

Trudier Harris. *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 222 pp., \$22.50.

Trudier Harris begins her impressive new study of lynching and burning rituals in black literature with a horrifying, albeit fictional, account of the three-hour torture, dismemberment, and murder (yes, in that order) of a black man and his wife. Alice Walker opens *The Color Purple* in a similarly shocking manner, with Celie's rape by the man we believe to be her father. The novel Harris quotes, however, was taken, detail by detail, from a real event, which she proceeds to document. The rest of her book is no less relentless in demonstrating that lynching and burning rituals were not simply hangings or auto-de-fes, terrible as those events are; more often, they were unbelievably extended barbaric acts, which provided well-attended sadistic circuses for whites.

As Harris reminds us, between 1882 and 1927, an estimated 4,951 persons were lynched in the United States. Of that number, 3,513 were black, 76 of those were black women, and many provided the raw material for fiction. From William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (the first black novel to dramatize a burning ritual, one played out before an assembled audience of 4,000 slaves) to Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Harris assays a ritualistic pattern that has been annotated by virtually every major black writer; she probes the reasons behind this, and concludes that black authors document the rituals of lynching and burning in their fiction for the same reasons that Jewish writers portray or allude to the Holocaust: for the sake of racial memory.

Harris skillfully weaves together similar motifs in the stories and novels which deal with these rituals, and thereby shows us a larger pattern of representation, comparing, for instance, Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" with Ellison's "The Birthmark," or the house servant Sam in William Wells Brown's *Clotel* with Sandy in Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*. A problem in this technique is that Harris sometimes does not go as far as she should with an individual text; when she does render an extended analysis, however, the results are compelling, as in her skillful charting of the patterns of emasculation in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Here, and elsewhere, Harris excels with analyses of character and motivation. In her chapter, "Fear of Castration," she gives us a searing series of insights into the black male/white female relationships that have figured prominently in so many works by black writers and reveals the looming cultural stereotypes of fear and hatred, longing and revenge that inevitably surreptitiously participate in the sexual act along with the interracial couple. Her analysis of the Rufus/Leona relationship in Baldwin's *Another Country* is particularly telling.

Harris brings all her approaches together in a chapter devoted to Richard Wright, wherein she attempts to prove that ritual violence provided a crucible for his aesthetic. She notes the first appearance of this device in Wright's poem on lynching, "Between the World and Me" (1935), and proceeds to trace the way he developed the lynching/burning ritual into the central metaphor of his art. One also welcomes her consideration of relevant material in Wright's late novels, *The Outsider* (1953) and *The Long Dream* (1958); flawed though they are, they deserve serious consideration in any discussion of Wright's career.

Her consideration of John Wideman's little known 1973 novel, *The Lynchers*, is not as fruitful. Harris labels this study of four black men and their plot to lynch a white policeman "an aborted attempt to reverse the ritual." One understands why Harris was drawn to this interesting variation on the pattern, but one also wonders why she devotes almost twenty pages to a minor novel which really is not that connected to her thesis. Much more valuable is her equally extended treatment of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), which has baffled many readers and critics. Harris couples the basic concerns of the novel with lynching and burning rituals, and convincingly argues that Morrison uses, undercuts, and transforms these historical and mythic patterns in the central story of Son.

One of Harris's discoveries about literary lynchings is that only male writers include castration scenes. She painstakingly traces the critical differences between castration and rape (the parallel fear for black women) and uses these factors in a probing analysis of the gender specific characteristics of black fiction; this discussion is especially welcome now, when so much controversy exists about (a) the allegedly sexist stance of black male authors and the characters they create, and (b) allegedly man-ignoring or man-berating black female writers and their corresponding fictional creations. Harris sensibly reminds us that much of the civil rights activity in America was designed to enhance the status of black males; it was felt "that such enhancement would benefit the entire race." It is therefore understandable that black male writers chose to emphasize the persecution of members of their own sex. Black female writers, by contrast, are found by Harris to be interested in describing the lynching and burning rituals, even though women too were occasionally victims; Margaret Walker, for example, details the lynching of two women in *Jubilee* in a few pages.

Harris concludes by asserting that black male writers, conscious of the long history of rituals that were designed to exorcise them from the face of the earth, consciously created their own rites of exorcism by showing that fear raised by these acts could be conquered by continuing a tradition of awareness and unified defense. Whites who committed these acts were to be publicly revealed in these "cultural records," and thus

forced to change their ways. The need to keep such outrages before the public became, Harris eloquently argues, “a baton which each male writer handed to the next in a contest for manhood and civil rights” (p.195).

Exorcising Blackness is a hard book to absorb, for it reminds us of terrible events; it is also, however, an indispensable tool for those who wish to truly understand the roots of the black aesthetic.

— John Lowe
Saint Mary’s College

Kristin Herzog. *Women, Ethnicity, and Exotics: Images of Power in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983) xxvi, 254 pp., \$22.95.

Herzog examines literary works of the mid-nineteenth century which reverse values, transcend stereotypes, and demand a reevaluation of the roles of “women, ethnicity, and exotics” in fiction as well as reality. The ethnicity are blacks and Indians; the exotics Herzog defines as “strikingly out of the ordinary” or “excitingly strange” characters. Images of women are similar to the images of the “Noble Savages” and other non-white people in that all are considered “natural,” more innocent or more demonic, more divine and more terrifying than white males. So too are they viewed as more passive, less logical, more imaginative, less technically inclined, more emotional, less incisive, more religious, and less scientifically oriented. As Herzog points out, the Romantic view of the Noble Savage provided a dichotomy of evil and good which was transformed into female images of fair and dark.

Herzog discusses several works by both Hawthorne and Melville, and she also devotes separate chapters to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle*