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Color Me White: Naturalism/Naturalization in American Literature by Mita Banerjee (review)

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tion of Petry's immensely nuanced and . . . transgressive and progressive body of writing." The implication that naturalism taints a literary work, somehow precluding the discovery of nuance and transgression, seems unnecessary and reductive. Despite Clark's apparent disdain, *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* has value for those of us who study American literary naturalism, precisely because it resembles the recent scholarship Clark appears to ignore: it begins with an oeuvre recognized as naturalist, then refuses to limit its analysis to the well-trod. Instead, it expands our understanding of Petry's works and thus—perhaps unintentionally—opens future avenues for research that can more thoroughly explore naturalism's place in the history of African-American literature, naturalism's polyvalent forms, and—to borrow a phrase from Clark—naturalism's "unbounded aesthetic universe."

—Dan Colson, *Emporia State University*

Color Me White: Naturalism/Naturalization in American Literature, by Mita Banerjee. American Studies: A Monograph Series, Vol. 237. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013. 484 pp. Cloth, \$87.00.

In this wide-ranging and richly textured study, Mita Banerjee explores the intersection of American legal and literary discourses on the subject of whiteness at the turn of the century (roughly the period of the 1880s to the 1920s). Prior to this time, whiteness was a self-evident fact; however, at the end of the nineteenth century, the courts were faced with a massive influx of all ranges and shades of white and non-white immigrants and had to determine who among them was white and, by default, who was not. In case after "racial prerequisite" case, as these cases came to be called, immigrant groups came before judges to establish their whiteness, and judges, in turn, were confounded by the dearth of evidence to rule decisively on the matter, turning often to the cultural logic of "common sense" as reflected in the popular culture and literature of the time. At this time, then, race was an unstable, pseudo-scientific category that was wide open to interpretation by both the law and the literature. Banerjee examines the collusion of these two—in particular, the texts of naturalization and naturalism—to show that, for both, whiteness came to be defined in terms of its cultural performance, in spite of its indeterminacy and at the expense of those deemed to be "off-white," non-white, and (often) female. This nexus of legal and literary texts also enables Banerjee to expose

the status of the law not as authority but as narrative, since the law relies on uncertain, impressionistic, and visual information to adjudicate whiteness; in a parallel manner, the literature of naturalism operates like the law, extending beyond the literary realm to bestow or withhold whiteness based on hierarchical differentiation between various racial groups. In the chapters of this book, Banerjee draws upon scholarship in the areas of ethnic studies, whiteness studies, and critical race theory, extending the implications of these to read the texts of literary naturalism through the legal cases of naturalization and vice versa. The result is a startling and revealing picture of the myriad ways in which race was interpreted, performed, and reproduced at the turn of the century.

In one perplexing legal case, for instance, a Syrian petitioner was deemed white by a judge based on his “social bearing” (whiteness scholar Matthew Frye Jacobson’s shorthand for “work ethic,” which includes everything from property ownership to proficiency in English, manner of dress, style, and so on). Yet, Banerjee shows, writing in the same time period, Frank Norris denies his character, the Chinese cook in *The Octopus*, any claim to whiteness *in spite of* the cook’s similar display of work ethic. The Chinese cook’s muteness resonates with the stifling of the legal testimonies of Chinese petitioners at the end of the nineteenth century; labeled black by default, the Chinese could neither testify against a white person in court nor indeed testify in their own favor. The image of coloring by numbers works well for Banerjee as it becomes a motif for highlighting the invisible white hand that paints one immigrant group white and another non-white; since different states used wildly different yardsticks to measure whiteness, “a claimant from Sicily may be non-white in South Carolina and white in California.” This arbitrariness proved to be both a lure and a trap for claimants, who vied for citizenship on the backs of other immigrant groups. Banerjee draws upon the prerequisite cases studied by legal scholar Ian Haney López to demonstrate the murky way in which issues of privilege and whiteness crisscrossed across borders, ethnicities, genders, and religions. One such case was that of Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian (South Asian) petitioner who offered as proof of whiteness his Aryan heritage, his Aryan language, and the “high-class” Hindu’s revulsion for “the aboriginal Indian Mongoloid” which, he argued, approximated the white American’s revulsion for “the negro.” Similarly pitting himself against another ethnic group to solidify his claim to whiteness, the Japanese claimant Takao Ozawa took off his shirt in court to show the judge that, contrary to other parts of East Asia, “*in Japan the uncovered parts of the body are also white*” (itals. in original). But unlike the

