



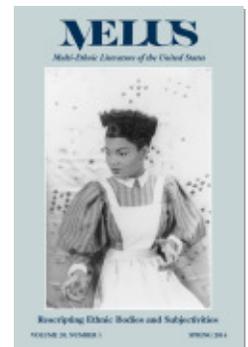
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Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896–1937 (review)

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Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896-1937. Julia H. Lee. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 228 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$23.00 paper.

Julia H. Lee's *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896-1937* offers new insights on how African American and Asian American identities were defined in relation to one another during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As Lee explains, the book seeks to show how "American identity emerges from the interplay between the fantasies of the 'Negro Problem' and the 'Yellow Peril'" (5). Lee focuses on iconic texts and court cases, as well as lesser-known novels, memoirs, and films in order to show how widely the trope of interracial encounter traveled, and how varied were its permutations.

Interracial Encounters follows from a recent wave of works committed to comparative and interethnic analysis, such as Vijay Prashad's *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (2001), Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen's edited collection *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (2006), Caroline Rody's *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (2009), and Cathy J. Schlund-Vials's *Modeling Citizenship: Jewish and Asian American Writing* (2011). These books continue the ground-breaking work of Werner Sollors and Elizabeth Ammons to see patterns across ethnic literary traditions while carefully attending to the particular ways American ethnic and racial identities have been negotiated in relationship to other minority groups. Lee maintains the specificity of each group's experiences in the United States and offers an important contribution to the study of American racial formation.

Lee makes coherent sense out of the complex and contradictory laws, court cases, and racial ideologies of the period she analyzes. Her re-reading of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) is particularly impressive, providing a powerful contribution to the scholarship of this pivotal court case while also shedding new light on its influence on literature and culture. *Interracial Encounters* does not oversimplify or selectively celebrate scenes of interracial solidarity; instead, Lee shows the "multiple logics of exclusion"

that were deployed in the period (5). While she provides ample evidence of cross-racial identification, she also illustrates the pattern of one group demanding inclusion at the expense of the other. *Interracial Encounters* reveals the tensions and alliances between Asian Americans and African Americans, as well as these groups' shifting relationship to normative whiteness. For example, her readings of the films *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Cheat* (1915) illustrate the contradictory ways African American and Asian American racialization appeared in popular cultural texts.

Lee is attuned to the complexity in how racial ideologies affect minority populations whose rights were (and still are) unevenly recognized and enforced. As she notes, "an American national identity was natural, desirable, universal—and utterly impossible for African Americans and Asians to attain" (10). While underscoring the US historical context for African American and Asian American literary production, Lee also traces the transnational and at times post-national implications of Afro-Asian encounters. Racial ideologies travel beyond the nation's borders, particularly in this period when the US became a global superpower.

The introduction lays out Lee's major claims and the theoretical concepts undergirding her work. Chapter Two contextualizes Asian American and African American racialization in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, particularly through the spatialization of the segregated train car, a site central to *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Chapter Three continues the discussion of segregated train travel by analyzing key scenes in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and Wu Tingfang's memoir *America, through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat* (1914).

Chapter Four addresses the transnational and imperial dimensions of racialization and orientalism as illustrated by the writings of the Anglo-Chinese-Canadian-American sisters Winnifred Eaton (Onoto Watanna) and Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far). By studying their fiction and nonfiction set in the US and Jamaica, Lee shows the women's competing strategies for asserting their status as representative Americans. Edith Eaton depicts Asian Americans and African Americans (and Afro-Caribbeans) as engaged in the same struggle against racism, while Winnifred Eaton asserts privilege by figuring herself as a vulnerable (white) woman under attack from black men.

Chapters Five and Six deal with narrative and genre in ways that extend the interethnic paradigm well beyond scenes of actual interracial contact. In Chapter Five, Lee argues that Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) employs chinoiserie as a means of exploring racialization outside of historical oppression. Chapter Six compares W. E. B. Du Bois's novel

Dark Princess (1928) and Younghill Kang's *East Goes West* (1937), arguing that both writers flout novelistic conventions in order to criticize the nation-state. In these two chapters, Lee pushes her argument into figurative and speculative territory, applying her theme of Afro-Asian encounter at the level of meta-discourse. The ambition of these chapters is admirable, though their arguments are more abstract and comparatively thinner than the rest of the book. It would be helpful to readers if Lee had reprinted images in the book, especially since she describes several political cartoons and analyzes scenes from contemporary films. A use of visual culture would have enhanced Lee's claims about the reciprocal representations of Asian Americans and African Americans in US popular culture.

Interracial Encounters provides original readings of canonical and popular texts, grounding them in thick context and historicization. It serves as a useful secondary source in graduate and undergraduate courses on ethnic studies, multi-ethnic American literature and culture, and American history and culture.

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