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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Revisiting Racialized Voice: African American Ethos in Language and Literature by David G. Holmes

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I'm not sure. But his book makes me realize how important it is for composition specialists to articulate what they value about writing. On this issue, my thinking re-begins.

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David G. Holmes. *Revisiting Racialized Voice: African American Ethos in Language and Literature*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. xi + 132 pages. \$55.00 hardcover.

David G. Holmes aims to reconsider, in his words, “the ideological and interdisciplinary relationships among literature, oratory, and composition epitomized in an explication of the metaphor of the black voice” (ix). He especially seeks to challenge notions of any single, “essential” African-American voice and hopes that such a re-examination might “afford African American students more flexibility in constructing their own racialized ethos in writing” (ix).

Holmes begins by exploring the philosophical relationship between Frederick Douglass and Ralph Waldo Emerson, especially with respect to two of Douglass's autobiographies and his only novel. Holmes then investigates a speech by Frances E. W. Harper. Holmes follows with a chapter on African-American dialect and modernism, focusing on the Harlem Renaissance, including such important writers as Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. Holmes also examines Alain Locke's theory of the “New Negro” and works by outspoken satirist George Schuyler. All these authors performed in front of a backdrop of an exceedingly horrific, disgustingly racist anthropological “science” that thrived for many decades.

Three other chapters focus, respectively, on Charles Chesnutt, W. E. B. DuBois, and Zora Neale Hurston. The final chapter explores later writers, such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Ishmael Reed. It also considers implications of this study of racialized voice for composition theory and pedagogy.

As he frames his study, Holmes ranges among numerous critics and theorists, including Naomi Zack, Shirley Wilson Logan, Keith Gilyard, K. Anthony Appiah, J. L. Dillard, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker. Holmes balances his desire to question any version of racial essentialism with the need to

avoid what Baker terms the “taxi fallacy,” which involves failing to recognize the sociological reality of racism in America.

Although Holmes does little to explain why he focuses almost entirely on literature rather than oratory (and Douglass alone gave several hundred speeches that are available), the reason, I strongly suspect, is that unlike the most-noted African-American orators, numerous important authors probe the issue of biracialism and complicate the entire notion of race. Holmes comments, for example, that Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, and Nella Larsen “creatively and critically questioned the arbitrary line between black and white” (34).

In considering Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*, Holmes unpersuasively asserts that Chesnutt presents a patronizing view of slave culture and “privileges Eurocentrism” (58). To the contrary, William Andrews notes that in this book, Chesnutt treats “slavery as a crucible that placed black people under almost unbearable psychological pressures, eliciting from them tenacity of purpose, firmness of character, and imaginative ingenuity in order to preserve themselves, their families, and their community” (“Chesnutt, Charles Waddell” in *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, ed. William Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 131–32). Chesnutt also deserves praise for such other magnificent works as *The Wife of His Youth* (1899) and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). In his *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)—surely one of the very greatest of all American novels—Chesnutt baldly exposes the horrors of white supremacy and the depredations of white racist violence while *simultaneously* and brilliantly investigating the complexities, ironies, and fluidity of racial identity among individuals and families.

Despite offering only twelve pages on the long-lived DuBois, Holmes makes useful observations about the NAACP leader, most notably that alongside his sociological, journalistic, and literary analysis and polemics on behalf of racial equality, DuBois manifested an attitude of Eurocentrism.

Holmes also deserves credit for his careful analysis of the works of Zora Neale Hurston, whose exceedingly rich, alternately humorous and tragic explorations of race, gender, folk culture, romance, love, marriage, poverty, and violence resist ready summary, as do her investigation of African-American dialect and her superlative reconfiguration of narrative form, especially in her classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

Disagreeing with Gates’s conclusion that race is a trope, Holmes makes the intriguing suggestion that race should instead be regarded a “cultural hermeneutic,” that is, “as a way of reading [. . .] society.” In that event, “American society, instead of race, becomes the text,” and race serves as the lens for seeing it (45).

In his final chapter, Holmes gently questions a landmark document of CCCC, “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (1974). He argues that it

“fell short of sufficiently complicating the links among race, language, and identity for peoples of color” (101). On the final page, he declares that “standardized American English” can become the “intellectual property” of African-American students (106).

The main problem with this entire book is its brevity. One digests only 106 pages of text before reaching the Notes and Works Cited. I would like to learn more about how race can function as a cultural hermeneutic. Can it expose the rhetoric of whiteness, as whiteness theorists (such as David Roediger) seek to do? Or does it mainly function to clarify multifaceted African-American culture and rhetoric? Can it develop a rhetoric suitable for biracial and multiracial individuals or families? I also wonder whether theories of African-American oral performance—whether related to songs (from spirituals to blues to jazz to R & B to rock-and-roll to soul to hip hop), to oratory (from folk preachers to Sojourner Truth to Barbara Jordan to Barack Obama), or to comedy (from Bert Williams to Whoopi Goldberg)—relate to the question of racialized voices in composition classrooms.

I would also like to learn more about Holmes’s position on “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” He seems to imply that that manifesto should be updated and perhaps extensively revised. If so, I wonder what a newer statement should say.

One can only admire Holmes’s uncanny ability to wrestle—almost always successfully—with so many important literary figures in such a short book. And one can only respect his capacity to use that investigation to raise questions about the racialized voices of students in our writing courses. This book is an invaluable introduction to its subject. I hope that we will hear much more from its author.

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Morris Young. *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. ix–xiii + 224 pages. \$27.00 paperback.

It was perhaps a coincidence that I was at the tail end of Iris Chang’s *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (Viking, 2003) when a request came to