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The white male cultural monopoly

I recently read an attack on feminists for injecting issues of gender into the study of literature. The man who wrote it honestly believed that literature and its study had been gender-free in the good old days when he did his graduate work.

There is no such thing as a gender-free literature. What the man meant is that male views in and on literature were the norm back then, and anything else must be excluded as narrow, intrusive, partisan, divisive. Male views are gender-free views. His bias was literally invisible to him — he could no more see it than he could taste his own saliva, so much did he take his conditioning as the natural order of things.

When women inject a refreshingly different point of view into the near-monopoly of male artifacts, commentary and assumptions, they are the ones called one-sided. The other side is by definition not a side. The male world of the past is just "the world."

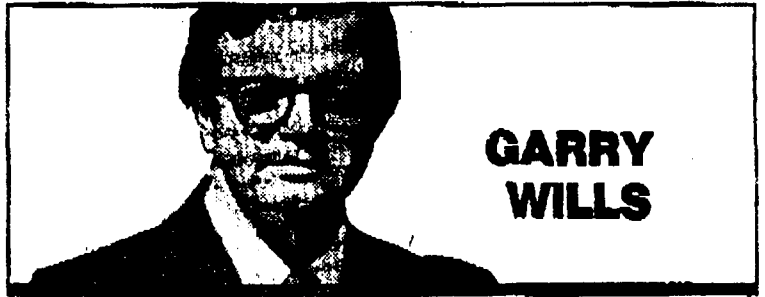
We hear a good deal now about the evil of attacking all of the past as dominated by "dead white males." But this is less a threat than are the people who think anything not by dead white males is an illegitimate intruder into the only permissible culture.

When, for instance, the National Book Award nominees for the novel last year included no white males, a critic called that situation "an unseemly spectacle." When all of the nominees were white males, that was very seemly indeed.

Actually, the nominees last year were widely varied and of high quality. They included a white female (Joyce Carol Oates) but also three females of non-white background. The winner, Charles Johnson, is a black male with a long track record of critical writings as well as novels, and his last work, *Middle Passage*, is stunning by any measure.

Why was it unseemly for women and blacks and Hispanics to be writing important fiction? I should have thought it, just by antecedent probability, the natural development. Artistic achievement is often inspired by the exploration of what is new, challenging or intensely felt in the life of a culture. The emergence of different voices in America has been the ordinary course of things. The New England WASP supremacy was challenged, successively, by those voicing the immigrant experience, or the Midwestern experience, or the frontier experience, or the Jewish experience.

It is true that Mark Twain was not, for a time, considered "real" literature. But what did people expect — that literature would keep issuing from the same Boston circle that had been overworked since the Colonial days?



Actually, compared to the Irish experience of, say, James T. Farrell, women have a far broader realm of experience to report on than any one ethnic group, and a longer apprenticeship to the task than any of the newer voices in America. The same is true of blacks.

This does not mean that any writing is good just because it is done by a black, but why does the critic assume it must be bad, or received too easily, or out of place, just because it is not seemly enough to be like the latest 15 novels by white authors put on the list of winners?

The critic I am talking about says these novels reflect a lowering of standards. She — yes, it is a she — should go back and read the winners from a decade or two ago. In fact, she assumes that all the white male novels get on just because of their merits. She, too, cannot taste her own saliva. She tells us it is disgraceful for a black woman to have lobbied for Toni Morrison's reception of the Pulitzer Prize — this is in a country "once the paradigm of a society based on the idea of individual merit." She obviously never heard how Arthur Krock lobbied for John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize when *Profiles in Courage* displaced some very distinguished historical works. (Besides, Toni Morrison at least wrote her own book, something Kennedy could never convincingly claim.)

Perhaps some people have praised black novelists just because they are black. But the critic I am describing, Carol Jannone, has far more certainly been praised just because she is a bigot. Conservatives have put her up for a place on the board of the National Endowment of the Humanities, though she has no scholarly qualifications except the indiscriminate blackguarding of authors who are not white or male enough to be seemly. She proves you do not have to be male in order to think that white males deserve the monopoly on cultural expression some people take as inevitable and everlasting.

Columnist Garry Wills writes for Universal Press Syndicate.

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