

The following excerpts are from “The White Gaze: Defining Blacks in American Short Fiction.” The paper was presented by Billie Travalini at the Sixth International Conference on the Short Story in English, October 2000, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. To reproduce all or part of this paper contact Maurice A. Lee, Conference Director at MauriceL@mail.uca.edu or (501) 450-3167.

This paper aimed to identify the ‘white gaze’ and uncover how its usage in American Short Fiction mirrored racist attitudes and practices whereby whites have historically defined ‘self’ by controlling and limiting the image of the black ‘Other.’ It was inspired in part by feminist theory where Laura Mulvey coined the term the ‘white gaze’ to describe how men gaze at women in a way that objectifies them and makes them “less than whole.”

Whites denied blacks their right to gaze, then forced them to give up their voice, which the white gaze worked to silence. But the white gaze failed. Blacks not only looked but they learned that there was a power in looking. Whites became a subject of critical interrogation. Blacks knew that whites did not really know them and said so. Richard Wright put it this way:

Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of our farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem (Miller 2000).