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BOOK REVIEWS

Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America, by Dianne Harris

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 392 pages, bibliography, index, black and white illustrations. Paperback, US$39.95.

Reviewed by Grace Lees-Maffei
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When I started working on what eventually became *Design at Home: Domestic Advice Books in Britain and the USA since 1945* (Routledge, 2013), there was little academic work on domesticity, and even less on issues of race and ethnicity as embodied in the domestic. Drawing on her existing book-length studies of homes as sites of power, architectural historian Dianne Harris here intends a contribution both to domestic history and to knowledge and understanding of race in America and its construction through buildings and domestic practices. *Little White Houses* examines houses and their representations, including textual and visual sources from mass market magazines, trade journals, and catalogues. The University of Minnesota Press has reproduced Harris's illustrations at a decent size, but only the cover of *Little White Houses* gives us a taste of the supercharged pastel colors of postwar domestic discourse.

Harris's introduction provides a methodological and historiographic tour, invoking Slavoj Žižek's notion of ideological cynicism to suggest that postwar Americans were both aware of the ways in which economically valuable whiteness was instantiated in their homes while at the same time regarding "themselves as entirely unracialized, their spaces as race-neutral" (13). The book's passing reference to gender appears in the introduction under the heading "Houses and Class," where Harris asserts that her book shows how houses and their representations "continuously and reflexively linked race, class and gender," while admitting that "this book's focus is not specifically on gender" and, rather, women are "implicitly key players throughout" (21).

Chapter one defines the "ordinary" postwar house, priced for middle class customers and including architect- and custom-designed homes, as it appeared between 1945 and 1960, a time "of significant shifts in racial thinking" according to Harris. She repeatedly returns to the place of Jewish householders like her grandparents within the housing market at a time when all-white housing developments often excluded working class, African American, and Jewish families.

Little White Houses confirms what we already knew: that postwar domesticity was white to the exclusion of ethnically diverse consumers. Harris sees whiteness, and therefore race, in the use of "words such as *informality*, *casual lifestyle*, *leisure*, *individuality*, *privacy*, *uncluttered*, and even *clean*" (60). She demonstrates whiteness in magazine articles, advertisements and architectural drawings also published in magazines, and in trade brochures. Harris proposes that in the aerial perspective or axonometric view "no viewer is defined or specified, because the assumed viewer is white and middle class, an assumption of unitary/collective identity that suppresses alternatives" (89). Of housing advertisements, she notes that "racial alterity appeared seldom, and typically only through the presentation of material culture artifacts"; "slaves, servants, and minstrels … configured as cups, planters, salt and pepper shakers, maple syrup containers and so on" substituted "for the absence of actual slaves and servants of color" (93). Unfortunately the reader must wait until chapter eight, "Designing the Yard," to see examples of these representations of racial alterity illustrated or discussed.

Harris quotes from Elizabeth Mock's book *If You Want to Build a House* (1946) that "'the real basis for house planning should be the individual not the group'," noting the accompanying illustration of "Undifferentiated Indians entering an undifferentiated tepee" (105). Harris emphasizes the way in which Mock associates individuality with whiteness, while Harris's own next chapter provides an extensive discussion of privacy and conformity which are implied to be practices of whiteness. In fact, chapter four, "Private Worlds," only makes sense within the context of the book if the reader accepts that privacy and conformity are American qualities and the construction of American identity is exclusively white.

Chapter five provides a long discussion of household goods, including a lengthy examination of S&H Green savings stamps, in which Harris suggests that modernism was considered by consumers to be "feminine, European, elitist, and Jewish" (174). Chapter six, "Built-Ins and Closets," contributes the notion that "since clutter was associated with lower-class, ethnic identities" (192), domestic storage systems were expressions of race. However, Harris's assertion that "Working-class women took pride in displaying their new appliances, whereas middle-class women preferred to conceal them" (201) merges class and race, thereby denying the existence of a nonwhite middle class in a consequently generalized, rather than historically accurate, account.

The final chapter examines the domestic, non-productive garden as a "cipher for middle- and upper-middle-class white identities" (295), maintained by "typically nonwhite and working-class" labor until power tools effaced labor into leisure (298). Harris's fleeting discussion of African-American consumption practices refers to Karyn Lacy's work in establishing that "the residents of black suburbs today pay close attention to lawn maintenance as a key measure that distinguishes them from blacks of lower economic classes" (297). Harris then uses Steven Dubin's work in a discussion of diminutive "Black Sambo" lawn sprinklers (300–1) as symbols of racial superiority. Ultimately, by consulting solely mainstream media sources, which depict only white families and normative domestic practices, Harris has excluded representations of an ethnically diverse postwar American society. Rather than analyzing *Ebony*, for example, and other publications which told a different story, Harris has produced a book that itself is characterized by whiteness.

Digital_Humanities, by Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012. 142 pages. Hardcover, $24.95.

Reviewed by Jeffrey L. Meikle

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From its oracular form of address to its use of an oversized all-caps typeface for major section headings, this accessible but fragmented introduction to digital humanities is haunted by the ghost of Marshall McLuhan, the 1960s media theorist who fell from favor in the 1970s and was resurrected during the Internet era. The five authors, who describe in an afterword the intense collaborative process by which

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