Journal of American Studies of Turkey
7 (1998) : 81-82.

Book Review

Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature, by Werner Sollors. 1997, 574 pages. Available from Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford.

Hana Wirth-Nesher

Werner Sollors's *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* is a book about boundary crossing that crosses boundaries itself, and therein lies its achievement. By drawing on a vast array of interracial literature from different national, ethnic, linguistic, and generic sources, Sollors creates a rich new comparative context for the discussion of works that have either been marginalized for their ideological ambiguity or confined to national or ethnic frames of reference that foreclose cross-cultural discussion. The book is, in Sollors's own words, "neither a comprehensive thematic history nor a systematic study of interracial literature, but literally—a series of **explorations** of interracial themes in literature." These explorations constitute a paradigm shift in American Studies, as Sollors not only subjects "some commonplaces to scrutiny" such as "mixed blood," but also relocates certain recurring themes in American literature within an international and intertextual arena that enriches our understanding of them.

Neither Black Nor White Yet Both investigates "origins" of racial difference as manifested in Western historical, theological, and mythical accounts, as well as specific recurring motifs such as "Fingernails as a Racial Sign." Drawing on ancient sources in the first three chapters, Sollors examines three points of departure for racial literature: narratives of the origins of races, representations of births of children whose color differs from that of their parents, and myriad versions of "The Curse of Ham." From Aristotle and Pliny to Darwin, Sollors cites and analyzes texts that pose questions of maternal and paternal descent and of the relation between race and species. By pointing out early 20th-century annotations to Aristotle's tale of the woman of Elis, for example, Sollors demonstrates how "black" and "white" had become genealogically imagined "essences" independent of "aspect." His chapter on the curse of Ham is exemplary in its scholarship, as he provides Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and secular exegeses of Genesis 9:

> No matter how impressive a Judeo-Islamic lineage can be developed for the curse on Ham, and how many early Christian readings of Genesis may have contained materials that could be used later on, the view that the Africans' skin color was a result of Noah's curse on Canaan appears to have been developed most fully in the modern world, starting near the end of the Middle

> Ages, and it has been most pervasive in Europe and North America for the past four hundred years.

As theology gave way to science, elaborate pseudoscientific schemes were devised to account for the origin of racial diversity. The fifth and sixth chapters of *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* focus on “The Calculus of Color” and “Fingernails as a Racial Sign” as indicators of the 18th- and early 19th-century obsession with racial taxonomy. Notions of pure races as analogues of pure metals and liquids transformed ‘race’ into a primal element akin to chemical elements. In this section Sollors charts the emergence of categories such as “Quadroon,” “Octoroon,” “Mulatto,” and “Hybrid.” From the scientific racism of Louis Agassiz to Charles Davenport’s positivistic exercises with charts, tables, and photographs, the attempts at precision race-categorizing often seem “like inadvertent self-parodies.” In keeping with the comparative approach to the topic of race, Sollors traces the tell-tale fingernail motif to a French novel, Victor Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal*, contrasts treatment of the *Code Noir* in the first African-American short story (by Séjour and in French) and in Hans Christian Andersen’s dramatic writing, and reveals European precursors for abolitionist storytelling. The discussion in “Retellings” of the adjusting and revising of the 18th-century *Spectator* essay “Inkle and Yarico” as it traverses linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries is a brilliant example of what the thematic/comparative method can yield.

The two closely related chapters devoted to the stereotype of the “Tragic Mulatto” and to the theme of “Passing” provide historical and systemic analyses of a vast body of material which challenges previous studies based on either-or models of white/black authorship. Amassing and elucidating a large repertoire of works and their critiques enables Sollors to expose the paradoxes inherent in the very terms “mulatto” and “passing.” These are the most impassioned chapters of the book, in which scholarship, theory, ideology, and finely nuanced readings all come together in a plea not to reinstate racial essentialism in readings of interracial literature, as has been the case in the treatment of “The Tragic Mulatto,” “the ultimate marginal man [who] was of immense importance in nineteenth-century Western literature.”