whiteness studies scholars on whose research Banerjee relies heavily (besides Haney López, Matthew Frye Jakobson is frequently cited), Banerjee insists on the literary-aesthetic dimension of these legal cases as it plays out in the fiction and popular culture of the time. Hence, the withholding of whiteness to Thind on the basis of his "pagan" religion is likened to Willa Cather's troubling attribution of "off-whiteness" to the Lithuanian couple in *My Ántonia*, the Shimerdas, on the basis of their Bohemian Catholicism and unhygienic household habits (hygiene and morality equated in a manner similar to Stephen Crane and Frank Norris's conflation of the two in *Maggie* and *McTeague*, respectively).

It would make sense to focus questions of whiteness, racial instability, and racial Others on the texts of naturalism, for the literary period of naturalism overlapped with the period of the racial prerequisite cases and, as such, was bound to represent some aspect of the cultural performance of whiteness prevalent in the era. Yet naturalism, the *enfant terrible* of American literature, meets its own limits when, complicit with the law, it silences racial Others. In the individual chapters of this book, Banerjee takes up the writings of Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and Willa Cather, showing how they constitute contestatory sites for the bestowal or refusal of whiteness and, by extension, cultural citizenship to the characters they deem "off-white" or non-white. A particularly useful dimension is added to Cather scholarship when we read Cather as not only a regional writer but a writer of "local *color* fiction" (my emphasis). Also instructive is the chapter on Rudolph Valentino, in which Banerjee reads Valentino's transformation from Italian immigrant to Arab sheik in the 1921 film *The Sheik* as his attempt to consolidate his whiteness by pitting it against a lesser whiteness. Yet, ironically, Valentino was never able to wash off his "brownface," in the way that white performers could wash off their "blackface"; he would be irrevocably linked to his role, the line between swarthy actor and brown character insufficiently separating the two races in the audience's mind.

Color Me White is not without some deficiencies. A proliferation of aims and purposes, especially as elaborated in the introductory chapter, tends to diffuse the main focus. Non-German readers, beware: quotations rendered in the original German bear no English translation. In some places, disconcertingly, a chapter is referred to as a "paper." And finally, the book would have greatly benefitted from an index, the absence of which necessitates much leafing through pages to find specific references. All of this suggests a project that is, in some ways, relatively undigested. However, the obvious strengths of this study more than make up for its

weaknesses. It contributes a much-needed aesthetic dimension to studies of whiteness while adding a valuable racial dimension to studies of naturalism. Most importantly, however, by asking us to pay attention to racial Others, it acknowledges the visible absence and thunderous silence of African Americans and Native Americans in discussions of naturalism, naturalization, and citizenship.

—Alpana Sharma, *Wright State University*

Reading Capitalist Realism, edited by Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. 260 pp. + index. Paper \$47.50; E-book, \$47.50.

During the 1960s, terms such as *nouveau réalisme* and *pop art* were employed to describe, both seriously and satirically, cultural works that borrowed content and techniques from advertising and mass media. In 1963, Gerhard Richter first used the term *capitalist realism* for the title of a Düsseldorf exposition: “Demonstration for Capitalist Realism.” As a refugee from East Germany and a socialist realist who had painted government murals, such as “Lebensfreude” (“Zest for Life,” 1956) and “Workers Uprising” (1959), Richter was responding to his past and to modernism, suggesting that capitalism had its own forms of propaganda, forms that drew inspiration from mass culture. Like Andy Warhol, Richter utilized a multi-step process to produce his new art. Beginning with an ordinary photograph that he projected on a canvas, he applied paint, often softening lines to generate a blurred effect. In creating works from quotidian images, Richter was embracing a realism and a randomness that self-consciously questioned both socialist aesthetics and abstract expressionism.

Over the last fifty years, the term *capitalist realism* has seldom appeared in critical discourse, replaced by the ubiquitous but somewhat nebulous label *postmodernism*. But in 2009, Mark Fisher resuscitated Richter’s phrase when he published a monograph titled *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* And in *Reading Capitalist Realism*, editors Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, along with Mark Fisher and other contributors, further define and complicate the term, suggesting that the phrase applies to works that extend postmodernism, that exhibit a neoliberal pathology, or that problematically employ realism to historicize late-stage capitalism. Their volume repeatedly asks a basic epistemologi-