

## Autistic Criticism

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Published online: 24 July 2020

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My son is autistic. He likes loud, brightly colored action movies, not the talky kind his mother and I prefer; so I took him to see *Spider-Man*, which he seemed to enjoy. “Did you like *Spider-Man*?” I asked. “Yes,” he answered. “What was it about?” “Baskin-Robbins,” he replied. My wife took him to see the first Harry Potter film, followed by the same catechism : “Did you like *Harry Potter*?” “Yes.” “What was it about?” “French fries.” In one scene, my wife explained, the kids at Hogwarts sat around a table eating French fries; in *Spider-Man*, I have to assume, the hero at some point must have swung (literally) by a Baskin-Robbins ice cream parlor, a feat that constituted the rationale of the film for Jeffrey.

You will notice a certain leitmotif in his answers: a fixation on food, a fixation that extends far beyond the movies, of course, and manifests itself in a reassuringly detailed review of each day's menu. Why autistics think as they do and act as they do is a great mystery that science has yet to unravel. Suffice it to say here, observing Jeff as my proof, that the autistic's response to an experience or an event will be unpredictable, oblique, non sequitrial, mystifying, answering only to some private logic—nothing at all like the response of a normally rational person (and, yes, Virginia, despite what your professors tell you, there are normal, rational people). *Spider-Man*, I have no qualms in insisting, is, in fact, not about Baskin-Robbins, nor *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* about French fries.

A trend in literary studies has arisen analogous enough to my son's malady that I think of it as autistic criticism. I refer not to such notoriously idiosyncratic

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and mistaken judgments as D. H. Lawrence's on Dostoevsky's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor"—that the author sides with the Cardinal *against* Christ—or G. Wilson Knight's on *Hamlet*—that the Prince is the villain and Claudius a good king (for a murderer). A *sottisier* of such views could be easily assembled, reflecting the eccentricities and deficiencies in taste and judgment of the perpetrators. But these would be their personal peccancies. Instead, the kind of critical autism to which I'm referring is ideologically induced. Nietzsche says somewhere that Christianity taught its believers to read badly, which is no doubt true; but the same holds for the effect of most ideologies: their practitioners interpret literary works in ways to make them accord with, even exemplify tenets of their faith, religious or secular. And this often involves radical distortions, many of the French fries at Hogwarts variety.

A specific example will illustrate what I mean—Anne MacMaster's "Wharton, Race and *The Age of Innocence*" (1999).<sup>1</sup> Of the three subjects that monopolize academic criticism these days—race, class, and gender—the latter most obviously relates to Wharton's novel; and, indeed, feminists some time ago annexed this writer as one of their own, this despite Janet Malcolm's well-founded claim that Wharton was a woman who didn't like women. Class? Not so much, as everyone in the novel belongs to the same Old New York aristocracy; much less than *The House of Mirth*, say, Wharton's other masterpiece, depicting upward—and downward—social mobility. Race? When I first read MacMaster's essay, I was puzzled by her claim that the novel was about race, because I couldn't recall a person of color in it. I was wrong: there is one, the mulatto servant of the novel's matriarch Catherine Mingott. She appears, briefly, four times. She does not have a name. She is, for MacMaster, the novel's Baskin-Robbins.

Lest it seem that I misrepresent this critic's position, let her speak for herself.

Racial difference is a latent topic in *The Age of Innocence*, a topic at first invisible beside the obvious topic of Old New York, but—once discovered—never far from the narrative's central concerns. At work in this novel we find what Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* identifies as . . . the Africanist presence in American literature . . . those black characters created by white writers who thus embody the "blackness that African people have come to signify in the European-American imagination."

<sup>1</sup> Anne MacMaster, "Wharton, Race and *The Age of Innocence*," in *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton*, ed. Clara Colquitt et al. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 188-205.

Now I offer the sum total of appearances of the one black character in the novel—it will not take long. Here is her first appearance, well over (note) two-thirds of the way through the novel.

Mrs. Mingott rapped impatiently with her stick on the shiny floor. A mulatto maid-servant in a bright turban, replying to the summons, informed her mistress that she had seen “Miss Ellen” going down the path to the shore; and Mrs. Mingott turned to Archer. (217)

The mulatto maid put her to bed, brought her a cup of tea as usual, laid everything straight in the room, and went away. . . .(272)

The mulatto maid called Mrs. Lovell Mingott into the hall, and the latter came back in a moment with a frowning brow. “She [her mother] wants me to telegraph for Ellen Olenska.” (274)

But in the yellow sitting-room it was the mulatto maid who waited. Her white teeth shining like a keyboard, she pushed back the sliding door and ushered him into old Catherine’s presence. (294)

And there you have it, a complete account of the Africanist presence in *The Age of Innocence*—and a prime example of autistic criticism.

Constructing an honest essay based on four such flimsy sticks as these could not be easy, so MacMaster begins to—let’s be charitable—improvise. For instance, “Catherine relies upon ‘the mulatto maid’. . . [who] asserts a conspicuous presence in Catherine’s house and Newland’s consciousness.” You have seen the whole of her “conspicuous presence” *chez* Catherine; Newland, who is present at only two of her appearances, never gives her a single thought, then or at any other time in the novel. The assertion otherwise is sheer—and inane—invention. The sentence—“Viewed against this historical role of the mulatta, Ellen’s association with the mulatto maid unmasks the insult behind Newland’s desire to make Ellen his lover”—might, or more likely might not, be true, if Ellen *had* any association with her; she does not—other than the maid’s reporting, in one of her four appearances, that Ellen had gone for a walk. This is autistic criticism: making up for not seeing what’s there by seeing what’s not there, or barely there at best. There follows a farrago of equivocation on the terms “color/ed” and “dark,” juggled to mean whatever MacMaster needs them to mean at the moment. Ellen Olenska’s Italian maid, Natasha, is described as “swarthy” and “Sicilian looking,” leading MacMaster to treat her as the

pigmental cousin of the mulatto, just a pair of “dark-skinned” girls who, although they never meet and have nothing in common, share, apparently, an unconscious agenda, to expose the blonde world as cold and . . . well . . . lacking color. So we get a preposterous sentence like this (suggesting that in an earlier life MacMaster may have been a feminist): “The dark-skinned servants, in marking Ellen's difference from other Society women, indicate that Newland desires not a particular person, but an Other, a romanticized or demonized version of his self.” (A thought experiment: if Ms. MacMaster were on the admissions committee of a university with an affirmative action initiative, would she find Natasha eligible for one of those slots set aside for people of color because she is “swarthy” and looks Sicilian? I can't believe this is *quite* what Toni Morrison had in mind as an Africanist presence).

Sometimes, however, when she more or less strays from her thesis, MacMaster makes some interesting and apt observations about Wharton's novel; my second example of autistic criticism never deviates into committing that error. Michele Birnbaum's “‘Alien Hands’: Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race” (1994) is about as thesis-ridden a piece as one is likely to find, even though the precise thesis proves slippery to pin down.<sup>2</sup> Initially, Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's now-iconic novel *The Awakening* set in *fin de siècle* New Orleans appears as an example of what Quentin Anderson calls “the imperial self” that figures centrally in American literature. The imperial self, however, Birnbaum argues, requires an empire and Edna, in reality, functions as a “colonizer” of . . . yes . . . black women, “nameless, speechless, shadowy women,” whom she exploits but whose stereotypical sexuality she internalizes.

Two men play crucial roles in *The Awakening*, Robert Lebrun, the man the already married Edna falls in love with, who “awakens” her, and, in the absence of Robert, unwilling to compromise her, Alcée Arobin who seduces her into adultery. Birnbaum discusses Robert in one paragraph, on his multilinguality; Arobin, essential to the story, she never mentions. Edna's most significant relationship, rather, her French fries at Hogwarts, is with a handful of “nameless, speechless, shadowy women.” (Can we lay down as a rule of critical thumb that any nameless, speechless, shadowy characters are highly unlikely to play significant roles in novels?) By the time of Birnbaum's essay, the feminist readings of *The Awakening*, where Edna figures as a sympathetic soul, seeking her independence and fulfillment, must have seemed old hat, even retrograde in the lefter-than-thou circles of the scribbling class—a *haute bourgeois*

<sup>2</sup>Michele A. Birnbaum, “‘Alien Hands’: Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race,” *American Literature* 66 (1994): 301-323.

“colonizer” who uses servants to baby sit for her while she wanders—and sleeps—around trying to “find herself.” Edna, that is, in an Africanist reading, must be the victimizer, not the victim.,

In addition—and presumably even more important—“Edna first discovers the erotic frontiers of the self by exploiting the *less visible construction* of sexual differences associated with the blacks, quadroons, and Acadians in the novel” (my emphasis). “Less visible construction” . . . hmm, what could that mean? That none of the novel’s “dark women” appears in the least sensual or acts in any way the least erotic, that they go about their business minding their business, nameless and speechless with all their clothes on? If we could read through *The Awakening* as we did through *The Age of Innocence*, noticing specifically the appearance and behavior of each of these women (and like Ellen Olenska’s Italian maid, the Acadians, originally French colonists, are awarded the status of honorary coloreds here, an attempt to add heft to a flimsy argument) we should find that exactly to be the case. If none displays any “sexual difference” whatsoever for Edna to “exploit,” if the “less visible” is actually the invisible, what in the world is Birnbaum asserting here?

Let’s try to follow Birnbaum’s argument. “As a ‘little negro girl’ sweeps with ‘long absent-minded strokes,’ as ‘an old mulatresse’ sleeps ‘her idle hours away,’ so Edna is frequently lost in an ‘inward maze of contemplation or thought.’ and feels pulled to ‘lose [her soul] in masses of contemplation.’” Sometimes she acts ‘idly, aimlessly.” Birnbaum simply juxtaposes discrete, unrelated phrases scattered through the novel to show that—what?—that Edna is becoming like black people, absent-minded and idle, one of the occupational risks of “colonizing,” apparently. But “Edna employs as well . . . their association with the marginal and, ultimately, with the erotic.” A little negro girl and an old mulatto—their association with the erotic? But of course—any black female, given the cultural stereotypes, must suggest all sorts of otherwise taboo sexual possibilities.

Birnbaum has found an art critic of a sort, Sander Gilman, who argues that, in nineteenth century art “black servants, signifying sexuality though not necessarily overtly sexual themselves, eroticize white women.”<sup>3</sup> Powerful stuff, this Africanist presence—but wait, a black woman *doesn’t even have to be present* in the painting to exert her erotic presence. “As Gilman argues in his discussion of Manet’s *Nana* (1877), the ‘sexualized female [functions] as the visual analogue of the black’ even when no blacks are present, for ‘the black servant is hidden in *Nana*—within *Nana*.

<sup>3</sup>Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” in *“Race” Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 223-261.

Even Nana's seeming beauty is but a sign of the black hidden within." Now, on the face of it, this argument, as Birnbaum generalizes it, is both circular and absurd, at least to the naked eye of common sense: every black female is (at least potentially) a sex pot, so every white sex pot must have internalized "the black" in order to have become what she is, a sexpot: the proof of this assertion being that she is what she is. Could Gilman's full argument be as fatuous as Birnbaum's excerpt makes it sound? The source—"Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature"—duly consulted, my answer is: yes.

Gilman's argument requires a little more attention, so closely it resembles, not *The Awakening*, but Birnbaum's autistic reading of *The Awakening*. The sentence after the last one she quotes above, his summary of the features of Nana, reads: "All her external stigmata point to the pathology within the sexualized female." Her visible features, that is, as interpreted by the science of the time, literally embody an inner corruption. But which comes first, the corruption or the stigma? Not an idle question, for according to this "science," primitives, meaning people of color, are intrinsically erotically charged, born hyper-libidinal, with no choice in the matter. And the "sexualized" white female, Nana?

The icing, for Gilman, atop all her other stigmata is her ear, turned so the viewer can see it—"to no one's surprise, Darwin's ear, a sign of the atavistic female." This feature, known scientifically as Darwin's tubercle, a slight thickening or bump on the inner upper rim of the ear, Darwin first identified and cited in *Descent of Man* as an atavism. Thus this detail in Manet's painting reinforces the nature of Nana's primitive thus pathological sexuality. In fact, however, the feature is randomly distributed in about ten percent of the earth's population, not noticeably more present in people of color; the greatest concentration, in fact, recorded in a 1929 study, was in fifty-eight percent of Swedish school children (the genetic residue of their savage Viking ancestors, perhaps). More to the point, I detect no such bump in the reproductions of the painting; if it *is* there, it would be so extremely small that a viewer would have to have his nose practically touching the canvas to see it. And among those who may have managed that feat, what proportion, do you think, would have "grasped" the significance attributed (supposedly by Manet?) to this tiny detail, a rather autistic focus in itself? But grant the bump is there, grant Manet meant it to signify what Gilman says he meant it to signify, Nana did not have to "internalize" anyone or anything to acquire her Darwin's ear: she was born that way. Any white woman, then, possessing the set of sexualizing

physical features that Gilman identifies, is, in essence, *born black*. Q. E. D., circular and absurd.

Birnbaum, however, in the very next paragraph after invoking Gilman's "authority," reverses course to argue not that black women are inciters to sexual license but, rather, serve as upholders of the South's bourgeois sexual status quo, as "counters to Edna's flights. When Edna throws her wedding ring to the floor in a pique of frustration, it is not her husband but the maid who returns it to her, reaffirming the established life that Edna has tried to toss aside." That the maid and not the husband returns the ring probably stems from the fact that the maid and not the husband sweeps the floor; and that she returns it to her mistress rather than, say, throwing it out with the trash or pocketing it demonstrates only that she is a person of at least average good sense. Still, "Servants and nannies, Chopin implies, are the keepers rather than the victims of traditional Southern society." First this about black women, then the opposite about black women—poor Kate Chopin just can't seem to keep her message straight. Unless—could it be?—that the bizarre inconsistency is not the novelist's, but the critic's, a *tsimmi*s of her own making.

But the strangest, most strained exposition awaits. Birnbaum comments at some length on one paragraph of an episode where, during one of her wanderings, Edna stops at the home of Robert Lebrun's mother to hear news of him from Mexico. Birnbaum quotes at some length and I will have to follow suit. Having rung the bell, Edna hears an altercation about who will come to open the gate, the old black servant whose duty this usually was or Victor Lebrun, the younger son of the house, who clearly has a crush on Edna. Victor wins, "surprised and delighted to see Mrs. Pontellier."

He instructed the black woman to go at once and inform Madame Lebrun that Mrs. Pontellier desired to see her. The woman grumbled a refusal to do part of her duty when she had not been permitted to do it all, and started back to her interrupted task of weeding the garden. Whereupon Victor administered a rebuke in the form of a volley of abuse, which owing to its rapidity and incoherence, was all but incomprehensible to Edna . . . [Victor] at once explained that the black woman's offensive conduct was all due to imperfect training, as he was not there to take her in hand.

Now Birnbaum's commentary on the passage above:

The black woman's resistance is not simply a sign of domestic unrest but a mark of Victor's adolescent incompetence. . . . Despite Victor's reference to

the woman's need for training, it is her superior knowledge of "natural" hierarchies which eventually reinforces the domestic order as well as an established sexual economy. Although she eventually does go in search of his mother as asked, she has underlined his social/physical immaturity, thus emasculating him before Edna.

My marginal comment when I first read these words was "Egad." I stand by that. For one thing, if Victor felt "emasculated" by an incident so minor, he really didn't have much to lose, did he? But this operation—whatever it is meant to mean—is not what happens. Read the rest of the episode and you find Victor mischievously flirting with Edna behind his mother's back, making funny faces, confiding in her some of the less salacious details of a young man's amorous nighttime activities in New Orleans: hardly the behavior of the emotionally maimed. And the sentence about the black woman's "superior knowledge of 'natural' hierarchies"—what? That "nature" meant her, member of an inferior race, to be a servant?—can most charitably be read as meaningless criticobabble.

And now Birnbaum's big climax: "Victor's seeming innocuous attempt at verbal domination evokes the history of rape as boyhood initiation. The black woman is used as so many before her, as the measure of a white boy's political power and sexual prowess. She is not allowed direct speech . . . but she is both social arbiter and sexual measure." Here is a prime example of autistic criticism: a very minor domestic spat, entirely verbal, inflates into the whole history of black-white sexual relations in the South. Again I note that this black woman barely exists in *The Awakening*, mentioned a grand total of four times in two paragraphs, then heard of no more. To say that she is insignificant to the plot would be to overstate her importance. I can hear the Birnbaum-types protesting that I, too, am trying to silence this strong black woman, the vicarious victim of so much of her race's suffering, to erase her story, yada, yada, yada.

No, I am insisting that she is an almost unnoticeable character, unimportant to the novel, who like Baskin-Robbins in *Spider-Man* or French fries in *Harry Potter* for my son, is focused on autistically by an ideologue in search of a theme. And poor Victor, his brief argument with her in Creole—neither Edna nor we *know* what he said—"evokes" rape as "boyhood initiation." *Had* he raped her? Had he raped any girl? Do most boys, even Southern boys, rape girls as part of their boyhood initiation? (I must have been out sick that day and they didn't offer a make-up.) In feminist circles, there is a lot of virtual raping going on: Catharine MacKinnon, the feminist lawyer, claimed that she was "raped" by a bad review of her book. I recall some years ago, in what became known as the Tawana Brawley Affair, that when the story the girl told of being assaulted and



raped by six white men, some of them policemen, turned out to be fabricated, some defended the girl on the grounds that many black women *had* been raped by white men throughout our nation's history, so her story was, if not specifically true, essentially true. She was a victim of—I think the term was—“meta-rape.” Victor may, in this sense, be a “meta-rapist,” which sounds worse than being a regular rapist, but, I guess, really isn't.

Like others of the Africanist-presence persuasion, Birnbaum becomes obsessed with the color white, not only as a racial designation but also as the symbolic signifier of a complex of traits and values attributable (supposedly) to Caucasians. When, for example, Edna becomes faint during an excursion to the Acadian island *Cheniere Cominada* with Robert, she is offered a place to rest in the home of an Acadian family (“lesser whites,” according to Birnbaum). “The whole place was immaculately clean, and the big, four-posted bed, snow white, invited one to repose.” Birnbaum reads this as “white bourgeois entitlement, reiterated by the white on white iconography” or again as “a defensive insistence on racial privilege”—her way of characterizing Edna's acceptance of the hospitable gesture of a woman whose bedsheets are white (presumably like most everyone else's in those pre-Martha Stewart days).

Ironically, Birnbaum can speak of a “fetishization of whiteness” in the last pages of the novel as if it were somehow Edna's fixation—or even Chopin's—instead of her own. These pages recount Edna's return to the resort on Grand Isle, scene of her “awakening,” where, her reasons for living gone, she will swim to her death. Here is Birnbaum's take on that last act:

There is no racial or ethnic presence in the final scene on the beach. And yet Edna's image of the “white beach” where there “is no living thing in sight” reveals anxiety about the influence of the Other. “Certain absences are so stressed,” argues Toni Morrison, “so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves, arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them.” The population textually held at bay in this last scene is implied by the emphasis on Edna's “white body” and “white feet” on the “white beach.”

