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From the Selected Works of Tim Engles

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Josef Benson's Review of *White Male Nostalgia in Contemporary North American Literature*



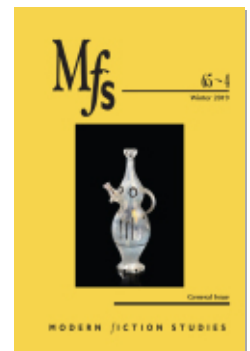
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White Male Nostalgia in Contemporary North American Literature by Tim Engles (review)

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(Review)

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Tim Engles. *White Male Nostalgia in Contemporary North American Literature*. Palgrave, 2018. v + 243 pp.

One endearing choice that Tim Engles makes in *White Male Nostalgia in Contemporary North American Literature* is to include himself among the white men who wittingly or unwittingly experience an emotional sense of mythical American nostalgia in response to the seemingly waning status of the white American male within American sociopolitical power structures. In Engles's case, this takes the form of a vacation he and his father recently took to Alaska where the two men enjoyed the "unspoiled 'wilderness'" (vi) with little thought to an indigenous past plundered by white interests. This admission bolsters Engles's credibility as a critic and as a human being.

Another choice Engles makes early on establishes the high stakes of the book and historically contextualizes his discussion within the current era of American history, which requires an all-hands-on-deck approach to repudiating the white supremacist ideologies bubbling to the surface of American life since the election of President Donald Trump. Engles notes, "When a candidate who had been caught bragging about sexually assaulting women ran during the 2016 presidential election with the full-throated support of the Ku Klux Klan, all while repeatedly promising to 'Make America Great Again,' he both embodied and deployed a form of nostalgia that was particularly appealing to white men" (1). Engles identifies the slogan "MAGA" as a powerful form of nostalgia that simultaneously galvanizes feelings of powerlessness among a large portion of American white men and legitimizes the idea that America can once again return to a time and place where white men reigned supreme.

Engles employs Svetlana Boym's phrase "restorative nostalgia" (8), a "desire . . . or aching . . . to return to a previous time and place . . . and thus to an idealized set of conditions, ultimately as a way of securing dominance in the present." Hidden in plain sight within the connotation of the word "nostalgia" is the idea that white men have been unfairly dethroned from their powerful perch and that this, more than anything, has contributed to the problems in the US.

The idea of restorative nostalgia links Engles's literary analyses together and offers a discussion of the various ways protagonists in their respective novels pine for an era long passed when white men enjoyed unencumbered power. Engles establishes a crucial idea in the beginning of the book: "Ordinary white men often cast themselves melodramatically . . . as struggling protagonists of their own lives, unjustly besieged by the status-threatening demands of women and ethnoracial minorities" (7).

Two particularly salient forms of restorative nostalgia that Engles identifies in these works are moral and spatial. First, he employs Richard Wright's novel *Savage Holiday* as a vehicle that highlights the hypocrisy inherent in the historical harnessing of whiteness as a moral impetus for exploitation and imperialism. Namely, Engles notes, "The moral conundrum that Wright locates at the heart of white masculinity is the donning of a mask of morality while knowing at some level of a collective immorality" (71). Implicit in the idea that the past represents a simpler and better time is an assumption of white men's moral superiority, which is often couched in references to the founding fathers. Engles identifies this fraudulent and hypocritical idea as problematic from the beginning, noting, "Slavery, and the profits it provided, violated white male American ethical convictions of overriding compassion and a sense of justice for other human beings" (77). The enslavement of Africans, as well as the extermination of Native Americans, grossly undermines any claims to moral superiority that white men may feel when considering the legacy of the United States and its development into a world power. White Europeans have never been morally justified in their efforts to settle North America.

To illustrate spatial restorative nostalgia, Engles uses the character of Jack in Carol Shield's novel *Happenstance*. Engles highlights the penchant of American white men to encroach physically, emotionally, or intellectually on virtually any space available to human beings, past or present, with total impunity, as though space does not become real until male whiteness has touched it. Engles notes, "As a white male academic historian struggling to write a book about what he continually terms 'Indian trading practices,' Jack offers ruminations that reveal his commitments to a conventional American—that is, white patriarchal—conception of American history and of his role as historian" (112). As a white male historian, foraying into Native American history, culture, and spaces for professional capital, Jack betrays his confidence as a white man that any space, literal or intellectual, is there for the taking. Engles further notes, "For white American men, the restorative nostalgic impulse often arises as a conception of earlier, seemingly open space, and that which Jack seeks to restore within such space is ultimately a sense of unencumbered mobility" (113). For Jack, the frontier is as wide-open for intellectual looting as it was for the US government who displaced whole tribes of peoples as it realized its genocidal manifest destiny. Engles emphasizes that this form of spatial nostalgia is predicated on the destruction and murder of Native Americans or anyone else who might have been in the way of white male influence.

Perhaps the book's most powerful example of restorative nostalgia lies within Margaret Atwood's novel *The Heart Goes Last*, a dystopian tale where "white male nostalgia has become a commodified lure, used to attract those who seek escape from their bleak" lives (225). The lure is presented in the form of "Consilience, a corporate-owned gated community . . . [containing] within it a . . . prison . . . In this setting, the residents swap places, performing prison labor one month and residing during the other in a simulated neighborhood consisting of 1950s-style suburban homes" (225). In this plot-driven metaphor, the novel's white characters literally give up their freedom in order to indulge in the dystopic illusion that they are living in the 1950s and once again enjoying racial dominance. The characters trade their actual freedom for a reified and restored nostalgia that they feel has been lost.

To indulge in the kinds of racial nostalgia that Engles points to in these novels is to confine oneself within an ideological prison wherein progress and the expansion of human rights represent not freedom but shackles, resulting in ever more frustration, hostility, and violence. Only days after President Trump declared himself a nationalist, two men were arrested for politically driven acts of violence that targeted several prominent liberals and worshipers at a synagogue. Engles's very good and important book exemplifies the sort of all-hands-on-deck approach absolutely necessary in fighting the ideological battle currently raging within American cultural life, a battle largely driven by one man's fomenting of white male insecurities as a means to power.

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Matthew Mullins. *Postmodern in Pieces: Materializing the Social in U.S. Fiction*. Oxford UP, 2016. x + 230 pp.

In *Postmodernism in Pieces: Materializing the Social in U.S. Fiction*, Matthew Mullins seeks to resuscitate the aesthetic of postmodernism by focusing on the things that populate the texts themselves, the objects—bottle caps, baseballs, rings—that the characters fondle, lose, assemble, and pursue. Building on Bill Brown's thing theory, as spelled out in his 2003 monograph, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter*