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REVIEW-ESSAY

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Sherwood Bonner's Reconstruction

USUALLY DATED FROM THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR IN 1865 TO THE END OF Union occupation of the South in 1877, the Reconstruction era is undergoing revisionary scrutiny from a sesquicentennial remove. In *Reading Reconstruction: Sherwood Bonner and the Literature of the Post-Civil War South* (2019), Kathryn B. McKee engages in this scrutiny through an “extended critical study of Sherwood Bonner’s life and writing” (4). Once prized for their comedy and sentiment, Bonner’s southern stories strike modern readers as insensitive, even cruel, in their portrayals of people of color. McKee considers this fiction to be racist, yet she argues persuasively that Bonner should be read. Her book provides many of the tools for an informed reading. As McKee says in Chapter 1, “monolithic discussions of the postwar world scarcely get at the period’s complexities, experienced differently by men and women, freedpeople and free blacks, northerners and southerners, residents of cities and residents of small towns, people who lived in Tennessee and people who lived across the state line in Mississippi” (19).

Before turning to Katharine Sherwood Bonner McDowell (1849-1883) and her formative years in the small town of Holly Springs, Mississippi, McKee gives a valuable overview of Reconstruction scholarship, from William Archibald Dunning’s 1905 history to more recent studies by Eric Foner, Heather Cox Richardson, Mark Wahlgren Summers, Gregory Downs, Sharon D. Kennedy-Nolle, and others. Historians disagree whether Reconstruction succeeded in achieving two of its main goals: reconciling the warring regions and extending greater equity to people of color. “Northerners quickly grew impatient with southerners’ unrepentant, sometimes still hostile, stance,” says McKee (28), and African Americans failed to secure political equality, much less social equality. The Civil Rights Act of 1866, she points out, “dealt only with civil equality,” such as property rights (35), and the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which afforded access to some public spaces (not including schools), was overturned in 1883. Against this national turmoil, McKee places Bonner in her “historical moment” (3) by giving unprecedented

attention to her work, a body of writing that ranges from travel literature to poetry. “Both her fiction and nonfiction,” says McKee, “amplify the tensions and uncertainties, the ambivalences and declarations, of the post-Civil War United States in such a way that her voice stakes its own claims and intercedes in the debates of the hour” (7).

McKee is well situated, both academically and geographically, for research on Sherwood Bonner’s “jumbled response to a jumbled period in American life” (3). The newly appointed director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture (and the first woman to head the CSSC in its forty-year history), she continues to serve as McMullen Professor of Southern Studies and professor of English at the University of Mississippi. An affiliate of the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies, McKee has taught interdisciplinary courses since 1997 with the University’s historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars of documentary studies. Sherwood Bonner was a subject of her University of North Carolina doctoral dissertation on humor in the fiction of four 19th-century southern women; since then, Bonner has remained a focus of many of McKee’s published essays and conference papers. Serendipitously, the Bonner home pictured on the dust jacket of *Reading Reconstruction* still stands in Holly Springs, half an hour from the Oxford campus of the University of Mississippi. McKee acknowledges the help of several Holly Springs residents, including staffs of the Marshall County Public Library and the Marshall County Historical Museum. The University of Mississippi’s Department of Archives and Special Collections provided access to the Hubert McAlexander collections on both Marshall County and Sherwood Bonner. McAlexander’s 1981 Bonner biography was an essential resource for McKee’s volume, as was Anne Razey Gowdy’s heavily annotated *Sherwood Bonner Sampler, 1869-1884* (2000). Like McAlexander, Gowdy contributed many of her research materials to UM’s archives.

