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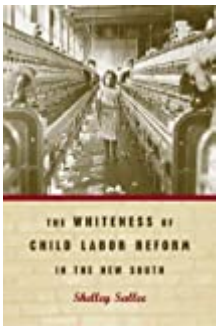

Shelly Sallee. *The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. xi + 154 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2448-7; $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2570-5.

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The Souls of White Folk

Peruse any bibliography or index from any scholarly work dealing with issues of race from before the late 1980s and you will be unlikely to find any reference to "whiteness." It certainly is not the case that white people have been underrepresented in the literature; rather, in discussions of race, "white" was often normative and anyone else was racial.

Now, however, whiteness studies abound in literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, film and art studies, and history, and this is by no means an exhaustive list. Do your own quick title search. Articles, books, and reviews work "whiteness" into wordplay and puns. My favorite thus far is "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being," and it turns up too often to merit a particular citation. However, with such a wide range and such a short history, it comes as no surprise that, as an analytical concept, "whiteness" is still a bit fuzzy.[1]

In 1990, Toni Morrison gave the Massey Lectures that would be published in her provocative little book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* Professor Morrison was not concerned particularly with whiteness as a historically constructed racial category. Rather, she meant "whiteness" as the apparent absence of "blackness." She challenged us to rethink the racial silence in canonical American literature and to examine the importance of the Africanist presence hidden in plain view in the works of major American authors. Historians, on the other hand, have utilized the concept of "whiteness" to examine the racial identity, or identification, of particular groups in particular historical contexts. That is, whiteness might refer to group identity, or it might refer to an outside observer's view of a group. In the American context, the major work in the first instance is David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, and in the second, Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race.* Other scholars have employed the concept of whiteness in an effort to change fundamental attitudes about racial categories. The difficulty lies in the fact that the explanatory power of whiteness is diminished considerably by its elusiveness.[2]

In *The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South*, Shelley Sallee employs the concept to evaluate the

trajectory of child labor reform in Alabama in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Sallee asserts that northern reformers appealed to race rather than to class in their efforts to organize opposition to, or at least regulation of, child labor. This strategy allowed for an alliance with southern progressives who were suspicious of a class-based labor strategy. Moreover, a race-based strategy worked to provide the foundations of a "transregional" Progressive movement. Sallee argues that "northern reformers made concessions to white supremacy in the South in exchange for support for national reform goals" (p. 2).

Sallee begins her narrative with a chapter on the mill owners of Alabama, contrasting the management styles of Howard Gardner Nichols and Braxton Bragg Comer, both of whom employed children in their mills. Nichols, a Massachusetts transplant, opened a mill for the Dwight Manufacturing Company in Alabama City in 1895. Nichols envisioned a model village populated by employee-families who would be provided respectable housing, recreation, and instruction. However, Nichols died in an accident after just a year on the job and his paternalistic plan died with him. Comer, an Alabama native who later would serve the state as governor, opened a mill with local investors, and was more concerned with the survival of his business than the nurture of his employees. His was the model that mill owners would follow. In the cash-strapped New South, mill owners were happy to employ children, but generally were less willing to provide the sort of welfare capitalism that Nichols had planned.

One thing that mill owners could not do to save money was to employ black workers in the mills, although some worked on the factory grounds. Efforts to do so failed in the face of resistance from white mill workers. Sallee suggests that this indicates that "whiteness ... meant more to the workers than to their employers," a conclusion that coincides with that of Michelle Brattain in her study of mill workers in Georgia.[3]

The whiteness of the mill labor force was important to two other groups. Southern boosters rejected the critique of the poor white laborer as a "cracker," and instead "stressed his whiteness and capacity for sobriety and industriousness," and offered northern investors the southern white worker as "an excellent alternative" to immigrants, who were presumably less white (p. 35). Progressive reformers on the other hand focused on the whiteness of the child workers in the mills to promote sympathy for the exploited laborer. Organizer Irene Ashby, who played an important role in cultivating a national constituency for labor reform in the South, pointed out that the employment of white children in greater numbers in the mills meant that African-American children were more likely to get an education.