Sollors concludes his explorations of interracial literature with a discussion of “Incest and Miscegenation,” of “too close” and “too far.” By interpreting a variety of texts, each in its specific historical, social, and cultural context, he offers “the heterogenous ideological motives that may have inspired different conflations of incest and miscegenation.” To expose and underscore difference and to resist simplistic or polemical approaches to interracial literature are the trademarks of this book. As a result, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* imparts valuable insights to readers interested in race as a central topic in cultural studies, American Studies, and poetics and comparative literature. Crossing these disciplinary boundaries with erudition and sensitivity is "thematic exploration" at its best.

Journal of American Studies of Turkey
7 (1998) : 83-85.

Book Review

The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815 by Robert J. Allison. 1995, 266 pages with illustrations. Available from Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford.

Anouar Majid

The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815 is one of the rare books which appear at the juncture of several events to illuminate a subject that urgently needs explaining. Published at a time when the essentialist theories of culturalism have been resurrected to map out future wars and account for the West's inevitable antagonisms with Islam, the book helps the reader understand why Orientalism continues to operate in a variety of disguises, almost totally unaffected by Edward Said's critique, published more than two decades ago. By focusing on the crucial formative period of the United States between Independence and the consolidation of the republic, Robert J. Allison, rather unassumingly, shows that Islam-as-Other is inextricably woven into the country's identity, and that America needs this otherness to continue to believe in its uniqueness, or what others may call “exceptionalism.” Just as the present-day US media uses Iran to underscore the medieval nature of the Islamic republic's regime and highlight its own secular, enlightened and freedom-bound ideologies, early America relied on the same perceptions to describe the Barbary and Ottoman states. The issues and the rhetoric may change, but fundamental attitudes remain.

Having inadvertently witnessed the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution in 1978 (seemingly antithetical to progress and liberty), Allison came back to the US to study his country’s own Revolution. Little did he know that “images of the Muslim world” would appear everywhere he turned “in the early history of the American republic.” Americans had inherited Europe’s attitude toward Islam and Muslims, and were anxious to avoid the pitfalls of Islamic societies. A wide-ranging literature conveyed “the persistent picture of the Muslim world, an inverted image of the world the Americans were trying to create anew.” Americans were warned not to follow in Islam’s despotic footprints and thus encouraged to uphold principles established by the Revolution. The only issue that complicated America's high morality (and in which it apparently fared worse than Muslims) is the issue of slavery—which stained the virtues of this otherwise ideal republic.

In the years following the Revolution, Americans were anxious to have access to the Mediterranean trade, but the Barbary states, urged on by both Britain and

France, posed a danger to American maritime commerce. The danger was so real that the appearance of three Moroccan-looking men at the shores of Virginia prompted that state to enact legislation which would become the prototype of the Enemy Aliens Act of 1798, allowing the US president to deport aliens whose countries were at war with the US. (The law was later struck down as unconstitutional.) After signing a historic treaty with Morocco and securing the Atlantic, Americans continued to wrestle over whether to pay tribute to the other Barbary states (Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli) or build a navy and suffer the risk of establishing a standing army. The new republic was forced to negotiate and pay in the beginning; but as the government commissioned the building of a fleet, the balance of power gradually shifted in favor of the better-armed and fiercely patriotic Americans. In 1805, the well-armed Americans defeated Tripoli and brought seventeen Tripolitan prisoners to New York, who were then advertized as "real bona fide imported Turks" and displayed at theatres. American patriotism reached new heights: "Testimonials to the heroes of Tripoli ranked them beside the Revolutionary fathers and placed the post-Revolutionary generation in a new heroic light. The Revolutionaries had beaten the British; this generation had bested the scourge of Christendom." Songs and poems commemorated the event and Lord Nelson lauded America's military feat. Even Pope Pius VII declared the defeat of Tripoli to be a landmark: "The American Commander, with a small force, and in a short space of time, has done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages."

