(Review) Seshradi-Crooks, Kalpana. Desiring Whiteness: a Lacanian Analysis of Race

Riaz Tejani, Phoenix School of Law

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/riaz_tejani/16/

'There was no one in Morocco like Ya'acov Wazana' repeatedly greeted Yoram Bilu as he interviewed Moroccan immigrants living in Israel in his attempt to reconstruct the life of an early 20th-century Moroccan healer and exorcist. Their memories yielded a fascinating figure: a Jewish healer who performed Muslim rituals and married a she-demon as the price of his immense power over humans, objects and especially demons. A man who, because of his tragic tendency to overstep social and metaphysical boundaries, met an early, perhaps even shameful, death at the hands of his supernatural allies.

While the core of the book consists of historical reconstruction, the beginning and ending deal with the contemporary unfolding of the Wazana legend. In the opening chapter Bilu investigates memories of the past, while in the epilogue his pursuit of contemporary 'inventions of tradition' weaves him into the narrative. This complex involvement of the ethnographer is illustrated by a striking episode. Bilu follows a self-made saint, who claims nocturnal revelations from Wazana, and finds that not only were these claims sparked by the earlier Hebrew version of *Without Bounds* but that his informant utilizes academic interest in Wazana to enhance his own reputation, thus overstepping the usual boundaries between ethnographer and case study.

This question of boundaries and transgression is a constant theme in the book. Its hero crossed not only the bounds between the human and the demonic, but also those between Jewish and Muslim society. These transgressive acts granted him an extraordinary fluidity of identity, yet were constantly accompanied by social and magical danger. Families and their relations to the healer and his lore provide a central theme: Wazana's parents and the conflicts and motivations they generated, the Wazana family's magical lore, the families of the informants who transmitted this lore, and especially Wazana's family of demons whom he 'adopted' as the price of his magical knowledge.

Bilu's theoretical framework blends social anthropology, cultural psychology and symbolic analysis, yet the book reads like a rich novel. Its contribution to anthropological theory lies not so much in detailed discussion of theory and method but in the many theoretical issues raised, and tersely addressed, in the course of its compelling narrative.

One such issue is evoked precisely by the compelling literary effect of Bilu's writing. Informed by post-modern critiques of the construction of anthropological narratives,
Given that within Langford's time-frame England underwent an industrial revolution, one might expect the English character itself to have changed. There was, both at the time and subsequently, an interpretation which argued that in the early 18th century the English were the most ungovernable people in Europe, but that a combination of Methodism, industrial work-discipline, and ruling-class repression reduced or raised them to the respectable law-abiding people we know as Victorians. Not much of this interpretation surfaces in Langford's sources. True, both foreigners and the English themselves noted decreasing hostility to strangers, and more civility in public from about the 1780s, and there is evidence that what are thought of as 'Victorian' character traits and behaviour were becoming more established in the first half of the 19th century. But the reader keen to identify perceptions of change has to be alert to occasional suggestions rather than insistent or sustained analysis. The same might be said for the period before 1650; Langford is aware of but does not fully engage with a literature which now suggests that Englishness can, if we so wish, be traced back to Anglo-Saxon times.

Langford's method is to group together comments on perceptions of the English: their energy, their candour, their decency, their taciturnity, their reserve and their eccentricity. Within each category there are sub-headings – for example, under Decency, 'barbarity', 'fair play', 'propriety' and 'modesty'. The overall picture that emerges is by no means one wholly complimentary about the English. Their lack of conversational resources, for example, was much commented on. The vast majority of the commentary concerns people of the same or similar social class as that of the commentator.

Anyone reading the book is likely to be impressed if not daunted by the extent of Langford's reading, but this very quantity of material is sometimes reproduced at the expense of a clear analysis of it, or indeed much judgement of the weight which can be put upon it. The book has a feel of a scrap book about it, the scraps being linked by an intelligent commentary, but one which is reluctant to reach for any large conclusions or overall interpretation. Nor does Langford comment on the significance of the fact that his commentators both want and feel able to identify qualities as national, that they expect the English to be different from other nations just as they expect other nations to differ among themselves. Readers can quarry for themselves in the rich mine which Langford has assembled, but they will not find in it any overarching thesis, and certainly not any engagement with discussions of nationality at the level of theory.

Hugh Cunningham
University of Kent,
Canterbury, UK
[email: H.Cunningham@ukc.ac.uk]


*Desiring Whiteness* is a provocative addition to the annals of critical race theory. Its explicitly psychoanalytic approach, promised by the subtitle *A Lacanian Analysis of Race*, also offers a didactic treatment of Lacan's highly abstract algebraic notation. Taking as a point
of departure Lacan's notion of the inherent lack in subjectivity, the author endeavours
to expose race in its modern context as a regime of visibility (p. 10).

Race, says Seshadri-Crooks, arises as a strategy for the subject to fill its lack and estab-
lish the semblance of a totality – one that is always already false. Attentive to the struc-
tural relations at work, she writes, ‘“[r]ace”, in other words, is a system of categorization
that once it has been organized shapes human difference in certain seemingly predeter-
mined ways’ (p. 4). But this ‘system’ is historically contingent and without any basis in
nature. As Seshadri-Crooks rightly observes, the opacity of this contingency is essential
to the operation of race as a system. Anchoring the symbolic structure of race is there-
fore the concept of ‘Whiteness’. In the author's opinion, ‘Whiteness’ is the ‘inaugural
signifier’ (p. 3) of race and ‘[t]o be a raced subject is to be subjected to the signifier
Whiteness’ (p. 25).

