Reviews

“White-Life” Literature Reconsidered

Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel
by John Charles
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whatever one thinks about the provocative thesis of Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?*—that African American literature came into being and came to an end concurrently with the rise and fall of Jim Crow—Warren’s book has functioned as a call for scholars to articulate what, for them, the term “African American literature” defines, who defines it, why we feel that definition is important, and what might be the consequences of our definition. Of course, writers and editors have been addressing such questions ever since they began anthologizing African American literature, a phenomenon Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has tracked all the way back to 1849 (32). But scholars are increasingly bringing such questions to bear on their analyses of the literature itself, as evidenced by a plethora of recent work by Ivy Wilson, George Hutchinson, John Young, Gene Jarrett, and James Smethurst, among others.1

It is precisely such questions that motivate John Charles’s recent book *Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel*. Charles’s fascinating book reexamines the limits and repercussions of contemporary definitions of the field by focusing on a body of texts that don’t comfortably meet our expectations of the African American canon. These are texts that fall both within and without common-sense definitions of African American literature: what Charles calls the “white-life” novels of the 1940s and 1950s, novels that were written by African Americans and yet are not about African American protagonists. These novels include Frank Yerby’s *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946), Ann Petry’s *Country Place* (1947), Zora Neale Hurston’s...
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Seraph on the Suwanee (1947), Willard Motley’s Knock on Any Door (1947), Chester Himes’s Cast the First Stone (1953), Richard Wright’s Savage Holiday (1954), and James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room (1956). Many of them are now out of print, and with the exception of Baldwin’s book comparatively few scholarly articles have been written about them. They are often conveniently excluded from overviews of their authors’ publications, and when they are mentioned, it is usually in an apologetic tone. And yet, as Charles notes, the very ubiquity of these novels in the late 1940s and early 1950s belies our sense of them as anomalous. Indeed, as Charles shows, writers of the period saw these novels as constituting an important new trend in African American writing, the stakes of which are lost so long as the novels themselves remain invisible.

According to Charles, white-life novels are typically excluded from the canon for two reasons. First, as Jarrett claimed in his important precursor to Charles’s work, Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature, white-life novels do not fit our expectation of what Jarrett calls “racial realism”—the idea that “black literature must bear a realist, or mimetic, relation to blackness” (qtd. in Charles 215). Second, according to Charles, these novels do not accord with our expectation that when African American authors do write about whiteness, “their central concern is to attack white supremacy” (15). In other words, white-life novels have been marginalized because they do not appear to be about either black life or anti-black racism, and if they are about race insofar as they are about whiteness, they are not sufficiently critical of that whiteness to count as “black.” But Charles, as he argues in his conclusion, rehabilitates these texts at least in part by showing them to conform to our primary desire that “black” texts be about race, as well as our secondary desire that they do progressive race work. They simply don’t do those things in the ways that we expect.

Prior to Charles’s work, if critics discussed white-life novels at all, it was typically to dismiss them as symptoms of black conformity with white liberalism, or as a move away from an earlier, more radical protest tradition. From this point of view, “white-life” novels were little more than a fundamentally flawed attempt to produce literature that white readers of the time would have recognized as “universal” because they were not “black.” However, as Charles describes in detail in his first chapter, many of the authors who wrote them felt that the protest tradition that dominated expectations of African American literary
production in the early 1940s actually reinscribed the racial hierarchies protest novels supposedly protested. For these writers, the protest tradition itself too often conformed to the tenets of white liberalism, insofar as it promoted a paternalistic and pathologizing view of blackness. Charles’s provocative thesis, therefore, is that white-life literature is less a product of liberalism than it is a challenge to liberalism’s core assumptions.

The first of Charles’s key contentions is that white-life literature does not focus on white lives because they are more “universal,” but because that focus enables black writers to avoid reproducing the images of black abjection that white liberalism repeatedly demands. By refusing to represent black lives, black writers also registered their resistance to white liberalism’s hypocritical tendency to protect white privacy by putting black lives under surveillance. White-life novels thus offered black writers what Charles calls “racial privacy,” which he defines as “access to forms of social, political [and] authorial autonomy unconstrained by dominant-culture notions of race” (8). Writing in this mode, black authors asserted their authorial autonomy by resisting hegemonic prescriptions on black writing. At the same time, their focus on the “scenes and signs of white privacy” (9) enabled them to show how the “ideals that underwrite normative white American identity” don’t just injure African Americans but “actually injure whites themselves” (10).

