

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Valerie Melissa Babb. *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 227 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1312-9.

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Without announcing itself as such, Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible* is a primer on the study of whiteness. I have been waiting for this book for awhile: it is a readable and brief interdisciplinary volume on whiteness in American literature and culture that breaks new ground while also neatly summarizing a decade or so of work in the field. It is certainly not as deeply researched as, say, Matthew Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color*, or Grace Elizabeth Hale's *Making Whiteness*, nor does it have the shocking freshness of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* or David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness*. But if you can, as they say, read only one book on whiteness this year (or get your students to read only one book) this might be the one to choose. Like Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*, this is a book that manages to synthesize some very rich and complex theoretical material into a surprisingly accessible format—thereby making the implicit argument that this is material that should reach undergraduates and general readers alike. It seems quite plausible to me that Babb's larger conclusions will be clear to even those readers who have not been through the captivity narratives, novels, religious tracts, and etiquette books that she parses here.

The short list I just offered should give some idea of how broad Babb's purview is. *Whiteness Visible* is organized chronologically, but does not intend to provide a linear tale of white racial formation. Rather, Babb's goal seems to be to describe a war for whiteness that has taken place on many fronts, for some 400 years of American history. While certain texts and events are particularly important to her analysis (from the Magnoli Christi Americana, through Moby-Dick, the Chicago World's Fair, Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, the founding of Hull House and so on), her point seems to be to demonstrate that whiteness could never have been established as a cherished and powerful racial identity position (with all the requisite institutional support) if it had not been articulated, defended, and developed along many different lines.

Here is the greatest value of Babb's work. Rather than focusing on one major social practice (say, Blackface minstrelsy) or even one relatively large body of texts (the classic American literature Toni Morrison sets her sights on), Babb wants to at least glance at the whole culture and its history. Of course this forces Babb to offer up readings that can be superficial at times; her analysis of Mary Antin's memoir, for instance, never satisfactorily explains the tangled web formed by immigration, nationalism, and racialization. But where else can you find a book that reads etiquette manuals, Jane Addams's Hull House, and colonial-era maps all as agents of whiteness?

Agency is the crux of all this. The only major problem with Babb's approach, as I understand it, is that she cannot demonstrate cause and effect in any of her particular case studies. That is, while it is believable that settlement houses were somehow in the business not only of Americanizing immigrants, but also whitening them, Babb cannot demonstrate this in any convincing detail. Her thesis, of course, anticipates and—to some degree—answers that criticism. The aim of her book is to demonstrate how many American institutions have been involved in the process of what she calls "monoracializing." This monoracializing, as she sees it, could only work if its agents were more or less invisible. Here is the leap of faith that defines the book: rather than focusing on the very public, very explicit dramas of white racial formation that Eric Lott found in minstrelsy and Grace Hale found in lynching, Babb argues (by implication anyway) that the real action took place in much less dramatic fashion.

As such, one has to take on faith that behind Babb's relatively few case studies are dozens more, just ripe for the picking. I think there are, but readers would have been well served by a more fully historicized introduction (or perhaps a "subjects for further research" epilogue) to the book. In her introduction Babb describes a course she taught on white male authors that received a great deal of media scrutiny (and I remember the amazed coverage

in some papers). It would have been especially helpful if she had included a pedagogical chapter that could have taken the form of an annotated syllabus. As it stands, the book offers up Cotton Mather and Herman Melville and not much else in the way of white male authors.

But these are quibbles. Babb is a sensitive and con-

vincing reader of texts, a scholar who sees significant cultural activity taking place where many of us neglect to look, and a writer who brings sophisticated insights to light in a cogent and convincing way. *Whiteness Visible* is too valuable to get lost in the recent storm of publications on whiteness.

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