

Transcending Categories: Hilton Als On "White Girls"

by Ashton Cooper 30/10/13 5:15 PM EDT

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Writer Hilton Als

(Photo by Bryan Bedder/Getty Images for The New Yorker)

"America is nothing if not about categories," writes **Hilton Als** in the first chapter of his much-anticipated new book, "White Girls." The New Yorker theater critic's follow-up to his well-received "The Women," published in 1996, is composed of the acerbic meditations on race and gender that Als's readers have come to expect. In 13 chapters, he considers how everyone from **Flannery O'Connor** to **Michael Jackson** to **Truman Capote** might be a "white girl." If America is fixated on categories, then Als has done his best to undo them. In anticipation of the release of the book, due out November 5 from McSweeney's, we spoke with Als about his first attempt at writing about men, **Wallace Stevens**, and psychoanalyzing **Eminem**.

I want to ask about the title "White Girls." In the book, there are sections about Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, Eminem, Michael Jackson, and Andre Leon Talley, among others. You address the ways in which those people transgressed or complicated certain notions of gender and race, and the whole book is about avoiding reductive ideas of race and gender, but you still put all of those figures under the title "White Girls." Why call the book that?

Well I thought a couple things: When I used to work in fashion I always thought it was weird that the hair and makeup people always referred to black models as black girls and they never would say white girls about white models.

So, one of the things that I thought was, why don't we take this figure who appeals in various worlds and how would the characters relate to this person if we called her a white girl? Would it be incendiary? Would it be not noticeable? And then another thing I thought was that a lot of books tell us about themselves before we've read them. There's Richard Wright's "Black Boy," there's "Invisible Man," and there's James Weldon Johnson's "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man." And these are all books about race that tell us before you even get into the

book that it's about race. What if we had a book that was called "White Girls" where that person or that figure was tangential enough or central to some of the stories? I'm not saying that the characters in the book are all white girls. I wanted the white girl to be the pivot for the characters and associations and issues but not necessarily be central. In a way the only three who are really central to that idea are Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, and Vivien Leigh. Oh, and Louise Brooks. So it's four people out of 12. The title really started with black women being called black girls and wanting to reverse that.

There's a sentence in the first essay that really clearly lays out the way the book is pushing against categorization. You write, "We were, in short, colored male Americans, a not easily categorizable quantity that annoyed most of our countrymen, black and white, male and female alike, since America is nothing if not about categories."

That's exactly right. That's really it. That's the book in a nutshell. And one of the things about that whole first chapter — everything that happens in the book is mentioned in that chapter.

And on the topic of categorization, the book is not exactly a collection of essays, it's not exactly a memoir. How would you categorize it? Was it important to you that it did defy categorization?

I really thought of it as a novel in a weird way. The way that Faulkner in "Go Down, Moses" had seven chapters and each story was different, but they were about a place. I really think of it as a novel that's about thinking, if that makes any sense at all. I really thought it was a novel about thinking and perception and those ideas were being expressed by these various characters. Do you think it would be annoying to people that they can't categorize it?

I guess it depends on what people you're talking about. Maybe for people who are trying to quickly write something about it, yes.

A blurb, yeah.

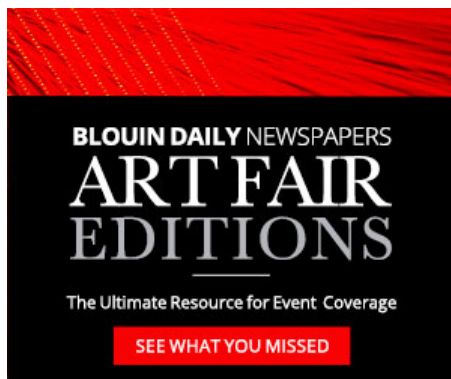
Exactly. This book is significantly longer than your first book, "The Women," which came out in the late '90s. Was it difficult to write a follow up? Were there things you wanted to say this time that weren't included last time?

That's a good question, because what was happening that was very odd was that I was writing two books at once. I felt very much that I had to write this book in order to get to maleness, because I had never really written about men before. That first piece where I talk about male friendship was a huge undertaking for me because I had never really written about men.

So that first essay was your first attempt at writing something about men?

Yeah.

When did you start working on it?



It took about eight months to write. The thinking takes longer than the writing and I'm a writer by draft. So, I just have to write through in order to understand where I'm going.

Some pieces had been previously published elsewhere, right?

Yeah, some of them.

And did you rewrite them significantly?

I rewrote, for instance, the Truman Capote significantly. I felt in order to make the book more of a whole I would have to rewrite certain things. The things that I rewrote were really the Truman Capote, the *Eminem*. It's interesting — the things that I had to rewrite were about men.

Why?

I think because I grew up in a family of women and I never really had any close male friends until high school. So it's just cultural and psychological.

Yeah. Both your mother and Malcom X's mother, Louise Little, figure heavily in both this book and "The Women." I know you're thinking through this idea of the "negress." But I'm wondering, why have those women been such important subjects in your writing?

I think that the biggest influence of my life emotionally was my mother. I think there's more literature to be written about mothers and daughters and mothers and sons. Also, I think her influence really was about encouraging a kind of empathetic strain. So I just always feel that I'm talking to her. She was the first person I showed my writing to and she was the first person whose opinion really meant something to me and it still does.

There's a section I really like where you quote a Wallace Stevens poem and you write, "his white girl was actually, 'This mechanism, this apparition,'/suppose we call it Projection A."

That's a great poem.

Yes, and you talk about Diana Vreeland as a projection. Then later on you talk about the photograph of Capote reclining and that brought me back to the idea of a person as a projection. When I read that I was thinking about the concept of woman as image. Where you thinking about that at all?

I don't think I was conscious of it. But I don't see how it could be avoidable really, because of the ways in which women are perceived. And I am a man so there would definitely be ways of perceiving them visually. I think that women are looked at. It's really interesting, that whole dynamic of being looked at, isn't it?

Right. And you do really focus on what people look like and what their image is, but the book is also about plunging below that exterior. In the *Eminem* essay you psychoanalyze him, which is funny because who has taken the time to psychoanalyze *Eminem*?

Right. It's sort of outrageous that this person would even exist. I completely agree with you. Here's the thing — how are we supposed to know anything about other people ourselves if we don't [pass] the limitations? Then we're just always doing the same thing. We're operating under the same prejudices. And it sounds corny, but it's real. We have to get past whatever ideas we bring to other human beings. I think that's the work of being a thinking person.

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