

Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks

Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian analysis of race

LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2000

Reviewed by Laura Hengehold

Desiring Whiteness makes an important, and for the psychoanalytically inclined, enjoyable contribution to debates about the epistemology and ontology of race, with implications well beyond feminist theory.

Why do we want to know what race someone belongs to? Does any real “knowledge” result? Although race has been discredited as a biological phenomenon through the study of genetics, it persists as a relevant descriptor or point of cultural reference among both anti-racists and racists. To Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, this suggests that “social constructionism” or “historicism” can only go so far in disabling the pernicious effects of such identities. Stepping back from theories that historicize racism in order to encourage tolerance of “races,” she argues that race itself, as self-evident visible phenotype, is the problematic effect of a “regime of looking” onto which citizens of race-divided societies project deep-seated desires for communication and sexual identity, along with the usual political or economic interests. Unless we understand how the act of looking satisfies psychic needs that may conflict with rational scientific or moral beliefs about human diversity, we will never explain why people continue to “go looking for race” where they have been told that none exists.

Seshadri-Crooks’ analysis requires working knowledge of the ideas of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Most psychoanalytically oriented feminists in Europe and the United States are familiar with Lacan’s account of sexual difference as a matter of seeming to *be* a signifier of social or linguistic mastery or of *exercising* mastery by having/exchanging such signifiers—the feminine and masculine positions, respectively. However, Lacan eventually reconceived sexual difference in terms of the *limits* rather than positive potential of symbolic systems such as language or kinship. According to his final seminar, insisting on “natural” signs of sexual difference allows the subject to deny that his or her being *escapes* social and linguistic determinism, as well as personal consciousness. Standard science, no less than racial pseudoscience, mobilizes the desire for a domain in which sexuate beings are destined for one another’s understanding and satisfaction whenever it speaks of “nature.” No individual can identify with the totality of human experience or knowledge. But neither can language correspond to or completely determine the singularity of someone’s being—which, depending on the context, is either reassuring or a source of terror and rage.

While sexual difference is a fundamental difference in styles of response to the universal trauma of being (imperfectly) named, Seshadri-Crooks argues that racial difference is merely superficial. Subjects of racial discourse can postpone or minimize their well-founded anxiety that sexuality does not complete their being or satisfy their capacity for knowledge by focusing on racial signs such as skin color or hair type which constitute “real” knowledge about something “obvious.” Racial codes promise mastery and knowledge to those who believe they “have” or “see” race. But *unlike* sexual difference, which orients subjects towards what is most indeterminate and

singular in their speech and corporeal presence, orientation towards Whiteness threatens to dissolve the one who has/sees it in pure *similarity* to other human beings. These marks have no meaning apart from the subject's fear of losing touch with the language expressing his or her desire. They symptomatize an entirely new psychic problem at both individual and collective levels: unconscious revulsion at the possibility of an undifferentiated humanity.

The second part of *Desiring Whiteness* develops these ideas in a series of literary studies. One reads Conrad's short story "The Secret Sharer" as a fantasy about the power and self-mastery that Whiteness is supposed to give the subject of racial self-understanding. A second addresses the anxiety provoked in "white" subjects by the unspoken and often unconscious knowledge that the meaningfulness of Whiteness as a visual sign is historical and contingent. This essay, which begins from Orwell's memoirs of Burma and Marrakech, offers a tremendously interesting and convincing account of racial jokes that questions the terms of the current hate-speech controversy. The third asks whether it is possible for subjects who have grown up with a racial aesthetic to take an ethical position on the structure of their own subjectivity—apart from accepting or condemning racism. Her reading of the 1993 neo-noir film *Suture* suggests that subjects who *know* their investment in racial marks is arbitrary should not flinch from taking the further step of "passing" when they can be persuasive, since racial identity is also a kind of "passing." Finally, Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" gives Seshadri-Crooks an opportunity to explore the interweaving of hatred and love provoked by bodily or social signs that are known to be meaningless.

Each of the above texts/films frustrates the reader's demand for a "real" historical, sociological, or visual account of its characters' race. Seshadri-Crooks' goal is to exhaust this demand, in order to provoke an experience of uncertainty in which the reader "passes" or traverses the fantasy of "really" being any race at all. Although she is skeptical that individuals or small artistic movements can encourage a widespread disinvestment in the racial regime of looking, she hopes for an "adversarial aesthetic" that makes us think twice about whether we *have* anything or *know* anything when we recognize someone as belonging to a particular race.

