



Constructing Race: Youth, Identity, and Popular Culture in South Africa. Dolby, Nadine E. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 162 pp.

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Nadine Dolby's ethnography of identity construction describes how South African youth make meaning of "race" in the post-Apartheid era. She argues that global flows of popular culture have become critical locations for the negotiation of race and the discursive formation of identity. Dolby's research is contextualized in the history of state-imposed racial classification in South Africa, as well as more recent reforms that have attempted to reject race as a category of identification. The study itself was conducted at Fernwood, a previously all-white high school in Durban that began to open up its admissions regulations in 1990 to take in more African, Colored, and Indian students, because white enrollments were declining. While the school had subsequently been held up as a model for a "rainbow" school in the nation's "multicultural experiment," by 1996, the time of the study, the student body was 66 percent Black, and the school was "laden with conflicts, problems, and racial tensions" (p. 36). Staff and management's anxieties about the school's identity and future were fueled by enrollment trends toward fewer white students and larger numbers of poor African students.

The book's primary contribution lies in its innovative and nuanced theoretical synthesis of racial identity, symbolic creativity, and taste practices to explain the construction of individuals in the new South Africa. The book situates the development of individuals at the three-way juncture of continually changing "traditional" cultures, urbanizing modernity, and the globalizing influences of postmodernity. Dolby extends the theoretical formulations of Willis, Bourdieu, Appadurai, and others in arguing that Fernwood students "construct race primarily as a discourse of taste, whose coordinates are located within the parameters of popular culture" (p. 15). Specifically, the book offers an exegesis of how "racialized taste codes" at Fernwood function as borders that are both collectively imposed, insuring the persistence of conflict and division but, also, individually transgressed, offering possibilities for connection. In addition, while the book does not take up pedagogy as a primary focus, it offers insight into the construction and negotiation of student identities through often-contentious classroom discourse. Dolby describes how teachers habitually carry out a "discourse of authenticity" in their classes that constructs an "imagined Zuluness" for their African students—a practice that



reinscribes Zulu culture as stagnant and denies the "coevalness of blacks and whites" at the school (p. 53).

While Dolby is careful to circumscribe the book's focus around how race functions as a "set of practices" within the school, it is unfortunate that the study did not address the implications of these practices for specific educational processes and outcomes. As such, the book contributes little to the larger question of what educational reforms such as more open admissions policies mean for the life chances of previously derogated populations in South Africa. Where provided, comments on educational processes themselves are somewhat disconnected. For example, the book claims that Black students were more academically motivated and successful than whites, although little academic achievement data is reported. In addition, Fernwood in 1996 is described generally as "overwhelmed by disciplinary and academic problems" (p. 38), a situation that Dolby argues is because of cultural mismatch. The relationship between these two claims is never made clear, and a more finely grained analysis would be appropriate here; for example, an analysis that systematically traced the connections between what these various racial constructions mean for student's engagement with school learning, and for students' imagined horizons, would be welcome.

Dolby's discussion of the complexities of race in the light of globalizing influences of popular culture will enrich the literature on cultural studies and comparative youth culture. Students of ethnography and qualitative research will find in the appendix an eloquent and honest statement of what this kind of research involves and what it can illuminate.

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