original writers and her novels have been subjected to a great deal of literary analysis. That a reliable biography was needed to guide, even censor, critics was evident. Exciting as the news of the forthcoming biography was, there was still the feeling that the task of capturing on paper something significant of this woman's awesome self was insuperable. The vast array of information