

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Writing White

Lee Sharkey

Martha Collins, *White Papers*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012, 75 pp, \$15.95 paper.

Jake Adam York, *A Murmuration of Starlings*. Carbondale: Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press, 2008, 96 pp, \$14.95 paper.

Jake Adam York, *Persons Unknown*. Carbondale: Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press, 2010, 112 pp, \$14.95 paper.

Kevin Coval, *L-vis Lives!: Racemusic Poems*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011, 120 pp, \$16 paper.

I've been moved, and also chastened, over the past few years to see white poets confronting race in their writing. By this I don't mean so much decrying the racism still intrinsic to these United States as unearthing personal, family, and regional history to discover the role race has played in privileging them at the expense of others. Not to address race in our writing, as Tess Taylor asserted at the 2012 AWP panel "Talking about Whiteness," perpetuates a silence in which power consolidates itself. A poet's politics, she reminded the ballroom full of poets, are conducted "on the level of sentences."

I devote this Books in Brief to discussing recently published volumes by three white poets whose work is furthering the public discourse about race and contributing to the creation of a space where, in Susan Tichy's words, "the narratives of the marginalized and people in power inform one another." The poets' perspectives differ markedly, as do the aesthetic terms of their engagement, but all have attempted to shake off the comfort of inherited assumptions to grapple with the living paradoxes of this country's signature obsession.

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Martha Collins's *White Papers* follows on the heels of *Blue Front*, her book-length documentary poem based on a lynching her father witnessed as a five-year-old in his home town of Cairo, Illinois. In *White Papers*, the family story becomes her own story, a coming of age to whiteness in a country largely oblivious to the implications of being white. She describes the book as taking place at "the intersection of personal and racial history."

The book is a white paper that defrocks whiteness, lays it down naked on the page. It does so by persistently and variously interrogating the vocabulary of whiteness, interleaving a racial autobiography with

history lessons, etymological reflections/deflections, and meditations on whiteness as an ontological state. Collins offers up her color-coded childhood in 1950s small-town Iowa: the contents of her toy box (the Beloved Belindy doll, “*mammy of Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy . . . the smile painted on her broad face was as cheery as could be*”), the songs she sang (“*My heart was black with sin / Until the Savior came in. / His precious blood, I know, / Has washed it white as snow*”), the one “Flesh” crayon in the crayon box, and the invincible Lone Ranger, the name of whose “faithful Indian companion” is the Spanish word for *stupid*. Painfully, she tracks the white keys on her piano keyboard to the slaves who carried elephant tusks overland to ships bound for Connecticut, “where they were cut bleached and polished”:

one tusk + one slave to carry it bought
 together if slave survived the long march
 sold for spice or sugar plantations if not
 replaced by other slaves five Africans died
 for each tusk

a tusk

that was cut into white keys I played, starting
 with middle C and going up and down

She shows us the racially isolated girl whose father said, “*Yes / but not in our lifetimes,*” who herself wrote a paper for school arguing “*Yes but not yet.*” Who failed to see absence. Who had no vocabulary for what in retrospect turns the stomach. Her self-indictment, inseparable from cultural indictment, is presented without the cover of bitter irony. Nor is there refuge here in language’s silky contours. One-syllable words—almost physical presences—follow each other with rhythmic insistence, as in this brief excerpt from her exploration of the word “red”: “*stop skin we said paint / the town were you ever / scare blood on my skirt / stop we said.*” Collins describes her stylistic tools as “fragmentation, questioning, stammering, repetition” (what Tichy calls “building a text that can blunder”). To which set I would add omission, elision, truncation, suspension, telegraphing, two-headed syntax, syncopation. Here’s the whole of the fifth poem:

black keys letters learn
 to play read write dress
 shoes purse suit grown
 up clothes hat tie night
 out morning coffee not
 yet sin will find you out

→

dirt sheep eye and blue
mark so it seemed wrong
that *in the* meant good
book word confused with
Middle English *blāc* pale
(see *bleach*) oh no never

The destabilized syntax keeps the reader alert, scrambling to figure out where to apply the missing adjective that blinks in and out. Alert both to unearned comfort with the status quo and to linguistic habits that shape our consciousness.

