

## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

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At a guest lecture that one of us delivered in Athens, Georgia, a graduate student asked how we academics could avoid essentializing whiteness in the same way that blackness, for instance, has been essentialized. A provocative question in its own right, it becomes all the more so coming from a young black woman in the South, for it highlights the vigilance that people of color have always called for in discussions of race. The woman's question underscores the crucial role of "non-white" voices in keeping whiteness studies from becoming entirely self-reflexive; further, it reminds us of a fact that is easily forgotten amidst the recent avalanche of works by whites on whiteness: that not only has whiteness always been visible to, and analyzed by, people of color, but that contemporary whiteness studies itself was born of the demand by feminists of color, in the early 1980s, that white feminists interrogate their own whiteness.<sup>1</sup> As editors, we offer this book in the tradition of "Third World" feminism: by way of keeping the field of whiteness complicated. Aside from responding to the question of essentializing, we raise similar questions about whiteness at the outset: Why study whiteness at all? Why focus on literature? And why examine the role of white women in particular? We take these up, one at a time.

### WHY WHITENESS?

White racism is a pathology looking for a place to land, sadism  
in search of a story.

—George Lipsitz

In "The White Stuff," Homi Bhabha declares that

[s]ince “whiteness” naturalizes the claim to social power and epistemological privilege, displacing its position cannot be achieved by raising the “gaze of the other” or by provoking the “return” of the repressed or the oppressed. The *subversive* move is to reveal within the very integuments of “whiteness” the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is—the incommensurable “differences” that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself; the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority. (21)

Bhabha voices the assumption underlying white scholars’ study of whiteness that heightened self-consciousness is the first step toward any change. See yourself as you really are, with your inconsistencies and conflicts; understand the effect of your actions on peoples and societies; take responsibility for the consequences of your thoughts and values in the perpetuation of oppression and abetting of injustice, and you cannot help but be aghast at what you have enabled and permitted to continue. Whether such an assumption is valid remains open to debate, but if we accept that heightened self-consciousness is a *sine qua non* of voluntary change, an essential first step in divesting oneself of arbitrary power, then whiteness studies would appear to have a purpose, a necessary positive value. But a heightened self-consciousness resulting from being the subject of unaccustomed scrutiny can also make many whites uncomfortable. Our book suggests that they work through that discomfort to see how the practice of whiteness plays itself out in manifestations of power. As Ruth Frankenberg argues in *Displacing Whiteness*, we need to make a distinction between whiteness as a bounded, impermeable culture and whiteness “as practice rather than object” (20). This is certainly a fruitful distinction in that it promises to keep us from essentializing or reifying whiteness; it is, moreover, a perspective with a long tradition amongst peoples of color. Even the controversial Malcolm X, as David Roediger points out, “made a point of connecting whiteness with the exercise of power, not with biology” (*Black on White* 12). More recently, in “Brown-Skinned White Girls,” Frances Winddance Twine challenges “biologically essentialist precepts that suggest one must be of exclusive European ancestry to have access to a white cultural identity” (215)—one which does not involve passing. Focusing on women of part-African American descent, who were raised by white or Asian mothers in middle- and upper-class suburbs, Twine shows how they identify as white, and how this identification shifts when they move to a racially politicized, urban college campus. Her analysis thus not only problematizes notions of biological whiteness—or whiteness as it is understood in common parlance—but also suggests that the *practice* of whiteness itself needs to be deconstructed.

Robyn Wiegman, however, has alerted us against a too-ready embracing of whiteness studies, urging instead an examination of the tension between the

universality of the power of whiteness and the particularities that have given to white racial power its “historical elasticity and contemporary transformations” (118). The trend in whiteness studies, she points out, is to particularize whiteness—that is, to detail its particular manifestations in specific contexts (geographical, historical, cultural, economic locations) and so to make it appear less monolithic, less overwhelming. Such a trend, she argues, can eclipse the universal power of whiteness, a power that persists across its particular manifestations, cuts through specificities, and devastates those who fall within its purview. Thus, to say that whiteness is not monolithic and to demonstrate that it is a nuanced construction reflects a disingenuous refusal to acknowledge the destructive effects of white power, which, in its overwhelming effect on the lives of people, carries the weight of the universal. Many contemporary whites, steeped in Civil Rights ideologies, disaffiliate from segregationist and white supremacist practices to declare themselves antiracist. Wiegman argues, however, that the acceptance of such disaffiliation as the overwhelming mark of antiracism obscures the many myriad ways in which “liberal” whites contribute silently to the economic power of whiteness.

The second equally problematic trend, she points out, is the move in whiteness studies to minoritize the white experience—in other words, to give to it a history of victimhood. Inflecting whiteness with class and stressing the ways in which power and privilege are mediated by socioeconomic conditions, such that poor whites can claim to be every bit as victimized as people of color, represents a strategy of making whiteness appear to be not a threat but a misunderstood phenomenon. Pointing to recent anti-affirmative action moves (spearheaded by academia), Wiegman reveals how these efforts are framed with the rhetoric of “minority” experience: “we” are being unfairly denied our rights because there are too many of “you” who are making claims on available resources. A similar move is the ethnizing of whiteness in order to deflect attention away from its power and, instead, to illuminate past experiences of discrimination suffered by various groups that fall under the “white” category—Irish, German, Italian, and Jewish immigrants. Wiegman poses provocative questions: “What generates this compulsion for a minoritized whiteness that is not “expensive” to people of color? Or, more precisely, why does the production of a minoritized whiteness become the seemingly necessary precondition for an antiracist project?” The particularizing of whiteness does not necessarily lead to anti-essentialism (and in seeking to anti-essentialize itself, whiteness appropriates one of the basic strategies of antiracist efforts by people of color); “nor does it guarantee the white subject’s disaffiliation from the powers of pretensions of universality.” Wiegman concludes, rather pessimistically, that there is “no theoretical, historical, or methodological escape from the impossibility of the antiracist white subject, partly because the very focus of the subject has far too much of the universal at stake” (147).

Wiegman’s criticism of whiteness studies is trenchant and not without legitimacy. Indeed, self-examination is no guarantee of self-reconstruction, or no

guarantee of self-reconstruction that matters. Whiteness studies can become a self-indulgent self-preoccupation, as she warns; more troubling, it can lead to a self-conceptualizing as victim that can result in dangerous reprisals against those who are seen as being responsible for the alleged victimization. We applaud Wiegman's corrective and critical take on whiteness studies and her insistence that it not become a self-congratulatory or self-preoccupied field of inquiry. We share her call that the "political project for the study of whiteness entail[ ] not simply rendering whiteness particular but engaging with the ways that being particular will not divest whiteness of its universal epistemological power" (150). Thus, while we acknowledge that white power can be mitigated by class, gender, and sexual orientation, we maintain that such mitigation does not have an appreciable impact on the power of whiteness over the bodies and lives of people of color.

