

**Review of *White Girls*. 2014. Hilton Als. San Francisco.
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Queer/Her/Body/Being/Born: A White Girl Reads *White Girls*

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Reading Hilton Als' *White Girls* on the tram, I suddenly look up and realise I am passing the second-hand store where I bought my first James Baldwin book. Ostensibly, in fact, I bought it for my husband's birthday: I took it home and wrapped it and affixed a card and let him open it; and then I devoured it whole. I remember thinking that Baldwin's description of the behaviour of the attendees at the Paris conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists was indistinguishable from Doris Lessing's account of the behaviour of aliens in intergalactic meetings in her *Canopus* series. From then on, Baldwin replaced Lessing as the intelligence with which I yearned to grip the world: I would stare at his hooded eyes peering out of the back cover and wish that I could see what he saw — and for myself, not just what blurred resemblance could be transmitted to me by his writing. Some time later, someone told me he was gay: I had simply thought he wrote tense, involved, sensuous accounts of his exchanges with men because he was a tense, involved, sensuous writer.

I am writing about Baldwin because of course one can't read Als without thinking of him, but also because I know that I am going to struggle to write about

Als himself. The “read of the year,” Junot Diaz declares from the cover – and who am I to disagree? – but the truth is Als itches as much as he enthrals me. I cannot help but bristle under his odd, rather insistent romanticisation of the white women – I will not write “girls” – who love black men. Perhaps I am tempted to identify with them – but, of course, I am not one of them. Als’ white girls are fey creatures: beautiful, caricatured, self-absorbed and absorbing. They are muses, although Als is a muse himself, he doesn’t mean anything gendered or condescending by it; or if he does he means something gendered and condescending that he also applies to himself. He “had a Daddy,” after all, and that “can send you packing” (11). His white girls exist at the nexus of life, love and art: they are living installations, tributes to... what? To degeneration, perhaps, or to freedom. Or perhaps to the unexplained, unconsummated love affair at the heart of the book; the love affair that cannibalises white girls as it purports to exalt them. Or I should say, to exalt their images. Throughout the book I never quite resolve this curious dynamic: the trouble with Als is that he sees race and gender as imbued with a meaning, a significance, beyond the sociopolitical – or, at least, he is determined to write as if he does. He wants to turn a gaze onto white womanhood – in interviews he often recalls his time spent in the fashion industry, where unlike their black counterparts the white models are never referred to as “white girls” – but for all that it would seem a vulgarity to describe his work as “postcolonial”. The front cover is proudly, almost aggressively, minimalist, with the title emblazoned in large white letters on an uncluttered black background – one almost imagines that the odd and curious reactions that many reviewers, especially men of colour, report upon reading the book in public were exactly the point. And yet there are moments where I can’t help but wonder if what they find inside is much more, finally, than a cliché: white femininity is Daisy Buchanan and Sally Bowles; Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor; movie girls and blonde twins; magazines, fingernails and couture – do we really need a writer of Als’ stature to show us that this is what is meant when we say white girls? Is there not something rather forced, dated even, in his quoting at the start of the book from Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* on the “sickness” that exists between black men and white women (11); as if that would justify the rather incongruent fetishisation of those relationships

that occurs in the pages that follow? How can we forgive sentences such as these “She was as conscious of her body as she was fearful of it; in short, she was a woman” (77) – especially from the writer who is also capable of writing, in defence of his obsession with women in general and mothers in particular, “Didn’t we queer her body being born?” (219)? I am sure I am supposed to think that Als transcends these clichés, that he revisits, reworks, and distorts them in ways that are creative or illuminating, but I am by no means wholly convinced of this – although this is perhaps influenced by the fact that I am by no means wholly convinced that there is anything in such clichés worthy of being revisited or reworked. It is only at the very end of the first chapter that Als mentions, suddenly and without preamble, the Central Park Five (93): as if to remind us, however belatedly, however obliquely, that this fantasy of luscious and vulnerable white femininity that he so willingly indulges us in comes in a place and a history – and with a terrible cost. Rich Benjamin, perplexed by this moment, deems it in his review “haphazard,” Als “stepping on his own toes,” the result of a “maddening attention deficit” that mars the text. But for me it is the only moment of the long, establishing first chapter that makes sense, the moment that allows me to trust in Als enough to follow him further into this book: haphazard, admittedly, but also finely worked; too intricate to be described as a “romp,” too playful, too irreverent, too broad to be described as anything else.