The author historicizes the concept of ‘Whiteness’ in its European context as a regime
of inclusion and exclusion whereby claims to primordial belonging come to be justified
by the attachment of the signifier to certain visible phenotypic traits (p. 49). The precarious-
ness and inconsistency of this attachment is, she points out, captured in an anxiety
immanent to racial joking. Here, Lacan's notion of the ‘uncanny’ as the unsettling ‘lack
of the lack’ is particularly insightful (pp. 99–100).

This account also re-presents the author's own challenge to postcolonial and post-
modern theories of identity. These 'power/knowledge determinisms' (p. 136), the author
writes, miss the autochthonous emergence of ‘Whiteness’ as well as the character of racial
signifiers as ‘rigid designators’, a term borrowed from the linguist Saul Kripke. Putting
Kripke into Lacanian terms, Seshadri-Crooks considers the rigid designator, a signifier
that like a proper name has no necessary referent, to be empty (p. 139). Hence, the oper-
ation of race as a regime of visibility; it requires that the signifier (i.e. black) be supple-
mented by so-called visible biological traits.

This being the case, Seshadri-Crooks suggests that subversion of racial logic is as
simple as upending the overdetermined movement from racial signifier to racial signi-
fied. The 1993 film 'Suture', wherein a series of violent accidents leads to an identity
exchange between an apparent white man and an apparent black man, is said to leave
the audience mistrustful of its racial signifiers (p. 131). This 'non-similitude' involves
a disjuncture between the dramatic situation unfolding on-screen, and the audience's
own racial looking. Likewise, Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif' demonstrates the obsolescence
of the signifiers 'black' and 'white'. Given the author's general thesis, then, these
examples serve as cogent indicators that an alternative to the regime of visibility
remains possible.

Nevertheless, in the evidence marshalled for this elaborate argument, the author
appears to have stacked the deck. The cultural productions she cites are almost too good,
for each has been realized by an academic composer. The question thus left unanswered
is how, outside the symbolic playground of the academy, racialized subjects are to subvert
their own interpellation by racial signifiers. The author's suggestion for a 'strategy of
discoloration' is explained as follows:

[The idea would be to void the racial knowledge by releasing the racial signifier from
its historical mooring in a signified. This entails the reinvention of culture as organ-
ized by differences based on other kinds of 'reasonings' than race. (p. 159)
This, coupled with the subsequent suggestion that we ‘throw racial signification into
disarray’, discounts the tenacity with which people of all ‘races’ cling to racialized
identity. George Lipsitz’ *Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1995), for instance, more
properly locates ‘Whiteness’ in its recent epoch as materially invested and therefore to
be only reluctantly upended.

Seshadri-Crooks’ petition to forfeit the false totality supplied by race also neglects the
very different ramifications this ‘desubjectification’ might have for different collectivities.
Her emphasis on colour-coded signifiers may be one cause for the oversight. Political
correctness notwithstanding, efforts to alter the language of race in law and medicine have
not yet yielded a regime of racial neutrality. Thus, a follow-up project may be to take
stock of the potentially varied ramifications of *Desiring Whiteness* and name the candi-
dates most likely to replace newly-retired racial signifiers. In the meantime, Seshadri-
Crooks brings Lacan’s algebra into much needed light and joins Fanon, Hall, Gilroy and
others in a very rich critical discussion on the psychoanalytic dimensions of race.

Riaz Tejani
Princeton University,
Princeton, New Jersey, USA
[Email: rtejani@Princeton.edu]

ISBN: (hb) 0 674 00323 3, (pb) 0 674 00829 4. Price: £18.50 ($27.50), £10.50
($15.95).

The complex and often painful love–hate relationship between Marjorie Shostak, the
anthropologist, and Nisa, the !Kung woman whose remarkable biography made Shostak
famous, remains ultimately unresolved, as this sequel to *Nisa* reveals with unflinching
candour. The book is a deeply touching testimony to Shostak’s struggle with cancer, her
sense of vulnerability and terrible fear of losing her world – her young children, loving
husband, family and friends. In telling this personal story, *Return to Nisa* is in many ways
a book about death, bereavement and attempts to seek healing. Although the voice is
Shostak’s, much of the book was constructed by loving friends and *Nisa’s* editor from
field diaries, letters and partially completed chapters or passages after her death in
1996, at the age of 49. A touching afterword written by Mel, her husband, who spent the early
fieldwork period with her in Botswana, records all the people who made the book
possible.

As part of her struggle to reclaim a lost self, Shostak returned to Botswana in 1989
during a remission in her illness, to relive once again a youthful love affair with the
African bush, but above all with the !Kung and Nisa, a woman whose voice she had
recorded and poured over endlessly after her return to the US, and to whom she owed
an intellectual as well as a financial debt. Despite Nisa’s brilliant rendition of her life and
her willingness to share her most intimate secrets of sexuality, illicit liaisons, love and
hatred with the anthropologist, Nisa had remained an enigma, beyond reach.

There is little that is ethnographically new in *Return to Nisa*. Shostak is a little more
explicit about her universalist feminist leanings, as when she explains about the natural