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THE PERILS OF DISEMBODIED READERSHIP

Tim Engles

Kathryn Hume. *American Dream, American Nightmare: Fiction Since 1960.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000. ix + 359 pp.

James R. Giles. *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel: An End to Innocence.* Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2000. xiii + 161 pp.

In these two studies, Kathryn Hume and James R. Giles explicate wide swaths of late-twentieth-century United States' literature, seeking its insights on, respectively, the ever-declining faith in "the American Dream" and supposedly escalating "urban violence." Hume offers a comprehensive overview of much recent American fiction that nicely introduces such works, while Giles focuses more closely on eight novels. While these studies make extensive forays into nontraditional literary fields, both of their approaches are grounded by mainstream American values, presumptions, and mores, and each finds much in recent American fiction that will dismay and even shock white middle-class readers. Hume and Giles do at times register an overt awareness of the normative presumptions harbored by themselves and by their presumed readers, but they persistently revert to a pose of supposed objectivity. Considered together, these two studies raise the question of just how self-

conscious the critic who is not writing from any discernibly marked social position might try to be; such a self-consciousness might help to avoid certain pitfalls brought about by trying to write objectively.

In her study of recent fiction that "expresses bitter disillusionment with America and the American Dream" (1), Hume summarizes and explicates roughly one hundred novels. She lays claim in her introductory chapter to an expansive receptivity, having selected works by disparate and "seemingly unconnected writers," with choices ranging from such regular standbys as Saul Bellow, John Updike, E. L. Doctorow, and Walker Percy, to such relatively new attention-getters as Leslie Marmon Silko, Kathy Acker, Ishmael Reed, and Carolyn Chute. Hume also tries to avoid preference in terms of ideology and genre, giving space to the paranoid fantasies of Andrew Macdonald's *The Turner Diaries* and the sci-fi speculations of Ursula LeGuin, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany. She also notes briefly: "When my analysis builds on middle-class or white assumptions, I try to label them as such and offer alternative views" (8). Largely eschewing any particularly recognizable theoretical perspective, Hume reads in search of "important common ground" among these writers, who for her constitute not a Lost Generation, but a "Generation of the Lost Dream" (8). She groups her chosen novels into eight thematic chapters, beginning in "The Shocks of Transplantation" with depictions of the contrasts between immigrants' dreams and harsh realities. Little that is particularly surprising comes to light, and Hume moves on to survey various dissatisfied depictions of lost, "Mythical Innocence" and those "Seeking Spiritual Reality," on through "Demonic Visions" of hellish American and otherworldly contexts, disappointed descriptions of "The Fragility of Democracy," and much more.

At some points, Hume convincingly imagines the different readings that different readers are likely to produce. Especially laudable is her occasional acknowledgement of the significance of race- and class-based memberships for *both* minority and majority characters. For instance, she accurately labels Ray Bradbury's nostalgic paean in *Dandelion Wine* a particularly "white vision of innocence" (46), and she writes of John Updike's Harry Angstrom, "*Rabbit at Rest* develops further [an] image of Rabbit as America—or at least as the white America of his generation [...]" (120). Nevertheless, the implicit middle-class whiteness of her own perspective, and of her critical posture, rarely elicits much of Hume's atten-

tion; this negligence problematizes her efforts toward theoretical neutrality.

Hume writes at the outset that she doesn't want to reproduce the readings variously striped theorists would produce, and that she is "trying to look at implicit value systems rather than imposing critical frameworks from without. Insofar as possible, [she] want[s] the books themselves to articulate their values" (8). Hume's introductory explanation of her project is quite brief, largely because she doesn't have an ostensibly complicated perspective to spell out. Instead of working from an explicitly theorized set of assumptions about how literature, politics, and life in general work, and then examining novels from that perspective, she instead pretends that she has no such groundings, and only wants to hear what these texts have to say. To point this out, though, is not to say that her perspective, which often oscillates between whiteness, middle classness, and a combination of the two, is not in itself complicated. As much of the recent work in Whiteness Studies has sought to demonstrate, being a member of the white middle class tends to induce a heightened presumption of objectivity, as well as the presumption that one's own beliefs, mores, assumptions, and so on, are shared by other reasonable, polite, well-behaved people. Again, while Hume does openly acknowledge at the outset that her middle-class whiteness might at times influence her critical stance, she rarely seems aware of the limitations this influence can impose.

At one point, such limitations become apparent when Hume actually does discuss more fully the racial status of herself and her presumed readers. After summarizing immigrant difficulties and challenged "American Dreams" as dramatized by Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Oscar Hijuelos, and Octavia Butler (in her *Xenogenesis* series), Hume writes, "One of the strengths of these novels is their ability to portray the ancestral cultures in ways that make them comprehensible to readers of Euro-American backgrounds. The very comprehensibility rests on fictions that permit the experience to be so revealing" (32). As a middle-class reader who shares this Euro-American background, I'm beginning to realize, with the help of culturally informed scholars and critics, that although some writers from other backgrounds may indeed be generously anxious to make their ancestral cultures comprehensible to the likes of me, many others embed within their works signals of impatience

and frustration with the understanding that they do so in ways that readers of Euro-American backgrounds can find readily accessible, and thus "so revealing." (For a recent explication of such embeddings, see Doris Sommer's *Proceed with Caution, when Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*, a brilliant study of strategic authorial recalcitrance.)

While Hume does much, then, to consider a wide range of texts and, at times, a range of probable reader reactions, her effort to let minority texts "articulate their values" without enlisting the aid of other, more informed listeners (and interpreters) actually leads her to favor texts that seem to accommodate white middle-class expectations. This favoritism is evinced by such comments as this one, on the works of several ethnic writers: "The novels present readers with a banquet of strong flavors, but they are flavors modified so as not to appear too hot, strong, or alien. [. . .] For readers [that is, white middle-class readers], such descriptions of food actualize the argument that other cultures are worth learning to appreciate. We benefit and will gain enjoyment if we can learn to savor their differences" (32). Hume goes on to applaud depictions of culinary delights as an authorial strategy that gradually wears away Euro-American resistance to cultural difference: "Sufficient exposure to something at first considered exotic can soon render it merely unusual and ultimately welcome as variety. Even very monocultural Euro-Americans would miss sweet-and-sour pork and pizza, adaptations of once-exotic viands" (39). Chinese American buffets and Italian American pizza joints can indeed be wonderful, but for many ethnic writers, gaining white middle-class acceptance of one's cultural background is often not a primary goal, particularly when such acceptance calls for reducing elements of one's background to the level of those watered down versions of "ethnic" cuisine that middle-class whites find tasty enough to buy in restaurants. In short, while Hume occasionally strives to register the significance of class- and race-based memberships, and to include minority perspectives in terms of authorship and presumed readership, her tendency to lapse into a stance of disembodied objectivity leads her to downplay or overlook those moments where minority texts challenge the very underpinnings of that readerly stance, and to indicate approval for those that do not seem to do so.

The middle-class biases that inform Hume's attempted objectivity are again evident in her discussion of three novels by Carolyn Chute, all set in rural Maine. In "Small is Beautiful," a chapter on novels that argue

for various forms of smaller communities as attractive alternatives to urban isolation, Hume sifts through Chute's depictions of a rural underclass, highlighting those features that stand out to her: "Life is wearing and ugly. [...] Screaming is a way of life [...]. A blow to the head is the usual cure for female behavior that does not fit male value patterns" (254). Hume goes on describing the lives of Chute's main characters in this manner for several pages, and she notes, as most critics of Chute's work do, that the novels express solidarity with these characters and anger with "the unfairness of the powers that control [their] lives" (258). She ends by directly attempting to distance herself from "middle-class white" readers, who, she says, "may disdain the rural lifestyle and cringe at its nastiness" (259). Nevertheless, aside from the perhaps telling lack of quotation marks around the word "nastiness" here, the middle-class values that undergird Hume's approach are evident in her brief, oblique mention of other classes of characters in Chute's novels, characters who interest Chute more than they do Hume. Amidst detailed description of the various "screaming" characters she perceives in Chute's work, Hume pauses to note other, "quiet" characters: "When quiet folk take over neighboring land and build a real house with windows, this is bad news for the tar-paper shacks. Quiet folk complain, report to authorities, and disdain the noisy" (254). In large part because the white middle class tends to lack self-awareness in class terms, its members tend to see residential signifiers of its own forms of existence as "clean," "quiet" "real" homes, rather than particularly middle-class ones that the poor folk with whom Chute sympathizes simply cannot afford, and may not even prefer. Hume errs here by not seeing that this difference between "quiet" people with "real" houses and "noisy" people with "tar-paper shacks" is a class-based difference between haves and have-nots that both Chute and her characters are explicitly concerned with. By focusing almost exclusively on lower-class signifiers, Hume overlooks Chute's extensive interest in several classes and in the power relations among them. Again, then, while other middle-class readers would do well to follow Hume's example of at least acknowledging the limiting influence middle-class membership can have on one's perspective, more extensive recognition of this influence can enrich one's interpretive practices.