Our point is not to deny that the power of whiteness can be attenuated by its contexts, but to understand the limits of such diminishment and the motivations of those who propose them. Class, while it may exclude the individual from entry into certain domains, does not usually invite physical or bodily harm. Further, one can acquire new class signifiers—either through wealth or education—and can mask one's original class origins or even entirely erase them. The situation is slightly more complicated with sexual orientation. Such brutalities as the 1998 killing of Matthew Shepherd, a white gay man in Wyoming, attest to the oppression of gays within the white mainstream. Queer studies scholars have made the persuasive argument that the immense hostility directed toward gays and lesbians stems, in part, from the feeling that their sexual behavior inhibits procreation of the race. In this context, the "danger" they pose is akin to the danger miscegenation is purported to pose to advocates of racial purity. Miscegenation taints whiteness; homosexuality diminishes whiteness by undermining its procreation (Nayan Shah). Although homophobia is by no means exclusive to the white community, we do agree with queer theorists that the racial element of homophobia is worth investigating for a nuanced understanding of this attitude. In the same context, pro-choice advocates have pointed out that mainstream antiabortion efforts are largely directed at white women, and that little effort is made to encourage non-white pregnant women to bring their fetuses to term. Such assertions point to the interior fault lines within whiteness and to the necessity of descending into its cracks and crevices, in addition to keeping sight of the larger landscape of whiteness.

But, however its contours may change, the broader landscape of whiteness remains. It is worth quoting white hip-hopper journalist Will "Upski" Wimsatt at some length here to illuminate the kind of vigilant self-interrogation that can prevent the broad theoretical landscape we now call whiteness studies from becoming just another academic fad or just another gesture of white guilt seeking absolution:

I am where I am because of the misfortune of others. While I get paid to write about hip-hop the people who taught me hip-hop are either struggling to get by, in jail, or dead.

I still have a lot to learn from blacks. I still have irrational fears of them. I still slip into degrading white ways of seeing (one of the worst is that I don't expect enough of blacks; another is that I expect too much of them). My speech still slips into a caricature of black speech. As whites, we cannot help blacks without undercutting their self-determination; we cannot be cool without encroaching on their cultural space; we cannot take risks without exercising our privilege to take risks; we cannot integrate without invading; we cannot communicate on black terms without patronizing. Faced with this situation, we need not become paralyzed. We must take the risks necessary to do right, while recognizing that, unlike the black struggle to make it in white America, our effort is not the center of importance.

"I'm confused about what your point of view is," an editor of mine once said. "I can't tell from reading this whether you are a hip-hopper or a racist, an insider in black society or some kind of outside sociologist. Do you love black people or do you hate them?" My answer is that I'm human, meaning that I'm complex enough to be all these things at once.

If only black people could get away with that. (Qtd. in Cornel West 203)

Wimsatt's articulation of the complex motivations and particularized subject positions available to whites—complexities and particularizations that were not perceived to be possible for people of color—reinforces the validity of Richard Dyer's observation that whiteness functions as "infinite particularity" (Wiegman 118). Particularity has always been available to whites, forming refuges that deflect attention from the universality of its power—the universality which imbues the larger landscape of whiteness.

Our book could be seen as abetting the particularization of whiteness, and in a sense that is exactly what it does. However, we make visible these specific manifestations of whiteness over time and in different historical and geographical locations not to undercut the monolithic power of whiteness. Rather, we think of this collection of essays as akin to a prism's operation on white light. The splitting of white light as it passes through the prism reveals the many components of visible light. In understanding the qualities of each of these components—its physical attributes and the uses to which it can be put—we have deepened and complicated our knowledge of white light. We trust our book will perform the same function. With regard to our own relationship to whiteness, as Americans of South Asian descent, our negotiations with the racial landscape of the United States are

ambiguous and complex.<sup>2</sup> Positioned between black and white, and often used as a buffer between them, South Asian Americans' encounter with race has been unpredictable, dependent on economic, political, and cultural forces at play at any given moment. Hence our exploration of whiteness represents a means of understanding our own assigned and claimed racial positions within the United States. Our take on whiteness is necessarily complicated by our different experiences with it in the postcolonial nations of Pakistan and India *and* our current experience with it in the United States. Raka Shome makes the point eloquently for us when she describes a "disembodied" whiteness in India, resulting not from contact with white bodies but from a "discursive whiteness" that remains as a residual aftermath of British colonization even after white bodies are no longer present in India. Mindful of her class position, Shome details the impact of discursive whiteness through her indoctrination in Western humanism in Catholic school, in the politics of skin color, and in the tyranny of the English language and literature—to all of which we can relate. Her point that whiteness travels, whether through colonialism or cultural invasion (and now through the demands of global capitalism), reminds us that the effects of whiteness can be felt even in places where there are no white bodies. Similarly, Shome speaks to our own experience when she describes the qualitative difference in the impact whiteness has on her in the United States. Here, whiteness "others" her through racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. The white body being the norm, her brown body "becomes the irreducible sign of difference everywhere [she] go[es]." The difference has been accentuated since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon, with many South Asians in the United States becoming the target of racist violence.<sup>3</sup> Our inquiry into whiteness thus stems from multiple interlocking imperatives. We have been guided in our construction of this anthology by the need to foreground the multidimensionality and multicontextuality of whiteness—geographic, historic, cultural, and discursive—even as we keep in mind that such particularizations of whiteness by no means diminish its authority. This contribution to the discourse on whiteness underscores our belief that whiteness studies can not be permitted to cast itself as merely the flip side of ethnic studies, but must be defined as a space in which both whites and people of color can explore constructions of race and representation from multiple dimensions.

#### WHITENESS STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES: WHENCE AND WHITHER?

Before turning to the question of "Why focus on literature?" a brief overview of some of the studies that analyze the construction and deployment of whiteness in the United States and elsewhere seems to be in order. It bears repeating that whiteness has always been commented on by people of color—a point amply

made by David Roediger's edited volume, *Black on White* (1998). Certainly, many nineteenth-century works, such as the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, and Charles Chesnut's essay, "What Is a White Man?" constitute analyses of whiteness. However, we use the term "whiteness studies" to mark the body of contemporary theoretical works analyzing the process whereby the monolithic power of whiteness came to be constructed.

A social constructionist approach to race first gained ground in 1986 with the publication of Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* and the influential collection of critical essays, "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The year 1986 also marks the publication of Virginia Dominguez's *White by Definition*, focusing on legal constructions of whiteness as applied to, and challenged by, Louisiana's Creole population. As such, Dominguez's work represents one of the earliest social constructionist analyses of race to focus specifically on whiteness. Since then, much has been written about whiteness, with differing areas of emphasis: while David Roediger focuses on the formation of the white working class in *The Wages of Whiteness* (1990), as does Noel Ignatiev, Ian Haney Lopez's *White by Law* (1996) expands Dominguez's discussion to illuminate the ways in which U.S. law shapes ideas about race and nationality, determining—by no means consistently—who qualifies as white and American. Our project owes a special debt to Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters* (1993), which broke new ground not only in its theoretical formulations of whiteness but also in its emphasis on how white *women* experience themselves as white, at varying levels of consciousness. Frankenberg's work and Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale* (1992) complement each other in that the former theorizes white femininity while the latter historicizes it in terms of transatlantic racial politics. Other historical approaches focusing on white women include Kathleen Blee's *Women of the Klan* (1991), a study of white women's roles in the second KKK, and Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire* (1993), which examines how the construct of white femininity operates in colonial contexts.