The historical narrative *White Papers* traces encompasses not only wars, lynchings, the slave trade that enriched New England in symbiosis with the agricultural South, Jim Crow, Black Codes, and White Money, but also the slaughter of indigenous Americans, the origins of khaki, the tulip trade, and minstrelsy, blackface itself a mask over the mask of whiteness (Had I ever known that Judy Garland acted in blackface?). Whiteness, Collins repeatedly reminds us, is a shifting historical and political construct that empties “us” out (“whatever it was we were”) by defining itself in contradistinction to an “other.” As James Baldwin put it, “The price the white American paid for his ticket was to become white.” That is, emptied of color. Given over to negation and denial:

Not mine: mine came late
they lived in England
Not mine: mine came late
and poor from Ireland
Not mine

Collins writes in the first person singular but also assumes a discomfiting first person plural that speaks in the name of the white race: “and on / we went, making roads and maps / of rivers and roads, assuming // we owned it if we could draw / it and color it in and give it / a name.” One poem early on in the sequence turns to address the white reader directly: “this is a white on white // paper if you are finding // it hard to read white // words on white consider. . . .” That it takes Caucasian readers for its primary audience is one startling aspect of the book’s confrontation with whiteness.

Collins is relentless, insistently returning to the word itself, *white*, a color in a set of colors—black, red, yellow—a subtraction of color. White lead, marble, lilies, snow, sheets, sails, petals, sepals—a catalog

of verbal and material associations. How deep the code, how thin the illusion: “the skin under / all skin is all / white seen skin / is skin deep.” Our words have married whiteness, whose nature Collins keeps worrying, its implied absences, absolutes, the attraction of its death embrace:

a white woman pure
white body skin hair

white eyes white
lips nipple blood

white grass for the white
stones of this white dream

Two of the pages in *White Papers* are left blank, as if to create breathing space, silence for listening. No, that’s inaccurate. Two pages in *White Papers* are blank except for the bracketed phrase “this page blank,” as if to say they’ve been blanked—by the author, history, and the failure (and success) of language itself. As if to say, “Fill in your story here,” as indeed I silently do. Reading this book leaves me feeling as naked as Collins must have felt writing it. The empty pages call to mind the one canvas lacking a bloodstain in Isak Dinesen’s “The Blank Page,” where the bridal sheets of royal consorts are framed and displayed in a convent’s portrait gallery. In both cases the blankness is daunting, freighted with the past and with the work the present demands of us. *White Papers* is that work in progress, the “*Yes but not yet*” at its beginning rewritten on its final page as “Yes Yes.”



Jake Adam York describes *A Murmuration of Starlings* and *Persons Unknown* as part of an open-ended series “to elegize and memorialize the martyrs of the Civil Rights movement.” He invites the reader to imagine *Persons Unknown* folded into the earlier book on either side of its middle section, as subsequent volumes might in turn be folded into an ever-expanding compendium. This is a lifetime’s project, a quest undertaken by a seventh-generation white Alabamian pledged to remember a history that time and the culpable would have us forget. As an act of reparative justice, York determined to “discover the lives that have been erased” by going to the sites of erasure, where “whiteness leaves its own mark” and the writer becomes, through the poems, a disturber of complacency. “*What y’all doing*

here?" a woman asks him in one of the poems, a question he repeatedly asks himself.

York's distinction between memorial and elegy is instructive; his poems bear witness and call to account even as they enact an insistent grieving his entire surroundings participate in, most notably the opulently depicted natural world. Having researched the histories and (re)visited the scenes of the crimes, he conjures a South made of images, shades, and transformations, birds its shadows, jazz its attendant pulse (Rollins, Coltrane, Sun Ra). The mode is lyric, gorgeously so. The poems themselves become sites of confrontation, imbued with the cultures that produced the murders, the murderers, the murdered, and those who stood passively by—the recurrent "no one" who sees nothing, is not responsible, and so facilitates the everyday and extraordinary processes by which racism perpetuates itself. As the East German novelist Christa Wolf wrote in 1977 in a different context, "The unearthly secret of the people of this century . . . how it is possible for one to have been both present and not there."