This dramatic ending to a troubling diplomatic crisis also reaffirmed to the Americans that their system, founded on liberty, was destined to triumph. Many had read in popular 18th-century literature that Islam fosters political and social tyranny and opposes progress. Many accounts stressed how Islamic despotism transformed the once-great Muslim nations and empires of the Middle East and North Africa into wasted granaries and depleted civilizations. Islamic government was seen as hopelessly corrupt—that the absolutist Ottoman sultan was a virtual hostage to his janissaries was proof of that. In short, "the Muslim world was a remarkably useful rhetorical device that could be used by libertarians like Mathew Lyon and Thomas Paine and by conservatives like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton."

Yet, as the American government fought to redeem its captives in the Barbary states, Jefferson, who upheld a tough line on the issue of tribute to the Barbary states, was fully aware of the contradiction of his and his country's position regarding the despotic institution of slavery. Like some of the American revolutionaries who were held captive in Algiers, he knew that American morality faltered on this issue, and simply couldn't convincingly justify itself. In 1800, the United States was holding around one million Africans in slavery, while from the entire period of 1785 to 1815, there were only around 700 American captives in the Barbary states. That these captives called themselves slaves and compared themselves to African slaves in the US is mere hyperbole, especially since the

status of slaves in Muslim lands was much better than that endured by Africans in the United States. Slaves in Muslim lands had more rights and could earn freedom and reach high social positions merely upon converting to Islam. This shows that slavery was understood differently by Muslims and Americans, which may explain why relatively fewer Americans chose to convert to Islam and become renegades.

In any case, the exaggerated designation of slave was sometimes used to combat slavery in the United States, not drum up sympathy for the American captive. The metaphor of white slavery was useful for abolitionists, even to those who had never been to Africa. When Benjamin Franklin, the president of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, petitioned against slavery and was attacked by a Congressman from South Carolina, he wrote an essay attributing the same pro-slavery argument to the dey of Algiers.

Allison reserves the last chapter of his book to James Riley's captivity narrative, the most popular and influential of the entire genre. In the end of the narrative, Riley, rescued from the Bedouins by a Moroccan trader, vows to fight slavery upon his return to the US. The kindness of Sidi Hamet, the Moor who rescued Riley and a few of his mates, so moved American readers that one American named his son Sidi Hamet. But the narrative's most dramatic impact was on young Abraham Lincoln, who cited it as one of the most influential books he had read.

There is more, so much more, in this highly readable book than can be accounted for in this brief review. A list of illustrations enhances the perception of Muslims at the time, and even reveals the ways in which Moors and Indians were interchangeable in Americans' minds. The book covers and deftly analyzes all the important books, plays, poems, and songs that dealt with the issue of Islam and Muslims. Using historical documentation and literary analysis, the author manages to create an argument that has a strong appeal to historians and cultural theorists interested in issues of Islam, Orientalism and American nationalism. The book definitely should have a wider readership, especially in the Islamic world. It launched this reviewer into a new intellectual pursuit, one which is still delightfully adventurous and full of surprises.

Journal of American Studies of Turkey
7 (1998) : 87-89.

Book Review

Women, Creators of Culture, Eds. Ekaterini Georgoudaki and Domna Pastourmatzi. 1997, 336 pages. Available from Hellenic Association of American Studies, c/o Domna Pastourmatzi, School of English, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, 540 06 Greece.

Jean Pfaelzer

The remarkable new anthology *Women, Creators of Culture* stems from a conference held at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece, in March 1997. Through music, song, dance, and especially, through a gathering of cultural critics from all over the globe and most particularly from Greece and the Middle East, the organizers sought, most specifically, to counter a tendency, they saw in other recent symposia, that emphasizes "the problems that many women around the world have been facing (illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, racism and sexism, devaluation of their cultural production, poor health care [and] violence." Instead, they sought to stress Greek and American women's individual and collective achievements rather than their historical oppression.