The book that follows is a tangle of essays, short stories and meditations, tackling everything and anything from Truman Capote to Richard Pryor, from Malcolm X to Flannery O’Connor. A particular gem is the chapter titled simply “Michael”: an alternately tender and savage paean to that lately deceased musical genius. In it, Als’ tremendous, compassionate, unyieldingly curious intelligence is at its best; he writes of Jackson with wit, humanity, pathos and devastating insight. “In the end,” the chapter concludes, “the chief elements of his early childhood – his father, his blackness, the church, his mother’s silence – won, and the prize was his self-martyrdom: the ninety-pound frame; the facial operations; the dermatologist as the replacement family; the disastrous finances; the young boys loved and then paid off. Michael Jackson died a long time ago; it’s just

taken years for anyone to notice” (185). But Als does not, as so many lesser writers have done before him, simply abandon Jackson to his rôle of tragic freak. Neither does he try to minimize the man’s self-destruction in favour of a puerile celebration of the talent. Instead, the essay deftly and unforgettably mires us in the unsettling contradiction of Jackson’s life: the genius and the pathology; the vitality and the disease; and, yes, the uneasy blurring of race, gender and sexuality; of black and white, man and woman, boy and man.

The chapter on Marshall Mathers III’s alter ego Eminem, entitled “White Noise,” is almost as extraordinary. Here again, Als’ gift is at its expansive best: he likens Mathers’ work to Plath, to the French photographer Jean-Paul Goude; and the comparisons don’t feel strained, they feel outrageous, illuminating, inspired. He anchors Mathers in the sociopolitical milieu of his native Detroit with convincing, imaginative grace – but it is in the telling of the relationship between mother and son, the focus of the piece as it is of so much of Mathers’ music, that Als really shines. Here again we see his curiosity, here again his unflinching, relentless humanity: “Every poet begins with the word,” he writes. “But every epic poet begins with the word as it shapes and reflects his or her world and thus the world. At home, or homes – when Mathers was nine years old, Mrs. Mathers-Briggs and her son moved to Roseville, another “white trash” dumping ground surrounded by Detroit’s black underclass – there was a certain insistence on Mathers’s mother’s self, her “I,” and her drama queen fantasies about her physical and mental abuse as she wiped her hang-over vomit of the Formica countertop in the efficiency, and her son developed his imagination” (167). On an album released only months after the publication of *White Girls*, Mathers offers in a track titled “Headlights” what he describes as an apology to his mother, whom he feels he may have wronged in his many previous releases describing and decrying their relationship. In “Headlights” Mathers is at his pathological best: the lyrics and voice weaving between aggression and tenderness haphazardly and seemingly without reference to one another. “But now the medications taken over/ And your mental state’s deteriorating slow/ And I’m way too old to cry, the shit is painful though/ But, Ma, I forgive you, so does Nathan, yo/ All you did, all you said, you did your

best to raise us both” he spits, the message of absolution and understanding belied by a note of almost hysterical violence that builds in his voice as he delivers the lines. Incoherent, confrontational, moving: the track stands out starkly from its accompanying fare on commercial radio. It is impossible, now, to listen to it – or to hear that a film clip is due to be shot this year directed by Spike Lee – without some regret that it wasn’t released a little earlier; that we weren’t given the opportunity to find out, *what would Als make of this?*

But, for me, the gem, the centre and the proof of the book is an essay Als wrote some years ago, to be included in a collection of lynching photography edited by James Allen. Tersely titled “GWTW,” the essay is a searing meditation on the photos and what they represent. In its painful, almost violent honesty – “I’m assuming this aggressive tone to establish a little distance from these images of the despised and dead” (133) – Als writes himself in a way that he doesn’t in any other part of the book; writes his bodily fear, his anger, and the peculiar anxieties of being a writer of colour in a writing world of whiteness. To begin an essay with the image of a hanged man; to pass through a reflection on crossing the street to avoid frightening white women and tensing up at writing scene parties; to finish with a love letter to Vivien Leigh: this is Als’ virtuoso brilliance. Early last year, in the abstract for a rather confused conference paper on *Gone with the Wind*, I wrote of the “disavowed spectre of racialised brutality, which lies at the heart of the precarious innocence of the plantation myth.” What I meant was that I wanted to write this essay. Or, failing that, that I wanted for it to be written. I wanted to read it.

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