While her book was in press, McKee’s emphasis on the era’s complexity was underscored by the essays in *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles over the Meaning of America’s Most Turbulent Era* (2018), edited by Carole Emberton and Bruce E. Baker. Contributors explore such diverse topics as the postbellum black press and the rise of US imperialism, often extending the period’s traditional time-frame. Many essayists highlight the African American experience of Reconstruction and its aftermath, as does Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his recent *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*

(2019), which Gates describes as “an intellectual and cultural history of black agency and the resistance to and institutionalization of white supremacy” (Preface, paragraph 2, Kindle). Race is a concern throughout McKee’s *Reading Reconstruction*, and she several times acknowledges that the struggle for human rights far outlasted that period and the Jim Crow era that followed, remarking that “today’s Black Lives Matter movement would not exist if all Americans felt, even now, that their citizenry were equal” (3).

As McKee explains in her Introduction, Bonner and her work are “embedded in the unsettled era in which she wrote” (14). During this time of the nation’s rebuilding, Bonner realized that debates about citizenship were relevant to white women as well as to African Americans. Her fiction often challenges white male authority, and the potential for violence can be strong, even in her most humorous stories. But these narratives typically end, says McKee, on “the familiar, comfortable ground of racial supremacy, if not patriarchy, before the situation veers irretrievably toward lasting change” (7). Thus, she reads Bonner “as a telling confluence of race (whiteness), gender (femaleness), and region (southernness)” (14). Race, gender, and region are central to Bonner’s “A Volcanic Interlude,” and McKee’s historical-biographical contexts in Chapter 1 culminate with her analysis of this 1880 story, published by *Lippincott’s* magazine.

McKee describes “A Volcanic Interlude”—probably inspired by George Washington Cable’s Creole fiction—as “singular among Bonner’s fiction for its direct treatment of miscegenation” (52). As McKee observes, Kate Chopin’s “*Désirée’s Baby*” (1893), another story “about family secrets around racial mixing” that “posited the inconstancy of hypocritical men as the root of the problem” (54), was published years later. (McKee does not mention some even closer parallels between “A Volcanic Interlude” and Grace King’s miscegenation tale “The Little Convent Girl,” which appeared the same year as Chopin’s story.) Although the tragic mulatto was a familiar stereotype of southern literary regionalism, McKee rightly notes that Bonner’s sympathy is wholly with the outcast Zoe, not at all with her two white stepsisters who recoil in horror at the revelation of race-mixing. The additional revelation that both stepsisters are illegitimate daughters of their mysterious Louisiana planter-father heightens the drama further, suggesting the story’s affinity to nineteenth-century sensation fiction, a genre more commonly associated with Louisa May Alcott than with

women writers from the South. In his biography of Sherwood Bonner, Hubert McAlexander views her first story, "Laura Capello: A Leaf from a Traveler's Notebook" (1869), as sensation literature; McKee, on the other hand, is more interested in Bonner's Italian setting, which "belies the restlessness that characterizes her attitude toward place and being 'placed'" (15). "A Volcanic Interlude" does not finally rest upon "the familiar, comfortable ground of racial supremacy" (7) that McKee detects in the majority of Bonner's southern stories but, instead, upon much less steady territory.

Bonner's restlessness is evident too in her travel letters from Boston and Europe in 1874-1876, the subject of Chapters 2 and 3. Bonner had been married to Edward McDowell for fewer than three years when she left her husband and daughter temporarily to start a literary career in Boston. In contrast to critical accounts of the former Confederacy by northern travelers, Bonner's columns for the *Memphis Avalanche* created "competing visions of the U.S. South and the national reunification project then underway" (57). McKee suggests that Bonner's "southern identity, on display less than a decade after the Civil War, was an asset she could turn to her favor" (61) in her interactions with celebrated authors like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and especially in her travel letters, for which "her role as a southern girl in a northern city is crucial" (61). Bonner once planned to become an actress, and McKee believes she "did act a number of roles, trying to find her part in a reconstituted American nation where the categories of her identity—'white woman,' 'southerner,' 'female author'—were very much in play" (2).