Charles’s second major contention is that these writers’ refusal to represent black lives enabled them to resist the equally problematic force of white sympathy. As Charles notes, “acts of sympathy” are often “more self-affirming than selfless,” with the intended or unintended “effect of bolstering rather than eliminating hierarchy and difference” (17). Thus, when Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) asked white readers to bestow their sympathy upon abject black characters, it arguably reinforced the very hierarchical relationship between whites and blacks that it claimed to protest. Richard Wright, in composing *Native Son* (1940), insisted that his protest novel was one that did not operate within that sympathetic structure—that did not give “bankers’ daughters the consolation of tears” (454). James Baldwin, however, famously rejected *Native Son* and the protest novel altogether in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), in part because Baldwin did not believe that the uneven power dynamic of white sympathy could be separated from the protest novel form. White-life novels, Charles argues, may have emerged as an alternative challenge to that structure. Rather than presenting troubled
blacks to the sympathetic gaze of white readers, black authors of white-life literature turned their own sympathetic gaze on troubled white characters, and thus reversed the hierarchical power structure upon which sympathy depends. In other words, against assumptions that black authors must beg for the sympathy of white readers, the authors of white-life novels asserted their authority within American culture by bestowing their sympathy upon whites.

As Charles notes, the only major African American writer of the period who did not write a white-life novel is Ralph Ellison (211). But Ellison’s influence is evident throughout Charles’s book, particularly in Charles’s two key contentions about racial privacy and sympathy. Ellison’s 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal’s influential sociological study, *An American Dilemma*, for instance, accepted Myrdal’s claim that white racism is the real “problem” in America, but refused Myrdal’s presumption that black populations were mere degenerative or pathological effects of that “problem.” Likewise, in “The World in the Jug” (1964), Ellison argued that Irving Howe’s claim that protest fiction is the only appropriate mode for black writing exposed Howe’s investment in whites having authority over black lives and black literary productions. In both pieces, Ellison identified the white liberal view of blackness as one that uses the guise of white surveillance and sympathy to pathologize and police black individuals. In Charles’s words, “the white liberal ‘needs’ black protest because sympathy for black suffering generates white liberal authority” (54). In response to white liberalism’s “othering” of blackness, moreover, Ellison frequently insisted that his identification with American culture was as radically important as his critique of it. Likewise, Charles argues that by claiming racial privacy and acts of sympathy for themselves the authors of white-life novels “construct their vision of American and Western culture, as Americans and Westerners, while also negotiating and contesting the racial order that attempts to construct them as somehow outside and beyond ‘normal’ national culture” (16).

After a first chapter that describes the context for the emergence of the white-life novel as a response to the white liberal demand for protest fiction, Charles devotes one chapter to each of the major novels in this genre: Ann Petry’s *Country Place*, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, Frank Yerby’s *The Foxes of Harrow*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*, and Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday*. In most chapters, his approach is to work comparatively, revealing the veiled racial politics of *Country Place*,
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*The Foxes of Harrow,* and *Savage Holiday* by reading them alongside Petry’s, Yerby’s, and Wright’s other fiction, or reading the veiled queerness of Willard Motley’s *Knock on Any Door* and Chester Himes’s *Cast the First Stone* against Baldwin’s more explicitly queer *Giovanni’s Room.* Charles’s readings are carefully and convincingly connected by the repeated contention that, in various ways, these novels argue that “masculine ideals of autonomy and self-mastery are achieved not through isolation and the domination of others, but . . . through sympathetic . . . connections with those deemed ‘other’” (19). If this contention is reminiscent of the claims of protest novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that white heteropatriarchy might be reformed through sympathetic connections with those deemed “other,” the difference here is that these novels make their case by depicting the negative effects of white male domination not on black lives but on white ones.

