

MITA BANERJEE, *Color Me White: Naturalism/Naturalization in American Literature* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 484 pp.

A serious, comprehensive consideration of “race” in US American Naturalism is long overdue. Mita Banerjee’s study *Color Me White* addresses the issue squarely in a manner that is both original and insightful, contributing towards filling this lacuna in earlier research. Yet, the innovative character of her book is not limited to its subject matter; it resides at least as much in its fresh, transdisciplinary approach to the topic.

Taking her cue from the court’s verdict in *In re Ah Yup* (1878) that resorted to “the literature of the country” for determining the meaning of the term “white person,” Banerjee reads legal and literary discourses as mutually illuminating projects seeking to ascertain which racial and ethnic groups should be considered “white,” thus gaining the right to own property (including land) as well as the right to marry white persons. Around 1900, these considerations were triangulated by yet another discipline: medicine, in particular hygiene. Both legal and literary inquiries into matters of “race” thus inspect not only the petitioners’ hands and teeth, but also their food, their kitchens and living rooms, as well as their clothing.

Curiously, from today’s perspective, the question of the claimants’ proficiency in English appeared much less important. But this is in fact one of the central points *Color Me White* makes: racialization is a historical, as well as a regional, specific practice. What might matter in one case—in addition to the instances already cited, “beauty” and religion, for example—might be dismissed in another. Neither is the “whiteness” or “non-whiteness” of specific ethnic or national groups a foregone conclusion. Thus, Syrian, Indian, and Japanese individuals were granted whiteness at some times and in some places, but not in others. Such “de-racing” and “re-racing” processes are by no means historically unidirectional, as the re-racialization of Arab Americans after 9/11 attests.

*Color Me White* discusses the canonical texts of literary Naturalism ranging from Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* to Frank Norris’s and Upton Sinclair’s works. In these novels, the whiteness of some ethnic communities, such as Lithuanian Americans in *The Jungle*, is established through their distinction from other,

similarly situated social groups, here Irish Americans, who are portrayed as lacking in terms of hygiene as well as morality. Interestingly, the verdict of naturalist fiction does not always tally with that of contemporary courts. Where Irish Americans were well on their way to whiteness around 1900, partly as a result of their decision to distance themselves from African Americans, as Ignatiev and Jacobson among others have shown, they are re-raced in Sinclair’s narrative.

The fact that naturalist texts revolve around characters who might be said to possess a “whiteness of a different color,” to use Jacobson’s term, indicates that their claims are at least being considered, if not always upheld. Other groups, Chinese Americans or African Americans, for instance, cannot even get this “hearing” in the pages of naturalist fiction. They remain marginal, silenced figures haunting the text’s cultural imaginary.

In order to reintroduce some of these missing voices, *Color Me White* turns to some of the “racial prerequisite” cases that served as its point of departure. If one considers the claimants’ petitions as a form of “life writing,” as Banerjee convincingly argues, these texts may help fill the gaps left by Naturalism’s disregard for those categorically deemed beyond the pale of whiteness.

Her book expands the present understanding of Naturalism in yet another way through a comparative discussion of whiteness in other novels of the period, specifically local color fiction such as Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*. Here, in the symbolic “district courts” of contemporary literature, petitions for inclusion are met with greater sympathy than before the “supreme court” of canonical Naturalism. How this might be related to the distinctly gendered perspectives in naturalist and local color narratives, given the pronounced masculinism of most naturalist works and the predominance of female points of view in local color fiction, is an intriguing question. Even the “district courts” did not admit the claims of *all* racial and ethnic groups to full civic participation, however. It was “only” popular culture, such as the movie *The Sheikh*, Banerjee suggests, to which these communities could turn.

This picture might run the risk of unduly homogenizing Naturalism as a literary movement, however, Banerjee’s work guards against this by drawing attention to Theodore Dreiser’s self-reflexive engagement with

both whiteness and gender in *Jennie Gerhardt*. A self-consciously *German* American approach here correlates with a depiction of Irish American masculinity that eschews the derogatory tendencies characteristic for many other portrayals. In this, as in their gender politics, Dreiser's texts differed significantly from those of his fellow naturalist writers.

Mita Banerjee's monograph offers lively, engaging interpretations sparkling with surprising insights. Among its strengths are the focus on the hegemonic category of whiteness which—like heterosexuality, able-bodiedness,

or cis-positions—frequently remains unmarked and unexplored in scholarship to date, as well as its self-reflexiveness. Its point that research on Naturalism would greatly benefit from an analysis that addresses its relation to indigeneity and its location within settler colonialism identifies a crucial desideratum for future studies of this literary movement. *Color Me White* is a lucid, thought-provoking, and illuminating book—a must-read for anyone interested in current discussions of American Naturalism.

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