In the realm of literary studies, Anna Maria Chupa remains a rare critic to spotlight white women characters (from a Jungian perspective) in *Anne: The White Woman in Contemporary African-American Fiction* (1990).<sup>4</sup> Two more recent works worth mentioning here, though not theoretical in emphasis, are Jane Davis's *The White Image in the Black Mind* (2000), which presents a broad typology of white characters in African American literature, and Renee Curry's *White Women Writing White* (2000), critiquing the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, H.D., and Sylvia Plath in the context of their whiteness. It is, however, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) which may be credited with having catapulted whiteness studies to the center. In this now seminal theoretical work, Morrison argues that white canonical authors like Melville, Poe, Twain, Cather, and Hemingway construct their own white identities and literary expressions vis-a-vis an American Africanist presence. (Euro-Africanism, she suggests, finds similar expression in colonial literature.)

In Morrison's provocative argument, "Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable" (59); it derives its associations of freedom and Americanness through the directly oppositional constructions of blackness as the "not-free" and the "not-me." More recently, Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible* (1998) analyzes American literature from the seventeenth century to the present to show how whiteness was, and continues to be, formed in response to various hegemonic agendas, particularly by way of establishing a national identity amongst heterogeneous peoples, potentially divided by class.

As Babb has shown, since the earliest white settlements in America, whiteness has served as the binding glue that has defused class tensions and minimized differences in nationality, language, and religion amongst a disparate people. In particular, poor whites have historically not only resisted identification with the poor of other racial groups but have used the whiteness of their skin to prop up their sense of self—a sentiment mockingly echoed in Elma Stuckey's poem, "Enslaved": "Don't want your food, out of my sight!/ I'm clinging to this—I'm white, I'm white!" Such assertions of whiteness on the part of white workers have often manifested themselves in violence: from the economically motivated lynchings of African Americans during post-Reconstruction, to the murder of Vincent Chin at the hands of disgruntled autoworkers in 1982, to the barbarous killing of James Byrd in Texas in 1998. Incidents like these reflect not only the white supremacist's sense that America belongs to whites but also the flaunting of white skin in much the same way that other kinds of property are flaunted, to assert superior status.<sup>5</sup> Even outside this violent context, as Du Bois put it, "the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage" (700). This being the case, to insist on attaching qualifiers to whiteness constitutes an evasion of the privileges that accrue to white skin per se—the kind of privileges Peggy McIntosh has itemized so eloquently in "White Privilege and Male Privilege" (1988).

Two moments in U.S. history highlight the emphasis on skin color as it relates to the construction of a civic polity. The first, as Babb points out, was during the early years of the republic, when the United States as a fledgling nation was articulating its criteria of democratic participation. "The Naturalization Law of 1790 limited the privilege to 'free white persons' and an amendment passed in 1870 extended the right to 'aliens of African nativity or persons of African descent'" (Chandrasekhar 19)—a gesture which was no more than a legality with little substance in practice. The second overt articulation of skin color and its relationship to citizenship occurred during the early decades of the twentieth century, the period when large numbers of immigrants came to the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia. The Chinese Exclusion Act had been in effect since 1882, in response to widespread agitation by Irish workers, while the Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan (1907) and the Asiatic Barred Zone (1917) were implemented to limit immigration from Japan and to shut out entry



of individuals from parts of Asia not covered by the Chinese Exclusion Act or the Gentlemen's Agreement. In the meantime, Asians who were already in the United States attempted to apply for citizenship. Two illustrative cases are those of Bhagat Singh Thind and Takao Ozawa. Prior to 1923, Indians were the only Asians to have been granted citizenship, on a case-by-case basis, on the presumption that Indians belonged to "the same racial classification as the 'Europeans' and to 'the Mediterranean branch of the Caucasian family,' while the Chinese and Japanese belonged to the Mongoloid group" (Chandrasekhar 19–20). Thus, when Takao Ozawa, a person of Japanese descent, applied for citizenship in 1922 he was denied it by Justice Sutherland who justified his decision by stating that "white" was synonymous with "Caucasian," and Ozawa's being Mongoloid precluded his candidacy for citizenship. Emboldened by this reasoning, a year later Bhagat Thind Singh, of Indian descent, applied for citizenship as a Caucasian. The same Justice Sutherland ruled, however, that Thind and other nationals were ineligible for citizenship because the term "white persons" as understood by the common man did not apply to Thind who, although scientifically Caucasian, was clearly not white. In denying Thind citizenship, Sutherland was refuting his own earlier argument in the Ozawa case that equated "Caucasian" with "white person." Thus, Justice Sutherland felt no compulsion to be consistent: while in the Ozawa case he had used race as a criterion of citizenship, in the Thind case his criterion was color.

Ian Haney Lopez's analysis of these and other representative cases aims at establishing three essential points: that the legal system in the United States has stringently demarcated the boundaries of a whiteness that is understood to be inherently superior; that through such demarcations, it has instituted exclusionary laws—like those barring entry into the United States and prohibiting interracial marriage—which have determined what most "Americans" will look like; and that by determining who will be empowered and who will not, the law "translates ideas about race into the material societal conditions that confirm and entrench those ideas" (14). Lopez concludes that whiteness as it has been constructed is of too much value to whites to be given up easily.

A decade prior to Lopez, Virginia Dominguez had taken on the fascinating question of whether one can declare one's racial identity at will, regardless of law or physical appearance. In *White by Definition* (1986), she uses the 1982 case of Louisiana native Susie Phipps, who, at forty-eight years of age, went to court to have herself declared white, challenging thereby a Louisiana law that, despite her white skin, deemed her to be black because she was descended from a black slave. Dominguez argues provocatively that there is a complication embedded in the legal system with respect to racial identity:

To speak of "what one is" is to imply that some identities are fixed, given, unalterable. A change of phrasing makes this clearer. "Freedom to choose

what one wants to be” would contain an implicit denial of the fixedness of identity in that it suggests that it might be possible to realize one’s wishes. “Freedom to choose what one is becoming” would convey a similar message. In this case, will and desire seem irrelevant, and extraindividual forces are patently evident in the very phrase “is becoming”; but the words openly assert a process of becoming. The activity would be continuous rather than completed. In both of these alternative forms, there is room for individual choice and action and, thus, room for conceptualizing freedom to choose one’s identity. But how, after all, can we possibly conceive of freedom of choice if we take identities as givens? And if there is really no choice, how are we to interpret the legal granting of “choice”? (4)

Lest we consider Dominguez’s argument to be merely a legal or academic exercise, let us not forget that understanding how race operates is critical to redressing past wrongs. Dominguez articulates the paradox inherent in a focus on race: “Protecting the rights of blacks require[s] the maintenance of a system for distinguishing blacks from whites, even though the system had come into existence for the purpose of disenfranchising those identified as black” (5). Indeed, the anti-race-based initiatives in California and Texas testify to the current reluctance to engage with the unspoken privileges accruing to whiteness. A focus on race, the anti-affirmative action advocates argue, disenfranchises whites. However, such a perspective ignores that “white,” too, is a race and, specifically, that it confers certain material privileges upon its members. Whiteness, as Cheryl Harris reminds us, is “property” that can be cashed, sometimes in ways not immediately apparent. To treat whiteness as the unspoken norm is to fail to see precisely how those who are perceived as white have come systematically to acquire this capital, buttressed by the particularities of the law.

