

Villares, Lucia. *Examining Whiteness: Reading Clarice Lispector through Bessie Head and Toni Morrison*. London: Legenda Press, 2011.

According to a number of cultural scholars, one of the most puzzling aspects of racial politics in Brazil has to do with the ability of elite Brazilians to reconcile mainstream ideologies of miscegenation and white supremacy. As Liv Sovik and John Norvell have argued, the hegemonic discourse of the nation's *morenidade* (or brownness), which helped cover up the “uncomfortable” whiteness of an outnumbered elite in a mostly Afro-descendant country, has not prevented the same elite from exerting discriminatory practices to reproduce white privilege and social power. Such an argument, while disclosing symbolic miscegenation as a symptom of (whites’) power anxiety, also reveals the growing centrality of critical whiteness studies among Brazilianists—a field that provides a new lens through which to analyze the boundaries of historic systems of racial inequality, and to explore power asymmetries in ways that challenge the “naturalized” overlap of whiteness and supremacy (Matt Wray, *Not Quite White* 4-5).

It is precisely within the parameters of this theoretical orientation that Lucia Villares’ latest book, *Examining Whiteness: Reading Clarice Lispector through Bessie Head and Toni Morrison*, proposes to fill a void in the vast scholarship of Clarice Lispector; that is, to provide a race-based rationale of Lispector’s most studied narrative paradigm of “subjective and narrative crisis” (3). Drawing from whiteness critical theory (partly indebted to influential African and African-American female authors such as Bessie Head and Toni Morrison), Villares brings to the forefront of her analysis the socio-historical foundation of deceptively “universal”—and therefore “unmarked”—experiences of subjectivity/agency loss in Lispector’s fictional writings. As Morrison’s and Head’s Afro-descendant protagonists remind us, bearing psychological depth is not an attribute reserved for white characters; additionally, self-shattering encounters with otherness do not take place in the historically-unbounded territory of universalism and humanity.

At the core of Villares’s argument reside Judith Butler’s theory of the subjection *modus operandi*—especially, the concepts of performativity and the mutual dependence of subjectivity and [a sense of] belonging—as well as the

redemptive notion of “haunting” as a “necessary presence of what has been obliterated from memory through a process of collective amnesia” (60). Of particular interest to Villares’s argument is the notion of whiteness as an “obliterated,” or better yet, “unexamined” socio-racial category, which “allows white people to retain the privilege of being perceived as individuals in their own right, of being socially unmarked, while raced people are seen first and foremost as part of an ethnic group” (88). As she argues, Lispector’s characters’ subjectivity/agency loss conflates with their awareness of racial inequality, leading to a rupture with the national discourse of miscegenation. In Lispector’s fiction, self-shattering encounters with ghost-like figures—personified as black maids, mulatto corpses or off-white *sertanejas*—unveil the reality of race-related power asymmetries silenced by the narrative of racial brotherhood.

By enhancing our understanding of Clarice Lispector’s novels with such an original and indispensable study, Villares demonstrates other unexplored ways through which Lispector broke away from the Primitivist vogue and mulattoophilia of her generation of *modernistas*. Perhaps due to her Jewishness, Villares suggests, Lispector differs from many of her peers by representing the predicament of race within Brazil’s imagined discourses of *morenidade* and racial democracy. Her characters face agency and identity troubles, as either their “uncomfortable” whiteness or their failure to pass as whites forces them toward awareness of the national system of race differentiation and the mechanisms employed to maintain its hegemony. Part One of *Examining Whiteness* relies on Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in order to demonstrate the influx of such operations on post-slavery/apartheid black subjectivities; Part Two is devoted to an analysis of the conflation of the protagonists’ subjectivity crisis and the rupture with mainstream racial ideology in Lispector’s five novels: namely, *A Paixão segundo G.H.*, *O lustre*, *A cidade sitiada*, *A maçã no escuro* and *A hora da estrela*.

As Lucia Villares concludes, interrogating these novels’ engagement with mid-century discourses of nation and race helps us to understand the vicissitudes and performatic dimensions of whiteness in Brazilian culture: “[I]t is not enough to have white skin,” she writes, “one needs to perform whiteness in order to be accepted as white” (190). During those years of intensively

nationalist modernizing projects, performing whiteness included the assimilation of an urban ethos, among other bourgeois life standards. Villares' study highlights the relevance of Lispector's work for our comprehension of such deep cultural transformations.

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