

REVIEW

Davis, Jane. *The White Image in the Black Mind: A Study of African-American Literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000.

Jane Davis's book, *The White Image in the Black Mind: A Study of African-American Literature*, argues that African-American writers have consciously and unconsciously created a typology of white identity types, one that remains fairly consistent throughout time and which should be examined because of what it reveals about overt and subtle forms of racism. Davis explains that the typology she outlines is present in "a huge amount of black literature," and she suggests that recognizing the persistence of the identity types might be "a key to freeing individuals (and thereby society) from duplicating negative forms of identity that hover as shadows over a culture, thus hindering individual and cultural progress" (3). Thus, Davis claims real political importance for black writing and for her project, both of which she believes are a part of the creation of a "liberatory mythology" (149) that seeks to liberate blacks and whites from racism.

Each chapter in Davis's book takes a different approach to the way that African-American writers look at whites. In the beginning of the book, she outlines four basic categories into which white images in African-American writing fall: the overt white supremacist, the hypocrite, the good-hearted weakling, and the liberal. These categories recur throughout the book and inform every chapter of the book. Furthermore, Davis asserts that each category represents a type of white racism, a fact that demonstrates that Davis's interest lies in exposing subtle forms of white racism. She does acknowledge that it is also possible to identify a "good white" in black literature but explains that "this type exists to such a small degree that it does not merit discussion (4). She devotes only one category to "overt" racism and then develops three more categories to consider what she says are subtle, less obvious forms of racism that whites do not often recognize in themselves. Clearly, the categories are not completely distinct from one another as Davis admits, but she uses a number of examples of white characters to illustrate how different characters can fall along the spectrum that her categories represent. Three chapters of the book are devoted to cataloguing and analyzing

various types of white racism in African-American texts, while, in three other chapters, Davis applies her typology to specific racial issues. In "Lynching Gyneolatry," for instance, she examines "the representation of white women in fiction" (55), and in "The White Problem in Today's America," she uses three nonfiction works from the 1990s to illustrate the "continual presence" of racism in the lives of professionally successful African-Americans (87).

Davis believes that her book's most important contribution is in making readers aware of the subtlety of racism. She explains, "if more whites could be so analytical of their good intentions toward blacks and how they often undermine them by a sort of unintentional white supremacy, the strain that has marked race relations throughout American history would be less prevalent" (55). Davis takes the writing of James Baldwin as the source and starting point for her assertion that "whites must be forced to look in the mirror held up to them by blacks" (15). Her book is one such attempt to "force" whites to see themselves as African-Americans see them and, in doing so, to recognize racism in themselves.

Davis's attempt to live up to the subtitle of her book, "A Study of African-American Literature," is problematic. On the one hand, Davis does consider a wide variety of literature, and she identifies her typology of white characters in literature as diverse as Charles Chestnutt's *Marrow of Tradition*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. On the other hand, she does not explain her selection criteria anywhere in the book, and it is difficult to understand why particular works and even themes were chosen to receive special attention. In fact, this "Study of African-American Literature" only examines about a dozen writers closely, examining other African-American writers very briefly. Considering that Davis looks at works from the late 19th century into the 1990s, it is easy to understand that this examination necessarily leaves out a number of important writers, but Davis spends an inordinate amount of her book considering the works of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright, excluding these authors' female counterparts and most contemporary African-American feminist writers as well. As a result of these exclusions, Davis's book seems to suggest that white women (the concern of Hughes and Wright) receive more attention in African-American writing in general than most other subjects and that regardless of historical or social context racism remains static, an idea that does not acknowledge the ability of racism to change over time as debates about race change. Of course, to have considered a broader range of texts in more depth

would have added significantly to the length of Davis's study, but in order for the book to really represent "A Study of African-American Literature" such breadth and depth are both necessary. Davis's study of racial ideology seems a bit overdetermined since she argues that the specific typology she identifies operates in the same way throughout African-American literature without ever developing and growing stronger or being effectively challenged.

This is not to say that Davis's book does no important work, however. Certainly, in addressing contemporary white readers with their "black mirror" image, Davis not only reveals subtle forms of racism but also claims authority for black writers who use white images in their work. Additionally, in specifically considering the political implications of her work, Davis offers a model for using literature to create a "liberatory mythology." She has outlined a typology that other scholars can use and has demonstrated how this typology can help to liberate white people from the negative identity types which they continually maintain and black people from being continually silenced and from racism perpetuated by ignoring the persistence and subtlety of racism.

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