Fortunately, however, this stunning collection belies the dualism or bifurcation of that intention, for the rich literary and historical traditions unveiled and analyzed in *Women, Creators of Culture* defines a cultural tradition of celebratory resistance. Taken as a whole, the essays in the anthology contextualize and analyze female culture from a stance deeply aware of the racial, patriarchal, and colonial histories from which the stories, poetry, plays, novels, performances, photographs, and topical essays arose. The essays in this collection only locate "aesthetic alternatives to patriarchal texts" by analyzing the complicated contingency of female culture. Rather than utopian alternatives, these scholars astutely position female aesthetics in layered articulations of influence, resistance, and re-inscription.

This anthology re-defines the issues and methodologies of "American Studies" because it develops perspectives on the intersections of Women's Studies and American Studies that are not bounded by traditional limitations of national definitions. Its achievement is truly dialogic, as it puts American feminist thinking in an actual, and not merely putative, dialogue with feminisms in other locations—national and transnational. I suggest that readers of *Women, Creators of Culture* approach it with the following questions: How do transnational feminist critical practices redefine America itself as a space that includes feminisms beyond American feminisms? Is American feminism a permeable space: that is, is it open

to other feminisms? What do American cultural practices look like viewed from and located within the field of transnational feminism? By focusing on Greek and American writers—those famous, those heretofore unknown, and those "anonymous"—these essays make clear the problems that arise when "feminism" appears as a universalized concept that is often identified with certain North American assumptions about identity, extended family, community, sexuality, "traditionalism," economic status and the state.

Because I do not speak fluent Greek, I find that I can not address the three (of twenty four) articles written in Greek.

Interestingly, the anthology opens with Valeria Lerda's study of Irene Parlby, a woman who, at the age of 28, settled on the western Canadian frontier. Raised in Rawalpindi, India, as an "imperial daughter" of a British civil engineer, she rose through local Canadian governmental organization to become a leader in the movements for rural public health, minimum wage for women, and renovation of rural school systems—all the while defining herself as "a daughter of the empire." It functions very well indeed to open the collection with a study of the complexity of class and the relationship between early feminism and bourgeois liberalism within an emerging national identity.

The complexity of national identity appears again in Marianthi Makri-Tsilipakou's comparative linguistic study of female conversations, a study that reveals that familial care-giving on the part of Greek women transcends the traditional views of such activity as solely altruism and self-abnegation, but further reveals that for Greeks, the term *ikoghjenia* or *dhikji* ("in group") extends to and encompasses the whole community. While it may provoke intense feelings of ambivalence, tension, and hence, guilt, care-giving nonetheless defines women's relationship to public forums and acts of public resistance. This trope endures in Evangeline Newton's and Smatie Yemenedzi-Malathouni's study of generations of Greek-American women who, as immigrants, in stabilizing family life contributed to the process of acculturation, resisting xenophobia, and discouraging assimilation. I would want to push this interesting study of resistant traditionalism one step further by asking the authors to pursue the relationship of first generation Greek women immigrants into the United States to consider their relationship to the shifting ethnic and national allegiances of Greek identity itself.

The issue of the relationship between feminism and nationalism flows through the collection. Ekaterini Georgoudaki astutely traces African-American poet Nicki Giovanni's movements between the polemics of the Black Arts Movement, aptly defined by Georgoudaki as "revisionist historian, social critic, prophet and truth-teller," to reactions against black nationalist critics, mainly male, who sought to delimit her expressions of the personal, the sensual, and the intimate. Ultimately, Giovanni has transcended nationalism to find, Georgoudaki argues, a rhetoric that derives from Greek and Egyptian mythologies, African American freedom fighters,

singers, and artists, crossing temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries to shape a wider female identity. Along similar lines, Maria Proitsaki shows how African-American poet (and recently, American Poet Laureate) Rita Dove turns to the myth of Demeter and Persephone to explore the theme of modern motherhood. Johanna Dehler traces the intertextual relationship between Sappho and contemporary lesbian poet Judy Grahn, going beyond a-historical essentialist views of sexuality by turning to the Sapphic notion of the "constructedness" of identity and history.

