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My Southern Home (Or, The South and Its People) by William Wells Brown (review)

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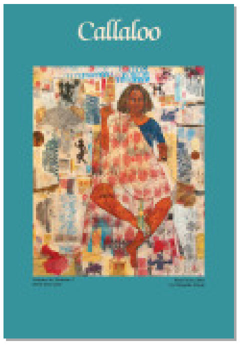

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REVIEWS

Brown, William Wells. *My Southern Home (Or, The South and Its People)*. Ed. and introd. John Ernest. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011.

Until relatively recently, William Wells Brown was remembered primarily for his role as the first published African American novelist, travel writer, and playwright. While this is certainly an astounding accomplishment, especially considering the fact that Brown spent the first twenty years of his life in slavery, he has become increasingly recognized as a remarkable literary figure for more than just his series of "firsts." As John Ernest observes, "many readers are getting past the sometimes condescending celebration of the obvious and are beginning to discover the William Wells Brown who many had never thought to look for: a talented writer with a sophisticated understanding of the racial politics of literary representation" (xvii). In this edition of *My Southern Home*, Ernest has made a significant contribution to the ongoing reevaluation of Brown's work by foregrounding certain problematic qualities within one of Brown's most perplexing texts, paving the way for future scholarship.

Originally published in 1880, *My Southern Home* is Brown's last book and one of several autobiographical works written over the course of his life. In the preface Brown portrays the book as part memoir, part travel narrative, stating, "The earlier incidents were written out from the author's recollections. The later sketches here given, are the results of recent visits to the South, where the incidents were jotted down at the time of their occurrence, or as they fell from the lips of the narrators" (5). However, as Ernest makes clear in this edition, *My Southern Home* is a more complicated text than Brown's preface would suggest.

Throughout his introduction, Ernest is particularly concerned with Brown's absence from the text. Even in the early chapters, which are allegedly Brown's recollections of his time spent in slavery, Brown's involvement in the action of the text is at most peripheral, and he generally chooses to remain an observer rather than a participant. As a result, his racial status is left significantly ambiguous; Ernest notes that, in most of the early chapters, Brown almost never refers to himself, "and when he does, he sounds less like an autobiographical narrator than a sophisticated observer, very much like the many white Americans who journeyed through the South and then published their travel accounts and offered their opinions on 'the race problem'" (xv). In other words, Brown makes no attempt to hide the fact that he is speaking from a great social distance, and at times he seems to emphasize this distance by identifying with the educated white population. This is perhaps most problematic when it manifests itself in the form of white supremacist rhetoric and racial stereotypes, which Brown often employs. For example, he asserts that "Slavery has had the effect of brightening the mental powers of the negro to a certain extent, especially those brought into close contact with the whites" (30). Elsewhere Brown writes, "History shows that of all races, the African was best adapted to be the 'hewers

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of wood, and drawers of water," and he goes on to state that "the negro is better adapted to follow than to lead" (71).

Furthermore, although he is quick to emphasize the many shared qualities that existed between slaves and poor white Southerners, Brown's portrayal of the slaves is often clearly informed by minstrel caricatures. For example, in one chapter Brown tells of a slave named Cato who worked as an assistant to a doctor. When the doctor leaves to attend some of his patients, Cato decides to impersonate a doctor, eventually removing a tooth from a slave suffering from a toothache. However, in what is clearly intended to be a comical moment, Cato removes the wrong tooth, leading to a brawl between the two slaves. This passage presents the slaves as not only ignorant and incompetent but also exceedingly vain. Throughout the exchange, Cato is preoccupied with the image of himself wearing the doctor's coat, and he is, at multiple times, found staring at himself in the mirror. When he discovers that the coat was torn in the brawl, he exclaims, "Oh, my coat! oh, my coat! I rudder he had broke my head, den to tore my coat" (35). Accompanying Brown's description is an illustration, wryly captioned "Negro Dentistry," which depicts the two slaves, rendered according to racially stereotypical specifications, on the floor mid-operation.

