

The *CI* Review

Lee Bebout. *Whiteness on the Border: Mapping the US Racial Imagination in Brown and White.* New York: New York University Press, 2016. 304 pp.

Stephanie Li. *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 248 pp.

JOSEPH DARDA

In the spring of 2015 Lee Bebout, an English professor at Arizona State University, had what he calls his “inadvertent brush with white supremacy fame” (p. xvii). Upon learning of Bebout’s course “U.S. Race Theory and the Problem of Whiteness,” a conservative student blogger wrote an article lamenting that the university allowed professors to “harass people for their apparent whiteness.”¹ The next day, Elisabeth Hasselbeck invited the student to air her grievances on the morning show *Fox and Friends*. Bebout’s course became national news and attracted protestors and then counterprotestors to Tempe. The student’s belief that she and other white Arizonans had been wronged by antiwhite “political correctness” would resurface in the 2016 presidential campaign, with Republican candidate Donald Trump riding a wave of white racial fear to the White House. Trump’s rise has renewed interest in critical whiteness studies, a field that had its high-water mark in the 1990s with groundbreaking work from such scholars as Cheryl Harris, George Lipsitz, and David Roediger. While the public debate surrounding white racial politics in the Trump era has been driven by sociological studies of postindustrial white communities—titles like Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016) and J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016)—ethnic studies scholars such as Bebout and Stephanie Li have sought to make whiteness visible and strange through the introduction of new comparative-racial frameworks that offer an antidote to narrow identity-based understandings of white grievance.

At the time of his run-in with Fox News, Bebout had drafted half of what became *Whiteness on the Border* (2016). His ambitious second book moves across three centuries to examine how whiteness has been articulated as Americanness through representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans. Taking a cue from Richard

1. Lauren Clark, “White Professor Teaches ‘Problem of Whiteness’ Course at Arizona State,” *Campus Reform*, 22 Jan. 2015, www.campusreform.org/?ID=6225

Wright, Bebout argues that the United States does not have a “Mexican problem” but a white problem. Or, as Toni Morrison once put it, “the subject of the dream is the dreamer.”² Turning from Morrison’s “Africanist presence” to what he calls whiteness on the border, Bebout draws together the insights of critical whiteness studies and Chicana/o studies to show how whiteness has been made and remade through the construction and policing of a material and imagined brown/white racial border. He reads “tropologically” across media—from fiction and film to cross-border matchmaking services—to argue that “whiteness on the border is not simply a racial and national project” but also “a project that shapes and limits the stories that can be told, those that appear sensible, those that are not only legible but legitimated” (p. 208).

Whiteness on the Border begins with a genealogy and taxonomy of the Mexican other in the white mind that situates the work of such Latina/o and Chicana/o studies scholars as Arnoldo de León, William Nericcio, and Leo Chavez in relation to that of Harris, Lipsitz, and Roediger. It then traces how whiteness on the border has been constituted through white racial hatred (chapter 2), love (chapter 3), and desire (chapter 4). If Bebout’s book has a weakness, it is an overreliance on literature reviews that reveals the strain of introducing two distinct fields to each other. But that cross-field dialogue also illuminates much about anti-Mexican racism in the twenty-first century. The second chapter, for example, follows how anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o activists like Pat Buchanan have transformed the Chicano nationalist discourse of Aztlán into a Chicana/o plot to overthrow the United States. A new iteration of an old idea, the Aztlán-reconquista narrative targets Chicanas/os and Mexican immigrants, but it also, Bebout writes, “exposes the deployment of white victimhood as a means of forging racial solidarity” in an age of multiculturalism (p. 81). His book asks that we recognize how whiteness, Americanness, and *whiteness as Americanness* have been forged at the border of brown and white.

Li’s *Playing in the White* (2015) also investigates whiteness as a construct and material condition founded on representations of blackness and brownness but with a twist. Rather than focus on how white cultural workers imagine their whiteness in relation to black and brown bodies, Li shows how mid-twentieth-century black writers began scrutinizing the meaning and making of whiteness long before the advent of critical whiteness studies. Through meticulous considerations of understudied “white life novels” by Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, and William Melvin Kelley, she articulates a new method for reading whiteness in black literature. Whereas critics have treated novels like Hurston’s *Seraph and the Suwanee* (1948) and Wright’s *Savage Holiday* (1954) either as meditations on racelessness or as black stories dressed in white, Li demands that we see them as studies in whiteness that unsettle what it means to write about race in America. These novels do not neglect blackness but rather address it from a different direction by attending to how white characters imagine blackness in the interest of consolidating their whiteness. White life writing teaches us, she argues, that black literature is not black just because of the racial background of its authors and characters but also because of patterns of representation and intertextual relations that may challenge “the racialized demands we impose on literature” (p. 29). Her readings reveal how black literature is in part constituted by a subtle engagement with whiteness as a calculated façade formed through the interaction between racial signification and social structure. That engagement with whiteness unites, for example, Hurston’s treatment of white-voiced black vernacular (chapter 1) and Wright’s meditation on a white man’s failure to enact his whiteness (chapter 2) as *black* literature.

2. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 17.

Playing in the White follows an old-school literary studies model with five chapters dedicated to the work of five authors: Hurston, Wright, Petry, Baldwin, and Kelley. The extended attention given to just a half-dozen novels results in elegant and thorough readings but leaves Li's book feeling sometimes too narrow and underhistoricized, given the eventful years of cold war militarism, racial liberalism, and civil rights it addresses. It does, however, advance a crucial rethinking of how we categorize and sort literature and other cultural forms. In the fourth chapter, Li turns to Baldwin's second novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956). While critics have read the whiteness of Baldwin's narrator, David, either as a mask for Baldwin to examine his own sexuality or as a kind of blackness in disguise, Li shifts the conversation to David's whiteness to demonstrate how he marshals blackness to secure his own fragile whiteness and negate his homosexual desire. Her nuanced reading identifies blackness and whiteness as "repositories for sexual fears especially as they impact notions of masculinity" and "the sheer panic at the center of such fanciful creations" (p. 141). The generic categories we foist on texts can, Li's book suggests, hide as much as they reveal.

Cynthia Young and Min Song observed in 2014 that "whereas once it hid behind claims of universality, now whiteness is on the march."³ The three years since have rendered their claim a truism and given new motivation and urgency to work from ethnic studies scholars like Bebout and Li. It is time, it seems, for critical whiteness studies to be on the march as well.

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Seth Brodsky. *From 1989, or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. 368 pp.

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What do Mstislav Rostropovich, Leonard Bernstein, and David Hasselhoff have in common? This question may read like a joke, and in a way it is. But since Sigmund Freud, jokes are never just jokes. Understood as symptoms, they demand to be taken seriously—especially when it is history that is playing the joke on us. That these three performers all marked the fall of the Berlin Wall with concerts in its vicinity; that all three concluded their performances by gazing "deep into the interior elsewhere" (p. 43); that all three used the occasion to celebrate the empty signifier "freedom"—such commonalities aren't just funny (though they are that). They also bespeak the powerful fan-

3. Cynthia A. Young and Min Hyoung Song, "Forum Introduction: Whiteness Redux or Redefined?" *American Quarterly* 66 (Dec. 2014): 1073.