White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism

Barrish, Phillip

Published by The Ohio State University Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28272.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28272

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1177678
PART TWO

Gender, Liberalism, and
Racial Geometry
Starting with Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* (1899), a literary realistic text once in need of recovery but now widely taught and anthologized, and then turning to Steven Soderbergh’s Academy Award–winning film *Traffic* (2000), Part Two continues this book’s exploration of white liberal identity. In the following two chapters, I investigate the triangulation within both texts of new, “liberated” versions of white gender identity with Africanist and Mexicanist signifiers. I do so with two interrelated aims. First, I wish to show that what Robyn Wiegman refers to as the United States’ “contemporary reconfiguration of white power and privilege”—a reconfiguration anticipated in *The Awakening* by Edna Pontellier’s accession to a liberal and relatively unmarked whiteness—should be understood as occurring in conjunction with the rise to prominence of “new” white gender identities, identities significantly progressed from sex-role orthodoxy.1 Second, I hope to begin addressing what I perceive as a limiting presumption that still operates in many literary-studies and cultural-studies treatments of American whiteness: a presumption that the racial two-category system of black and white that became so rigid in the southern United States is the only pertinent system of racial meaning.

The juxtaposition of these quite different texts emphasizes the roles played by Mexican characters and Mexico-associated signifiers in the development of a “new” white femininity (the New Woman) in the late nineteenth century and of a “new” white masculinity (the sensitive, nurturing—yet nonetheless empowered—man) in the late twentieth century. For both works, what Toni Morrison calls “real or fabricated” Africanist elements function in tension and collaboration with real or fabricated “Mexicanist” elements to help define white liberal gender identities that are, in each text, relatively freer from old-fashioned sex roles.2 Further, these new liberal identities deemphasize their own whiteness and thus become available to figure, whether within or outside their texts, as harbingers of a liberal and ostensibly color-blind American nation.

Compared to literary critics, historians of U.S. whiteness have responded more quickly to the need at least to complicate what Carl Gutiérrez-Jones identifies as “a tendency in U.S. race discourse to pose black/white dynamics as the defining characteristic.”3 Historians working in whiteness studies have striven to trace the uneven emergence and spread of a two-
category racial system across the nation, dwelling on the many powerful variations and exceptions to that system throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For instance, Neil Foley’s *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* explores what it means that, in Central Texas’s “triracial borderlands,” “whiteness meant not only not black but also not Mexican,” and that the latter two categories also shifted their meanings in relation to one another. Historian Matthew Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* traces a shifting geometry of racial significations through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries. It is a geometry of relationships which at varying moments and locations included several different groups that were each considered, both popularly and scientifically, as distinct “races.”

By contrast, even such astute literary and cultural critics as Robyn Wiegman, Eric Sundquist, Linda Williams, and Toni Morrison herself still tend to read “whiteness” as constructed only in opposition to “blackness” or, in Morrison’s term, Africanism. It is as if our recent decades of literary criticism devoted to analyzing portrayals of black-white race relations, especially in literature set in the South or involving African American migrants from the South, predetermined that, for most literary critics, the emergent field of “whiteness studies” would remain fixated on the two-category system. I do not deny that the black/white axis has been and still remains the single most powerful and pervasive influence on constructions of American whiteness throughout U.S. culture and literature. It is the axis upon which the current book’s first two chapters turn. Rather, I am arguing against a default critical assumption that, if a black/white binarism appears within a given literary text, it entirely subsumes whatever other racialized dynamics may simultaneously be at play. Whiteness critics concentrate so intently on understanding and critiquing the complex set of strategies by which literary whiteness establishes itself in relation to literary blackness that they may miss opportunities for recognizing the distinct roles played in certain U.S. texts by other nonwhite categories in defining whiteness (as well as in defining blackness). Critics sometimes substitute the binary “white/of color” for the binary “white/black.” However, when the omnibus “of color” is effectively treated by whiteness critics as if it were a unitary category, as is often the case, this nod to multiplicity still risks oversimplifying the complicated, often asymmetrical economies of racialization that contribute to representations of American whiteness.

Moreover, analyzing how more than just one binary set of racial meanings contributes to shaping literary portrayals of whiteness can also sharpen our awareness of divisions within literary whiteness. Indeed, if it does not make sense to regard “of color” as a unitary category in a work such as
The Awakening, neither does it make sense to regard “whiteness” as unitary within Chopin’s text. Rather, The Awakening emphasizes ethnic differences between its white Protestant female protagonist Edna Pontellier and the Old World, Catholic, French-speaking white “Creoles” among whom she finds herself. I argue in chapter 3 that, through the play of descriptions and connotations among the novel’s Africanist presence, its Mexicanist presence, its portrayal of Old World whiteness, and, finally, Edna’s white Protestantism, Edna herself emerges as an American New Woman, a national figure seemingly beyond ethnicity and thus ready for adoption by white feminists of the 1970s and 1980s.

Understanding such dynamics in The Awakening provides both a framework and useful points of reference for the reading that then follows the “new” version of liberal masculinity developed by Michael Douglas’s character in Traffic. Douglas’s new masculinity emerges most vividly through its uneven triangulation with an African American drug dealer (who in a racially charged scene takes sexual advantage of Douglas’s iconically white American daughter) and a layered but ultimately opaque Mexican police officer. As we will see, this triangulation also helps Douglas’s character, Judge Robert Wakefield, distinguish his liberal American masculinity, still empowered but now relatively unmarked as white, from the eminently white centers of power he begins the film by representing.