York has spoken of touching the names of the civil rights martyrs through the water that runs over the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery. In his poems, he names them to honor them: James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, Jimmie Lee Jackson, and others less familiar: Lamar Smith, Herbert Lee, Lewis Allen, Mack Charles Parker, the Reverend James Reeb, Aaron Lee, Joseph Thomas, Charles Eddie Moore, Henry Hezekiah Dee. The poems might be read as portraits, though faces are never sketched and absence is a palpable feature. The murder sites too become subjects of portraiture ("incident turned ambient"), themselves complicit. "Each skin," he writes in "A Natural History of Mississippi," "becomes / the history of its harbor, / another word for *here*."

But the author as researcher finds no physical trace of what happened decades past, rather a gradual covering over by dust, water, the duff of sloughed skin. All he can hope for is the "wave of heat, / the echo // that will fill" a night composed of obsessively recurring images—rivers, birds, moths, wings folding. These establish an atmosphere that persists from poem to poem. All is in motion; "the moth on the window / folds to a bullet, // then unfolds / to watch again." "Homochitto," the opening poem in *Persons Unknown*, enacts this metamorphic process memorably. The woods where Charles Eddie Moore and Henry Hezekiah Dee were tied to a tree and beaten to

death have gone silent save for the flicker's "ki-ki-ki-ki-ki," eerily reminiscent of

the *Kiwu!*

which means *Klansman, I want you!*

which means you are alone
and soon the water will take you

and keep everything but the names
nothing here remembers.

"Somewhere," the speaker muses, defining his only purpose at this far remove, "there is a name for this. / Someone could write it down."

In "Darkly," dedicated to Dave Smith, an interlocutor challenges the speaker to explain the death of Willie Edwards, whom Klansmen forced to jump from a bridge to his death in the Alabama River. "*How* you'd ask me— // *Why?* so simple / it won't tell a thing— // To condemn is easy, you said, / to condemn is to turn away // where no one will ever understand." This provokes him to walk back fifty years, into the lives of five men sitting in a diner, rattled by the Freedom Riders' threat to their way of life, "each bus offering its insult / or imagined slight—." A familiar of Southern nights, he can walk the same streets and catch a glimpse of himself "in a window or a windshield // that wrecks my face / so for a moment // I can mistake myself / for the redneck at the end of a joke." He could walk through a door and "sit beside them // hardly out of place"—a brutal moment "when he sees himself as his language does"—the shape of his vowels, the cultural caul draped over his consciousness. It comes down, he reflects, to seeing how the map of ourselves has been drawn. If we miss that glimpse in the glass, we might well "force a choice // so [we] wouldn't have to / make one," and say looking back, "*My life hasn't meant a thing.*" These speculations reduce him to a state of not knowing, his original intentions incomplete:

And now I can't tell you
how I got here

or what I'd hope to see,
what face would rise

if light swept from the channel
or the opposite shore.

The sky is empty,
and the river's bent

like a question too close
or too far away to read.

In "Mothlight," York lays out an *ars poetica* for the poet with a "dream of feeling everything," for whom race has become, to borrow from Eduard Glissant and York himself, a verb, "an ever-changing, ever-diversifying process of relations." From this perspective, the epigraph to *Persons Unknown* from Faulkner's *Light in August* is particularly resonant:

Anyway, he stayed, watching the two creatures that struggled in
the one body like two moon-gleamed shapes struggling drowning
in alternate throes upon the surface of a black thick pool
beneath the last moon.

Those inextricable creatures might be black and white, victim and perpetrator—two parts of ourselves and our civic realm, destined to live or die together. The poet, immobilized by his refusal to shut out any part of the scene, has in his "forsaken hand" only the most fragile of means: "a dream of quiet"—and once again moths:

Raise them to the day
and let them fall, through themselves,
again. Then mark where they lie,
each a frame of arrested flight.
Then begin, with invisible ribbon,
with resin, and lay them end to end,
end to end, again—how many?—
until this stillness moves.