Despite his goal of reclaiming the political value of the novels he discusses, Charles does not shy away from their politically problematic aspects. In his discussion of *The Foxes of Harrow,* for instance, he shows that Yerby supplants “the white-supremacist ideological project at the core of Mitchell’s [*Gone with the Wind*] with a Popular-Front-inflected, national- ist parable of American manhood” (132). However, Charles also argues that Yerby’s sympathetic treatment of the white male hero is motivated both by a desire “to correct Mitchell’s representation of blacks” and by a desire “to put Scarlett back in ‘her place.’” The novel thus simultaneously critiques white supremacy and expresses longing for the patriarchal power that was denied Yerby as a black man. Similarly, Charles argues that Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwannee* pits Jim Meserve and his wife Arvay against each other as potential models of Southern culture, with Jim representing a progressive, interracial future for the South and Arvay representing the South’s racist and regressive past. To affirm a racially progressive future, therefore, Arvay must finally admit that she owes her position in society to Jim’s vision—and thus that her rape and subsequent “enslavement” to Jim via marriage “is in fact her good fortune” (Charles 175). Charles’s fascinating reading of this perplexing dynamic reveals the extent to which Hurston seems to be projecting onto Arvay an inversion of anti-black dogma: here, it is the poor white who must be “civilized” by enslavement, surveillance, and sympathy. Like Yerby, Hurston seems ambivalently split between a critique of white heteropatriarchy and a desire to occupy the position of white patriarchal power.
Charles is careful to attend to the gender politics of almost every novel he discusses, but the book as a whole never satisfactorily accounts for the implications of Hurston’s choice to punish whites via the proxy of a white woman, and to make that punishment come in the form of a white man. Also under-discussed are the ways in which Ann Petry’s *Country Place* fits this gender paradigm: in Petry’s novel, the most racist and materialistic characters are white women who have an inappropriate amount of control over the men in the lives and thereby over the structure of society as a whole. The social order is only reconfigured when a previously emasculated man finally puts his racist, materialist, and murderous wife in her place. Charles’s readings of each of these novels do individually acknowledge these issues, but his book never directly addresses the odd pattern that emerges when they are read alongside each other, a pattern in which achieving a more progressive racial order repeatedly depends on affirmations of white male authority. The racial content of that authority may be restructured, but male dominance over women is retained. Given the tendency of mid-twentieth-century liberal sociology to use black divergence from normative gender roles to pathologize black communities, it may be that these authors were trying to turn that argument back on white communities, to demonstrate that normative white communities are always already “pathological” by their own standards. On the other hand, it may be that these novels are simply not as critical of heteronormativity as our current assumptions would lead us to hope or expect.

Charles’s chapters on Yerby and Hurston stand out from the whole in part because they draw attention to aspects of the white-life novel that continue to feel problematic even after Charles’s own important reconceptualization of the genre. For Charles, these novels are internally conflicted, complicated, and disrupted by Yerby’s and Hurston’s repressed rage toward anti-black racism. Yerby’s novel depicts a longing for white patriarchal power, while Hurston’s depicts a longing for white punishment. However, these contradictions and disruptions might lead one to wonder whether sympathy is really the desired effect here, or if it is in fact the object of criticism. I would argue that Jim Meserve’s violent “civilizing” of Arvay might indicate that the “sympathetic” future of the South that Jim represents is no less violent and exploitative than the South’s explicitly racist past. Read in this way, Hurston’s novel might not “fail . . . in its efforts to sustain its own utopian vision of a New South prospering through interracial sympathy”
(181), as Charles argues, so much as it purposely demonstrates the failure of sympathy to overcome hierarchical power structures. Perhaps this genre of novels turns a sympathetic eye on white characters not just to escape, but also to expose, sympathy’s oppressive dimensions.

In his conclusion, Charles returns to the idea that these novels seek to “transcend” (210) hegemonic notions of black writing through which “black selfhood” becomes “little more than an effect of white power” (8). His chapters, though, more often indicate that these books are less about transcending hegemonic notions of blackness than they are about rejecting transcendent notions of whiteness. In other words, as Charles’s close readings reveal, these novels are committed to demonstrating the extent to which white selfhood is little more than an effect of white power, or an effect of the anti-black, anti-woman, anti-queer prescriptions out of which white heteropatriarchy is formed. In this respect, whether or not these novels reconstruct white heteropatriarchal selfhood matters less than how they show white selfhood to be shaped by historical forces. This itself is a powerful rebuke to the assumptions of white liberals like Irving Howe and Gunnar Myrdal, who saw the ways that black life had been shaped by historical circumstances, but failed to understand the way that white lives were inescapably shaped by quite different, though thoroughly damaging, operations of power. More attention to this aspect of his own argument in Abandoning the Black Hero’s conclusion would have helped Charles secure the white-life novel’s unequivocal place not only within the African American literary canon, but also within the canon of works available and of interest to critical race studies more generally.

All of this is not to diminish the important interventions made by Abandoning the Black Hero, but rather to point to the further questions that Charles’s line of reasoning demands we address. Again, the irony of Charles’s framing of the book is that he resists our critical insistence that African American literature do progressive race work not by dismantling that criterion, but by demonstrating that these novels meet that criterion in an unexpected way. Ultimately, those aspects of the novels that continue to make us uncomfortable are precisely those that seem to reinforce rather than reconstruct or resist white heteropatriarchy. Even my suggestions for how else we might read these novels have been efforts to bring them more closely in line with this deeply engrained criterion. In this way, Charles’s book not only pushes us to rethink our expectations of the field, but also encourages us to recognize how thoroughly attached to those expectations we have become.
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Note

1. See their contributions to Hutchinson and Young’s collection, Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race since 1850.

Works cited


