(Re)Production of Whiteness: 
An examination of Space, Race and Gender

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Abstract
Doris Lessing’s novel *The Grass is Singing* is compared with Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* to show how the maintenance of normalized racial and gender lines are connected to upward economic mobility. The dynamic nature of the relationship between race and gender is explored in connection to both land production and reproduction. This analysis considers the way boundaries operate in terms of maintaining, interrupting and offsetting rigid definitions of whiteness, masculinity and femininity.

In *Imperial Leather* Anne McClintock argues that “race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other, but... rather, they come into existence in and through relation to each other.” In other words, these concepts cannot stand on their own but rather must be in constant dialogue with each other in order to create meaning. Using this idea as a springboard, this paper will consider how space, gender and whiteness are connected to upward mobility. Doris Lessing’s novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) demonstrates a failure to maintain masculine and feminine norms and thus results in an undermining of whiteness. By not successfully producing and reproducing gender norms, the maintenance of boundaries between gender, space and race are compromised. This non-adherence to normalized lines culminates to result in the significant social taboo between a white woman and her black servant.

Whereas Lessing’s text points to an uncontrollable African landscape, in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), the land is feminized and successfully colonized. This observance to the traditional colonial trope of the raping of the land and traditional boundaries between labour, gender and race provide the main characters, Arvay and Jim, with the upward mobility Dick and Mary lack. Arvay and Jim are able to escape poor whiteism through dedication to boundaries. Any blurring of these boundaries is easily passed off onto a “lesser” white, therefore re-inscribing degrees of racial purity. Both texts indicate that upward mobility is closely intertwined with the maintenance of rigid gender roles, space and race in these two contexts.

In *The Grass is Singing* Dick fails to represent standards of white masculinity. Both he and Mary seem aware of this failure insomuch as they both comment on Dick’s lack of success on the land. Mary states that she “despises” Dick’s abasement before her and Dick acknowledges that Mary’s energy and efficiency “undermined his own self-assurance even further... for he knew, deep down, that this quality was one he lacked.”

Dick’s lack of self-assurance gets postulated onto the production of the land itself. Mary notes this by commenting that the condition of the farm was “not a question of bad luck, it was simply incompetence... everywhere she found things begun and left unfinished.” Insomuch as Dick is unable to assert masculinity within his own personal character, this lack of dedication is reflected in his failure as a farmer.

Of course, as McClintock notes, “one of the most valuable and enabling moves of recent feminist theory has been its insistence on the separation of sexuality and gender and the recognition that gender is as much a issue of masculinity as it is on femininity.” Masculinity and femininity speak very closely to each other and therefore, both Mary and Dick sustain each other’s failures to adhere to gender roles. Just as Dick does not contribute to his masculine role of provider and controller of the land, Mary similarly subverts her role as mother within the domestic sphere. Mary is able to remain “untouched” and Dick does not pressure Mary to consummate their marriage. Both Mary and Dick fail to produce and reproduce; Mary denies reproduction and Dick is unable to seed both his farmland and in Mary’s womb.

At times there seems to be a reversal of roles between Mary and Dick. As suggested by Cairnie, “Mary promises to be a much more efficient farmer than her husband because she is willing to control both the land and the black male bodies that work it, but this is clearly a violation of her role as a white woman.” While speaking to the black workers of the farm she lectures:

> [the black workers] would never be any good...until they learned to work without supervision, for the love of it, to do as they were told, to do a job for its own sake, not thinking about the money they would be paid for it. It was this attitude towards work that had made the white man what he was.

However, this is exactly the type of work ethic that Dick lacks and in this statement Mary undermines his whiteness.

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3 Ibid., 131.
5 Lessing,*The Grass is Singing*, 56.
But Mary herself falls short in maintaining the sanctity of whiteness and motherhood by desiring a child simply for her own sake. Dick alternatively desires to have children but refrains from doing so out of economic necessity. In this sense, both Mary and Dick seem better able to meet the gendered and (re)productive functions of their partners, rather than themselves. By not meeting the necessary roles of gender and labour both characters fail to adhere to traditional concepts of whiteness as examined in Dyer’s White. These failures culminate in the inability of both characters to perform socially sanctioned and gendered labour. These failures ultimately result in the ‘desacralizing of whiteness’ (explain more about what you mean by this as it is a new term for readers who are unfamiliar with race theory).