After a failed attempt to pass reform legislation in 1901, leadership in the movement passed to Edgar Gardner Murphy, founder of the Alabama Child Labor Committee. Working alongside Alabama's reform-minded white clubwomen, Murphy and his allies avoided inflammatory class-based criticism of mill owners, and instead offered a sentimental appeal for the protection and nurture of white children. Not only did child labor keep white children from attending school, but it encouraged the southern mill version of the deadbeat dad, an idle white father who would send his family into the mill while he avoided the responsibilities of southern manhood. In 1903, with the support of the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, Murphy was able to claim some success with the passage of a watered-down child labor law.

In a chapter entitled "Whiteness of Reform," Sallee investigates the particular strategies Murphy and other reformers employed in their attempt to gain broader support among white southerners and their potential northern allies. "In a highly racialized context where differences and otherness were racially categorized to justify subordinate social, political, and economic status," she writes, "reformers sought to create a positive racial identity for cotton mill children" (p. 101). The problem the reformers faced was the fact that the more the mill workers were perceived as degraded "crackers," the more their "claims to the privileges of whiteness diminished" (p. 100). It was only as Anglo-Saxon children that they would deserve protection from exploitation. Reformers emphasized their whiteness so that they would merit sympathy that they might not otherwise have received.

By distancing the protection of mill children from the issue of labor reform, the Alabama Child Labor Committee and the Women's Clubs forged alliances with reformers outside of the South. These northern reformers, in turn, abandoned their efforts to improve the lot of African Americans, so that they could focus on reforms that would benefit southern white children. The legislative successes that resulted from this alliance in Alabama were meager, but changes in demand and labor availability during the First World War reduced the need for child labor in the cotton mills. More important,

Sallee asserts, was the creation of a "transregional Progressive culture," that politicized southern women who might not otherwise have participated in reform efforts at all. "As a result of interregional reconciliation in the name of reform for white children," she writes, "a transregional Progressive culture emerged as Alabama women embraced new images of themselves and their work and found support for demanding more of their region than their local movements had imagined" (p. 116). Compulsory education, female suffrage, and prohibition follow where "the whiteness of child labor reform" lead.

Sallee's emphasis on the "whiteness of child labor reform" provides a thematic coherence to her study of child labor reform in Alabama. I would not dispute her conclusion that "the desire to force the South to enact more meaningful reforms encouraged the continuation of the focus on the whiteness of southern children" (p. 123). Certainly race, white or otherwise, is a historical construction; certainly it varies in place and time and is exploited by individuals and groups for particular ends. Certainly, reformers in Jim Crow Alabama are likely candidates for the latter.

Placing whiteness at the center of her analysis creates two problems for Sallee. The first is the old wine/new bottle problem. It is not new to assert that poor whites in the South benefited from the privileges of their race; or that southern reformers, be they populists or progressives, played that card; or that northern reformers readily abandoned the cause of African Americans in the South for the sake of transregional reconciliation and reform. We long ago learned these things from Du Bois and Woodward, and their students. When Sallee writes that "southern child laborers were white, and reformers sought to assign meaning to this whiteness by contextualizing these workers as racialized subjects, in part by categorizing them using familiar, powerful ideologies about Anglo-Saxon superiority" (p. 93), she adds little to our understanding. Were whiteness to provide more analytical clarity to these issues, then it would certainly be a useful tool. The problem is that the meaning of "whiteness" depends on the context. It can be either in the eye of the beholder, or in the identity of the beheld. Too often "the whiteness of child labor reform" or "fictions of whiteness" conflate perspectives and ideas. When Sallee writes of the Alabama female reformers that "the whiteness of child labor reform had increasingly validated their public activism" (p. 118), she is reifying an idea into which the important insight is that it is contingent.

The other problem with whiteness as an organizing principle is that it provides too narrow a perspective on a variety of phenomena. It privileges theory over the complexity of history. Without a doubt, in southern reform race trumps class, but there are other important factors that get short shrift in this book. Changing attitudes about childhood, the role of religious institutions in reform efforts, and the peculiarities of Alabama politics disappear under a broad brush. Sallee has provided us with a good history of the efforts to address the problems of child labor in Alabama, but her contribution is diminished most when she tries too hard to provide another monograph in the field of whiteness studies.

Notes

[1]. Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *Journal of American History* 89, No. 1 (2002): pp. 154-173. This is an excellent critical overview of the field thus far.

[2]. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Roediger's sequel to *The Wages of Whiteness* was published recently. See David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

[3]. Michelle Brattain, *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Sallee does not cite Brattain's earlier work.

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