In her position as Longfellow's literary assistant, for example, Bonner performed many roles, from supplicant to mentee. McKee finds "a complicated weave of desire" (63) in Bonner's dedicatory poem to Longfellow, which prefaces her 1878 novel, *Like unto Like*. On the other hand, Bonner's travel letter on Longfellow and his historic home depicts him as an ideal host and cites Bret Harte's praise for his poetry. McKee contrasts this column with some of Bonner's more satiric Boston letters, including one on Ralph Waldo Emerson. Longfellow is again an exception when Bonner lampoons much of Boston's literary establishment, including Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Julia Ward Howe, in her notorious satire from the same period, "The Radical Club, a poem respectfully dedicated to 'the infinite' by an atom" (1875).

Bonner's correspondence for the Memphis paper reports not only on literary figures but also on people and events with more direct relevance to Reconstruction politics, such as Boston's large memorial service for Senator Charles Sumner and area festivities for the nation's centennial. McKee compares Bonner's "flippancy" (99) on the anniversary tributes at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill to Mark Twain's travelogue humor in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). McKee adds, "It remains clear to her that the South is a stepchild at this national family reunion" (102). A major difference between the Boston letters and Bonner's 1876 travel columns from Europe is her adoption of a new persona. No longer exaggerating her southernness as consistently as she does in the earlier epistles, she instead filters new experiences "through the lens of national, rather than regional, exceptionalism" (115). The *Boston Times's* publication of Bonner's pieces might be a factor, and McKee notes several variants in the versions Bonner sent to the *Memphis Avalanche*. But McKee also finds "evidence of her awareness of her own incompatibility with the models of womanhood available to a white southerner in the process of being enshrined as the centerpiece of 'Lost Cause' ideology" (117).

According to McKee, alternative models included the women Bonner met in England, France, and Italy, "particularly those exhibiting the kind of independence she admired throughout her correspondence" (139). Women in paintings and sculptures also intrigued her, including a beautiful Sibyl in an artist's workshop in Rome and the Venus de Medici in Florence. Weighing evidence from several sources, McKee wonders if Bonner herself might have posed for a sculpture of Eve, but she admits that "Such speculation is obviously risky for a variety of reasons" (148). Undeniably, however, Bonner was fascinated with the liberating ambience of an artists' community in Grez, France. The very title of her final letter from Europe, "Reminiscences of a Visit to Bohemia," proclaims "the license she saw herself taking in this dip beyond even the freedom of Parisian life" (159).

With Chapter 4, "Spectres of Instability in Bonner's *Like unto Like*," Bonner leaves her European idyll and returns to the tensions of gender, race, and region that mark Reconstruction-era America and much of her fiction. McKee describes the book as "a reconciliation novel that offers no reconciliation" (177). A popular postwar genre, the reconciliation romance typically portrays a North/South love plot that ends in marriage. Bonner's young protagonist, the southern Blythe Herndon,

however, remains unmarried after breaking off a serious relationship with the Yankee extremist Roger Ellis, who is several years older than she is. McKee aptly characterizes the novel as

a dizzying pastiche of postbellum literary styles and contemporary concerns, reflections of Reconstruction-era politics ranging from Radical Republican to staunch Democratic perspectives, engagements with quotidian, legislative, and legalistic debates about the meaning of black and white citizenship, outright condemnations of "Lost Cause" ideology, and frankly feminist assessments of the cost of marriage to young women. (177)

McKee delineates specific parallels between the Radical Republican Roger Ellis and Bonner's abolitionist acquaintance James Redpath. Redpath was in Mississippi the summer of 1875 and reportedly proposed to Bonner, who was home from Boston, visiting her family in Holly Springs. Both Redpath and Bonner had spouses, although Bonner was considering divorcing the financially irresponsible Edward McDowell.