The failure to maintain boundaries of whiteness, labour and gender is reflected in the lack of distinction between the private and public space of the farm. Mary represents the female boundary marker that McClintock refers to as a “mediating and threshold figure by means of which men oriented themselves in space.” Through Mary’s own lack of boundaries Dick is unable to maintain his “proper” space resulting in economic failure, and, ultimately, Mary’s death. The domestic space of the farmhouse is a symbol of the lack of boundaries between domesticity and wildness that Mary exudes. When first arriving, she states, “she could see the skins of animals on the red buck floor: some kind of wildcat, or perhaps a small leopard, and a big fawn-coloured skin of some buck.” The animalistic, wild, African terrain encroaches on the home until “the skin of the leopard near the door seemed to take shape and fill out.” This dissolution of boundaries between domesticity and wildness reflects the “personal relation” Mary has with Moses her servant; “the central social taboo in Rhodesia.” That Mary is murdered on the threshold of the farmhouse veranda is “deeply significant” given the blurred line that the veranda represents between the domestic on the inside and the wilderness of the African landscape.

In Lessing’s text, the land that Mary and Dick inhabit is represented as a wild, masculine force that is so powerful it has the ability to devour the passive domestic dwelling that infringes upon it. This wild masculinity stands in contrast to the “feminizing of the land [as a] ritualistic moment in imperial discourse, as male intruders ward off fears of narcissistic disorder by re-inscribing, as natural, an excess of gender hierarchy.” Whereas Lessing’s text seems to undermine these

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1 Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, 152.
2 Ibid., 88.
5 Ibid., 187.
6 Ibid., 164
8 Ibid., 19.
interpretations of gender Seraph on the Suwanee seems to properly demarcate and maintain traditional boundaries in a way that The Grass Is Singing does not. Also, Mary and Dick face an economic downward spiral in Lessing’s novel, while in Neale Hurston’s novel, Arvay and Jim succeed in finding upward mobility.

Arvay and Jim begin in the town of Sawley which, like Mary and Dick’s farm, is in a degenerate state. The fields are described as having “scratchy plantings” and the house Arvay and her family inhabits, only one room has a ceiling. However, this degeneracy is overcome by strict adherence and recognition of gender norms. Jim clearly demarcates the normative roles of both women and men:

Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he’s able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he’d like to have, and make him so happy that he’s willing to work and fetch in every dad-blamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That’s what women are made for.

Unlike Dick, Jim is able to persevere in his wants and is self-assured in his actions. His labour power allows his to stand out as a desirable candidate for marriage. His strength is also revealed in his aggressive pursuit of Arvay through both his physical and economic prowess.

As Rieger suggests, “there is a precarious balance between humans and nature in Seraph, and the line between exploitation and husbandry is not easily demarcated.” The colonial land in this text is clearly feminized which most vividly stands out with the Mulberry tree where Arvay is raped. This rape, however, is not only a scene of masculine violence but of eroticized feminine passivity. As Arvay is about to scream “her mouth [is] closed by Jim’s passionate kisses, and in a moment more, despite her struggles, Arvay knew a pain remorseless sweet.” Following the rape, Arvay hangs her white torn drawers from the mulberry tree of her childhood, symbolizing a simultaneous surrender of both woman and child.

By maintaining gender norms and expectations Arvay is able to escape poor whiteism by successfully reproducing children while Jim successfully produces the land in which he acquires. Although Arvay plays a substantial part in Jim’s success by bearing him children, she attributes all success to Jim alone. After returning to Sawley and sitting under her Mulberry tree she contemplates, “would she have ever escaped from this ugly and lonesome place if Jim had not come along and just seized

18 Ibid., 25.
20 Hurston. Seraph on the Suwanee, 51.
upon her and carried her off to the light? She doubted it.\textsuperscript{21} The Christian imagery reflected in the language of ‘saving’ and ‘light’ is closely connected with whiteness.\textsuperscript{22} By revealing her passivity in these terms, Arvay attributes her upward mobility (and thus “increased” whiteness) to the success of Jim’s production of the land, while remaining ignorant of her own contributions. This is consistent with McClintock’s argument that, while women are offered symbolic agency, they are usually denied any direct agency.\textsuperscript{23}

