

**Jeff Karem. *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literatures.* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2004.) 247 pp., \$55 cloth, \$18.50 paper.**

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The “romance of authenticity” to which the title of Jeff Karem’s timely new study refers is the romance between the American reading public and the regional or ethnic writer who is viewed as providing an “authentic” cultural viewpoint, often to the extent of becoming regarded as the premier representative of that culture. Karem’s argument, however, is that too much “symbolic weight” (205) is often attached to the work of writers seized upon as “representative.” They are asked to bear the burden of providing a vicarious and definitive immersion in a particular culture, and therefore their work is judged mostly in anthropological terms, with regard to the authenticity of the experience delineated. “Mainstream” writers, however, are evaluated by much broader standards: they are freer to explore different genres, for example, without risking accusations that their culture is not being accurately represented. “[M]uch criticism invested in authenticity and representation,” says Karem, “has reduced marginal authors to mere informants” (209). Worse, in the academic arena the work of such authors (whose canonicity is often largely determined by publishers) is often used as a means of confronting ethnic issues purely symbolically in the classroom, precluding any real action

beyond it.

Karem develops this thesis through examination of the publication and reception history of the works of five American writers, together with their own evolving responses to the way they were perceived by critics and the reading public. This aspect of the book is especially valuable, containing as it does much original research into the publishing history of the works under discussion, and their contemporaneous reviews. Perhaps surprisingly, the first "marginal" author considered is William Faulkner, but Karem reminds us that early in his career Faulkner was viewed largely as a regionalist, a representative Southerner, who took many years to achieve his eventual stature as a major Modernist experimentalist and mainstream American author. Karem then goes on to discuss Richard Wright's tussles with the Book of the Month Club, and his waning "authenticity" once he moved to France; the problems encountered by Ernest Gaines in meeting expectations for an African American writer; Leslie Marmon Silko's resistance to and later embracing of the role of shaman; and, perhaps most interestingly, Ronaldo Hinojosa, who as Karem explains is almost devoid of reception history thanks to his resistance to "orthodox mythologies" (157).

In the discussion of each author's work, Karem's focus is the aspect that has been obscured by the "authenticity" question, and his analysis is thoughtful and frequently illuminating, although one might question his reason for including two African American authors (admittedly of different generations) when other groups could have been included. The book concludes with the suggestion that literary studies explore the intersections between traditions and cultures, rather than confining authors within the "old categories of cultural nationalist representation" (210). This more fruitful approach is already being explored by a number of critics (Paul Gilroy, for example); what Karem's book does very effectively is to outline the causes and extent of the problems remedied by such an approach.