### WHY LITERATURE?

Thinking in terms of scripts has liberatory potential; scripts after all can be broken, rewritten, or played subversively out of context.

—Alison Bailey

In his essay, “Reflections on Critical Whiteness Studies,” Parker Johnson asks why, given the pioneering impact on whiteness studies of Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, “there has not been a noticeable rise in the study of whiteness in literature in a manner similar to the social sciences” (3). We believe that one reason for the relative silence of literature is the 1970s emergence of cultural studies and the confluence of such phenomena as ethnic studies and feminism. These movements

fueled the drive to examine narratives and testimonies not generally identified as literary and to interrogate the social and political forces operating within the institutions and systems of civic formations. The term “literature” has itself been called into question, with Marxist critics exposing the hegemonic value judgments undergirding the criteria for calling a piece of writing “literature.” The challenge to traditional notions of “the literary” has resulted in the application of the practice of literary analysis to “objects” other than literature. Not surprisingly, then, literary scholars find themselves somewhat on the defensive when they focus on material that falls under the traditional understanding of what constitutes literature.

We do not offer this collection defensively, however. Beyond presenting this anthology as a corrective to the literary “silence” in whiteness studies, we eagerly take on the challenge posed to us by one reviewer of this volume: “Why literature, and how are ‘literary representations’ (as opposed to other discourses?) particularly useful (or obfuscating?) for gaining critical access to ‘white women?’” The reviewer observes that most available volumes on whiteness studies follow an interdisciplinary cultural studies approach, pointing out that “some have argued that ‘cultural studies’ as a model of ‘mixed’ or inter-disciplinary knowledge production offers a kind of study inherently consistent with the business of displacing neutral self-reference that is at the heart of critical ‘whiteness studies’ . . . [S]cholars in cultural studies will reasonably contend that inter-disciplinarity as such is the only likely basis for a properly ‘anti-essentialist’ . . . interrogation of ‘race.’”

Acknowledging the profound usefulness of a cultural studies approach, we nevertheless believe that it need not displace a discipline-specific methodology such as literary analysis. If anything, the sensitizing of those intellectual and emotive muscles and nerves that are called into play when studying the ways in which language can be manipulated is often essential to penetrating nonliterary “texts” and apprehending their impact, as the New Historicists have demonstrated. (We are not analyzing here the term “literary” or the criteria for its applicability, only observing that certain discourses and authors have been more readily identified as literary than others and that these identifications are subject to the social and cultural forces operating at any given historical moment.) Given that knowledge is primarily discursive and that self-consciousness is also discursively experienced, it seems obvious that a heightened ability to “read”—whatever the “object” of our reading—is critical to any project that involves an effort to transform or shift from one set of conditions to another alternative set of conditions. In answering the question “What good is reading literature?” Steven Knapp asks us not so much to engage with our “wildly various relations to literary texts but with the possible ethical and political benefits of literary *interest* . . . —that is, an interest in representations that construct new compositions of thought and value out of pre-existing relations between words and objects and the responses associated with them (where the ‘objects’ in question are actually types of persons, actions, and situations as well as ‘things’)” (89).

Before probing the implications of literary interest as Knapp defines it, and discussing its connection to ethical or political matters, let us contemplate what Derrida says about literature: “literature seemed to me . . . to be the institution which allows one to *say everything, in every way*” (36). This power, “*in principle . . . to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history*” (37), enables literature to be a subversive instrument or to be a space in which one can simultaneously consider conflicting perspectives, multiple scenarios, and, as Knapp says, “generate *new possibilities of valuation*” (89). Knapp cautions that complexity of perspective is not inherently a “good” thing, for there is no guarantee that such a stance leads to the ethically appropriate response (where what is to be deemed “appropriate” can itself be contested). In a brilliantly argued commentary, Knapp declares that perhaps the

moral benefit of literary interest lies not in any capacity to tell us which values are the right ones, but far more modestly, in the way it helps us to find out what our evaluative dispositions *are*. Perhaps a complex scenario [such as is constructed by the play of imagination to be found in literature] sets up a kind of experiment in which we test not the moral worth of one scenario against another one, . . . but the relative strengths of our own responses to the alternative scenarios. (100)

Further, Knapp wonders why we should value this self-consciousness generated by our responses to the complex scenarios of literature. His answer, while not entirely satisfactory, points us in a fruitful direction toward making a connection between literary interest and the sphere of politics and civic society: “The kind of person we happen to value—by no means the kind of person valued at every time in every human society—is the kind that wants to check itself out, know how it feels, be aware of its inconsistencies” (101); we value such a person because in a democratic society founded on the principle of pluralism, it is imperative that we all engage in this kind of self-analysis in the context of our relationship with both those like and unlike ourselves. Knapp argues that

A person who discovers, by reading literature, the conflicts, inconsistencies, and overdeterminations among her own dispositions is a person who can read *herself* as an instance of descriptive representation. She therefore encounters in herself an analogue of the predicament . . . detected in a descriptively representative legislature: how to choose a particular course of action without suppressing the competing interests that all have a right to be registered in the same representational space. She finds herself embodying the ascendancy of information over action, of representation over authority, of “thick description” over simplifying principle, that reappears at various levels of the liberal state. (101–02)

The limitation of Knapp's very fine line of reasoning is that it assumes a reader who is open to the discoveries of conflicts, inconsistencies, and overdeterminations within her/himself. But to dismiss literature's potential as an instrument of self-knowledge within the context of alternative scenarios, and the implications of such knowledge for a civic society, simply because of those readers who do not take advantage of the opportunities an encounter with literature offers, is to discard a tool of immense value. Recently, one of us taught an introductory course in the art of literature, covering short fiction, poetry, and drama. The students were mostly from disciplines other than English and were taking the course to fulfill a humanities requirement. As is typical of most readers unfamiliar with literary analysis, the students entered the course wary of poetry. However, by the end of the semester, a majority of the students commented that the poetry section had been their favorite because in poetry meaning had not been immediately available to them; they liked having to work with the intricacies of language to make meaning and appreciated hearing the different ways in which their classmates engaged the material. On a similar note, Derek Attridge reminds us of "the paradox that reading in the strictest sense is called for by that which is *unreadable* in a text" (3). By "reading" Attridge here means engagement, interpretation, analysis, the act of going beyond noticing the obvious imitative and referential aspects of literature to those elements that cannot be immediately assimilated. Whiteness studies, then, can be seen to involve two steps—first, the making visible of whiteness to those who do not see it even as they wield its power, and second, having made whiteness visible, to present it as needing to be read, needing to be examined beyond its immediate visible manifestations.

