

Explorations in Sights and Sounds

James B. McKee. *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective.* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 376 pp., \$16.95 paper.

In his sweeping study of the treatment of African Americans in American sociology from the 1920s until the 1960s, James B. McKee, a professor emeritus of sociology at Michigan State University, concludes that sociologists “need to revive an older democratic commitment to speak to a larger public that includes and cuts across the conflicting racial identities whose fates are inexorably bound together in the same historical struggles” (366-7).

Surprisingly, McKee’s conclusion follows over 360 pages of indictments of sociologists in which he argues that race relations experts failed because they assumed that African Americans “if not biologically inferior, were a culturally inferior people, not yet fit to participate in modern society ...[and] possessed no inherited culture of their own” (342-3). Nevertheless, between 1930 and 1970, sociologists assumed that African Americans’ primary objective was assimilation into the mainstream of American society. Furthermore, McKee points out that after World War II sociologists neglected the politics of race; the failure of social intervention; the failure of modernization to engender the assimilation of African Americans; and embraced the myth of a color-blind middle class. On these series of issues, McKee argues cogently, sociologists were grievously wrong. In addition, sociologists did not take into account “the constraining power of social context and the place of collegial consensus in the shaping of sociology” (348-9). Thus, for McKee, a sociology of race relations in our times must be “critically disinterested.” In other words, it must “refuse to accept claims by contending actors whether they be the state or any of its bureaucratic agencies, those who speak as racial liberals or the representatives of organised racial groups, that their definition of the situation is the only correct one” (366).

Despite McKee’s attempt to provide the “whole” historical and sociological analysis of the study of race relations in American society, his book falls woefully short of his aim. His problem, in part, stems from his unidimensional theory in reference to the myth of the cultural inferiority of African Americans. By arguing at many points that sociologists such as Robert E. Park, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, and Oliver C. Cox were progressives who challenged the myth of Black cultural inferiority, McKee contradicts his argument that sociologists per se were reactionaries on that issue. For example, after an extended attack on John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, McKee argues that, from the day of its publication in 1937, Dollard’s book was universally lauded by sociologists and widely cited in the literature. Furthermore, he claims it was cited,

quoted, and recommended long after many other works of the 1930s had receded from early prominence and were little read. I do not doubt that McKee's assertion is true, but he does not document this and similar statements that are interspersed throughout his text. Put another way, should we assume the internal dynamics of the discipline of sociology are democratic? (I think not.) A more reasonable question is whether or not the leading students of race relations embraced the myth of Black cultural inferiority.

In short, before the "whole" historical and sociological analysis of the study of race relations can be written, more monographs, such as the ones written by John H. Stanfield, III, R. Fred Wacker, Stow Persons, and myself, must be published.

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Seymour Menton. *Latin America's New Historical Novel.* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993) 228 pp., \$30.00 cloth.

Seymour Menton's eight chapter description and analysis of the new historical novel in Latin America is a comprehensive and well written discussion of the topic. However, treatment of ethnic issues is not a dominant concern.

Menton defines the new historical novel as one possessing the following six characteristics: Bakhtinian concepts of the dialogic, the carnivalesque, parody, and heteroglossia; intertextuality; metafiction or self-conscious narrative; an historical protagonist; the conscious distortion of history through omissions, exaggerations, anachronisms, and the creation of apocryphal historical characters; and the subordination of the mimetic reproduction of a certain historical period to the development of more transcendent concepts.

After an initial chapter discussing the definition and origins of the new historical novel, Menton devotes the chapters to a discussion of the following works: Mario Vargas Llosa's *La guerra del fin del mundo*, José J. Veiga's *A cascata de serpente*, Abel Posse's *Los perros del paraíso*, Fernando del Paso's *Noticias del imperio*, Gabriel García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto*, Fernando Cruz Kronfly's *La ceniza del Libertador*, Alvaro Mutis's "El último rostro", Germán Espinosa's *Sinfonía desde el Nuevo Mundo*, Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial*, Pedro Orgambide's *Aventuras de Edmund Ziller en tierras del nuevo mundo*, Moacyr Scliar's *A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes*, Homero Aridjis's *1492: Vida y tiempos de Juan Cabezón de Castilla*, Angelina Muñoz's *Tierra adentro*, and Carlos Fuentes's *La campaña*. The book