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Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



Young Joseph A.; Brazier Jana Evans(eds.), Erasing Public Memory: Race, Aesthetics, and Cultural Amnesia in the Americas.

Eleftheria Arapoglou

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Joseph A. Young and Jana Evans Braziel (eds.). *Erasing Public Memory: Race, Aesthetics, and Cultural Amnesia in the Americas*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007. Pp. 280. \$60.00 (Hb.).

A thought-provoking exploration of racial assumptions in American culture, *Erasing Public Memory: Race, Aesthetics, and Cultural Amnesia in the Americas* problematises the canon of western civilisation by exposing the ubiquity and contiguity of racialised rationalism and unsettling typical notions of 'beauty,' 'memory,' and 'public culture.' Moving toward the de-reification of race as an *a priori* ground of western knowledge, *Erasing Public Memory* examines the impact of race and racist societal structures within the arts.

The editors and contributors to the volume—which sprang from the “Race in the Humanities” conference held in November 2001 at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse—view race as instrumental in the development of aesthetics and aesthetic ideals in the West. They argue that aesthetics, in turn, has played a crucial role in constructing race in the *socius*, while simultaneously attempting to erase its own racialised foundations. Hence, the volume challenges traditional notions of beauty, memory, and orthodoxies of refinement, as well as standardised art, history, and public culture based on discursive practices and methodologies that generate racial hierarchies and diminish all differences into “the sameness denoted by the white imperial subject under a veil of an ultimate universalism” (4).

The volume’s objective is three-fold. The editors and contributors aim to de-ontologise first, manifestations of art as an enforced aesthetic practice of encoding the master codes of the dominant culture that create and sustain regimes of beauty; second, manifestations of history as a mythical project linking, under a ‘Specific History,’ discrete temporalities and conflicting historicities; and third, narrow, aestheticised, tidy notions of culture. The volume undermines notions of aesthetics as universal and race as conversely political, by illustrating that, because art is political and race is aesthetic, aesthetics constitutes the unquestioned (even purposeful) reification of the historical-cultural-political values of the *socius* (5).

The volume is theoretically grounded on the work of Michel Foucault, V.Y. Mudimbe and others who have contended that the white subject is negated in its own cultural practice by the monopolising performance of a history that confounds a white transcendental unity and prevents it from contemplating the implicit. Also, the contributors and editors critically respond to the work of Paul Gilroy—mainly, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993)—in that they inquire into the racialised parameters of aesthetics in their attempt to determine the way in which discussions of ‘race,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘ethnicity,’ and ‘culture’ have eventually given rise to ‘cultural studies.’

The comprehensive introduction, followed by a seven-page bibliography, successfully unravels the complicated historical nexus of race and aesthetics, from Enlightenment and early modern anthropological studies to Kantian aesthetics and emerging systems of aesthetic classification within literature and the arts.

The collection begins with Jana Evans Braziel’s “Genre, Race, Erasure: A Genealogical Critique of ‘American’ Autobiography,” which exposes the genre of autobiography as a racialised literary construction founded upon the discourse of sameness and the logic of identity (37). Braziel contextualises her study within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideological shifts which overlapped chronologically with the European colonisation in the Americas, the Caribbean and Africa. Braziel’s article discusses not only literature—as the title suggests—but also anthropology, science and political theory. Working within the same historical context—the nineteenth century—Joseph Young, in his “Erasure and Retrieval of Public Memory: Artful Deceit in Mary Johnston’s *Prisoners of Hope* and Subtle Disclosure in Pauline Bouvé’s *Their Shadows Before*,” explores the cultural debate about whether or not African Americans should be included in the mainstream during the emergence of segregation. As Young illustrates, both Johnston’s and Bouvé’s narratives challenge the epistemological and ontological violence embedded in the ontological closure of whiteness (83, 87). The debate on canon formation is also at the core of David J. Vázquez’s “An Epistemology of Ignorance: Hierarchy, Exclusion, and the Failure of Multiculturalism in the Modern Library Top 100.” Vázquez revisits the legacies of the Enlightenment to illustrate the ways in which ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ Enlightenment ideals have reified racial difference and a regime of whiteness (120, 121). Jerome Branche’s “Soul for Sale? Cuban Counterpoint in Madrid” further delves into the “commodification by white aesthetics” in that it examines how race figures into national and nationalist projects through capital, both in the case of the Negrista movement and of the twenty-first-

century's configurations of Spanish national identity (163, 173). In "The Pillory/Pelhourino in Open-Air Museums in the US and Brazil: A Site of Racism and Racial Reconciliation," Paula Straille compares open air museums in two American sites—Bahia's "Pelhourino" and Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg—and illustrates that the representation of history is racially-coded and white washed. Further pursuing the discussion of the "racialized historical matrix," Arie Bruce Saposnik's "Succor for the Ailing Jewish Body: Images of Jewish Racial Degeneracy and Zionist Cultural Work in Palestine," discusses the extent to which the Zionist work in Palestine could function as the 'cure' for the 'diseased' Jewish mind and body—the outcome of exile. Paralleling arguments made by Saposnik, "Re-tracing the Unruly Boundaries of the Jewish Body in Barnett Newman's 'Stations of the Cross'" by Nancy Nield Buchwald analyses an abstract expressionist cycle of fourteen paintings as an "artistic and cultural space of remembrance" (252). Buchwald's analysis interprets Newman's abstract expressionist cycle as a set of visual tropes that constitute an act of "forceful Jewish witnessing" (254). The volume closes with three poems by Sean Thomas Dougherty that creatively highlight the imbricated and complicated terrains of race, aesthetics, and memory.

Erasing Public Memory follows in the tradition of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) and Uli Linke's *Blood and Nation: The European Aesthetics of Race* (1999) in that it interrogates literatures as a description and inscription of racialised consciousness. Moving beyond these studies, however, the specific volume expands the theoretical terrain of critical approaches to literature, by addressing genre studies, artistic movements, and the arts in general. Overall, *Erasing Public Memory* bears testimony to the fact that "there is much more to say about being human than mechanized tautologies can offer about a history [and an aesthetic] of the Same," as Mudimbe puts it in his *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (198).

Eleftheria Arapoglou
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki