

# explorations



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## REVIEW

**Justyna Fruzińska. 2022. *Nineteenth-Century Visions of Race. British Travel Writing about America*. New York and London: Routledge.**

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The main topic of Justyna Fruzińska's 2022 *Nineteenth-Century Visions of Race: British Travel Writing about America* (published by Routledge in the acclaimed *Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature* series) is the complex issue of perception, understanding and presentation of race in British travel literature in the first half of the 19th century – that is, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Fruzińska examines texts (travel essays and sketches, newspaper articles, diary entries) by eleven British writers, including Frances Trollope, Frances Wright, Frances Kemble, Harriet Martineau and Charles Dickens. It should be noted at once that the titular "visions of race" refer to descriptions of both black and Native Americans, with an eye on the fundamental and significant differences between the representations of black slaves on the one hand and the images of Indians on the other hand. This is relevant as nineteenth-century depictions of Afro-Americans were usually informed by the abolitionist rhetoric with its urgent appeals to abolish slavery while the portrayals of Native Americans were invariably indebted to the myth of Indians as the Rousseauian "noble savages," both innocent and immune to the progress of civilization (the most famous example of such a presentation is undoubtedly Chateaubriand's *Atala*).

The book's opening chapter ("Nineteenth-Century Conceptions of Race") is devoted to nineteenth-century theories of race and some of the seminal assumptions of the so-called "racial science." Fruzińska takes the Enlightenment (scientific and taxonomic) concepts of race as her starting point and then discusses the main distinctions made by nineteenth-century theoreticians of the new science. These include the ideas of monogenesis and polygenesis, the concepts of comparatism and degenerationism, with Samuel Morton's "scientific" craniology completing the list. Finally, the critic meticulously analyzes the British travelers' reactions to and portraits of the Blacks and Native Americans.

In the second chapter ("Touring the Land of the Unfree") the author interprets selected texts describing British travels to the United States in terms of their authors' attitudes to the phenomenon of slavery as well as in the context of the way black slaves are presented. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this part of the book is a discussion of the ambiguous, strongly ambivalent rhetoric that informs most accounts of the New

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World. On the one hand, we have a strong condemnation of racial segregation and a clear criticism of racist attitudes, something that Christopher Mulvey called "latent racism" that can be found in the texts of travelers from Great Britain - including those representing liberal and emancipatory views (such as Frances Wright). On the other hand, and importantly, we encounter attempts to justify slave owners and even question the very idea of the abolitionist movement – all in the name of the belief in (yet) the difference of races and (yet) the superiority of the white race.

Chapter Three ("Children of the Forest, Noble and Ignoble Savages: Encounters with Native Americans") aims to demonstrate how visitors from Great Britain perceived and described Native Americans. It quickly becomes clear that we can speak of many different types of representations of the "Indian race." The most important of them derived its language from the myth/concept of the noble savage, but we have also representations of Indians as barbarians who are capable of neither accepting the more advanced civilization of whites nor creating their own civilization. The author then discusses some images of the so-called "vanishing Americans," i.e. rebel Indians; this romantic stereotype appears, among others, in J. F. Cooper's *Leather Stocking Tales*. As Fruzińska rightly notices, as far as British travel literature is concerned, Indians are presented in a more negative way than black slaves. Ambivalence and nuances disappear, stereotypes remain.

Chapter Four ("Gazing at Racialized Bodies") shows how representations of the human body affect one's understanding and presentation of race. The Polish critic analyzes both the British travelers' encounters with the physical (embodied) presences of the racial Others and different types of discourses by means of which the other races are depicted. One of the most interesting motifs in this chapter is the theme of the body as an object of white gaze. As the author notices, the objectification of the "race-marked body" is a typical postcolonial motif. "The body is a sign," as critic Patrick Wolfe writes in his 2016 *Traces of History* (156). Fruzińska concludes the chapter on a similar note: "he colored bodies signify for the British travelers inferiority, as they depart from white beauty canons and evoke associations with animals. At the same time, these writers feel compelled to stare, and expect blacks and Native Americans to accept being stared at ... the human being gets trapped in their body, unable to speak for themselves, changed into a mere sight." (Fruzińska, 138)

*Nineteenth-Century Visions of Race: British Travel Writing about America* is written in a clear, lucid language informed by precise syntax and phrasing. The author has much to say about her main subjects; I myself have learned a lot about the lesser-known pages of British travel literature from the first decades of the 19th century. All in all, Fruzińska's is a fresh reinterpretation of the topic announced in the book's title. What we get is an interesting and valuable contribution to the studies of the 19th-century European (British) representations of the North American racial Others.

#### REFERENCES

Wolfe, Patrick. 2016. *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*. London: Verso.

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