WHITE FEMININITY: RACE, GENDER & POWER

Katerina Deliovsky Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2010

REVIEWED BY SUSAN WHITE

"Ma, I saw the most beautiful boy in art class today. He has skin like chocolate butter," eleven-year-old Katerina Deliovsky excitedly told her mother. This innocent comment led to the dire warning from her father that if that she ever brought "one of *those* people" home she would be, without hesitation, tossed out of her home and disowned. The frightened child "was left with a very unsettled feeling that I spent much of my life trying to understand."

Thus the author sets the scene for her eventual realization of the meaning of "white femininity." Her family's outraged rejection of her when she later fell in love and had children with a Black man precipitated her "realization of whiteness."

Agreeing with feminists of colour that "white feminism" has only scratched the surface of understanding of how women become white, Deliovsky aims to dig deeper, "to remap some of the territories of 'white' femininity." Through analyzing discussions with 24 white Canadian women about their experience and understanding of their whiteness, she posits three "disciplinary regimes" as key.

The first is compulsory white heterosexuality. "Western notions of heterosexuality are culturally/politically organized to compel women's attraction to the opposite sex. [O]f equal importance is that this compulsion is toward the same "race." "White women are expected to demonstrate loyalty to whiteness—most particularly through their choice of sexual partners—and any failure to do so is met with co-

ercion and the threatened loss of the privilege that comes with whiteness. If she disobeys, the "good (white) girl" becomes the "white slut."

The second regime consists of rituals of unity and exclusion—everyday ways of performing whiteness in codes of speech, modes of thought and action which solidify white group membership and maintain relations of domination with the racialized 'Other'. Deliovsky offers explanations and examples of passive participation in these rituals that must provoke serious reflection in a white reader as to their own history and actions.

Finally, Deliovsky focuses on "normative white' femininity"—"the white' capitalist patriarchal compulsion to adopt styles and attitudes consistent with an imposed white' feminine aesthetic." Women strive to look, and act, like the feminine ideal, an ideal which is defined by whiteness, thus putting the white middle/upper class woman at the top of a beauty hierarchy and women of colour at the bottom.

Almost half of this 136-page book is devoted to a useful review of the history and major conclusions of critical race theory and the feminist "whiteness" literature. The literature review (though it could have been updated slightly for publication) and her use of this theoretical base to examine 'whiteness' in Canadian circumstances and history is an important contribution of the book.

Influenced by theory largely rooted in U.S. experience, Deliovsky argues that a "black and white binary" dominates Canadian society, just as it does in the U.S. She maintains that there is a hyper visibility to African Canadians in contemporary Canada that is not accorded to other communities of colour (thus explaining for Deliovsky why her parents warned her against Black men but not Asian or Aboriginal men).

She does recognize that in Canada's particular history, with its historically small black population and the absence of a plantation slave economy, "white" womanhood depended his-

torically more on a juxtaposition to Aboriginal womanhood, especially in the Prairies, and to Chinese womanhood in B.C. However, this regional variation in dominant racial antagonisms is not explored further, either historically or for contemporary Canada where the now much larger Black population is heavily concentrated in southern Ontario, where Deliovsky's research was carried out. If one lives in Winnipeg, one could argue that the primary perceived threat to 'white womanhood' there is seen in Aboriginal, not Black, men. Elsewhere in Canada, huge communities of East and South Asian origin face a similar racial dynamic.

Deliovsky rightly calls for more research on these variations, and whether there is a dominant Black-white binary or a more complex picture, it does not invalidate her detailed investigations of the mechanisms which create and maintain "white womanhood."

White Femininity is theoretically rich and will be useful to the academic specialist and advanced students. The personal testimonies do provide clear examples of the meaning of "whiteness" in easy to understand language. However, the dense theoretical language of much of the book limits its usefulness for the general reader and for most undergraduates.

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