Almost thirty years ago, Roland Barthes in his pioneering work with photographs and other visual images made the distinction between *denoted* message and *connoted* message, in which the denoted message of a photograph (or painting, drawing, cinema, or theatre) is the message without the code, i. e., the imitative reproduction of reality (scene, object, landscape), and the connoted message is the "second meaning, whose signifier is a certain 'treatment' of the image (result of the action of the creator) and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain 'culture' of the society receiving the message" (17). Working with a similar distinction he made between work and text, we can steer ourselves toward an understanding of the particular advantages of literature in the interrogation of a construct such as whiteness. Barthes explains:

the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field. The opposition may recall (without at all reproducing term for term) Lacan's distinction between 'reality' and 'the real': the one is displayed, the other demonstrated; likewise, the work can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses), the text is a process of demonstration, . . . ; the

work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of the discourse . . . the *Text is experienced only in an activity of production*. (156–57)

We would argue that literature is the realm that most readily encourages, perhaps even demands, a textual engagement with its artifacts; in other words, a literary approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of the ways in which we are constituted and constitute others in language. Thus, social and political institutions, systems of commerce, frameworks of education, all of the intricate grids of interaction upon which a civic society is founded can be “read.” Going back to Barthes’s distinction between display and demonstration, one could say that literature makes us dissatisfied with mere display; it sharpens in us the appetite to know how and why things operate in certain ways, it makes us demand demonstration. With regard to whiteness studies, therefore, we would argue that literature sensitizes and prepares us to probe the intricacies of current structures of whiteness and to imagine and envision alternate modes of its manifestation.

#### WHY WHITE WOMEN?

As the often-silent benefactors of both white supremacy and legal protections that were made possible by civil rights movements led by people of color, white women in particular have a moral and ethical responsibility to place the abolition of white supremacy at the forefront of their personal and political agendas.

—Dreema Moon

White women occupy an interstitial position in the sociocultural landscape of the United States, European nations, and those countries in which the residual effects of colonialism still operate. At once racially privileged and sexually marginalized, their in-between status theoretically should give to white women the resources and the sensibilities to become a significant mediating force in bringing together the center and the periphery and eventually blurring the distinction between the two. But the practices of white women have not always optimized on this potential. Though they have been energetic in calling for solidarity among all women in opposing patriarchy, white women have not been equally motivated to examine their own racial privilege. Feminists of color, including Third World feminists, have long criticized white women’s blindness in this regard. The impassioned articulations of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Cherrie Moraga, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, to name a few, speak to the necessity of a nuanced examination of the intersection of race and gender. Womanhood does not result in automatic bonds of shared oppression, they reason, particularly when much of the oppression is racially inflected. The response to this criticism in Marilyn Frye’s

1981 address is relevant to contemporary white feminists who continue to be accused of insensitivity to race:

It seemed like doing nothing would be racist and whatever we did would be racist just because we [white women] did it. . . . Am I racist if I decide to do nothing? If I decide to refuse to work with other white women on our racism? My deciding, deciding to do anything is poison to her [a feminist of color]. Is this what she knows? . . . It becomes clearer why no decision I make here can fail to be an exercise of race privilege. . . . What is this “being white” that gets me into so much trouble after so many years of seeming to me to be so benign? (Qtd. in Mike Hill 6)

Frye’s final question reveals the blind spots that our book seeks to illuminate. While white women have long considered themselves to be the champions of the down-trodden, the essays in our volume complicate this perspective. They do not deny the many instances in which white women have, indeed, labored side by side with racial Others to challenge white male privilege, but the essays probe these instances to uncover the intricate tangle of social, political, and psychological forces underpinning these moments. By displacing attention from race to an exclusive focus on gender, white women—and white women writers—abdicating their ethical and moral responsibility in the fight against racism. As Renée Curry observes, “Keeping oneself innocent of racism enables one to write with racially fraught vocabulary and yet to ignore its implications” (16). Curry’s book demonstrates “ways to read poetry written by white people as racial works that reflect white worlds and white imaginations” (170). Our collection takes the examination of the white female imagination beyond the realm of poetry into narrative, and beyond the United States into other territories.

Literature, with its ability to render complexity (by creating alternative scenarios to a particular ethical, political, or emotional problem against which readers and characters test their responses), forms an ideal vehicle for exploring white women’s actual and potential roles, and the possibilities and limitations of their agency, in the effort to undercut the oppressive force of whiteness. Indeed, as Nina Baym and others have shown, literature in nineteenth-century America became a powerful vehicle through which white women began to envision new roles for themselves beyond the domestic space and beyond the paternalism of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Because literature is seen as disconnected from reality, a realm apart, it invites the performance of bold and subversive acts within its pages, the testing of new possibilities of being. These fictive scripts may be seen as preparation for transformative and life-altering moves in the real world. Indeed, Frances Twine underscores the central role of literature in the fight against slavery, pointing to the domestic space as the potential site for subversive practices by white women: “The war over slavery was first fought not on the Civil War

battlefields but in the popular literature of the antebellum period, most of it read by women; it was through an appeal to the sanctity of motherhood that the evil of slavery—with its disregard for the holy bond between infant and mother—was rendered most luridly visible to white America” (“White Mother” 144). One could debate the extent to which literature was the moving force in the fight against slavery (notwithstanding Abraham Lincoln’s quip to Harriet Beecher Stowe that she was the little lady who started all the trouble), but Twine is right to remind us that family/home represents a crucial site for the dismantling of racial oppression. In discussing the birth of the literary genre of memoirs by white mothers of black children,<sup>6</sup> Twine writes that these texts can be read in multiple ways—“novellas of consciousness, parenting guides, antiracist treatises, and feminist autobiographies”—and that they “point to some of the conditions under which an antiracist consciousness might be formed among white women in the post-Civil Rights United States” (148). Twine quotes Jane Lazarre’s eloquent cry, “What is this whiteness that threatens to separate me from my own child?” and notes that “[l]ike abolitionist literature, this appeal bases its emotional force on the power of motherhood to speak across difference” (qtd. in Twine 151).

Let us not forget, however, that white women have also used the family/home not to subvert but to preserve the status quo. Dreama Moon, who focuses on the production of white femininity as a middle-class bourgeois enterprise, argues that white girls are “made” at home through certain communicative practices: “The enculturative process is *racialized* within the cultural space of the white family/home in that the patriarchal production of ‘good girls’ within the family is inextricably linked to the racist production of ‘good *white* girls.’ In short, becoming a ‘good girl’ within the context of white family relations often takes on a racialized dimension as what it means to be ‘good’ is frequently bound up with issues of racial loyalty and solidarity” (181). Given the centrality of home in the process of creating white girls, and the role of women as primary socializing agents of white children, Dreama Moon calls on white women to “build ‘home’ as antihegemonic spaces in which engagement with the movement against white supremacy is made a cultural norm” (196).

