

U.S. Women Writing Race

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By focusing on the production of racial meanings by women, this special issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* takes an uncommon approach to a common pairing of terms. It asks: what do we learn about the category of *race* when women write it? What do we learn about the category *women*?

For excellent reasons, Americanist literary criticism tends to be more interested in the *unwriting* of race. Sensitive to the extraordinary violence performed by racial discourses—including, many argue, those generated on behalf of identity politics—we value writing that denaturalizes racial concepts and disrupts their effects. This emphasis on writing against race is, perhaps, especially pronounced in scholarship on women writers—work that is often informed by a feminist concern with resistance to oppressive paradigms, or, more troubling, by a persisting critical habit (one identified by Lora Romero two decades ago) of imagining women writers as removed from power and from white masculinist hegemony, innocent, unimplicated, and critically objective.¹ A similar and potentially related tendency is evident in feminist scholarship on intersectionality. Sociologist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectional” in 1989 in the context of her ground-breaking research on how race and gender interact in employment discrimination and violence against women.² Twenty years later, a large portion of the work that calls itself intersectional analysis (much of which also comes out of the social sciences) still characterizes race—along with gender, class, and other such categories—solely in terms of structural oppression. In a recent collection on intersectionality, one essay defines race and gender as “axes of domination,” another as “social divisions,” and a third as simply “inequalities.”³ This is not to discount the important scholarship that approaches intersectionality through ontology and epistemology—here the influential founding example is Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (1990).⁴ But while standpoint theorists and critical race scholars have thoroughly examined how race combines with gender and other forms of social identity to structure practices of knowledge and agency, they have not often concerned themselves with how intersectional subjects carry out their own racial projects.⁵ In feminist studies of intersectionality, race and gender are still largely framed as things that happen to us.

The essays collected here demonstrate the benefits—for both literary

criticism and research on intersectionality—of asking how women make racial meaning. Four offer critical analyses of fiction and poetry by U.S. women writers; one looks back on a career of writing and reading African American's children books; and the concluding piece, a new entry to TSWL's archive section, moves outside of U.S. contexts to examine women's testimony for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. All six arguments show that when an analysis takes women's production as its beginning point, there is little danger of reducing race or gender to injurious forces that act upon unified Cartesian subjects from without.⁶ Here race is never merely a false construct that writers strive to discredit, but an ineluctable medium of self-becoming made up of cultural practices, social interactions, and the everyday inhabitation of embodiment. One outcome of this perspective is a more fully realized investigation of woman writers as intersectional subjects: both producers and products of racial meaning, not legible through an opposition of compliance versus subversion. Another is a more situated, less totalizing understanding of race—one that, for example, underscores its diverse uses and effects. To be sure, all of the essays are concerned with understanding how concepts of race oppress and exclude, but they also show us race functioning as a mode of pleasure, play, and emotional intimacy. We find race used to reify difference and naturalize hierarchy; but we also discover how its introduction can destabilize fixed orders and established narratives. These essays also bring into relief the diverse vocabularies and locations within which race take place. They indicate race as enunciated through the languages of nationalism, eugenics, consumerism, cartography, translation, jazz composition, lyric poetry, and early modern drama, and as it emerges from the geographies of the body, the hair salon, the front yard, the utopian city, the border town, the novel, and the poem. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant remind us, "Race always operates at the crossroads of identity and social structure."⁷ The contributors to this special issue bring us to the crossroads, to the places in our cultural and material landscape where agency meets subjection, representation meets structure, innovation meets reinscription. They suggest that if analysis of structural racism and racialization can obscure the idiosyncracies of individual racial production, the reverse may less frequently be true.

