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BOOK REVIEW

Veronica T. Watson

The Souls of White Folk: African-American Writers Theorize Whiteness

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Veronica T. Watson's *The Souls of White Folk: African-American Writers Theorize Whiteness* is an important and ambitious project drawing together writings published throughout the twentieth century that aim to confront the hegemony of whiteness and its operation as a form of political, psychological and social oppression throughout integral turning points in US history. Each of Watson's selected texts by authors including W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston partially comprise a canon of what the author terms "white estrangement literature" (p. 5)—works ranging across literary genres which "make visible the unseen, unspoken and unevaluated nature of Whiteness" (p. 5)—and which here provide powerful and affective interjections into the dominant cultural scripts that govern our comprehension of the US national past.

The Souls of White Folk is a valuable addition to Whiteness Studies, building upon influential research undertaken by key scholars in the field including bell hooks (1992), Ruth Frankenberg (1993), Toni Morrison (1992), and George Yancy (2012) amongst others, with especial recourse here to the work of David Roediger, editor of the 1998 collection *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*. Watson's prose is both provocative and highly accessible, and is likely to appeal to students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as well as a wide range of interdisciplinary researchers.

In providing a close reading of each text and in considering how deeper understandings of whiteness are brought about by those with a lived experience of oppression, Watson makes a solid case for the value of Whiteness Studies as a key component of Critical Race Studies. In making this case, she also points to the difficulties African-American authors have traditionally faced in using white estrangement literature as a strategy for reaching audiences and confronting white readers. As Watson explains, prior to the 1990s the body of work was little

read, taught or theorised due to the marginalisation of black literature in commercial contexts, discomfort with the material on the part of both black and white readers, and difficulties in categorising the work in the academic environment (pp. 6-8). Watson in her introduction thus provides an important consideration of the life of these texts, and the politics involved in their circulation, beyond the oppositional strategies employed within the pages.

The book comprises three chapters, with the first centring upon the 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois classic *The Souls of Black Folk* and Charles Chesnutt's 1905 fiction novel *The Colonel's Dream*—texts that Watson argues engage in a critique of white double consciousness. As Watson explains, double consciousness is "the two-ness that is born when one's self-understanding collides with social constructions of race that limit one's ability to actualise one's vision of the self" (p. 16), thus producing a set of emotional, psychological and spiritual effects in both those who benefit from and those who are disadvantaged by a discriminatory racial hierarchy (p. 17). Du Bois and Chesnutt, Watson illustrates, utilised white double consciousness to challenge the assumption that whites were better suited to occupy leadership roles within the United States, exploring this divided state of being as a threat not only to the individual but an obstacle to national progress (p. 19). Watson contextualises these ideas amidst medical and psychological debates of the time, particularly in relation to theories put forth by Dr George Miller Beard, which framed nervous disorders as markers of white intellectualism and emotional sensitivity. Du Bois and Chesnutt, she explains, contested ideological belief systems of their time in attributing white double consciousness not to medical affliction, but to historical and cultural sources.

Chapter Two explores the means by which Frank Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Sewanee* (1948) engage in a demythologising of idealised notions of the white American nuclear family, with a focus on exposing the performances that constitute white femininity. The chapter is particularly welcome for its consideration of the intersection of race, class and gender identities and the role white women have played in the maintenance of the white, patriarchal status quo—a role that continues to occupy a point of concern in arguments over feminist politics and methodologies. Watson in this chapter provides an examination of 1940s post-war America as exhibiting anxiety over the female place in the home following the Get a War Job campaign, noting that the decade produced five novels by African-American authors that challenged cultural myths about white female identity. Yerby's and Hurston's novels, which examine the figure of the Southern belle and the poor white woman respectively, "dramatise the psychological manoeuvrings necessary to make race and class elitism desirable to white women who are themselves marginalised" (p. 68). The effect, Watson asserts, is a more complex characterisation of the white woman that ultimately removes her from the pedestal upon which she has been placed.

Watson's last chapter examines the memoir of Melba Pattilla Beals, one of the nine African-American students chosen to attend Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas as part of the integration strategy following *Brown vs Board of Education*. In *Warriors Don't Cry*, Beals recounts the shocking violence and hostility she endured as part of a daily campaign by white students to force the group's departure from the school, which included an attempted rape and an acid attack. Watson here utilises Beals' writings in order to engage in a

phenomenological reading of the white body's relationship to space, discussing the interchangeability of white bodies and white spaces, and the violence at Little Rock as part of a strategy to "retain certain spatial privileges that had once been so widely defended and infrequently challenged as to seem natural" (p. 118).

Some criticisms of *The Souls of White Folk* may include that the texts are perhaps too diverse in style and genre to compare comprehensively or that the selection of texts is arguably limited for a study of white estrangement literature spanning the greater part of the twentieth century. While such criticisms may be valid, they would miss the fundamental point of Watson's impressive monograph, which aims to draw together a group of literary works whose authors share not only the pain of oppression but also the common goal of challenging the "myths, lies, and distortions of whiteness in an attempt to re-write the present and future of race-relations in America" (p. 12). It is this common goal that unites marginalised and often silenced voices across decades and certainly traverses differences in literary form and narrative content. It is the diverse approach to subject matter and writing style taken by these authors that allows Watson to encourage debate in relation to a variety of academic methodologies within the discipline of Critical Race and Whiteness Studies. Through detailed textual analysis of these historical works, this book offers a good deal of insight into the manner in which white hegemony operates in the contemporary context both inside and outside of the United States, and suggests some key strategies we may utilise in order to work toward a better tomorrow.

Author Note

Kendra Marston is a PhD candidate in the School of English, Media Studies & Art History at the University of Queensland. Her thesis explores images of melancholy white femininity in contemporary Hollywood cinema. She is interested in the interrelationship of race and gender politics within popular culture and has published articles in this area.

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