Thus the anthology shows how female writers perforce deconstruct borders, and move around, over, and between frontiers that they never erected to begin with. In discussing Demetra Vaka Brown, the "first Greek woman to record her story of [American] immigration and to acquire visibility and power in the United States," Yiorgos Kalogeras traces the rise of a woman, well-known in her time, as a contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly, Century*, *Colliers Magazine*, and *Asia*. Using her ethnicity to legitimize herself as a mediator, she wrote of "exotic" landscapes and characters to an American public increasingly interested in "the Oriental question," most noticeably in her personal narrative, *Haremlik* (1909) in which she confronts her own orientalist fantasies when she encounters the women of the harem, and in *The Unveiled Ladies of Stamboul* (1923) which explores the significance of nationalism for Turkish women, as the harem then emerges as a possible site of sexual fulfilment and revenge, as well as oppression and constriction.

Turning to 20th-century African American author Toni Morrison, critic Helene Himis also insists that we return to history to understand the ways in which "refigurations of identity-in-history" are imbedded in ways that are subversive of hegemonic and patriarchal notions of identity. By returning to slavery and diasporic moments, we find a history-making that simultaneously aims at a (more) truthful reconstitution of the past as it foregrounds the past in radical subjectivities.

Clearly, part of the activity of celebration sends us into the still on-going project of recovery, even as it analyzes the processes of silencing. Lisa Radinovsky locates the repression/suppression of 19th-century American author Elizabeth Stoddard in the realism and sensuality of her depictions that challenged contemporary notions of female genius and authorship. Zoe Detsi enters the emerging field of scholarship on early female playwrights, situating the writings of such figures as Mercy Otis Warren, Anna Cora Mowatt, and Frances Wright in the interactive relationship between the American theater and American public life.

If, as critic Barbara Karsky argues, in the cases of 19th-century artists Lilly Martin Spencer and Mary Cassat, we understand the ways women, as creators of cultures, navigated the restrictive traditions of domesticity and sentimentalism, Stephen J. Bottoms insists that we also cannot ignore the issue of race when accounting for women's public marginality, in such figures as contemporary Cuban playwright Maria Irene Fornes.

Thus, *Women, Creators of Culture* is an important book indeed. In its profound act of celebration, it recenters our debate, enlarging not only the scope of the various canons—literary, painterly, dramatic—but the important connections, influences, and notions of difference that mark the work of women. The anthology marks an early moment in what will hopefully be a long international conversation about the critical, political, theoretical, and personal bases of feminist scholarship.

Journal of American Studies of Turkey
7 (1998) : 91-93.

Book Review

Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition, by Caryn Cossé Bell. 1997, 325 pages. US $35.00 plus postage and handling. Available from: Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA. Phone: +1 (225) 388-6294, or through Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., Convent Gardens, London WC2E-8LU. Phone: +44 (171) 240-1003. Fax. +44 (171) 379-3313.

Diana I. Williams

Caryn Cossé Bell's *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition 1718-1868* traces the history of radicalism on the part of Louisiana's enigmatic creoles of color. Bell's emphasis on creole radicalism constitutes an important revision in the literature. Previously published works on her topic have been far more likely to argue for creole conservatism. One historian has advanced, for instance, that before, during, and after the Civil War the creoles of color—privileged by free status, money, and light skin—variously distanced themselves from and even oppressed slaves (see Rankin, "The Forgotten People: Free People of Color in New Orleans, 1850-1870"; Rankin, "The Impact of the Civil war on the Free Colored Community of New Orleans"; Rankin, "The Politics of Caste: Free Colored Leadership in New Orleans During the Civil War"). Historians researching free people of color in the United States South, Latin America, and the Caribbean have suggested that they formed a caste often more likely to support the interests of masters against slaves than vice versa (see, for instance, Foner). In fact, significant leaders among Louisiana creoles of color were themselves slaveholders—an important issue that Bell unfortunately does not address directly.

