

Review Article

White Women, Racism, and History

GILLIAN WHITLOCK

ON THE COVER of Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*,¹ there is a photograph of a group of women sitting on mats within an enclosure which strongly resembles a boxing ring. The women within the roped square are all immaculately dressed, each with elegant hat, pearls, and flowing garments draped modestly over legs and feet. They are immersed in each other; no one looks outside the enclosure; all turn inwards, avidly paying attention to their neighbours. The stage is set for some kind of elegant pugilistic encounter. It is only the sign on the enclosure and the caption which allow us to place the scene correctly: these are the European Ladies, photographed at the marriage of a maharajah's daughter in India, 1932.

Another stunning display of racial and sexual identity is captured in a later photograph: Jerry Hall poses in a bikini, statuesque, her long blond hair draped over a body which is proclaiming its availability. Crouched about her is a circle of seven women; each is shrouded in a chador; only the eyes peer out and gaze directly at the lens of the camera; the caption: "Jerry Hall's swimwear may have raised a few eyebrows in Morocco. But no one's really sure."

Ware does not comment explicitly on either of these illustrations; indeed she does not need to; each speaks eloquently of the "white femininity" which is her subject. It is no accident that in coming to review this book, one is inclined to begin not with a quotation from the 260 pages of prose argument and analysis but with these photographic illustrations. As Ware points out, it is difficult to find a language that expresses links among race,

gender, and class without prioritizing and oversimplifying. It is the camera which is able to capture the interplay and force of these elements, and to do justice to the complex terrain under consideration here. I have mentioned just two of a number of captivating photographs reproduced in the book, each a powerful image of white femininity and supremacy.

Ware's project in *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* is to examine the intersections of race, gender, and class, the ongoing implications of colonialism and imperialism, in a way which does not retreat into "grand theory," or simple binary oppositions, or move into a study of representations alone. Ware intends this book to be a political response in the fullest sense, a way of working towards an agenda for social change and coalition politics, a means of conceptualizing an identity politics sensitive to various forms of domination and "fractal" patterns of social relations. Although she is critical of both marxist and feminist agendas, the activism and commitment of these political movements remain a priority here. Ware's analysis has the precision and the research of the best kind of academic enquiry, yet ultimately this book is not an academic treatise; its author is an activist, concerned with promoting practical political action in the arena of everyday life: "There would not be much point in understanding how the category of white femininity was constructed through history if this information was not used to engage with contemporary ideologies of domination" (43).

In constructing her argument, Ware moves between a number of voices and styles—straightforward historical accounts, biography, autobiography, journalese—to recognize the different sorts of narratives that are inflected with race and gender. She frequently shifts to the everyday to remind herself and her reader that she is talking about ideologies that surround and influence us *now*. So anecdotes about Lionel Richie, British Labour Party advertisements, and the marketing of Jerry Hall's swimwear are all part of the fabric. So too are many less-known texts: the autobiography of Ida B. Wells, Catherine Impey's journal *Anti-Caste*, Annette Ackroyd's diaries and her thoughts on the education of women, and cross-Atlantic correspondence from the anti-slavery campaigns. The problem Ware identifies in both past and

present is the “transparency” of white femininity. The ongoing failure of feminism to address the racialized *and* gendered categories of Western femininity deeply compromises and complicates feminist politics according to Ware, who argues that it is a matter of urgency that we begin to analyse how British feminism has developed as a political movement in a racist and imperialist society.

The recognition that Western feminism has tended to be both ethnocentric and middle class is not new; it goes back to the mid-1980s at least, and the writing of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, among others. Nevertheless, the challenge to theorize the meanings of whiteness, and in particular the historical construction and function of white femininity, has not been met. Like Robert Young’s *White Mythologies*, Ware’s book undermines the “naturalness” of white dominance, peels away the layers of its construction, and examines an ongoing recycling and reconstruction of imperialism and white supremacy in British popular culture and politics. I am being wary and perhaps overly precise here (and earlier) in specifying “British.” Ware argues that, although framed in the British context, the themes of white femininity and the entanglement of feminism and racism are relevant in any country where structures of white supremacy, racism, and male dominance continue to affect people’s lives.

Writing as I do from a state where there has been this week yet another black death in custody, a visible and notorious sign of an ongoing racism and colonization, it does not do to quibble about Ware’s claims that the situation she considers is not confined to Britain alone. However, those of us who read this book as (post)colonials are inevitably placed differently as readers. First, we are outsiders to the detail of contemporary British politics and culture which are key coordinates of Ware’s autobiographical presentation. The book is Eurocentric even as it examines critically the racism and sexism of British imperialism. Second, as a reader living among the ongoing legacy of imperialism, in the remnants of a white supremacist settler colony, I was disappointed to find that Ware does not explicitly address the particular valency of white femininity in the settler colonies during the nineteenth century. To be sure, her book gives us the tools, the

ideas to take this analysis forward. However, like so many British studies of imperialism, it is British India and the memsahib that are the focus of particular attention. As Ware points out, the Empire provided both a physical and ideological space in which the different meanings of femininity could be explored or contested. However, the different kinds of colonial organization within the Empire need to be recognized as crucial in the development of constructions of white femininity. In settler colonies, where the reproduction of the white race was crucial to the identity of the colony, the place of white women as wives and mothers was a critical part of imperial culture and society.

