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Pearl Amelia McHaney

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Women s Voices, Black and White

by Pearl A. McHaney

Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered. By Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999. 200 pp. \$49.95

Comic Visions, Female Voices: Contemporary Women Novelists and Southern Humor. By Barbara Bennett. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1999. xvi + 136 pp. \$27.50

Unveiling Kate Chopin. By Emily Toth. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999. 290 pp. \$45.00

Beaulieu demonstrates how black women writers at the end of the twentieth century have revised history and fiction to render enslaved mothers genderless. In fact, the implication is that formerly enslaved women can regender themselves only in a space of physical freedom. The fictionalized slave narratives of Beaulieu's study are the result of the feminist and civil rights revolutions that lead to a revision of our understanding of "black women and black family relations" and of "the role that gender plays in narrativizing history" (4). Furthermore, these neo-slave narratives allow contemporary readers, especially black women, to unburden themselves of their collective guilt about slavery by finding in the black women writers and in their heroines a means of celebrating both race and gender. Beaulieu discusses Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) as a transitional work and then develops her thesis principally by examining Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991), Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). These texts are not so much slave narratives as they are "freedom narratives: stories that celebrate freedom

from ‘soul-killing effects’ of slavery, freedom from commodification, and freedom from the invisibility that has historically enshrouded the enslaved mother” (14).

By way of introduction, Beaulieu describes the ways in which Walker breaks from slave narrative conventions in the writing of *Jubilee* (1966); nevertheless, she concludes that *Jubilee* fails due to its stylistic weaknesses as criticized by Hortense Spiller (25). Vyry, the protagonist, is a well-developed character, an independent, dignified woman with a strong sense of family. It is unclear, however, why Walker’s revision of the autobiographical element in neo-slave narratives, her use of history and its documentation, and the mythic scale of mothering are considered the novel’s weaknesses since these are seen as strengths in the later novels of Beaulieu’s study.

The core of Beaulieu’s study, three neo-slave narratives, focuses on enslaved mothers who are “deliberate, determined, and dignified” (xv). Shirley Ann Williams’ novel *Dessa Rose* details a series of reversals of racial hierarchies. “My reading,” writes Beaulieu, “emphasizes reversals that empower blacks, women, and most especially, black women” (52). Reading *Beloved*, Beaulieu enumerates examples of what she names “gender-blurring.” For example, Sethe’s sons are “unmanly” because they run away (62); Paul D’s “intuitiveness and connectedness” are feminine traits that blur his gender (66); Sethe’s actions and language are “warlike” (69) and her “isolation from the strong female-centered community . . . illustrates the idea of gender-blurring as well” (69). Beaulieu says it is interesting to note that “the characters share traits of both genders,” but the meaningful effect of such sharing is unclear. She suggests that it is also interesting “to observe the ways in which Morrison prioritizes ‘women’s ways of knowing’ . . . precisely by attributing them mostly to a male character, and by dramatizing the female character’s struggle to know and accept the past in a healthy way, a way that reveals itself, finally, as feminine” (73). By Beaulieu’s reinstatement of the traditional gender roles, have we not arrived where we began? In a note, Beaulieu states that Paul D offers Sethe the “only promise of family” since Baby Suggs’ death and Sethe’s sons’ leaving (79). She ignores, however, Sethe’s daughters and concludes that only with Paul D can Sethe find “a new order of personhood” (78).

Analyzing J. California Cooper’s novel *Family*, Beaulieu argues that through the “narrative voice,” the self-conscious structuring, and the character of Always, Cooper creates “a new myth to explore and explain” the legacy of slavery (87). The novel suggests a new myth because it ends in peace whereas the western myths (Beaulieu cites the *Aeneid*, the *Iliad*, and *Beowulf*) are initiated by violence (105). Furthermore, the emphasis on

“‘blood’ as kin . . . draws attention to peace both as subject and as the legacy of her [Cooper’s] myth, a fact she underscores by placing an enslaved female who is both an othermother and a mother at the center of that myth” (105). The discussion is not necessarily strengthened, however, when it begins with a relatively superficial definition of myth from Harmon and Holman’s *Handbook to Literature*.

Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative is a book too hastily published from Beaulieu’s dissertation at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (1996). As a dissertation, it works well. Beaulieu cites leading scholars from history and literature, the organization reflects the meta-cognitive processes of the doctoral candidate, theory is applied appropriately, and a few stretches one might perceive as risky are dared. But as a published book, Beaulieu’s work exemplifies why dissertations are just dissertations and not meant for general academic consumption. A good editor would have encouraged Beaulieu to delineate her own conclusions, excise the repetitious quotations, and drop the academic jargon and MLA paranoia of over-citation in favor of a synthesis of the critical perspectives that she seeks to further or challenge. The book raises important questions and as a starting point for individual study of the neo-slave narrative it offers a thorough bibliography. The title and table of contents alone will help to frame courses and perspectives for further study. The book should not, however, serve as a model for students, except as a lesson for the revision of dissertations before publication.

Beaulieu’s study and Bennett’s *Comic Visions, Female Voices: Contemporary Women Novelists and Southern Humor* both suggest the significance of gender in contemporary women’s fiction. Humor, Bennett hopes to demonstrate, helps “to define voice, communicate theme, and establish new definitions of southern literature” with an optimistic tone (2). Female humor makes the literature “less guilt ridden than . . . fiction written by men or by their literary predecessors” [meaning females?] by its unifying or challenging effect (2). She selects writers who demonstrate the “‘southernness’” in their writing, a “contemporary setting, and the female perspective” (2).

The most frequent topics that lend themselves to humorous treatment are “death and violence, scatology, religion, sex, gender roles, and the place of traditions in contemporary life” (3). Although women have been writing comedy for some time, they have not been wholly successful according to critics. Bennett suggests that by “reevaluating definitions and standards of humor, the study of gender-based comedy becomes an important tool in exploring the differences between the sexes” (13). However often Bennett uses literary, sociological, and psychological studies for

supporting background evidence, her book as a whole does not fulfill her worthwhile aim. Had she developed her readings of Welty's and O'Connor's fictions as exemplary rather than as historical background, she might have had more success. Curiously, Bennett uses Zora Neale Hurston as a primary example, although Hurston's work is no more contemporary than is Welty's or O'Connor's. These three authors together achieve what I think Bennett tries to find in the many southern writers from the 1980s and 1990s of her study, but she gives insufficient analysis to either the modern or the contemporary writers, choosing instead to cover a broad field with sparse analysis.

In her chapter on "Voice and Identity," Bennett asserts that women make their own humor to understand, to unite, to disrupt authority. She uses *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the traditional male *bildungsroman* for comparison, but what we are to understand as unique in contemporary southern women's humor is not clear. Next, women's humor heals. Accordingly, Freud and Bergson did not understand that women "just find different things funny" or that a specialty of women's humor is its unifying power (38). Bennett believes that the southern women writers have made "good use" of Norman Cousins' evidence that laughter can cure the body, but she does not demonstrate this effect (39). Instead, she suggests that humor can heal relationships by creating bonds and breaking down barriers. Bennett's comparisons and contrasts of female writers' fiction to fiction by men and to patriarchal analysis on culture, however, yield little comprehensive significance.

The remaining chapters posit additional aspects of humor: "scatological and black humor," "religious and sexual desire," "confronting stereotypes." Traditionally, such humor is male territory, but now, when women write these ways, disrupting authority, and when women are without men, they have more fun and laughter according to Regina Barreca, Anne Goodwyn Jones, and Bennett (76). Bennett quotes a scene that mocks a religious drama in Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, but here and elsewhere, Bennett's examples go awry. The incident she describes seems to be just juvenile humor of situation rather than religious satire, and to compare Brown's satire to Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (95, 96) seems ludicrous.

Overall, southern women, Bennett asserts, are stereotyped (more than other women) by America as southern belles, as physically and intellectually weak, and as emotionally dependent. For Bennett, southern female writers break these stereotypes through humor. Speaking scatologically, using black humor, telling bawdy stories, and sharing sexual exploits and fantasies, the characters in southern women's novels rebel

against “cultural and religious” barriers (98). However, the writers Bennett discusses seem unconvincingly southern in their relationships, problems, or humor.

Bennett relies too much on previous studies of humor and southern women’s writing by Regina Barreca and Nancy A. Walker and collections of essays edited by Maxine Alexander, Carol Manning, and Peggy Prensshaw rather than developing her own readings. Although Bennett’s index lists more than fifty southern women’s novels, none receives a sustained discussion of more than three pages although a dozen or so are mentioned five or six times in various chapters. The result is that we are left wishing for an analysis of how this humor is created, how it is sustained, why these scenes are funny, and the relevant significance of the humor in the individual works.

