

White Man Falling: Race, Gender and White Supremacy by Abby L. Ferber; White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States by Louise Michele Newman

Review by: Vron Ware

Feminist Review, No. 66, Political Currents (Autumn, 2000), pp. 157-160

Published by: [Palgrave Macmillan Journals](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395842>

Accessed: 14/05/2014 13:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Palgrave Macmillan Journals is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Feminist Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

the lot of young designers, and she closes the book with a wider plea for feminist and left-wing scholars and policy makers to take these ‘new kinds of workers’ (p. 188) seriously, rather than to dismiss them as ‘Thatcher’s children’. She writes: ‘the re-socialisation of creative or cultural work . . . , which is not unimaginable, will not and could not mark a return to the organisational forms of “old labour” but require instead a more imaginative leap’ (p. 189).

This book itself makes just such a leap. Its analysis of the design industry is often tentative, at times perhaps even speculative: it is, after all, the first to attempt a serious sociological investigation of the field. A recent article by McRobbie in *Feminist Review* angrily argued that feminist scholarship has become too fascinated by consumption and its pleasures, and has failed to ask ‘whether it is “as much fun on the other side of the counter”’ (1997: 76). It is to be hoped that the example of this truly ground-breaking book will spur the imagination of other scholars; to break out of a narrow focus on consumption and to ask important questions about women’s real lives and livelihoods today.

Merl Storr

References

McROBBIE, Angela (1997) ‘Bridging the gap: feminism, fashion and consumption’ *Feminist Review* No. 55: 73–89.

White Man Falling: Race, Gender and White Supremacy

Abby L. Ferber

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc: New York/Oxford, 1998

ISBN 0–8476–9027–X (Hbk) \$24.95

White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States

Louise Michele Newman

Oxford University Press: New York/Oxford, 1999

ISBN 0–19–508692–9 Hbk;

ISBN 0–19–512466–9 Pbk

It is over twenty years ago since Adrienne Rich eloquently demanded a reckoning with what she called ‘female racism’ in her forthright essay

‘Disloyal to civilization’ (Rich, 1979). White women had been embroiled in racist and patriarchal practices for centuries, she argued, and white feminists interested in expressing love and solidarity towards black women needed to examine this history and to take some responsibility for it. In order to do this, however, it was first essential to deal with the paralysing emotions produced by guilt, ignorance and paranoia that prevented them from addressing uncomfortable questions of race in their interactions as feminists.

Compared to the scope of Louise Newman’s book *White Women’s Rights*, Rich’s polemic now appears almost tentative, a preliminary scout party for what has become a concerted exploration into this dense and disorienting thicket of race and gender history. Guided by the ghastly gleam of white supremacy, Newman has reinterpreted the thoughts and deeds of individual American feminists, documenting incontrovertible evidence not just of the extent of ‘female racism’, but what might more bluntly be called ‘feminist racism’. As the ambiguity of her title suggests, whiteness lay at the heart of the feminist project: a political movement that demanded rights for women in general was capable of eliding smoothly into a women’s rights agenda that explicitly privileged one racialized group of women at the expense of others.

An important aspect of Newman’s book, and others like it in this growing body of feminist scholarship, is that it shows how nineteenth century feminism both took on, as well as took against, developments in male-dominated academic or at least intellectual circles. By pursuing the lives and writings of individual feminists in different intellectual climates from the 1870s to 1930, Newman is able to demonstrate the ways in which the social and political meanings of race and gender shifted through time. In her first chapter, ‘Evolution, women’s rights, and civilizing missions’, for example, she conjures up a picture of veteran activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton reading late into the night in order to keep abreast with and repudiate new theories of evolutionism that had become popular in the 1880s. Having developed her own brand of feminism in the heat of the abolitionist campaigns of the pre-Civil War era, Stanton was used to exploiting the idea that white Protestant women were eligible for the vote on account of their superior moral status. But having acceded to this dominant religious notion of sexual difference, she had to work hard to argue against a new generation of theorists who enlisted science in their arguments against women’s suffrage. In their view, the very future of the white race was threatened by the prospect of women engaging in activities that might endanger their health – specifically their fertility – or diminish their effectiveness as responsible wives and mothers.

Newman develops this theme of moving goalposts to reconstruct a world

in which freshly discovered data on the meanings of racial, cultural and sexual differences could be configured in overlapping ways, sometimes contradictory but always interconnected. Nor was it just male sociologists and scientists who produced conflicting accounts of human development; women's rights activists continually argued among themselves over the status of sexual and racial difference. 'Sometimes', Newman writes, 'the two approaches – women's sexual differences can be eliminated without racial degradation, and women's sexual differences, revalued in positive terms, are crucial for racial progress – existed side by side within the same text in an uneasy but not entirely contradictory fashion' (p. 41).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century these debates lay at the heart of political discourse on assimilation. Where their British counterparts were wringing their hands at reports of downtrodden Muslim and Hindu women in the East, many Anglo-Protestant feminists believed that the treatment of women was a key factor in rescuing (and assimilating) the so-called 'primitives' living within the US, even if this meant abolishing, for example, the Indian reservation system in an attempt to promote Christian values and save the 'race' from the spiral of evolutionary extinction. By placing the work of several women reformers within this historical context, Newman is able to show how the feminist impulse was compromised by imperialist, evolutionist thought at almost every turn. Although she cites individuals who worked closely with Indian leaders to make their voices heard, she also demonstrates how hard it was to escape dominant forms of cultural ethnocentrism and white supremacy.

One of Newman's strongest chapters explores the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose contribution to this debate on assimilation has also been scrutinized by Gail Bederman in her recent book *Manliness and Civilization* (1995). Hard to summarize in this brief review, Gilman's views on social evolution were relatively straightforward. Human development followed a strict unilinear pattern: white civilization was the most advanced since women (through education and upbringing) had begun to break down the separate gender roles. On the other hand, primitive cultures needed to adopt the specific gender roles and separate spheres that Gilman found so oppressive in her own life, in order to transcend their own racial heritage. Only then would they be in a position to qualify for true assimilation into the wider white collective.

Newman's book is a tremendous resource for anyone trying to fathom (or teach) the historical relationships between feminist ideology and race-thinking in American history. Her thesis, however, is sometimes hard to follow, despite or perhaps even because of the wealth of historical research and the painstaking documentation of these contorted theories. Leavened by some fascinating and often funny illustrations, it is still a demanding

read. Unlike Rich's overtly political challenge which was made in more utopian times, *White Women's Rights* offers a deflationary message, hardly likely to inspire fresh anti-racist zeal among a new generation of feminists: 'In short,' concludes Newman, 'feminism must find ways to challenge patriarchy without reinscribing discourses of Western domination or white superiority' (p. 185). Hard to know what else to say after all that damning evidence, but is that the end of the story? Possibly a nod towards the ways that feminists *have* found to challenge patriarchy and white supremacy together might have been more encouraging.

Abby L. Ferber's book *White Man Falling* consolidates a number of useful essays she has published recently on the dynamics of gender in white supremacist discourse. Though there are few surprises, and the author has to contend with some intellectually challenged materials, this is a book that should prove an effective teaching aid. Ferber takes pains to introduce basic sociological theories of race and gender before embarking on her study, providing a welcome addition to the emerging literature on gender and the social construction of whiteness.

Vron Ware

References

- BEDERMAN, Gail (1995) *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880–1917*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- RICH, Adrienne (1979) 'Disloyal to civilization' in *Lies, Secrets and Silence* London/New York: Norton.

The Bisexual Imaginary

Edited by Bi Academic Intervention (Phoebe Davidson, Jo Eadie, Clare Hemmings, Ann Kaloski, Merl Storr)
Cassell, London: 1997

Bisexuality is surely the perfect postmodernist identify. Certainly as represented in this impressive volume, bisexuality is sophisticated, self-conscious, playful and disruptive. As both title and subtitle indicate, the approach is resolutely poststructuralist: belief in fixed, coherent identities has been relinquished, even though the contributors do acknowledge the pleasures to be gained from such comforting illusions.

The editors outline three definitions of 'imaginary': the psychoanalytic