Can we wax practical for a moment? This scene occurs in the off season, before March. Victor is at the resort making repairs. “How dreary and deserted everything looks,” Edna says to him on her surprising arrival. When she proposes to go for a swim, both Victor and Mariequita exclaim, “The water is too cold! Don't think of it.” But she does. Is it surprising, then, that she finds the “white” beach deserted in February?

Would a beach of a different color—say, brown—at a similar time and place have been jumping with bathers? Do we really need “anxiety about the influence of the Other” to account for her choosing so obvious a *mise-en-scene*, where she first fell in love with Robert, for her suicide? And the “emphasis” on Edna’s “white body” and “white feet” is exactly one mention of each, the former most probably attributable to the fact that, having thrown all her clothes aside, “for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air.”

Like Birnbaum’s interpretation of “white” as implying vacancy, sterility, fatality in *The Awakening*, MacMaster plays a similar riff on *The Age of Innocence*. While Ellen Olenska interacts with color, she insists, in all its variety and vibrancy, May Welland remains the quintessence of whiteness and its associations with purity and innocence, but (citing Newland’s musing), “What if ‘niceness,’ carried to [May’s] supreme degree, were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness?” “Through curtains, veils, ice and snow,” MacMaster concludes, “the novel’s imagery connects this possibility that nothingness lies behind the facade of May’s innocence.” But Newland and more than one critic fail to grasp May’s complexity, even guile in outmaneuvering him in his plan to leave her; and MacMaster, again hardly alone, fails to acknowledge the judgment passed in the last chapter, thirty years later, that the Archers’ marriage had been a good one, May a devoted and dutiful wife who “died thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own.” Newland’s own mature assessment, Jamesian in nuance, differs from those who see only satire and condemnation in the novel’s depiction of the upper crust of Old New York, whiter than which, perhaps, there is not. “Looking about him, he honored his own past, and mourned it. After all, there was good in the old ways.”

The depiction—or interpretation—of white and its connotations as symbolic of sterility, negation, death, even evil is not *necessarily* a component or corollary of the Africanist-presence ideology; but the fact that both of the essays I’ve discussed employ it suggests a common influence—one not difficult to detect, since both cite it: Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).<sup>4</sup> Here is Morrison’s crucial passage: “images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable.” Then she adds, “Or so our writers seem to say.”

<sup>4</sup>Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Responsibility for so sweeping and harsh a judgment thus falls not on her, but upon “our writers.” Whether the meager handful of instances that she adduces (six, one of which I think she reads wrong) legitimately constitutes the category “our writers” sounds dubious at best; but in a book so small—91 pages—there is no shortage of mega-generalizations, this, most likely, the most crucial:

Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not “about” Africanist presences or characters or narratives or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation.

Morrison, let's be clear, is claiming that “the Africanist presence” is present in—all? —American literature, *especially* when the works are not “about” any aspect of that subject—explicit or implicit, a visible or invisible mediating force. To have the Africanist presence present only implicitly and invisibly—like the unseen black woman in *Nana*, not there but there—certainly makes its ubiquity easier to assert, like a paranoid's enemies, unseen but everywhere. Are we to assume, then, that *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Golden Bowl* and *The Red Badge of Courage*—to invoke only works involving color—can be given readings in which an Africanist presence reading will predominate, even if no black person appears anywhere between their covers? Curious heuristic, that.

What I have called critical autism in these two essays is not, of course, neurological, clinical, but metaphorical, ideological—a fastening on some marginal element of little or no significance and, for ideological reasons, treating it as if central to the core of the work. I think, in this context, of a line from Wharton's *The House of Mirth*: “It is less mortifying to believe oneself unpopular than insignificant.”