Similarly, Vron Ware has shown how white women use the domestic space and their power within it to further racism. Discussing white women’s racist reasons for having elected a neofascist party in a racially diverse neighborhood of England during the elections of 1993, Ware declares that their justifications were couched in the rhetoric of protecting the home. Their complaints against Bangladeshis and Blacks centered on the defiling of the domestic space through the smells, spitting, cockroaches, and disease that allegedly accompanied the presence of Bangladeshis and Blacks. They also pointed to the practice of polygamy among Bangladeshi Muslims and saw in its unfairness to women the “mark of an inferior civilization.” As Ware observes, ironically, the dutiful young white mother “becomes a cipher for racial intolerance through the vulnerability and powerlessness that



[white femininity] comes to articulate. . . . [T]he enduring image of a seemingly passive, but wronged, white femininity can be seen to occupy a central place in the contemporary histories of racist domination and female subordination” (“Island Racism” 300). White women give racism a veneer of innocence and of family values; in doing so they invest themselves with a vulnerability that has easily been deployed to oppress men and women of color.

Most glaringly, the institution of American slavery—one of the mightiest edifices of racial oppression anywhere—was constructed on the body of the fragile, pure, and chaste white woman, a strategy that Minrose Gwin compellingly documents. Moreover, eloquent personal narratives by white Southern women testify to the ways in which their supposed vulnerability and innocence continue to be mobilized in the service of racism. For example, Kim Hall writes, “Fear has been central to the meaning of whiteness in my life: fear of miscegenation, fear of non-white others, fear of being disowned” (29). Another Southern white woman, Amy Edgington, credits Civil Rights’ warriors with helping to “create a world where [she] ha[s] the chance to become a true adult instead of remaining a child who must do what white men dictate” (43). With regard to white Southern women’s fiction, Rebecca Aanerud’s reading of Kate Chopin’s heroine, Edna Pontellier (*The Awakening*, 1899), demonstrates compellingly the intersections of literature with sociocultural and historical forces. Accounting for the novel’s poor reception, Aanerud locates its publication in the historically specific moment of post-Reconstruction, a time marked by widespread lynchings of black men, allegedly for raping white women. In this sociohistorical context, *The Awakening* presented a heroine who threatened the position of the white male in his exercise of power over the black male: “Edna Pontellier is a white woman whose ‘immoral behavior’ cannot be attributed to black male lust. As such her transgression threatens to destabilize not only the authority of white men over white women, but the authority of white men over black men” (44). Aanerud’s analysis reminds us of the skills that we acquire from reading literary texts, and the value of these skills in reading the text of life. Further, it underscores the ways in which certain literary texts have been embraced by white women as celebrations of a “raceless” feminism, with a blind eye to the racial dynamics that are central to their themes and even to the manner of their reception in the literary world.

It would appear, then, that white women have a special responsibility to undo racism, given the benefits they have derived from it and given the deliberate and unwitting ways in which they have abetted it. Echoing Adrienne Rich in “Disloyal to Civilization,” Alison Bailey makes the case that rather than feel paralyzed by knowledge of one’s racial privilege and the impossibility of disposing of it completely, white women should use that privilege to topple racist institutions. Refusing to use one’s privilege in the service of antiracism can amount to a waste of resources, or worse: “Although the master’s tools may not be able to successfully dismantle the master’s house, they may be just the tools we need to gain access to

its contents. . . . Furthermore, refusal to use the tools privilege affords us to break into the master's house may amount to protecting the house" (99). The essays in this anthology explore the extent to which, and the ways in which, white women use the realm of fiction and poetry to acknowledge or ignore privilege, to attack or protect edifices of racism, and to take up arms in, or retreat from, the war against oppression.

### THE ESSAYS

Primarily literary in focus, the essays cover extensive historical and geographical ground. They address the early captivity narratives of white women in seventeenth-through-nineteenth-century America and bring us all the way up to the present moment in the trials of Louise Woodward and Manjit Basuta, both British nannies, accused of causing the deaths of their infant charges in the United States, in two separate cases. In addition to the United States, the essays take us to Egypt, South Africa, Cameroon, India, and Thailand. We seek through this collection to understand how the intersection of whiteness and gender manifests itself in different historical and cultural settings. The majority of the essays focus on this intersection as it occurs in literary texts. We have included an essay on film primarily because women are now becoming active players as cinematographers and directors, and so questions of representing racial Others will become as relevant for cinema as they are for literature.

Three of the essays in this volume are nonliterary in focus. We include them in an opening section, "Brown on White," to demonstrate how, as Gayatri Spivak has observed, it becomes necessary to read the world as text if we are to appreciate fully the complexity of what we live and experience. Susan Koshy's essay in this volume, "South Asians and the Complex Interstices of Whiteness: Negotiating Public Sentiment in the United States and Britain," is particularly relevant to a discussion of the "silence" surrounding whiteness. Situating South Asians vis-à-vis whiteness in the United States and Britain, Koshy draws attention to the protean quality of legal definitions of whiteness as they have been applied to South Asians. While in Britain South Asians have been categorized as black, their racial identity in the United States has had a more complex history. Positioned outside the black-white polarity that usually governs race in the United States, South Asians become an ambiguous racial category, whose very ambiguity, legally and socially, provides a nuanced perspective on whiteness. Koshy's essay also draws attention to South Asian American invisibility, resulting from such ambiguity—an invisibility which is, however, quite different from the ways in which hegemonic whiteness is invisible, as South Asian American invisibility serves to silence and erase, rather than empower. Koshy goes on to examine the Louise Woodward case as a focal point for her argument, demonstrating how the white British au pair accused

of killing eight-month-old Matthew Eappen could be cast as innocent by public, media, and judge, while the South Asian origins of the victim's father, Dr. Sunil Eappen, and his marriage to the white Dr. Deborah Eappen served to throw that "innocence" into sharp relief. Koshy argues that the highly publicized case "marks the limitations in middle-class South Asian American strategies to claim an identity unmarked by race. The Woodward case dramatizes the ways in which, despite the rhetoric of the American dream, class does not provide access to the immunities and privileges of whiteness for racial minorities."

In a companion piece, titled "Whiteness and Soap-Opera Justice: Comparing the Louise Woodward and Manjit Basuta Cases," Monali Sheth picks up where Koshy leaves off. Sheth demonstrates that while Woodward profited from her own whiteness and the nonwhiteness of the Eappens, Manjit Basuta—a British South Asian day-care provider in San Diego—could not play on the sympathies of the white mainstream in Britain or the United States in the same way, despite strong evidence of circumstances that ought to have operated in her favor. Analyzing Basuta's case in light of Woodward's, Sheth underscores the "highly racialized issues of immigration and nationality" that had tacitly determined the terms of the public debate surrounding the Basuta trial, on both sides of the Atlantic. Sheth contends: "While both Woodward and Basuta were immigrants to the United States, only Basuta was seen as the 'racial other' in the courtroom and the American public consciousness. It is this difference that made Woodward's alien status something that could be overlooked, while it made Basuta the 'perpetual alien.' Similarly, in the U.K., both Basuta and Woodward were British citizens, but Basuta alone, as the 'racial other,' could not achieve the ultimate standard of 'Britishness.'"