In her closing chapter, "The Failure of the Dream in Fiction," Hume sorts through what has arisen (for her) from the multiple literary voices prompted into dialogue in her previous chapters. She gathers various

novels into many types, and the apparent randomness of her conclusive groupings would seem to enhance her introductory claim to theoretical neutrality. However, while mentioning once more how wide-ranging her approach has been, Hume voices a common white middle-class disdain for ethnic groupings (groupings she earlier disparages as "marketing categories" [6]), setting her sights on forms of commonality that stand out to her, rather than on the significant differences of the sort that many minority writers wish middle-class whites would acknowledge more fully. She ends on a bleak note, finding in these works no "new sustaining myths" (292) that could replace the various modes of faith once held in the American Dream, downplaying among the works she has discussed those that record, from consciously marginalized positions, a history of resistance to the very idea of an "American Dream."

In *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel: An End to Innocence*, James R. Giles focuses on far fewer novels, devoting each of his eight body chapters to a recent American novel that grapples in some way with "violence." His choices include William Kennedy's *Quinn's Book*, Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*, Richard Price's *The Wanderers*, John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, and John Rechy's *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*. He labels these works "urban novels" and intends for his selection "to be representative of the dominant concerns and modes one discovers in the contemporary American urban novel of violence" (ix-x). Like Hume, Giles unabashedly eschews any declarations of theoretical alliance ("My study is hardly a theoretical one [...] [x]"), thereby adopting a critical posture from which he occasionally acknowledges his middle-class biases, but more often strives toward dissipation into supposed, disembodied objectivity.

Giles's primary effort is to track an escalating progression of urban violence, as depicted in his chronologically arrayed chapters. He frames his literary explications with descriptions of urban children involved in recent violent incidents: Robert Sandifer, who in 1992 at the age of eleven shot and killed a fourteen-year-old girl; and a nine-year-old identified in the press as "Girl X," who was raped and poisoned in 1997. These lurid episodes, which both took place in Chicago, emblemize for Giles a "loss of innocence" that he finds in each of his urban novels, a loss brought about by increasingly cruel forms of violence committed against indi-

viduals in the postindustrial urban landscape. In his surveys of these actual atrocities and of the fictional ones depicted in his selected novels, Giles finds evidence that because such events have become more commonplace, urban life has become increasingly nasty, brutish, short, and so on. As his study progresses, Giles gradually enacts the perspective of white, middle-class observers of contemporary inner-city "jungles" and "wastelands," displaying little interest in the larger systemic forms of violence that set the stage for and engender such incidents.

This eventual, distanced focus is rather surprising because Giles labors especially well in early chapters to show how fully and incisively William Kennedy and Caleb Carr depict early American formations of rigid, oppressively class-based hierarchies. Explaining how the grotesquely absurdist violence in Kennedy's *Quinn's Book* counters American myths of equality, Giles elucidates Kennedy's depiction of a ruling elite's repeated strategy of fomenting ethnic and racial antipathies (in particular, pitting early Irish immigrants against newly freed slaves in a struggle for too few miserable jobs). Still, in this chapter and others, he veers off into a celebration of authorial bravery and imagination: "the best writers can describe almost unimaginable horrors and social injustice so pervasive as to discourage the most resolute of optimists while illuminating the mystery of words and the magic of storytelling" (25).