For this reason women who write race may, in addition to showing us something new, also challenge what we think we already know. In *PMLA*'s recent special issue on comparative racialization, Susan Koshy argues that what some critics have described as our "postracial" condition might be better understood as a case of "representational fatigue," where interpretive apparatuses have simply failed to keep up with—failed to keep making visible—the changing manifestations of racial formation.⁸ Koshy's concern is with contemporary and future racialization. But we can also apply her

critique to earlier periods, to ask whether our critical paradigms are, at this point, preventing more discoveries than they can generate. A similar query into how we read race is posed by the artwork created for this issue by Lexi Stuckey, a graduate student in English at University of Tulsa. At first glance, Stuckey's design—a series of black and white female profiles—seems a straightforward visual representation of our focus on U.S. women writing race. But a second glance reveals more. Like the silhouette artist Kara Walker (whose work she references) Stuckey has made an image that operates on the double take. In Walker's controversial lifesized installations familiar-seeming scenes of antebellum Southern life are rendered unfamiliar by the artist's insistence on, as one critic puts it, "seeing the unspeakable."⁹ What first appear as quaint happy groupings—ladies in hoopskirts, gentlemen in frockcoats, slavewomen clasping pickanninny children—give way to episodes of interracial violence and sexual exploitation, explicit images of murder, rape, and scatological degradation. Walker writes race. Telling U.S. racial history from a black woman's viewpoint (it is important that her figures are cut outs, signifying absence and excision) she both invokes and transforms it. In a similar manner, Stuckey's image cites and disrupts the received racial paradigms that may frame our initial response to this issue's title—most specifically, the dominance of the black/white color line as social, historical, and critical narrative. As we look again, the nostalgic diction of the silhouette, the tidy symmetry of form and color, become their own critique—the very picture of representational fatigue. This is especially so when we realize that the female profiles are all distinctly white, upper class, and identical to each other: a potent visual analysis of how logics of black/white opposition have produced, in hysterical repetition, iconic white femininity; or, of how failures of intersectional thinking have produced the false generic of "woman."

In the arguments that follow, critics and the women writers they examine take up racial vocabularies, like Walker and Stuckey, in a way that both signals exhaustion and wakes us to new particularities of meaning and effect. The color line (to stay with that central figure in the U.S. racial vocabulary) is still "socially real," as Joyce MacDonald puts it here, and perhaps also "theologically fundamental" in the religion of U.S. nationalism. It still organizes thinking and shapes the interpretation and conduct of race relations—including relations not between blacks and whites, as Elizabeth Savage shows in her analysis of how references to Jim Crow and lynching shape the treatment of white/Native American racial difference. The make up of this collection itself attests to the color line's continuing traction on the academic imagination. Out of the unusually large number of submissions received in response to the call for papers on "women writing race," only one focused on a racial category other than black or white. What does this suggest about our interpretive habits (or, for that matter,

about the rhetorical habits of my CFP)? Have we come as far as we think from the logic quoted by Stuckey's image? And yet, the analyses presented here do not organize into any kind of stable face off between binarized racial meanings. Both collectively and individually, these essays show that blackness and whiteness are produced not just against but also with each other, and without reference to each other, and through varying gestures of affiliation and opposition that orient us to other U.S. color lines—the white and Native American pairing discussed by Savage, the black and Latin American relationships that MacDonald explores, and the nativist/immigrant opposition that underwrites the racial narrative examined by Katherine Broad. Most significant, perhaps, is that no two versions of blackness or whiteness discussed here look or work in the same way. Each is distinguished by the always-idiosyncratic circumstances of intersectional subjectivity from/with which it is produced and by the social geography in which it takes place. So that, revising Omi and Winant, we might say that these essays take us to the crossroads to reveal race not just “operating” but also *arising* there. Each context of production becomes the necessary condition—the very substance—of the meaning in question. Each essay offers a close up look at the incommensurabilities that characterize racial discourse—not only from one national culture to another, as Brent Edwards has argued, but also from each embedded enunciation to the next.¹⁰