The third book considered here, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, is a study of just one writer, sometimes considered southern, who is most revered as the author of *The Awakening*. More appropriately, the book might be titled *Unveiling Emily Toth*. The author would delight in this play for she asserts herself boldly from the acknowledgments through to the selected bibliography (she authored or co-edited one fifth of the book-length studies listed and wrote nine of the nineteen “Useful Articles”). Toth hopes that her “biographers, if I ever have any, will pull together all my book acknowledgments and create the mega-acknowledgment that really will cover everyone” (ix). A noble sentiment, to show appreciation for all, but the reader should be warned of Toth’s omnipresence in her biography of Chopin.

Toth began reading Chopin in the early 1970s, wrote a dissertation on Chopin’s work, and during the 1980s researched a “full-fledged” (xxi) biography that for some supplanted Per Seyersted’s seminal *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (1969). Toth’s out of print biography, *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of “The Awakening”* (1990), is, nevertheless, fewer than ten years after its publication, the basis of this new biography, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. She borrows extensively from the first, referring vaguely in the leading endnote of each chapter to the appropriate chapters of the 1990 biography where one must go to discover her sources, sometimes without success.

Toth’s 1990 book was about the “content” of Chopin’s life, and with “newly discovered manuscripts” she will reveal for us now the “content” of Chopin’s “character” (xxi, xxii). Toth’s 1990 victory was to prove that *The Awakening* was never officially banned. Now she will tell us “the true story of a St. Louis society belle who—with talent and ambition—became

the author of the most radical American novel of the 1890's" (xxii). And now that Toth is in her fifties, she can understand Chopin better, she says, for her own mother has died, her father's significant presence or absence is understood, a daughter's role is clearer, and in her middle age she knows "more about domestic violence" and "meaningful women's friendships" (xxii). For these reasons and the centennial year of the publication of *The Awakening*, Emily Toth unveils Kate Chopin anew.

Making a personal connection with Chopin's life leads Toth to write unprofessionally. In discussing Chopin's disgust with provincialism at the 1894 Western Association of Writers convention, Toth recommends her own essay on such a topic (156). She makes rash generalizations: "Women who do unconventional things often have trouble making and keeping friends" (179); and "Authors always feel unappreciated by their publishers" (195). Chopin unnecessarily dramatizes to create suspense: "Before the war was over, Kate O'Flaherty would, in many ways, be robbed of her innocence" (22). She might have been liked in Cloutierville—"if she had not been involved with someone else's husband" (94). And "She had always known how to be a widow" (121)! Furthermore, as if writing a serialized biography for monthly publication, Toth begins each chapter with a recap of the previous information.

Drawing on feminist scholarship and research on women's friendship, Toth establishes the importance of the female friends and family mentors in Chopin's life. She suggests that at age twenty Chopin "was developing what Virginia Woolf calls 'the androgynous mind'" and that "as Woolf also says: a woman thinks back through her mothers" (62). However, Toth discourages lesbian readings, writing that Chopin used a pseudonym to publish "Feodora" not because of the woman kissing a woman, but because the story was based on a real-life incident of a "displaced crush" (198) and that readers confuse sexuality and sensuality regarding Adèle Ratignolle's caresses in *The Awakening* (211). Yet Toth reads Edna's description of Alcée Arobin's effect on Edna as clitoral imagery that Chopin's "contemporary readers—if they thought so—could never have said in print" (214).

She suggests, briefly and unconvincingly, a reading of Robert Lebrun as a homosexual. Of course, no contemporaneous readers or critics acknowledged the possibility, but Toth writes that "possibly the codes for recognizing a gay male character were well known to avant-garde readers in 1899, and they had no need to write down what they already knew" (213). This reader wonders what those codes were and, if so much of *The Awakening* is based on reality, what experiences Chopin had in order to create Robert Lebrun.

As in her 1990 biography, Toth equates most of Chopin's characters and scenes with real-life persons and plays with characters' names to suggest Chopin's own friends. What Edna Pontellier feels and experiences, Kate Chopin knows first hand. When Toth does give interesting information, as regarding the innovative story "La Belle Zoraïde," she attributes Chopin's success to "a habit of seeing life from many sides all at once" (139) or to having lived a similar experience rather than to her skill and talent as a writer per se. According to Toth, Chopin rarely had to invent characters or plot, revised very little, had no particular aesthetic sense, and wrote solely for the income, catering to publishers as needed. As unveiled by Emily Toth, Kate Chopin is a disappointment.