Bell turns to sources as chronologically and geographically distant as the colonial era and the Revolution of 1848 to suggest that the radicalism of creoles of color has been overlooked, underestimated, or at least misunderstood by those who have neglected to investigate the international origins of creole protest ideology. Bell's thesis is that the experiences and ideas of creoles of color were shaped by their unique colonial and "Latin European" experience, one which accustomed them to less racially determined/restrictive treatment from whites than was expected in the slave societies in the United States or, say, the British West Indies. When expectations began to change following the Louisiana Purchase, they protested,

going so far as to advocate for universal suffrage and to fight against racial segregation.

According to Bell, the structure of early Louisiana society favored the development of a sizeable free black community. The shortage of skilled laborers and soldiers until 1830 meant those occupations could be open to people of color. “Catholic precepts” written into the *Code Noir* meant that slaves could enjoy the sacraments, even marriage. A three-caste racial order and the practice of *coartacion* (Note 1) under Spanish rule contributed to the free colored creole population, as well as to their sense of justice. Other historians have focused more on the sense of privilege conferred on mulatto or mixed-race children freed by their wealthy white fathers, but Bell’s emphasis on other structural factors affecting the community is far more instructive.

Bell’s main new contribution to the subject lies in her analysis of the impact of international revolutions on the creoles of color. This includes the inheritance of republican ideals from the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, and the Revolution of 1848, as well as intellectual trends in freemasonry, spiritualism, and European Romanticism. Employing articles from French-language creole newspapers, fascinating testimony of spirit communications in creole spiritualist circles, and writings from creole Masonic lodges, Bell demonstrates how the creoles of color appropriated ideas from these movements for their own political purposes. Their experience as literal and figurative descendants of Haitian soldiers in the American Revolution, and of decorated black creole soldiers from the War of 1812 led them to demand the full citizenship that they felt was their due. Their encounters and alliances with radicals in exile following the French Revolution and the Revolution of 1848 caused many to leave the (pro-Confederate) Catholic Church and join antiplanter Masonic organizations, as well as spiritualist movements—often interracial organizations steeped in republican rhetoric. Increasingly they came to support the cause of the slaves. Prominent creoles such as Henriette Delille broke the law to educate slave children. In 1864, Jean-Baptiste Roudanez and E. Arnold Bertonneau petitioned President Lincoln to extend suffrage to blacks born free and recently emancipated. During and after Reconstruction, creoles of color stridently opposed racial segregation in schools and on public accommodations.

By mining previously unexamined French-language sources, Bell successfully identifies some of the main weaknesses of the historiography on creoles of color and advances a truly innovative thesis. Sometimes, however, her evidence does not work in her favor. For instance, chapter 5, “French Freemasonry and the Republican Heritage” ends with the observation that

> For all of their ideological fervor, however, a number of these republican zealots, including [Pierre] Soulé himself, refused to recognize the aspirations of slave laborers and free black republicans. Still,

> their idealization of the principles of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* disputed the intellectual and moral legitimacy of a slave-society. (186)

As a local political leader and as Franklin Pierce's ambassador to Spain, Soulé advocated popular sovereignty and the annexation of Cuba (by supporting the Ostend Manifesto). Although Bell describes him as a proponent of Cuban independence, she does not sufficiently contextualize her analysis of Soulé's republican ideology in terms of what Cuba's annexation would have done to expand and perpetuate US slavery and slaveholder power. Within a context of Manifest destiny, Soulé's support of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* seems as paradoxical as the slaveholder Thomas Jefferson's authorship of the phrase "all men are created equal."

How did slaveholding creoles of color deal with the paradox of their radicalism? What are we to make of the image of Francis Dumas, a wealthy creole of color, organizing his slaves to fight "to break the bonds of their fellow men" during the Civil War? Bell makes a case for creole radicalism—a discourse which was necessarily subtle, due to a strict and highly punitive 1830 state law prohibiting speech "having a tendency to produce discontent among the free coloured population ... or to excite insubordination among the slaves" (94). She documents how free creoles of color opposed racial distinctions among free people during the Antebellum period, and points to the significance of this anti-segregation, pro-suffrage stance after the Civil War. But the creoles' record on antislavery issues remains mixed; for instance, while creole nuns were teaching slave children, others were pulling their children out of school in reaction to the enrollment of slaves. Creole radicalism must therefore have had important limits. What Bell's narrative reveals is not so much a consistent protest tradition or even the consistent transmission of radical European thought to the New World black societies, but rather the flexibility of the creoles' appropriation of certain ideas to often contradictory ends.