The body is, of course, the location we associate first with racial production, and it is the first discussed here. In the opening essay, “Race, Reproduction, and the Failures of Feminism in Mary Bradley Lane’s *Mizora*,” Katherine Broad examines whiteness that is conceptualized through both feminine embodiment and the fetishization of women’s domestic roles as producers and caretakers of bodies. Broad’s argument focuses on an 1881 utopian novel set in a land populated exclusively by blond, blue-eyed women and entirely organized around the ideal of (parthenogenetically) creating perfect daughters and keeping them pure. Linking the Mizoran fear of contamination to late-nineteenth-century social Darwinism, she shows that what some critics have celebrated as a feminist revaluing of women’s social and biological labors relies on the identification of such labor with the purgation of nonwhiteness. In this, Broad’s essay reminds us that neither of the terms from this issue’s title stands as fixed or prior to the other: productions of racial meaning are always also productions of gendered meaning, each constituted by its confluence with the other—and with other dimensions of ascribed difference. Hence, as Broad argues, it becomes vital to read intersectionally so as to avoid affirming, by eliding, invidious logics such as that which underwrites the racial

politics of *Mizora*. Broad places Lane alongside Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton as another turn-of-the-century eugenics feminist. She also locates Mizora's eugenic bodies at Omi and Winant's crossroads, showing how Lane's attempt to elevate female embodiment converges with—and faithfully reinscribes—the state's appropriation of the same for the reproduction of social and racial order. Finally, her analysis informs contemporary questions about identity politics movements. In 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote, "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (p. 1242). In Broad's discussion of Lane's woman-centered utopia, we find that identity-based politics can also require the production of difference—as in the image from Stuckey's frontispiece—in order to take form.

The next two essays, by Lori Harrison-Kahan and Elizabeth Savage, link literary productions of race to literary form. Harrison-Kahan focuses on the use of black musical motifs in Harlem Renaissance novels, and Savage on how the modernist lyric functions intrinsically—if covertly—as a performance of whiteness. Both track the tensions that arise between content and form as authors write both with and against racializing effects of the latter. Harrison-Kahan's "'Structure Would Equal Meaning': Blues and Jazz Aesthetics in the Fiction of Nella Larsen" conducts a formalist analysis of Larsen's well-known novels, *Passing* and *Quicksand*, tracing their compositional logic to traditionally African American musical forms. She reads Larsen's use of jazz and blues motifs as a contribution to Harlem Renaissance debates over how best to forge a black aesthetic. While critics have typically associated the writer with pro-assimilationists like Countee Cullen, pointing to her middle-class characters and cultured narratorial voice, Harrison-Kahan aligns Larsen with Langston Hughes's separatist embrace of an urban black vernacular. Her argument raises fascinating questions. For if, as Anne DuCille contends, Larsen's middle-class milieu shouldn't necessarily be taken for an expression of white-identification, then what identification with Harlem blackness can we read into formal references to blues and jazz? How, for example, does this choice of racially encoded form comport with the questioning of racial authenticity that drives both narratives? In her discussion of *Passing*, Harrison-Kahan focuses on how jazz motifs generate a dialogic production of racial meaning, structuring exchanges among characters within the text and between the text and its readers. She shows how blackness emerges from/as community, while also providing a resource to community. But her analysis of a scene from *Quicksand* reveals the gendered and interracial tensions that underwrite such dialogues. Overwhelmed by the power of a black spiritual, the novel's main character Helga Crane finally embraces black identity. But the moment is severely ironized by the many similar episodes

of racial self-revelation that have previously gone flat, and by its outcome that leaves Helga unhappily married in an all-black town and pregnant with her fifth child. Here, where music is explicitly identified within the content of the novel as a formal vehicle for blackness, it also becomes a vehicle for female confinement. Even while Larsen produces race for her own use, she never forgets how race makes use of its producers.

In “Bleach[ed] Brotherhood”: Race, Consumer Advertising, and Lorine Niedecker’s Lyric,” Elizabeth Savage likewise takes up the problem of aesthetic form as a medium for racial meaning that has its own power to determine, limit, and constrain. This richly suggestive discussion of two Niedecker poems reveals an intersectional subject who writes and is written by the raced and gendered meanings that reside in the lyric form and tradition. Savage understands the poems as largely about their speakers’ struggles against being so written: they function as extra-dramatic renderings of the compulsion to textually perform oneself as white—a process of reinscription against which Niedecker’s critical awareness stands no defense. In Savage’s reading, the lyric form comes to resemble the Butlerian body: the always already gendered and raced site and substance of self-becoming that is also, therefore, the site and substance of gender and race reproduction. But reproduction is not replication. As Viet Thanh Nguyen points out—theorizing race in terms striking similar to Butler’s theorization of gender—racial formation is always also transformation.¹¹ In becoming the codes we change them; we animate them uniquely. For Savage, this shift occurs at the point where Niedecker’s lyric succeeds in naming its own whiteness—in part by mapping the poem’s confluence with consumerist, nationalist, and racist discourses. In both the poem and in Savage’s engagement with it we find affirmation of James Kyung-Jin Lee’s hope that the literary archive can be a place where critics radicalize race, a place not exempt from the reality “that race is an activity that must be reproduced over and over, every day, across all scales” and yet one that “also offers us the potential to put that reproduction into crisis, not out of the belief or certainty of our work’s or crisis’s outcome, but in the simple commitment of never saying no to the utopian impulse.”¹²