If whiteness gave to Woodward the cashable capital of "innocence," then, as Vijay Prashad's essay argues, whiteness conferred upon Mother Teresa the quality of benevolence. She was, in Prashad's words, "the quintessential image of the white woman in the colonies, working to save the dark bodies from their own temptations and failures." His examination of her does not detract from her extraordinary work but shows how her elevation to mythic proportions by the Western media results in two types of silencing: (1) it inhibits an appreciation for the brown-skinned women and men of India who, like her, labor to help the dispossessed and the diseased, and (2) it forestalls a critique of the economic structures that give rise to the conditions which dispossess the Third World in the first place. The essays by Prashad, Sheth, and Koshy, together comprising Part I of our volume, raise the social, political, and economic issues that readers will reencounter in Parts II and III, as textual renditions of white women in racialized spaces.

The essays in Part II, "White American Womanhood," focus on such renditions in an exclusively American context. The first three illustrate the limitations of white women's attempts to break out of the stranglehold of white patriarchy. Rajini Srikanth's essay, "Ventriloquism in the Captivity Narrative: White Women Challenge European American Patriarchy," focuses on white women's articulations

of selfhood in the popular genre of the American captivity narrative. Drawing on a few selected texts, Srikanth shows that white women in Puritan, colonial, and nineteenth-century America used the captivity narrative to mount an oblique challenge to Euro-American patriarchy. During their period of captivity by Native American tribes, some white women gradually came to realize aspects of their selfhood to which they had not had access within the constraints of Euro-American femininity and domesticity. Within the context of the racialized Native American Other, these women felt “at liberty” to act in ways that would have been deemed transgressive and unacceptable in “freedom”: they exhibited independence, physical violence, boldness, and deception. This new selfhood, Srikanth argues, could be entertained and expressed because the reading public perceived the women’s challenge to be directed against the Native American, not against white patriarchy. However, the challenge was at best limited; the captivity narratives were appropriated into the new republic’s agenda of nation building and westward expansion. Srikanth’s essay discusses the ways in which white women held captive “used” the racialized Otherness of the Native American to enact new ways of being; but cloaking this new self behind the Native American Other enabled the co-optation of the narratives by the nation’s leaders to justify their encroachments upon the Native Americans’ ways of life.

Similarly, Peter Chvany’s essay, “‘Those Indians Are Great Thieves, I Suppose?’: Historicizing the White Woman in *The Squatter and the Don*,” underscores both the potential and the limitations of Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s late nineteenth-century critique of U.S. expansionism. Highlighting her insightful linkage of race and class in the oppression of Californios, Chvany argues, however, that situating Ruiz de Burton’s novel in the context of white femininity—in terms of both its fictional representations of white women and the author’s self-representation as a white Mexican—reveals the limitations of her critique of oppression. As Chvany demonstrates, Ruiz de Burton’s focus on the racio-economic oppression of upper-class white Californios casts San Diego as the “prostrate South” of post-Reconstruction politics, at the continued expense of the truly dispossessed Native American and African American population.

Like Srikanth and Chvany, Diana Paulin examines the political potential of white women’s narratives. In “‘Let Me Play Desdemona’: White Heroines and Interracial Desire in Louisa May Alcott’s ‘My Contraband’ and ‘M.L.’,” Paulin revisits nineteenth-century domestic fiction by white women like Alcott, to illuminate their subtle but highly-charged politics. She discusses the author’s radical depictions of interracial relationships involving white women and light-skinned black men, and her bold challenge to the myth that white women needed protection against “burly black brutes.” To this extent, Alcott’s white heroines serve as models of transgressive female agency, but, Paulin argues, her stories privilege white women’s agency and identity vis-à-vis black male powerlessness. Although, as such, the narratives do not significantly challenge racial hierarchies—indeed,

they replicate the racial myopia of nineteenth-century women's rights activists—Paulin's essay explores the ways in which they might “provide space for reevaluating the transformative power of popular and sentimental fiction.”

The next two essays in Part II invert the white female gaze, focusing on black authors' representations of white women. They demonstrate two very different—almost antithetical—dimensions of the black gaze, however. In “Getting in Touch with the True South: Pet Negroes, White Crackers, and Racial Staging in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*,” Delia Konzett challenges prevailing critical trends which dismiss Hurston's *Seraph* as a novel pandering to a white audience. Framing her discussion in the context of Hurston's controversial essay, “The ‘Pet’ Negro System” (1943), and spotlighting the poor white “Cracker” heroine of *Seraph*, Konzett illuminates the novel's engagement with the intersecting and conflicting roles of race, class, and gender in the articulation of the New South. As Konzett argues, Hurston's analysis eschews binary constructions, laying “bare a messy system in which traditional oppositions of perpetrator and victim, master and slave, white and black, overlap and are at times indistinguishable from one another.”

Contrasting sharply with Hurston's nuanced politics, Malcolm X and Iceberg Slim form the focus of Terri Oliver's essay, “Prison, Perversion and Pimps: The White Temptress in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Iceberg Slim's *Pimp*.” Yoking together these two African American male writers with diverse backgrounds and motivations, Oliver first locates their narratives in what she identifies as a long tradition of “white temptresses” in black male autobiography. She goes on to show how both Malcolm X's and Iceberg Slim's narratives, in particular, challenge the equation of white femininity with innocence, recasting white women as a physical and psychic threat to black manhood. As such, Oliver asserts, their narratives rewrite the classic tragic-mulatta story, in which a light-skinned black woman meets her death through a white male villain. Mindful of black feminist criticism of sexist ideologies of black masculinity, Oliver argues nevertheless that these authors' confessional and cautionary tales about the white, thrill-seeking temptress not only respond to the historical memory of lynching but call attention to the reenactments of that racio-sexual dynamic in the 1960s era of the Civil Rights Movement.

Part II concludes with Zhou Xiaojing's essay, “Subject Positions in Elizabeth Bishop's Representations of Whiteness and the ‘Other.’” Zhou takes issue with critics who, interpreting Bishop's poems as voicing a single subject position—that of a privileged white woman—attempt to explain the poet's perspectives on race, gender and class, in that light. Informed by Foucault's theory of subject positionality and Bakhtin's theory of double-voice, Zhou's argument posits that allowing for multivocal subjectivities reveals complex and many-sided perspectives on race, class and gender in Bishop's poems, especially as these affect relationships between women. As a white woman who wrote, often ambivalently, of race- and class hierarchies at home and legacies of colonial oppression in Brazil, Bishop

straddles both Part II and Part III of our collection, forming seamless links between the subjugation of nonwhite Others within the United States and abroad.