Of course, it would be difficult to champion Arvay’s successful role in reproduction without addressing the birth of Earl, her “defective” child. Earl embodies Arvay’s anxiety regarding her self-assumed affair and similarly the anxiety surrounding her whiteness. She refers to him as “the punishment for the way I used to be” which is connected to her previous condition of poor whiteism.\textsuperscript{24} Earl is described as animalistic and “running like a hound dog hunting for the scent,” suggesting a similar anxiety to that which Mary had in Lessing’s novel. In much the same way, poverty has failed to properly demarcate the line between whiteness and blackness and the wild has the capacity to infiltrate the home.\textsuperscript{25} Earl, like Moses, also ends up armed and a threat to the community he lives in. Earl represents the time before Arvay and Jim became middle-class and therefore stands out for Arvay as a symbol of her latent poor whiteness.

It is this latent poor whiteness which requires Arvay to reassert her privilege. When Jim announces a white family’s move into the house in the grove, Arvay notes that “they turned out to be Portuguese... that made them foreigners and no foreigners were ever quite white to Arvay.”\textsuperscript{26} When the Corregio’s encroach on the land Arvay uses them at every opportunity as an outlet of blame for the insecurities Arvay has as a white mother. When Earl dies, it is the Corregio’s Arvay blames. When Kenny leaves, it is Felicia and her mother who are blamed. Arvay also suggests that Jim is attracted to Felicia, undermining Arvay’s security of her own feminine desirability. The infringement on her space requires her to reassert her power by suggesting that any shortcomings in her role as wife and mother is a result of something ‘foreign’ to Arvay relative to her own femininity and whiteness. In reasserting her whiteness and femininity through blame on a “lesser” white Arvay is able to reinstate her racial privilege.

Whereas Arvay is concerned with reasserting her femininity, Jim is concerned with continually monopolizing feminized spaces. Arvay originally fears the swamp on their property and states that “she doesn’t want any part of that awful place,” which is closely related to the fear of the bush that Lessing’s character Mary

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 134-50.
\textsuperscript{23} McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather}, 354.
\textsuperscript{24} Hurston, \textit{Seraph on the Suwanee}, 69.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 120.
Yet Jim describes the land as “wet and rich” and therefore fertile. This feminization of the land allows for what is eventually described as “retreating before the magic of man,” suggesting that that a real man should be able to properly seed the land and women’s womb with the “magic” power that masculinity is awarded.

In many ways Arvay and Jim’s maintaining and reassertion of gender norms is opposite to Mary and Dick’s lack thereof. And yet to simply state that both novels operate in a binary would be just that – too simple. The dichotomy seems to suggest that maintaining gender norms will lead to upward mobility and yet there are fissures in this explanation. Rather than viewing these two texts as two alternate systems, both can be looked at in terms of responses to the dominant discourse of the time these two novels were written in the mid-twentieth century. As Mills states, “women negotiate meanings within the context of dominant discursive fields; whilst the dominant discourses may place emphasis on confinement, passivity and protection, these discourses are themselves challenged and reaffirmed by representations produced by both men and women.”

Although Arvay does indeed find upward mobility by maintaining her feminine role, she does so only at the cost of loss of agency. She becomes a passive victim when she is forgiven by Jim and becomes only symbolically powerful through the advancement of Jim’s boat, the Arvay Henson. When Arvay begins to gain strength in response to the sleeping porch Jim builds for her, she does so through the glass window panes which provide both literal and figurative sight. Yet these window panes still keep her within her contained domestic space.

As Rieger suggests, Seraph “should alert readers to the subversive attack on the values of what Hurston called an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ civilization masked as a traditional fairy tale of a poor white girl rescued by an upwardly mobile young suitor.” The audience is alerted to this because they are exposed to the ideas of a black woman who speaks from outside the white perspective and therefore disrupts the dominant discourse. The fissures in the supposed freedom of Arvay on “her” boat (and perhaps more so the birth of a deformed child) point to the limitations of the traditional white fairy tale. Although the two texts seem very opposite, it seems that their narrative function is the same. Just as Hurston provides readers with an almost ironic telling of the story often-told, Lessing undermines the discourse in another way – by entertaining the dystopic reality that gender and racial norms inflict on society.

27 Hurston, Seraph on the Suwanee, 80.
28 Hurston, Seraph on the Suwanee, 80, 195.
Works Cited