Bell's book is an exciting new look at a fascinating subject, and should appeal to those interested in African-American, American, and French history. It will be of particular importance to those studying comparative race relations in the New World, including the Caribbean and parts of Latin America. It should also be of great interest to intellectual historians.

Notes

1

This term refers to the right of the slave under Spanish law to purchase his or her own freedom. Kimberley Hanger's recently published *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* deals with this topic at length.

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Journal of American Studies of Turkey
7 (1998) : 95-96.

Book Review

Arranged Marriage by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. 1995, 307 pages. Available from Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. 1540 Broadway, 10036 New York.

Kuldip Kahur Kuwahara

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of short stories that explore the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective. At once pessimistic and filled with hope, Divakaruni creates contradictory as well as connected fictional worlds through the nine short stories that make up this collection. Though the characters vary, the themes of the short stories are essentially the same—exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as the experiences of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions.

"The Ultrasound," "Affair, and "Meeting Mrinal" are the three short stories with which *Arranged Marriage* concludes. In their exploration of experience and insight, as well as narrative technique, these stories surpass the six stories with which the collection begins. However, the earlier stories also contain unforgettable scenes, as in "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" when a student, arriving in the city of Chicago, is brought face-to-face with the horrifying reality of its mean streets; or of the child in "Bats" who is vaguely aware of his mother's desperate flight from their home in Calcutta to the warmth and comfort of his uncle's home; or of a young Indian bride's fairy-tale vision of America shattered with the murder of her husband who manages a 7-Eleven store.

The immigrant's experience in America intersects with the experience of arranged marriages in the earlier stories. The theme is particularly fascinating to the American as well as the Indian reader of Divakaruni's fiction. It is also of special interest to the scholar of cross-cultural themes in world literature. Though Divakaruni examines different world-views in her earlier stories, it is not until she writes the three concluding stories that she arrives at a deeper understanding of the complexities of experience in a cross-cultural context. Her achievement matches her intentions as she spins out the many-sided conflicts central to the short story "The Ultrasound." Runu and Abha, two friends separated by time and place, find themselves in different worlds. All is well for the Asian-American, Abha, who joyfully gets the news, "It's a boy!" Not so with Runu whose husband and in-laws in India coerce her to kill her unborn daughter. Through snatches of telephone

conversation and a compelling stream-of-consciousness, the reader is placed close to Runu's dilemma. The narrative concludes with Abha's resourceful thinking, "Maybe Runu can come to the United States with her daughter. Maybe she can live close by in a little apartment. She can sell chutneys and sweets and *samosas*—maybe even open her own restaurant" (229-230). Thus from the confining framework of an arranged marriage emerges a new possibility of freedom to define the self in the new world devoid of traditional structures. Yet Divakaruni does not stop on this note of optimism and hope. In her concluding narrative, "Meeting Mrinal," she sketches the reality of an East-Indian arranged marriage in which Asha's husband, Mahesh, leaves her for his red-headed white secretary, Jessica. Asha, on meeting her friend Mrinal, successfully keeps up all appearances and paints the picture of a happy marriage in which Mrinal believes. However, Mrinal, a successful executive in India, drops her social mask to reveal an ironic truth. Though she has chosen to defy the tradition of an arranged marriage, she has only done so at the cost of isolation and intense loneliness. Asha's realization that the perfect life is only an illusion is tempered by her awareness of the joys of motherhood. Sadness and hope underline the concluding sentences of the narrative, "The glasses glitter like hope. We raise them to each other solemnly, my son and I, and drink to our precious, imperfect lives" (300).

In her preoccupation with detail and exploration of here and now, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes in the realistic tradition of American literature. In *Arranged Marriage*, her collection of nine short stories, each complete in itself, she provides a compelling spectrum of images of women in a cross-cultural world context.