Part III, “The Global ‘Memsahib,’” focuses on imperial and colonial contexts of white women’s narratives.<sup>7</sup> The silences embedded in Bishop’s poetry—silences surrounding white lesbian sexuality—become the focus of Paula Krebs’s analysis in “How Can a White Woman Love a Black Woman? The Anglo-Boer War and Possibilities of Desire.” Unlike male homosexuality, sexual relationships between women of different races, within a specifically colonial frame, remain generally uninterrogated. Krebs’s essay makes good the omission by locating the 1899–1901 Anglo-Boer War in South Africa within the seldom discussed context of the history of lesbian sexuality. Focusing on an account by Emily Hobhouse (herself a white Englishwoman) of the relationship between a white woman and her female African servants, Krebs’s interest lies not in demonstrating evidence of lesbian relationships but in exploring the discursive possibility of lesbianism in a particular colonial context. Referring to Eve Sedgwick’s idea of “a powerful unknowing as unknowing, not as a vacuum,” Krebs argues that the antiwar discourse of the times relied on the inadmissibility of interracial lesbian desire to promote a more politically expedient image of same-sex sympathy.

Like Krebs and Paulin, Céline Philibert also explores the implications of interracial desire, using film as text. Her essay, “From Betrayal to Inclusion: The Work of the White Woman’s Gaze in Claire Denis’s *Chocolat*,” explores the ways in which Claire Denis, herself a white woman who grew up in Cameroon, challenges traditional cinematic viewpoints on colonialism. Analyzing the construction of the white female gaze in *Chocolat*—a gaze which she characterizes as both racial and sexual in nature, Philibert sees Denis’s film as aligning Cameroon’s struggle for national identity with Denis’s own attempts at self-definition. As such, Philibert argues, *Chocolat* “constructs, restructures, and transforms viewing strategies as well as gender and racial determinations,” both at the personal and public levels, in a colonial context. Philibert’s essay takes us to a Francophone location. Her inclusion in this collection is not meant to suggest an undifferentiated whiteness among women in different racialized contexts; rather, because she focuses on the white woman’s gaze within the domain of heterosexual and cross-racial desire, her essay offers a valuable comparison to Paulin’s and invites an analysis that keeps at the forefront the dimensions of history, culture, and geographical location. Interracial desire in Louisa May Alcott’s nineteenth-century United States and in Claire Denis’s twentieth-century remembrance of her childhood in colonial Cameroon are both similar and different; we urge readers to find the points of intersection and divergence.

Another angle on gendered colonial discourses forms the focus of Melissa Miller’s essay, “The Imperial Feminine: Victorian Women Travellers in Egypt.” Miller addresses optimistic feminist analyses of narratives by white Victorian women, arguing that the primary texts do not support the image of “a Victorian heroine

who, presumably unlike her male counterparts, displays a greater sensitivity to difference and reluctance to dominate.” Miller’s analysis focuses on the racialized, distinctly Muslim, space of Egypt—an area too often neglected by race theorists and literary scholars. Standing as it does at the confluence of several cultures and continents, Egypt complicates such categories as “African,” “Asian,” “Mediterranean,” and “Arab.” Miller’s essay challenges the notion of Victorian women as innocent bystanders in this liminal space, providing a historical link to Sheth’s and Koshy’s contention that white femininity operates as innocence in contemporary court cases such as Louise Woodward’s. Spotlighting texts by Luci Duff Gordon and Amelia Edwards, Miller considers the implications of the terms “mother,” “teacher,” and “man” in relation to these two women, arguing that Gordon and Edwards assume a “racialized masculinity,” as they conflate whiteness with the power of masculinity to dominate the Arab Other in a “feminine” manner.

Part III closes with Susan Morgan’s essay, “Chinese Coolies, Hidden Perfume, and Harriet Beecher Stowe in Anna Leonowens’s *The Romance of the Harem*,” bringing together many of the themes and concerns of the preceding essays. Although Siam (Thailand) withstood official colonization, Leonowens’s Victorian subjectivity, and her position as governess-narrator in Siam’s royal palace, link her narrative to imperialist discourse. Morgan analyzes a section in Leonowens’s relatively obscure second memoir, demonstrating how it interrupts conventional colonial discourse in such “realistic” travel narratives by Victorian women as those discussed by Miller. The racialized space of Siam here also represents the very gendered space of Nang Harm, the royal city whose gates confine the women of the king’s harem. Focusing on the British governess-narrator, Anna, and her Siamese friend, Sean Klean, a royal concubine who recreates herself as a Buddhist Harriet Beecher Stowe, Morgan argues that the identities of the three women are fluid, permeable, and overlapping in this female space. As such, they not only represent a seamless connection amongst the history, politics and rhetoric of freedom in Siam, Britain, and the United States, they also overturn racial and colonial hierarchies. In particular, the “teacher” of Miller’s discussion gets reinscribed in Morgan’s interpretation of Leonowens’s narrative as “student,” and the text demands a parallel process of (un)learning on the part of the reader. This is not, Morgan argues, a simple reversal still operating within the language of imperialism; it represents, rather, a “politics of metamorphosis” (as opposed to a politics of identity) which favors a plurality of subject positions, making possible narrative moments “when gender works to suspend . . . the veil of imperialist assumptions which drives the narratives of so many nineteenth-century British travel memoirs.”

Morgan’s critical engagement with Leonowens’s Stowe brings us back full circle to the racialized space of the United States. We hope that, collectively, our volume will demonstrate that white women can, if they so choose, alter the hegemonic implications of their whiteness in racialized spaces, preempting any temptation to allow a politicized consciousness to fray into paralyzing guilt. We hope

that our collection invites the white woman, instead, to abdicate from “pedestals” of power and privilege, to her own advantage as well as that of others—permitting herself, in the words of a poem by Adrienne Rich, to be “dragged by the roots of her own will/ into another scene of choices.”

## NOTES

1. Mike Hill, and Chris Cuomo and Kim Hall are among the few whiteness scholars who foreground this fact in their respective Introductions. Cuomo and Hall further note that “White men and African American men seem to listen and respond to each other as if the huge amount of scholarship by feminists of color (and the growing body of work by antiracist white feminists) doesn’t exist” (6).

2. See Susan Koshy’s essay in this collection. South Asia is a geopolitical label comprising the seven countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. South Asian Americans trace their ancestry to one or more of these countries.

3. Visit the websites of the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA) and the South Asian American leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT) for news reports on the backlash against South Asians. The SAALT report compiles over six hundred separate incidents in the aftermath of September 11: <http://www.saja.org/tipsources.html#backlash>, <http://www.saalt.org/>.

4. See also Samina Najmi’s dissertation, *Representations of White Women in Works by Selected African American and Asian American Authors*.

5. See Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”

6. Twine discusses in particular Maureen Reddy’s *Crossing the Color Line* and Jane Lazarre’s *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*.

7. “Memsahib” (Madam) was the local term for Englishwomen in British India, and has since found its way into English literary texts, as well as the Oxford dictionary. We extend the use of the word here to connote the class- and power relations that inform white female subjectivity in any colonial location or imperialist context.

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