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There couldn't be a better demonstration that race is a verb than Kevin Coval's *L-vis Lives!*, the coming-of-age story of a "whiteboy drawn into and reared by Black music." *L-vis* is a composite figure based on Elvis (the avatar of white black musicians), Coval himself, and a roster of white hip hop artists who have hit it big, often bigger than the black artists who inspired and taught them. Coval is both sympathetic to the impulse that draws white youth to black culture and incisive in his critique of what may result from living out that impulse. This crossover book deserves an audience among those drawn to performance poetry and those who value the less time-bound relationship between the reader and the poem on the page.

In the first, apparently autobiographical, section we meet L-vis as a deracinated Jewish boy living in the Chicago suburbs in a family where “nothing was explained. no one home to contextualize.” The cultural codes he’s absorbing are contradictory and confusing. What does make sense is the music and books he discovers that cross the color line and give shape and rhythm to his anger:

there was a tape deck. a walkman. there was no apartheid in the music. no separation in the library. books endlessly check-out-able. there was holden. the hero Huey P. the wandering protagonist in the midst of all that quiet. the new music to soundtrack the walk to school. the music truthed.

The poems track Coval/L-vis posing in the full-length mirror, writing his first rap to promote a friend’s campaign for eighth grade class president, hopping “the bus he was warned against” and crossing the city until he discovers

fenced-in black
top, hands beat bricks
to a beat. headz bent
& nodding, talk fast
body part base
line, stories over boom
bap. words picked
up like passes.

A picture emerges of a boy hungry for sense, drawn to music and language as instruments of self-expression. Much as Collins and Coval are miles—and generations—apart in their personal histories, one can’t help but hear the resonance between her etymological word play in “black studies” and his love poem to “black words i learned // to speak / first”:

black stax, black bodies stacked, shack(il)led
by o’neil english. speak back, black backs
lashed raised scars, africa attack, black oil
black guns in the hands of blue, black foils.

The rhythms are hip-hop, but the density and the hybridized noun/ adjectives are familiar from Collins’s poem. Coval is at his best when he writes at this level of energy and compression.

It’s not clear where the desire for stardom ends for L-vis and the desire to bend the arc of history toward justice begins. What Coval does make clear in the poems where the L-vis persona merges with Eminem, Vanilla Ice, and other white rappers is that the transracial

cultural space in which they do their truth-telling exists only in performance. In “nerve,” Vanilla Ice/L-vis fesses up: “i am making Black / art, and am not. i am / something new and am not,” the “am not” ringing as an existential emptiness the reader also encounters in Collins’s and York’s depictions of unconsidered whiteness. In “L-vis sittin on some New Magellans,” Coval calls out both the white hip hop artist exploiting black culture and the crowds that consume his performance:

[i] trade
tokens in the language of marketplace. dialect
glass encased. studyable. i am
a linguist presenting my findings in the field
of Black labor.

Yet there’s something not so easily dismissed here. Coval gives it its boldest expression in “photo collage / jump cut-ups: white mobs in 1956,” a year when “teeny boppers poodle skirt, shimmy and pat / Boone their way through watered-down versions of the twist” and their “parents gather at the feet of Black boys turned effigy.” Onto this scene of arrested development and murderous racism, Elvis makes his entrance, and Coval imagines his swiveling hips as “the inverse mourning of Black bodies swinging,” the girls’ hysteria as wild grief “for the history we inherit.” A summoning of passion “for the coming revolt.” That revolt has its source in black culture and has led Coval to teaching and mentoring work with young people, most notably as co-founder and artistic director of Louder than a Bomb, a program that marshals poets and teachers to work with student writers in the Chicago public schools.

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For all three poets whose work I have discussed here, there’s no way forward but to stumble through the painful revelations of their own racism and our racial history toward a collectively constructed societal transformation. Despite her dying, Adrienne Rich still whispers in my ear, “We can’t wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity and, in our lifetimes, no end to this process.”

Note

During the month of November, Martha Collins, Kevin Coval, and Jake Adam York will discuss issues raised in this review on the *BPJ* Poet’s Forum, blog.bpj.org.