Dreaming Black/Writing White: The Hagar Myth in American Cultural History (review)

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Beth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Sometimes explicit and sometimes oblique in response, the American voices are inflected by sectional differences—a useful point of comparison. Double-proposal novels of the South, those of Caroline Hentz and Augusta Evans, differ from novels by Laura J. Curtis Bullard, E.D.E.N. Southworth, and Phelps. Mindful of her market, Hentz creates heroines who “preserve both their personal prerogatives and their class entitlement,” embark on autonomous journeys, and return to slave-holding on something of their own terms when they marry (59). They are not, Tracey argues, reduced to mere objects of exchange because they have enlarged their potential sphere of action. Evans’s *St. Elmo* (1867) enacts conflicting views of female roles, participates in intertextual dialogue, and attempts to ameliorate social forces while supporting planter-class interests and arguing for women’s intellectual freedom. Yet in the end, Evans’s heroines submit to the second proposal and idealized marriages.

Unencumbered by allegiance to the South, Bullard, Southworth, and Phelps have greater freedom. Bullard uses gothic devices to prompt psychosocial development in her heroines, refuses to let them reform the rejected suitors, and chooses careers that tie them to the domestic realm. Southworth’s postwar serial *Britomarte, the Man-Hater* (1868–69) pushes boundaries by allowing women to demonstrate strength and complexity in the interproposal space, enlarging on the necessity of women’s work during the war. Paradoxically, Phelps creates the most careerist of the heroines, before returning them to traditional, essentialist unions with weak men.

Tracey argues that the renegotiated marriages produced by the double-proposal plot indicate incremental progress toward women’s rights. While the authors are reluctant to call for change in marriage, they gesture toward egalitarianism by engaging in a conversation sustained over decades. Tracey is stronger on marriage than on authorship. It would be worth discussing the meaning of originality, aesthetics, and individualism in this particular intertextual conversation.

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In *Dreaming Black/Writing White*, Janet Gabler-Hover examines thirteen novels written between 1850 and 1913 that use the figure of Hagar, all but one of which were authored by white women. Gabler-Hover argues persuasively that white women simultaneously “dreamed black” by using the Hagar figure for white feminist empowerment and, in racist ways, once the empowerment was achieved, denied the interrelatedness between black and white women by suppressing Hagar’s racial complexity. Beginning with the first Hagar novel,
E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Deserted Wife*, Gabler-Hover examines novels by Alice Carey, Harriet Marion Stephens, Mary Jane Holmes, Charlotte Moon Clark, Pauline Hopkins, and Mary Johnston. While proslavery writers of Hagar fiction stereotype black women as oversexual in order to disavow their white heroines’ ethnic ambiguity, Pauline Hopkins in *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901–02) resists this stereotype and reinforces the hybridization of a black/white Hagar in order to insist on the sisterhood of black and white women in their resistance to patriarchy.

Gabler-Hover’s book is situated at the intersection of feminist, postcolonial, and U.S. cultural studies. Like recent scholarly books on race and U.S. culture, *Dreaming Black/Writing White* draws its inspiration from Toni Morrison’s provocative thesis in *Playing in the Dark* that a suppressed Africanist presence is at the heart of “American” identity. Gabler-Hover exemplifies this thesis through the Hagar canon, which she argues “is the dream basis upon which America was built.” In the process, she brings to light an entire aesthetic and cultural tradition, including a series of works hitherto marginal to U.S. cultural studies. Gabler-Hover uses familiar analyses of stereotypical black female sexuality and Southern white female chastity in order to generate provocative questions about white women using a heightened (black) sexuality to bolster their aesthetic and creative credentials. The strength of Gabler-Hover’s book is the complexity of her analyses. Instead of simply enshrining women’s writing as liberating or demonstrating the racism of white women’s writing, Gabler-Hover analyzes the complex, different ways that white women writers rely on and deny a hybrid Hagar figure. These analyses, in turn, are competently grounded within cultural material such as nineteenth-century painting as well as theories of race and Egyptology. Gabler-Hover thus politicizes women’s writing and argues against the notion of separate spheres. Although her use of postcolonial theory for studying Southern women writers needs more theorization, Gabler-Hover’s book is also an important addition to the emerging field of postcolonial American studies. Gabler-Hover uses Homi Bhabha’s insights about psychic splitting and Robert Young’s analyses of hybridity to examine the vexed “colonial” relationship between Southern white women and African American women.

*Dreaming Black/Writing White* is a significant contribution to nineteenth-century U.S. race studies, African American studies, and feminist scholarship. Indeed, as Gabler-Hover hypothesizes, the Hagar myth might well be the source of the white male isolato of American romance fiction. As such, like Dana Nelson’s *The Word in Black and White*, Gabler-Hover’s book is one more work in the urgent process of analyzing the complex racial dynamics of U.S. culture.

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