Book Review: Performing Whiteness, by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster

Tim Engles

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Review
Reviewed Work(s): Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster
Review by: Tim Engles
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While reading Gwendolyn Audrey Foster’s study of whiteness in film, I was repeatedly reminded of the Race Game, a thought experiment proposed by Thandeka in Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America. As one of several methods toward raising white consciousness, Thandeka suggests that whites spend a week referring to everyone they mention who happens to be white as a “white” person, just as they, and the media, commonly mark people of color with racial adjectives. Foster sets herself a similar task: “Most commercial American films and television programs are still solidly performed and received as white. What happens when we mark these films and television programs as white constructions? What happens when we call them white films?” (93). In the process of doing so with a wide array of films and a few television programs, Foster demonstrates that the same effort in recent “critical whiteness studies” has only just begun, with much to be learned about how the inherent instability of whiteness as a category requires continual enactment to assert itself.

Recent scholarship on whiteness has included a wealth of articles and books focused on cinema, many of which explicitly build upon what remains the richest study of this sort, Richard Dyer’s White (1997). Foster’s introductory explanation of her theoretical framework draws on Dyer’s work as well, also referencing Butlerian performance studies on the way toward establishing her guiding presumptions: that “whiteness is a performed construct,” and that Hollywood cinema has been centrally constitutive in white America’s continuous efforts to shore up iniquitous, inherently unstable categories of race (4). Some readers might consider simplistic or old-fashioned her primary, oft-repeated conception of
scrutinizing cinematic whiteness as part of “the Lyotardian breakup of the grand narratives” (137). However, while Foster does not do much to advance the theoretical underpinnings of critical whiteness studies, she does succeed in elucidating the myriad extents to which cinematic performances of whiteness have worked to constitute and support ongoing American fables of race. I also found this study loaded with useful heuristic encapsulations, and often entertaining in its wide-ranging choices for analysis, from early cinema to the present.

Foster begins her study with an overview of key insights from the extensive corpus on the history of whiteness, and then examines the 1934 Motion Picture Production Code, which she reads as a tool in part “designed to maintain the borders of whiteness” against the realities of racial hybridity (34). Of course, white womanhood at the time was conceived as an especially precious site of purity threatened by miscegenation, and Hollywood morality tales regularly punished white female characters who transgressed racialized limitations on desire. While some female actors did provide inspired moments of sexual liberation, they sometimes did so in ways reminiscent of the conflicted white emotional investments in blackface minstrelsy explicated by Eric Lott. While Mae West, for instance, has been read as a subversive celebrant of aberrant sexuality, Foster points out that such performances sometimes relied on appropriation of overheated figurations of black feminine sexuality.

Foster’s study refines the parallel to be drawn between white actors of cinematic performance and racial whiteness itself as a scripted enactment. As a counterpart of sorts to blackface, Foster posits the notion of “whiteface,” which “involves performing whiteness in such a way that traces of ethnicity are erased [and defining] the cinematic landscape as a white space. . . where class and ethnicity are homogenized, sterilized, and largely erased” (47, 51). Since, according to an emergent truism in the recent scholarship, whiteness is ontologically dependent on projected figurations of specified racial and ethnic differences, “whiteface” becomes most apparent in cinema as the rather forced, anxious performance of whiteness itself when white characters are set in interaction with others who are clearly marked as non-white. Foster’s delineation of standardized musical motifs that typically accompanied the en-
trance of such otherness (such as low drum beats for “Indian” characters) is useful here, as is her discussion of characters who try to become white in Alice Guy Blaché’s short film, *Making an American Citizen* (1912). Blaché has been hailed as a feminist filmmaker, but Foster argues convincingly that she coded her depictions of proper male treatment of women as white by contrasting them with degrading portrayals of ethnic, raced, and classed otherness. Blaché’s short film about a series of lessons in Americanization undergone by a Russian immigrant family dramatizes how early it was that the unstable conception of standard American identity had to be continually acted out in interaction with both properly white and clearly non-white others, in order to be recognized—yet not recognized—as “white.” Here and elsewhere, then, Foster’s multifaceted analysis of the dialogue between cinematic and everyday whiteness demonstrates how much, in addition to visually apprehended epidermal difference, race is perceived and embodied as both imitative and contradistinctive performance.

Foster explores the Otherness lodged within white identity in one of her more fascinating chapters, an exploration of films depicting “the bad-white body”: “white bodies out of control, invisible bodies, bodies missing hands, brains without skulls, monstrous eyeballs, bodies contaminated by nuclear fallout, bodies at war with their own corporeal existence” (67). Foster convincingly reads such films as *The Attack of the 50 Foot Women* (1958) and *The Brain that Wouldn’t Die* (1962), and their popularity in the fifties and sixties, as nightmarish returns of a repressed white awareness of its own contamination by hybridity. In this sense, the freaks of “bad-white-body” films, who always must be horribly destroyed, “challenge the integrity and wholeness of whiteness . . . as well as the notion of a unified performing self” (emphasis in original 69). When contextualized within their era’s contests between resurgent racial otherness and reactionary whiteness, the enraged white bodies chopped into pieces and prodded back to life, or provoked by chemical and nuclear contact into gigantic or tiny proportions, are interpretable as enactments of white fear about its own potential slippages into forms of deviance that are commonly projected onto racialized and ethnic others. Again, though, Foster demonstrates that by acting out an uncaged, violent monstrousness
that springs from deviant white bodies themselves, the bad-white bodies in these films allegorize how such deviance is muzzled within whiteness’ own falsely unified identity, which is why its manifestations must always be banished. As Foster writes, “Whiteness is above all about sublimating forms of identity. . . . Dualism exists in the white body and its performances cannot be summoned forth without consequences” (78).

I found Foster’s chapters consistently engaging, but at times meandering. One on “Performing the ‘Good’ White,” for instance, sometimes strays from a clear conception of just what “‘good’ white” means. For the most part, it seems to mean performances that fully repress the sorts of troubling badness enacted in “bad-white-body” films, with badness portrayed instead in secondary characters, who again highlight by contrast the goodness of centralized whites. Foster also repeats Dyer’s demonstrations that Hollywood’s positive white characters are classed in this way as well—faces and body parts are made-up and lit into pristine whiteness against occasional secondary white characters who have been literally darkened as one signifier of their lower class status. Of more interest are the connections Foster draws between cinematic constructions of white womanhood as relatively silent and attentive, and the gradual silencing (and thus, whitening and feminizing) of appropriate audience behavior. If Foster is right here, and I think she is, there is a gendered, racial foundation to the demand for “respectful” silence in most of today’s movie theaters.

Foster’s final chapter, “Performing White Otherness,” explores cinematic deployments of “race drag,” ethnic types, and “white trash” in ways that should prompt further scholarly attention in these areas. Foster ends with a solid analysis of an African film, The “Great White” of Lambaréné (1994), Bassek Ba Kobhio’s recasting of Albert Schweitzer as an unwitting enactor of colonial arrogance and Eurocentricity. As this closing gesture suggests, perhaps belatedly, the understanding of whiteness as a performance advances more rapidly when we attend as well to analytical depictions of it produced by filmmakers of color.

**Tim Engles**
Eastern Illinois University
Works Cited