In *Like unto Like*, Blythe Herndon sympathizes with Roger Ellis's anti-slavery position and his defense of freedmen, and she strongly resists her Grandmother Herndon's obsession with the Confederate past. But Blythe resists Roger with equal vehemence when he proposes that they share a meal with the African American character Willy, nicknamed Civil Rights Bill. "By 1878, more than ten years after the Civil War's end," says McKee, "it is still the clashing perspectives that most interest Bonner and help to drive Blythe and Roger irrevocably apart" (181). In his turn-of-the-century profile of Bonner with accompanying excerpts from her work, Alexander Bondurant quotes a *Boston Courier* review of the novel: "The main thing to observe is that Sherwood Bonner has seized the transition period of the feeling between the North and the South so perfectly that her book will probably stand in future as the best representative of this episode of the national life" (444). With regret that Bonner did not live long enough for "still more splendid accomplishments," Bondurant nevertheless concludes that "the writer of 'Gran'mammy Stories' achieved enough to entitle her to a permanent place in American literature" (445).

McKee presents a darker assessment of the gran'mammy tales and much of Bonner's other black dialect fiction in the final chapter of *Reading Reconstruction*. As "fetish" or "stylized figure of nostalgia," the stereotyped gran'mammy is "suggestive not only of the limits to the white imagination but also of the incredible lengths to which it would

go to avoid confronting the changes that postwar America would first insist upon and then utterly abandon" (McKee 240). McKee's analysis of the Gran'mammy cycle in Bonner's posthumous *Suwanee River Tales* (1884) challenges much previous scholarship on the group of six stories. Anne Gowdy, for example, cites Molly Wilson, the Bonner children's nursemaid, as the model for the character, observing that the several mammy figures in Bonner's fiction are "always lovingly drawn" (xxxiv). McKee, in contrast, relates loyal slaves and postwar servants in the *Suwanee River Tales* to blackface minstrelsy and to white southern women's Lost Cause memorials.

But McKee suggests that Bonner's *Dialect Tales* (1883) is an even more troubling collection, with grotesque depictions of black bodies in such stories as "Hieronymous Pop and the Baby," "Dr. Jex's Predicament," "Aunt Anniky's Teeth," and "The Gentlemen of Sarsar." McKee's comparison of these violent plots to the southwest humor tradition is apt; her footnote on Henry Clay Lewis's "Stealing a Baby" describes an equally gruesome story from an earlier generation (n. 15, 316). Commenting on "The Gentleman of Sarsar," McKee could be summarizing much of Sherwood Bonner's most popular fiction, including *Like unto Like*: "As the southern humorists navigated a South still settling into its national role, so Bonner navigates a similarly imprecise moment, this time as a region fits itself back into a nation, populated by a freed people who will be swallowed into neither history or narrative" (293). As McKee recommends, the writing of late nineteenth-century African American women writers like Alice Dunbar, Pauline Hopkins, and Ida B. Wells offers new perspectives. In the first chapter of *Reading Reconstruction*, McKee compares the Holly Springs activist Wells to Bonner as "another tester of boundaries" (44) who, also like Bonner, suffered family deaths in the town's 1878 fever epidemic. (Wells is accidentally omitted from the Index, but McKee's short discussion of her life on pp. 44-45 is an important part of the history of Reconstruction in Holly Springs.)

Although her focus in the final chapter is short fiction with major racial concerns, McKee notes briefly that other "thematic subsets" in Bonner's *Dialect Tales* and *Suwanee River Tales* are "equally worthy of critical attention" (n. 2, 315). Comparing Bonner's black dialect fiction to her stories set in Illinois and Tennessee, for instance, could yield further insights on gender and class politics in Reconstruction literature. Another productive text for gender issues is the novella *The Valcours*

(1881), written in Illinois, where Bonner established residency for the sake of her divorce from McDowell. Hubert McAlexander describes the four-part *Lippincott's* serial as Bonner's "most outrageous romance" (201) and "the capstone of her literary career" (207). McKee argues that "It matters to Kate Bonner's experience of Reconstruction that she spent 1865 to 1873 in Mississippi" (30). But, in her short life, as McKee also ably demonstrates, Bonner crossed many borders.

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