Like Harrison-Kahan and Savage, Joyce Green MacDonald approaches literary form as mode of racial production. In “Border Crossings: Women, Race, and *Othello* in Gayl Jones’s *Mosquito*,” she reads the “assertively nonlinear” structure of Jones’s novel as a deliberate rejection of black realism that enacts belief that new black racial identity—what Jones calls “New World Africanness”—requires new narrative forms. MacDonald’s essay also echoes Savage’s in its attention to the coarticulation of racial and U.S. identities. While Savage looks at how Americanness becomes tacitly synonymous with whiteness, each identification supposing the other, MacDonald shows that for Jones it is blackness that has been problemati-

cally defined by U.S. national boundaries. Here racial meaning obtains in relationships—not just among people but also among genres, genders, and geographies—and in the movements that order them. MacDonald outlines an old world racial order rooted in seventeenth-century cartography and in the establishment of physical and imaginative boundaries that constituted, racialized, and gendered the idea of the new world. She argues that in *Mosquito* Jones opens a discursive space for new world blackness by plotting a series of counter-imperial geographical and literary border crossings. These include, in MacDonald's ingenious reading, the rereading and rewriting of two early modern texts, *Othello* and Donne's Elegy 19, by Jones and her titular heroine. As in the case of Kara Walker's womanist historiography, Jones's deliberate privileging of a subordinated female/feminized point of view (characterized in turn by Jones, Mosquito, Desdemona, the colonized subject, the Americas, and nonwhiteness) does more than merely filling in blanks to complete an existing picture. It destabilizes and ultimately remaps the hierarchies of race, gender, and nation left by early modern colonization.

In "Hairitage: Women Writing Race in Children's Literature," the fifth essay in this collection and the last that concentrates on U.S. literary contexts, Dianne Johnson addresses a subject that has recently received a large share of popular and academic attention: black hair.¹³ Johnson offers her own take on the issue by viewing it through the lens of her dual careers as a university professor who studies African American children's literature and an author who creates it. In a discussion that ranges back to the early twentieth-century magazine for children, *Brownie's Book*, and forward to her own books, Johnson looks at race as it is written in representations of hair—and in hair itself—and considers the myriad interpretations to which both kinds of texts are subject. "Africa is in the hair," she writes, "But what that means and for whom is a different question." Like many others, Johnson is concerned with the meanings that have been imposed on black hair by a racist culture: the descriptors "nappy" and "kinky," the contrast of "bad hair" (African) with "good" (European). She wonders how successfully such terms can be reappropriated by writers of black children's books, and she worries that new readers won't understand why Toni Morrison describes a light-skinned girl from *The Bluest Eye* as "a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back." Yet Johnson also emphasizes the sense of racial belonging that black hair and the culture around it foster. She shows that black hair—like racial identification itself—can be understood as a source of pleasure and also an expression of playful hybridity. So that even processed hair can become a statement of "authentic blackness" and a beehive hairdo feel like "home."