Like Hume, Giles includes a widely diverse selection of novels, and his explications are richest when, unlike Hume, he turns to other, more culturally informed observers for extensive help. Indeed, this study's strongest chapter may be its explication of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, where Giles uses wide-ranging references to other Native American authors, critics, and authorities, effectively summarizing and entering some of the controversies that have arisen around Momaday's text. He illuminates (though not in ways likely to enlighten those familiar with discussions of this text) the more subtle modes of violence in this novel, including the disabling and divisive internalized racism displayed by various Native American characters and a brutal Hispanic police officer.

However, when Giles chooses to focus on acts of physical violence committed by various members of an urban underclass against their hapless cohorts, he seems to accept and feed middle-class anxieties about "urban violence" at the individual level as the kind of violence most worth worrying about. Giles begins a turn from delineation of the systemic

engendering of urban violence to alarmed description of particular incidents in his overview of Richard Price's 1974 novel, *The Wanderers*. Set in the 1960s Bronx, this novel's teenaged gang members beat and stab each other in ways that Giles reads "with something approaching nostalgia" because these scenes seem relatively mild compared to the ultraviolence he reads about in today's newspapers (44). Giles also maintains his thematic focus on "lost innocence" by highlighting abusive parents in this novel, and in Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* and Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. This narrowed focus often displaces extended consideration of broader oppressive forces that can induce such abuses, and of the social programs and efforts that can alleviate them. More to the point, Giles's disinterest in these matters echoes a general white middle-class disinterest in them, as does his tendency to overlook other forms of contemporary urban violence.

Aside from ignoring the widespread violence that occurs outside of cities—such as domestic violence, suburban school shootings, and that committed against perceived outsiders and minorities (some of which are extensively explored by other authors) —Giles spends little space on violence that is inflicted on members of an urban lower class from without, rather than from within. As studies from several disciplinary angles have shown, post-WWII white flight, the loss of an industrial job base, decreased property tax revenues, decaying educational institutions, and other factors also constitute forms of aggression inflicted upon inner-city populations. In addition, as demonstrated by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*, Neil Smith in *The New Urban Frontier*, and more recently, Rebecca Solnit in *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism*, gentrification and other forms of "urban renewal" have also come at the decidedly violent expense of resident populations. Giles does note such factors at times, as in his attention to Wideman's depictions of capitalist exploitation in *Philadelphia Fire*, but he persistently reverts to dismay over isolated victims, most of whom seem to suffer at the hands of their parents. Many observers argue that large-scale systems of oppression, as well as countervailing social programs, are more worthy of attention because addressing them effectively could help to decrease those incidents at the individual level that interest Giles. Some would point out as well that the personalized, individualized violence that elicits Giles's concern has actually been declin-

ing (although usually in ways that again afflict lower-class urban populations, particularly by increasing the numbers, resolve, and ruthlessness of police forces).

In his concluding summary of the story of Girl X, Giles highlights the most lurid details provided by newspaper reporters. At one point he clearly indicates just who would be jolted by such details. After uncritically quoting a reporter's rather sentimental assertion that this victimized child is "emblematic of innocence lost by so many children in the violence of urban America," Giles identifies the reporter's vivid description of the daily violence in a Chicago housing complex as "one of those comments that appear frequently in such accounts and can only astonish a middle-class reader [...]" (131). He bemoans once more how quickly childhood innocence is sacrificed in the contemporary urban landscape, then hails his selected novels for their "unflinching witnessing" (135) of urban decay. He then performs what can only seem like another white middle-class reflex, the search for a happy ending, finding it in a transcendent celebration of stalwart, affirmative imagination: "the imaginations of America's urban novelists have not failed, and [...] they have not allowed their witnessing to destroy affirmation" (136). Each of his novelists finds at least one small, good thing in his or her urban settings (love, "color and diversity," and so forth), and for Giles, each "strives to transcend 'race, class, and everything else,'" including "an inner-city culture in which violence has become the norm and a spiritually barren wasteland ruled by a mad god" (135–36). Unfortunately, that this "mad god" could actually be embodied in the culpable forms of negligent urban landlords, corrupt politicians, confrontational police, distanced middle-class voters, and other human figures ultimately escapes Giles's attention, just as it does that of most middle-class whites—but not that of most who live in America's cities.