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Strangers at Home: American Ethnic Modernism Between the Wars (review)

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Thus, claims Burns, whilst a theatrical image of nation and spirit may have been formulated and affirmed, Shakespeare's plays present "history as made out of the uncontrolled, often embarrassing, emotions of a dysfunctional multinational family," in ways contrary to the drives of national integration myths: "as this happens, [Shakespeare's Histories] can be seen to mock the audience's need to pull together, to find a larger frame for the interfamilial squabbles in front of us" (164).

Hoenselaars's collection offers many examples of such lively skeptical thought to identify and counter many forms of national and theatrical parochialism, and their intrinsic restrictions. The assembled essays argue enthusiastically and convincingly for the valuable strengths of Shakespeare's Histories in opposing the restrictions of ostensibly self-legitimizing power.

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Rita Keresztesi. *Strangers at Home: American Ethnic Modernism Between the Wars*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xxii + 226 pp. \$60.

When I teach Modernism, Zora Neale Hurston is central to my course, as are Nella Larsen and Ralph Ellison. Jewish and Native American writers are also a decided part of my canon of authors. I know of few teachers whose conception of Modernism is so antediluvian as to encompass only Anglo-American authors. Innovative anthologies of American Literature such as the excellent Heath anthology transparently critique such narrow canon formations. Moreover, critics such as Werner Sollors and Houston Baker moved beyond such narrow conceptions of Modernism in the 1980s and 1990s so that Ruth Keresztesi's contention that her approach of getting beyond the canon is controversial and innovative is unsustainable. She does "rethink the project of American literary modernism from the perspective and peripheral locales of ethnic writers" (xiii) and in doing so brings some interesting critiques to bear on a wide range of authors, but her approach is hardly earth shattering. As she says, "I critique the taken for granted high modernist standards of American modernism, reread the canon from its ethnic perspectives and suggest that modernism and ethnicity were intimately connected within American version of modernism" (191). I would like to know "taken for granted" by whom? Surely

not the informed mass of university educators who laugh out loud at the elitist pretensions of traditional critics who support such propositions and are now in a decided minority except at Oxbridge and certain Ivy League institutions?

Despite my frustration with the claims of this book, there are many interesting critiques of an interesting variety of authors and it is good to see the juxtapositions between different ethnic authors. Countee Cullen is shown to subvert “the genre of melodrama to expose the class bias and patriarchal ideology of the New Negro Movement as farce” (26). Here, as elsewhere, Keresztesi brings fresh perspective to an author who previously has been too readily dismissed as marginal to the modernist canon. Likewise, Mourning Dove is interestingly juxtaposed with Nella Larsen through their common interest in the mulatto figure. There is much talk throughout the book about the importance of performing ethnicity, and the use of Judith Butler’s theories here illuminates the ways in which racial performativity is different to that of gender and plays out in different ways. Her reading of this trope in Mourning Dove’s work is particularly astute. Also astute is her use of Paul Gilroy’s work to discuss Nella Larsen in a context beyond the narrow confines of North America. She rightly insists that “(B)y bringing in non-American examples ... into the American narrative, Larsen exposes the claustrophobic character of Nationalist discourses in general” (47).

Overall, though, the book is disappointing. It begins to talk about minstrelsy, but fails to use the vast wealth of material available in studies by Michael Rogin, Eric Lott, and W. T. Lhamon to investigate it as a key trope of performative ethnicity both for Jews and African Americans. Melville, we are told, “puts on a minstrel show of the whole nation” (14–15), but she does not develop this through her discussion of Modernist writers. She is not very good at discussing the world beyond the literary which I believe is key to understanding the full context of the writers she discusses. Thus, jazz is mentioned when discussing Hurston but there is no discussion of its importance formally for African American writers. Writing is a narrow business for Keresztesi. I am afraid she is also prone to restate her position repeatedly. Hence, Countee Cullen’s double plots and the problems of Zora Neale Hurston’s patrons are discussed repeatedly to the annoyance of this reader at least. In conclusion, *Strangers at Home: American Ethnic Modernism Between the Wars* contains several incisive readings of a range of writers but its overall scope is less ambitious than it claims.

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