

Susan Gubar: On "White Things"

What is the basic relationship of blackness to whiteness and why is it that has been dominated by white? The first stanza of Anne Spencer's "White Things"--which appeared in a 1923 issue of *The Crisis*--strikingly disentangles preponderance from power, majority from might, in its meditation on these questions.

Beginning with black human beings, Spencer's poem subversively locates whiteness as an aberration. Most of the earth and its inhabitants are colored so where did the whites come from and why, asks the poet, is the white race "free"?

Unlike black men in Spencer's poem, whose color complements the green plains, golden stars, red hills, darkened pines, and ruby rose of nature, the white race appears unnatural: Whiteness is represented by "things," rather than beings, things which are "rare" and alien, as if from a "silvered" world elsewhere. Interlopers on the earth, the whites steal (creep out) into the world of sky, earth, and sea so as to steal (appropriate) it by steeling for warfare. Indeed, the first stanza ends with a cluster of images of destruction: "white feathers of cowardice," used throughout World War I to encourage men to volunteer for the front and almost certain death; the "wand of power" as a magical, magisterial phallus or weapon; the blood drained from the bleached, blanched "white poppy-flower." Rare, expensive, silver white things have devolved by the end of the stanza to "poor" white things, for the "wand" of white power blanches or bleaches, leaching color from the earth.

In the second and final stanza of "White Things," the stealing of the whites moves beyond pilfering and pillaging to the systematic murdering of a lynch mob. When the fire of the pyre changes black into white, life turns into death, burnt flesh and skin become ashes, heads revert to glistening skulls. In this nightmare conclusion, a ghoulish "young one" swings such a skull "In the face of God" and demands that this deity "make" the world and its inhabitants "white" or, in James Weldon Johnson's term, "ex-coloured." Spencer concludes her poem, then, with a scene of lugubrious drollery reminiscent of the fates of Gus and Silas Lynch in *The Birth of a Nation*. Her ghastly Descartes/Kurtz responds to the jungle as a suitable setting for a scapegoating ritual from a theater of cruelty not unlike the lynchers dancing "round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee" at the end of Claude McKay's sonnet "The Lynching" (1920).

As a statement about the psychology of racism, Spencer's poem suggests that the marginalization of whites, their insecurity at being a minority, their guilt at appropriating a world in which they feel alien, their envy of a natural beauty not their own, all these factors combine to cause the murderous mastery of imperialist violence. Here whiteness resembles cowardice or fear and its reaction-formation, domination.

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Reversing normative ethical and spiritual valuations of color, Spencer hints that the white race should be associated with evil. For the "ghoul" who swears "by the hell that sired him" utters not a pious prayer but a daemonic curse that God "make white," and "white" rhymes here with "might." The only hope the poem holds out persists in the quotation marks of the last line

which contain the possibility that the God who made (black) men (not white ghouls) is a deity of color who will refuse to hear or heed the deadly malediction.

A powerful protest poem, "White Things" illustrates exactly how extraordinary a cultural moment occurred during the Harlem Renaissance because this poem traverses normative stories about race. By starting with a "colorful" world peopled by "Black men," Spencer topples the usual view of beginnings offered by traditional myths of racial origin.

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Unlike most earlier speculations, Spencer's poem operates under the radical assumption that black people are the "first" race in the sense that they are the originatory, natural people inhabiting a landscape of their own; the whites--Promethean and Satanic--are second-comers, sly and destructive thieves. She therefore attributes racism to white belatedness, the anxieties of whites about entering a world of green, gold, red, dark, and ruby rose colors, all of which are born and born alive, while whiteness is produced by and through death. At its most gruesome Spencer's poem implies that, though colors simply exist, whiteness must be manufactured out of sacrificed black bodies. If blacks turn white only in death, perhaps white men are dead men, ghoulish ghosts in a silvered world of Unbeing. As so often in satiric portrayals of lynching, whites are the savages who engage in cannibalism, the human sacrifice of pyring a race. The poet therefore sees the advancing, colonizing culture of whiteness as one grotesquely committed to transforming black into white and in the process murdering nature, killing colorful lives into ashen, blanched things. According to Spencer, then, white culture dedicates itself to genocidal race-change, reducing black heads to white skulls, for no other reason than the need of whites to assert dominion.

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