Desiring Whiteness makes an important, and for the psychoanalytically inclined, enjoyable contribution to debates about the epistemology and ontology of race, with implications well beyond feminist theory. In the subtlety of its approach to sexual difference, its recognition that victims of racism may have troublesome psychic investments in race, and its discussion of the anxieties provoked and circulated by fantasies of human indifferentiation, it moves beyond Fanon's largely recognition-based politics and extends Bhabha's insights regarding the ambivalent status of mimicry in colonial societies. It also occupies a distinctive place in recent discussions regarding the post-colonial implications of Freud's European Jewish identity and the evident impossibility of resolving contemporary ethnic aggression through reason. Its most significant insight, I believe, is the notion that racial vision provokes and protects individuals, including "nonwhites," against the fear of being indistinguishable from others. This is a fear expressed in the racist claim that "they" all look alike, which seems just as bizarre and symptomatic to many observers as the claim of characters in the film *Suture* to see *almost no difference* between Clay and Vincent, half-brothers of different races.

The author offers a wonderful summary of the relationship between Whiteness and the origins of slaving/colonial racism in 19th century philology, showing that the signifier Whiteness originated in *inter-European* rather than *global* conflicts. But if Whiteness is a signifier of indefinite differentiation among physical types, why does she focus on the fundamentally binary visibility found in American and some post-colonial societies, when Native American, Asian and mestizo identities have also been naturalized at certain historical moments? Finally, Seshadri-Crooks' attachment to Lacan's analogy between Kantian ethics and Freud's mythical explanation of the superego as the inheritance from a primordial patricide may also give an overly Judeo-Christian cast to psychic structures that are, given the topic, properly intercultural.

More importantly, readers new to Lacan's work risk being misled by her refusal to analogize racial difference and sexual difference. Although Seshadri-Crooks believes that the racial "regime of visibility" is as historically contingent as specific racist practices, she does not believe that the universal fact of sexual difference with respect to the trauma of entry into language implies any *given* regime of sexual practice or identity is universal. However, this is not immediately clear from her mode of presentation. And I have never been convinced that there are only two ways of responding to nonsense. I have often wondered, for example, whether the very act of visual differentiation (including racial, economic, or aesthetic categorization) doesn't *extend* the subject's desire and frustration at the fact of language in multiple directions. Phenomena like race may very well allow people to evade the intensity of this trauma. But these phenomena also *articulate* sexual difference when people try to bring the unthinkable into words—by attaching it to the rather different sort of "unspeakableness" we find in vision. Seshadri-Crooks seems to acknowledge the compatibility of both points of view when she speaks of Whiteness as a fantasy of hypermasculinity. But she refuses to explicitly challenge Lacan's conviction that even "un-natural" sexual difference is binary.

The contingency of sexual identity, I would argue, emerges from encounters with history as well as the contemporary social field. Situating ourselves in the inherited record as well as in response to the words of immediate others, we *historicize* in certain ways and avoid others. We may choose to evade history altogether—or our inevitably partial grasp of the contemporary—through fantasies regarding racial ancestry and nature. But Seshadri-Crooks is quite aware that the apparent self-evidence of racial marks does more than stabilize subjects with respect to the psychological present. It also wards off anxiety regarding a *specific* history of uncompensated exploitation and expropriation joining "whites" to "non-whites" since the colonial period. In this sense, racism is still very much the issue. Her claim that the traumatic act of naming that brings individuals into historical communication is "non-historical" should be read as one way of taking responsibility for the historical propagation of names, not as an escape from history into the transcendental rather than the natural.

Laura Hengehold received her Ph.D. from Loyola University of Chicago in 2000. She teaches and researches on political philosophy and feminist philosophy, using perspectives influenced by Continental philosophy and psychoanalysis. Many of her essays explore the relationship between language and the lived experience of embodiment. She is especially intrigued by the way in which political conflict over the right to speak in different situations shapes women's experience of their own bodies as active forces or passive obstacles to joy.