
Mary F. Brewer. *Staging Whiteness*. Middletown, CO: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. 236p.

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In *Staging Whiteness*, Mary Brewer examines the social history and cultural developments of race in conjunction with British and U.S. theatrical productions in the 20th century, presenting the theater as a “site of ideological struggle” within which Whiteness has been constructed and valorized. Her analysis yields that part of the discourse surrounding U.S. and British theater practices anticipates and enables the White subject. One of Brewer’s goals is to show how Whiteness operates by demonstrating the ways in which race and racism function both at the institutional level and at the micro-level of the individual. While the book inevitably touches on Blackness as Other, it focuses on representations of Whiteness to expose the apparatuses that sustain racism. Each chapter discusses the social history informing the period under study followed by specific play analyses and shows how some theatrical productions function against the historical boundaries of race representation of their cultural milieu while others remain within those parameters. When the theater offered representations that critiqued White power, it enacted possibilities to resist dominant ideologies. Furthermore, by showing the myriad White subject positions within 20th-century British and U.S. theater, Brewer problematizes Whiteness as a “unitary, fixed entity” not only exposing it as an artifact of multiple discourses but also questioning it as a pure racial identity. Although British and U.S. cultures differ in historical constructions of Whiteness and histories, they share the illusion of a constant and consistent White identity.

Brewer selects both canonical and non-canonical plays based on their focus on Whiteness in each historical period, concentrating on how they reproduce or challenge dominant myths regarding the White race and how constructions of Whiteness have changed throughout the 20th century for various reasons. Furthermore, Brewer connects performance or theatricality to constructions of race, finding that Whiteness is inherently theatrical. Rather than offering a grand narrative of Whiteness, however, she traces its historicity to illustrate how the concept of Whiteness mutated from the turn of the 20th century through the 1990s.

Brewer begins her discussion by historicizing the concept of race. Oppression founded on racial difference had not always been conceived in terms of skin color; rather, it initially rested on degrees of moral and cultural refinement, as in the case with British racism over the Irish already in the Middle Ages, and came to be viewed in terms of skin color only when British imperialism needed to justify ideologically

its enslavement of Africans. Furthermore, the racialized schema offered a visible representation of difference. By the mid-19th century, scientific, economic, religious, and political ideologies were all used to rationalize colonialism despite the inconsistent mythology these contradictory discourses engendered.

Brewer argues that in addition to dominant discourses, literary and theatrical ideas also had a powerful effect on popular perception of the racialized subject. From 1900 to 1930 theatrical productions were both influenced by these historical debates and contributed in generating and conveying an image of what it meant to be a White British national. More specifically, George Bernard Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* questions contemporary cultural myths supporting colonial endeavors, exploring options to the prevailing social order. Similarly, W. Somerset Maugham's *The Explorer* interrogates White racial mythology, while simultaneously presenting the virtues of White colonialism through the epitome of an Edwardian leading character. Nevertheless, it does not denounce British imperialism; rather, it presents an ambiguous representation of the colonial project and reaffirms the purportedly natural nexus between Whiteness, heterosexuality, and power by positing homosocial bonds as superior even to heterosexual ones. W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6* also illustrates the ways in which Whiteness retains its cultural authority despite its essential inconsistencies.

The investigation continues by tracing the evolution of the prevailing notions of racial difference through British colonial discourse, showing how constructions of Whiteness operate in terms of the colonial myth of Manifest Destiny. Upon contact with American soil, White settlers considered themselves superior to the natives in terms of social practices—White English capitalist “forms” centered upon private ownership of commodities and enclosed land as opposed to the natives’ communal ways and tribal spiritual practices—rather than physical characteristics. When great numbers of indentured servants had earned release, however, the land-owning gentry, feeling threatened by the possibility of White and Black laborers joining forces, advanced race-consciousness over class-consciousness. The mere possibility that non-Whites could come to resemble White Europeans threatened the British sense of superiority, and by the late Victorian era, competing types of Whiteness and Otherness appeared and circulated. As a result, Blackness became tantamount with the subhuman. Although the concept of “variegated Whiteness” emerged to account for the great numbers of non-English speaking immigrants, White ethnicities could be a part of Whiteness eventually, while Blacks remained firmly secured at the bottom of the U.S. socio-racial hierarchy. Naturally inferior non-White ethnic groups, according to this view, could better themselves by approximating Whiteness. Brewer examines Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, which challenges the myth of the

American Dream even for White people; Langston Hughes' *Mulatto*, which explores cross-racial sexual relations; Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, which demonstrates the nexus between sex-gender subordination, racial oppression, and class domination; and Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, which exemplifies how myth functions to smooth over contradictions within social relations.

The effect of WWII altered the social context of race in both the Britain and the United States. By the end of the war, the British Empire began its decline. With the crumbling of the British Empire, great numbers of formerly colonized people immigrated to Britain. While colonial subjects were welcome as members of the war effort, when the war ended, they were felt as rivals for jobs that the British felt belonged to them. As Britain struggled to create a new, postwar identity, Whiteness became the unifying symbol of Britishness, and British society began to mirror U.S. racist practices. Bridget Boland's *The Cockpit* reflected these practices, making an appeal for racial tolerance. T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* also explored but did not resolve classical colonial tensions, while John Osborne's *The Entertainer* displayed how racial fictions create modern British identity.

In the U.S., for the first time in history, the willing involvement of Blacks was crucial for victory, both at home and in the armed forces, yet Blacks still did not gain entrance as first-class citizens. Further, after the war, anxieties over the future of White dominance emerged, as enemies of the American-way-of-life also became an issue, blending anticommunist dogma with racial politics during the '50s. Any attempt at reform was deemed un-American. Brewer looks at Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge* in this section.

Next, Brewer explores the 1960s, as the U.S. economy continued to flourish and the conditions of education, technology, culture, and leisure improved considerably—for White Americans. The Civil Rights movement and anti-Vietnam war sentiment contributed to the realization that the U.S. was not as invincible as was once thought, and the confidence in the moral exclusivity and manifest destiny also eroded. Brewer looks at Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, and David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* in terms how they interrogate Whiteness and look at the underbelly of the American way of life. Further, she looks at the feminist movement, which, while also attacking White male hegemony, was in many ways complicit with it. Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* reveals how the Whiteness begins to fracture as the race-gender binaries come undone.

The last two chapters of the book look at the rise of neoconservative discourse in the 1980s and the accompanying White backlash. Women and homosexuals

joined Blacks as scapegoats, as the dominant group sought to contain them while attempting to resolve the crisis in White masculinity. Nevertheless, both in the U.S. and in Britain, even though Whiteness came under scrutiny, Blacks remained at the bottom sprung of society, relegated to the lowest paying jobs regardless of education and skills. Brewer concludes by discussing John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's *The Island of the Mighty*, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*, Philip Osment's *This Island's Mine*, and Michael Ellis' *Chameleon*.

Staging Whiteness is not only for teachers and students of 20th-century British and American Drama but also for anyone interested in Whiteness and Critical Race Studies. Its major strengths are its remarkable tracing of U.S. and British history, lucid use of critical race theory, attention to the multiple discourses that complicate Whiteness, and cogent analyses of theatrical productions. Brewer reveals Whiteness as the historical product of social and economic competition, a fragmented myth, and ultimately an illusion. ✱