Ernest notes that the second half of *My Southern Home*, the portion that covers Brown's postwar travels, continues to draw on the existing stereotypes that served to justify white supremacy; however, he also acknowledges that "when Brown steps more deliberately into his text and presents himself as a black man, he also redefines his audience, addressing directly a black readership and assigning white readers to the periphery" (xxix). Along with this contrasting perspective comes a variety of conflicting courses of action. Brown's message to the African American in the South is a call for self-reliance, but what exactly he has in mind is unclear. At one point Brown writes, "The great struggle for our elevation is now with ourselves . . . we must imitate the best examples set us by the cultivated whites, and by so doing we will teach them that they claim no superiority on account of race" (178). However, only a few pages later Brown suggests that African Americans "leave the South and starve the whites into a realization of justice and common sense," remembering "that tyrants never relinquish their grasp upon their victim until they are forced to" (181). The question of whether African Americans should emulate the "cultivated whites" or "starve" them as tyrants is never resolved.

Also complicating this text is the fact that, although Brown presents *My Southern Home* as a memoir, he manipulates numerous sources in its construction. In fact, as Ernest indicates, Brown's collected works demonstrate an ongoing process of revision and recontextualization:

> Stories from his autobiographies turn up in his fiction; stories in his autobiographies themselves change; novels are reshaped; episodes from his autobiographies become episodes in his plays . . . stories from his fiction turn up again in his histories; and material from earlier historical works reappears in later historical works, in different contexts, serving different historical purposes. (xliii)

In *My Southern Home*, Brown reprints episodes from virtually all of his other books, often placed in different contexts, leading to different conclusions. Moreover, Ernest points out that many of Brown's personal experiences are ascribed to other people, and episodes from his fiction are recast as actual events that he claims to have witnessed. Frequently, Brown also borrows accounts from newspapers and political pamphlets, making few or no changes and presenting them as his own observations. One of Ernest's most significant achievements in this edition is his identification of the many sources at work within Brown's text. What Ernest uncovers is often surprising. For example, Brown tells the story of a slave named Pompey who tricks a free black man into receiving his lashes. Brown relays this story because it demonstrates "what the slaves in those days would resort to, to save themselves from flogging, while, at the same time, it exhibits the quick wit of the race" (88). Ernest notes that this episode is based upon a story that Brown tells in his earlier 1847 autobiography, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*. However, in this context, Brown himself is the one who tricks another into receiving his lashes. Here a remorseful Brown includes the story for what seems to be a much different reason. Ernest writes, "in his *Narrative* he brings to it a forceful moral, as well as an insightful explanation of how the system of slavery creates behavior that is used to justify racism; he brings no such moral to this story in *My Southern Home*" (203). In fact, *My Southern Home* presents Pompey as not only feeling no remorse for what he has done, but also enjoying a hearty laugh at the free man's expense. Brown does not condemn Pompey's actions, and no further comment is made about the story.

What are we to make of the text in light of these issues? Ernest commends *My Southern Home* for representing "the South in all of its complexity, in its unresolved conflicts, and in its play of opinions that neither begin nor end with shared premises" (xxx). He also suggests that "we can witness the transformation of that most central of nineteenth-century genres, the slave narrative, into the larger story of African American self-representation, and we can witness the development of what scholars have called the neo-slave narrative" (xliv). While these are certainly valid and important points, a truly satisfying reading of *My Southern Home*, one that makes sense of the text's many discrepancies, is yet to exist. With this edition, Ernest has not so much answered the questions as he has brought them to the surface, providing a valuable starting point for others who wish to navigate the shifting perspectives and recontextualizations of Brown's legacy.

—Ryan Charlton

Munro, Martin, ed. *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2010.

If the publication of an anthology devoted entirely to her work is any indication, Edwidge Danticat has truly arrived as an author of critical and cultural significance. This first collection devoted to Danticat's work is so welcome a contribution to scholarship on this beloved writer that many of her devotees may wonder why such a text hasn't appeared sooner. The opening question of Munro's "Introduction: Borders" suggests one possible reason: "When you go to a bookstore to look for something by Edwidge Danticat, which section do you go to first?" (1). As Munro asserts, Danticat contributes to but resists full incorporation into any one categorization of writers—Haitian, Caribbean, African Ameri-