"Archived Voices: Refiguring Three Women's Testimonies Delivered

to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” a collaboration by Antjie Krog and Nosisi Mpolweni, closes this issue. As a contribution to *TSWL*’s Archives section, this piece is informally linked to our focus: it does not address U.S. contexts or women who are writers in any traditional sense. And yet Krog and Mpolweni speak eloquently, often wrenchingly, to many of the same questions and problems that shape the first five essays. Colleagues at the University of the Western Cape, Krog and Mpolweni have worked together since 2004 to retranslate texts from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission archive, recovering meanings lost when testimony was first translated into English from the original tongue—Xhosa, in the cases presented here. The English versions constitute the only written archive; access to the original recordings is limited and there is fear that their deteriorating condition will eventually make these materials completely unavailable. By retranslating these three testimonies to restore the fuller implications of the original Xhosa, Krog and Mpolweni write gender and ethnicity back into the record. Their comparison of transcripts reveals dramatic omissions and distortions: the “toning down” of emotional content; the assumption that “struggle-widows” are there to testify for men and family rather than for themselves; the technical, psychological, linguistic, and epistemological ruptures that exclude, distort, and also add meaning. But this essay is not an effort to restore authenticity, or correct the English archive so that it stands whole. Rather, Krog and Mpolweni emphasize that all archives are “figured”—selected, ordered, framed in support of specific narratives—and must not be approached as sources of fact or truth. They pose their own project as an attempt to refigure the TRC archive, to mobilize it toward new meaning-making potential. A particularly evocative example comes from the testimony of Nombuyiselo Mhlawuli in which she recalls learning about her husband’s murder by apartheid security forces in June 1985. At the center of Mrs. Mhlawuli’s statement is her continuing distress over the absence of her husband’s hand, cut off by his torturers and not buried with the rest of his body. Krog and Mpolweni’s treatment of this anguishing account emphasizes the widow’s desire for information, her need to finalize the record and bring an end to her mourning: “the hand had not yet come to rest in her mother tongue.” In one sense, their efforts to unpack the multiple significances of the missing hand—within Xhosa culture, within the racial logic of Apartheid, within South African colonial history, and within Mrs. Mhlawuli’s own life—moves toward the closure Mrs. Mhlawuli seeks. Through them, a fuller representation of the hand’s meaning enters the record. Yet this very addition also destabilizes an archive that had achieved finality precisely by overlooking and suppressing incongruities among national, ethnic, racial, and personal histories. In this, their essay evinces that same “utopian impulse” described above by Kyung-Jin

Lee—the faith that it is possible to confront the reproduction of hegemonic narratives, to intervene in ways that will “put that reproduction into crisis.” Or, as they explain it in their own conclusion: “the apartheid archives ordered the criteria of evidence, proof, testimony, and witnessing in the court cases. It was through its factual stories that the apartheid state affirmed its fictions to itself which was now destabilized by the testimonies of these three women.”

NOTES

¹ Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

² Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989, p. 139; see also her “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, 43, No. 6. (1991), 1241-1299; subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ In a special issue of *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13, No. 3 (2006), edited by Ann Phoenix and Pamela Pattynama, see “axes of domination” in Anna Bredström, “Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist HIV/AIDS Research?” pp. 229-43, “social divisions” in Nira Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics,” pp. 193-209, and “inequalities” in Mieke Verloo, “Multiple Inequalities, Intersectionality, and the European Union,” pp. 211-28.

⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵ This term comes from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994). They define it thusly: “A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56).

⁶ For a recent discussion of this problem in intersectional analysis, see Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30, No. 3 (2005), 1771-1800.

⁷ Omi and Winant, “Once More with Feeling: Reflections on Racial Formation,” *PMLA*, special topic on Comparative Racialization, coordinated by Shu-mei Shih, 123, No. 5 (2008), 1565.

⁸ Susan Koshy, “Why the Humanities Matter for Race Studies Today,” *PMLA*, 123, No. 5 (2008), 1542.

⁹ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Viet Thanh Nguyen, “At Home with Race,” *PMLA*, 123, No. 5 (2008), 1557-1564.

¹² James Kyung-Jin Lee, “The Transitivity of Race and the Challenge of the

Imagination," *PMLA*, 123, No. 5 (2008), 1554.

¹³ Recent examples include Chris Rock's 2009 documentary *Good Hair*, dir. Jeff Stilson, HBO Films; Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Chris-Tia Donaldson, *Thank God I'm Natural: The Ultimate Guide to Caring for and Maintaining Natural Hair* (TgiNesis Press, 2009)—a practical and political guide; Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001).