I am reluctant to be critical of omissions in this book, for one of the things I most admire about Ware's method is her ability to select and develop a series of case studies which are sensitive to the specific historical context, which resist any simple causal analysis and yet are able to examine connections between gender and race, white femininity and imperialism, past and present. These case studies focus in a precise way on the historical and cultural construction of woman/women, categories which assume shifting meanings; they are also selected to interrogate the various shifts and alliances around race and gender in the women's movement. So, for example, Part Two, "An Abhorrence of Slavery," focusses on the role of women in the anti-slavery movement from *Oroonoko* to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and through a series of distinct campaigns for abolition, emancipation, and the end of black apprenticeship. Some of this ground has been covered brilliantly in Moira Ferguson's recent study *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834*. Ferguson and Ware together bring new material and argument into this relatively neglected field of women's writing and feminist politics. Ware's particular interest is how race, class, and gender intersect in this emergence of feminist politics in both Britain and the U.S. She goes beyond "Uncle Tom" to examine the anti-slavery pamphlets written by women, the annual reports of their anti-slavery groups and, in particular, correspondence across the Atlantic. In her reading of three key feminist texts, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, William Thompson and Anna Wheeler's *Appeal of One-Half the Human*

Race, and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, Ware examines assumptions of white superiority and the emergence of hierarchies of race and gender in both feminist politics and the wider political culture. The paradox is that even as the battle against slavery was being won, the war against racism was being lost with the establishment of disciplines such as ethnography and anthropology producing new ways of understanding natural differences, and with the expansion of Empire into new territories.

The significance of these shifts is clear in Part Three, "Britannia's Other Daughters: Feminism in the Age of Imperialism." What does it mean that organized feminism occurred during period of expansionist foreign policy? How were feminist ideology and practice shaped by the social, political, and economic forces of imperialism? Did feminism offer an alternative to imperialist ideology? Ware is right to point out that feminist historiography has not taken up these questions, even though the Empire provided a physical and ideological space in which different meanings of femininity could be explored. Too often feminist historians have celebrated the adventuress, the pioneer, the traveller, without examining the role of these women in a larger imperial dynamic—in the case of Mary Kingsley, for example. The writings of Josephine Butler, Ellice Hopkins, and Annette Ackroyd are examined from a different perspective in *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*; as products of a culture obsessed by nationhood, patriotism, and race, they are caught in its contradictions and preoccupations. The potential for feminist arguments about woman's sexuality and moral superiority, her restraint and integrity not to provide ideological underpinnings for conservative imperialist ideologies, for Britannia's daughters and the Mothers of Empire, is evident. Significantly, feminists who were active in formulating anti-imperial ideologies were those well versed in colonial affairs, beyond the centres of Empire: Olive Schreiner, Daisy Bates, Lady Florence Dixie, and Harriet Colenso.

Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History begins and ends in the present, with vivid and detailed descriptions of politics and popular culture in Britain today. Like other feminist

studies of imperialism (Sara Mills's *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, for example) this book too is aware of the ongoing recycling and rearticulation of imperialism, the celebration of the golden age of Empire nascent in the British national collective. Ware reminds us that history is recent, that understanding the articulations of race, gender, and class in the Empire is critical if imperial nostalgia, memory, and reconstruction are to be countered. In documentaries, mini-series, film, children's literature, romantic fiction, and in the marketing of products from swimsuits to hair colour, the aura of "white femininity" remains and continues to play a role in the development of contemporary forms of domination. Ware points out that the women's liberation movement in Britain was full of women whose mothers, aunts, or grandmothers were affected in some way by the emigration of British people in the Empire; there must be a significant number of feminists whose education was paid for by money earned in the British colonies, yet the significance of these personal histories, an intimate implication of feminism and imperialism, is rarely addressed. The majority of black women living in Britain are visibly and personally connected to the British Empire, largely descended from colonial subjects whose lives were bound up in different ways with the Empire. These personal histories too remain unarticulated.

Ultimately, then, Ware's history concludes with notes for histories which remain to be written, histories which examine the complicated interconnections of race and gender that are the ongoing legacy of the Empire. One of the great strengths of this book is that it makes visible the various constructions of white femininity, the fictions which can all too easily seem natural. It is also infectious in the best sense, leading the reader into the kind of pervasive and vigilant apprehension of racism and sexism that is so much part of Ware's own way of being. Hard to leave behind is one of the final analyses in the book, an analysis of the travel diary of Anita Roddick, the founder of the mega-successful "Body Shop" enterprise. Ware's reading of the politics of race and gender in the "green consumerism" which Roddick both promotes and benefits from is acute. The connections she goes on to

make between the world of the "Body Shop," the association between women and nature it promotes, and the particular kind of femininity which dates back to the sanitary reform campaigns of Victorian Britain is a tour de force. This is the best kind of historical and cultural analysis, resisting generalizations and simple causations, but nevertheless revealing ongoing discourses of domination and imperialism as they emerge in everyday life.

Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History is an important book. Like Cora Kaplan's *Sea Changes* and Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, it is an fine example of an engaged feminist analysis, a study which allows women agency and choice, and reaffirms the necessity and value of working for social change. Ware's autobiographical and historical discussion about what it means to be a British white woman is a major and convincing attack on "white mischief," and (perhaps) a sign that post-colonial critiques are being heard and responded to from the centre of Empire itself.

NOTE

- ¹ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*. London: Verso, 1992. \$59.95, \$18.95 pb.

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