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Recommended Citation

Peter Schmidt. (1999). "Review Of "Race-Ing Representation: Voice, History, And Sexuality" By K. Myrsiades And L. Myrsiades". *College Literature*. Volume 26, Issue 2. 214-216.

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Race-Ing Representation: Voice, History, and Sexuality* by Kostas Myrsiades and Linda Myrsiades

Review by: Peter Schmidt

Source: *College Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), pp. 214-216

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112465>

Accessed: 20-01-2017 21:29 UTC

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Myrsiades, Kostas, and Linda Myrsiades, eds. 1998. *Race-ing Representation: Voice, History, and Sexuality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. \$55 hc. \$19.95 sc. 281 pp.

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For this volume the editors have assembled thirteen recent essays on race and representation, many of them originally published in the 1990s in *College Literature*, which they edit. The anthology is divided into four sections of unequal length: five essays on "Race-ing Representation," three each on "Voice" and "History," and then a concluding duo on "Sexuality." There is also an introductory essay by Linda Myrsiades summarizing the arguments of all the essays and briefly placing the collection in the context of current race and cultural studies theory, particularly Toni Morrison's own anthology *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* (1992), to which this volume is indebted for more than just its title.

Race-ing Representation provides an instructive mix of topics and approaches. The first section opens very strongly, with Kanishka Chowdhury's look at the collected work of Cheikh Anta Diop, Molefi Asante, and Jemie's and Madubuike's 1983 anthology *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*. Chowdhury's reading of Diop's evolution and his own complex response to the Negritude movement is the best short discussion of this important cultural historian that I know; its critique of Asante's books within the broader context of African cultural studies is also greatly welcome, and well balanced. This essay is followed by the equally intelligent and provocative essay on current "whiteness" studies by Henry Giroux. Giroux's is the one essay not drawn from past issues of *College Literature*, but despite some limitations (discussed below) it is a welcome addition to the collection and addresses the anthology's themes in ways none of the other essays do.

The rest of Section I contains essays of uneven quality; they also are much narrower in scope: Houston Baker gives his own (rather slap-dash) take on the Hill/Thomas hearings; Neil Brooks focuses on Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; and Corinne Blackmer gives a fine close reading of Larsen's *Passing* and recent criticism it has received. It is hardly clear why Brooks and Blackmer's essays belong in this section rather than in one of the later sections of the anthology, for (especially in Blackmer's case) they are attentive to the complexities of how all the anthology's themes of "history," "voice," and "sexuality" are embodied in writing. Section II primarily focuses on instances of black women's voices; it contains a strong essay by Brenda Carr on Audre Lorde; Mara Dukats's adroit juxtaposition of Condé and Césaire against Nathanael Hawthorne's Hester Prynne; and Biman Basu's reading of Morrison's *Sula*, which (despite too much jargon) puts Bakhtin's concepts of the grotesque in very useful dialogue with Morrison's novel. Section III ("History") contains two comparative literature essays—Robert Crooks's first-rate essay on the different ways Himes and Mosley have revised the detective genre and Helen Lock on Morrison's *Beloved*, Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Bradley's *Cbaneysville Incident*. The section concludes with Dana Heller's reading of *Beloved*.

Sections II and III of the anthology contain strong, supple, detailed essays—particularly Carr's, Dukats's, Crooks's, and Heller's—but their very ability to discuss issues

of “voice” and “history” together make too confining the categories in which they are placed by the table of contents. Basu’s and Lock’s essays are worthy to be included but are somewhat marred by simplistic distinctions between how “voice” and “writing” have evolved in African-American cultural traditions. Basu’s notion of oral vs. textual representation (156-57) is too sharp a contrast to capture Morrison’s many moves, and similarly Lock’s claim that “the linear conception of time [in written narrative] . . . fixes the past unchangeably . . . [and] demands that the past remain static, never to be revisited, reconfigured” (202) greatly overstates her case: consider how trenchantly Harriet Jacobs uses the oral inflections and written language of both blacks and whites in her *Narrative* to reconfigure her story as scripted by both her “owner” Norcom and her Northern “patrons.”

The anthology concludes with two excellent essays that are labeled by the table of contents as being primarily about “Sexuality”—Amy Ongiri on responses to black masculinist nationalism by Riggs, Julien, and Hemphill; and Ann Pelligrini’s witty deconstruction of how recent popular films such as *Boys on the Side* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* use racial difference to mark the burden of a lesbian difference they do not want to face. But by having two fine examples of contemporary queer theory bear the burden of representing “Sexuality,” the anthology inadvertently reproduces the very divide between “feminist theory” and “queer theory” that Pelligrini critiques: “once queer theory becomes conceived as the academic area ‘reserved’ for the study of sexuality, and once feminist theory gets marked out as the place set aside for the study of gender, it becomes difficult to imagine and enact theories that can investigate the diverse ways in which gender and sexuality articulate each other” (250).

A few brief comments on individual essays, then a concluding reflection on the importance and limitation of anthologies such as this one. Ongiri’s essay is a superb introduction to the complexity of movies such as *Tongues Untied* or *Young Soul Rebels*, which both appropriate 1960s Black Power masculinist rhetoric and turn it inside out; she also deftly places their innovations within and against the 1950s, especially James Baldwin’s work. The essay also pairs provocatively with Chowdhury’s: both are written with a minimum of jargon, so that they can work well on undergraduate syllabi, and both offer nuanced critiques of several versions of “Afrocentric” work in its historical contexts, neither simplistically damning nor deifying. Giroux’s essay is synoptic too but comes with some clear biases, including arguing 1) that “identity politics . . . served to undermine the possibilities for white youth to engage critically the liberal appeal to a color-blind society” (53); and 2) that much of “whiteness” studies is complicit in this problem. I find both these claims unsubstantiated, especially the second. Giroux’s reading of David Roediger’s work seems particularly narrow and ungenerous. On the other hand, the essay is written with verve and covers a wide range of sources, and Giroux’s central thesis—that to be useful “whiteness” studies must rearticulate its subject as part of a broader and more plural understanding of “cultural, social, and political citizenship” (55)—couldn’t be more timely, and stresses how much this emerging field is indebted to black studies, among other fields. (Note: Giroux’s citation of Stuart Hall’s classic essay “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference” is incorrect; it should be dated 1989 and appeared in issue 23.4 of *Radical America*.)

As an anthology investigating the representation of blackness in twentieth-century film, literature, and cultural theory, *Race-ing Representation* does its job well. Though primarily U.S.-centric, it does include a few pieces dealing with the cultural history of the larger black diaspora. Nevertheless, imbalances abound and reveal the fact that the anthology is basically drawing from one source, *College Literature*. Toni

Morrison is a central figure, and black women's fiction from the Renaissance forward is decently represented, but there's a need for more essays on black male writers, though the strengths of Crooks's and Chowdhury's essays somewhat compensate. An anthology that claims to rethink "race" yet focuses almost exclusively on black and black/white issues obviously has some representational problems of its own, however. Linda Myrsiades's discussion reinterpreting the Caliban/Friday/Prospero/ Crusoe matrix (12-14) is representative of the anthology's commendable ideals and methods, but the fact that she cites Lyotard and Said but slights Rétamar and Saldívar (who have also written on Caliban, colonialism, and race) is just one instance of how the anthology doesn't quite live up to the promise of its title. But collecting these essays was definitely worthwhile, and the editors are in particular to be commended for shepherding into print the work of so many good younger scholars.