

# Race and Other Clichés

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Formalism is on the return. The romance with the formal properties of discourse seemed on the rocks for several decades starting in the 1980s when critics had their heads turned away from the literary by cultural studies and the politics of identity. Surely a renewed interest in form does not mean that cultural critique in the twenty-first century will pick up where New Criticism left off. Attention to form once implied an evasion of politics coupled with a retreat to identifiable patterns that gave meaning to literature. In contrast, form today circulates in an expanded sense that includes identity, social role, and political function in addition to the literary artifact. But the question remains how adequately can a “new formalism” grapple with configurations of race, especially since these configurations nowadays appear old, one tired leg of a tired mantra that intoned “race-class-gender” as criteria for evaluating a literary text?

Formalists do not declare any hostility to examining race. Rather, these readers privilege form as a set of historically dynamic phenomena that offers alternatives to the putatively programmatic ways race is used in a politics of identity. Thus John Brenkman argues that a methodology that brings race (or gender or class) to the forefront “has nothing to say about” complex matters of the black middle class and distributive justice because identity is too static and fixed to account for the historically mobile nature of class formation (122). Similarly, Ellen Rooney suggests that focus on the thematics of identity produces a “sterile reading practice” that scripts conclusions in advance (30). Such critiques, Rooney’s in particular, are crucial to revitalizing the study of form as a significant tool in understanding social as well as literary texts. But the problem with such critiques is that they often turn out to be merely formal, devoid of the historically and culturally specific promise of a new formalism. For instance, Brenkman provides no example of the “gender/race/class paradigm of identity” that in his mind has flattened the interpretative landscape (122). Nor does Rooney’s opposition of formalism to “various modes of thematization” (a phrase that seems intended to conjure up the thematics of race and other identity categories) offer a historically specific

*The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy*  
By Mason Stokes  
Duke University Press, 2001

*A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892–1912*  
By Cathy Boeckmann  
University of Alabama Press, 2000

*Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence*  
By Sarah Chinn  
Continuum, 2000

*Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*  
By Gayle Freda Wald  
Duke University Press, 2000

example of how such thematization manhandles the intricacies of form (29). It is instead necessary to historicize the uses of formalism in studying race, and the books under review here—Mason Stokes's *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy*, Cathy Boeckmann's *A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892–1912*, Sarah Chinn's *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence*, and Gayle Freda Wald's *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U. S. Literature and Culture*—provide for such an opportunity.

To take advantage of the opposition between formalism and racial thematization, a little history is required. This history undermines that opposition, however, suggesting that race has always been entangled, often anxiously so, with form. Back when it was still the twentieth century, race existed on the outskirts of literary studies. It fell to disciplines not as invested in beauty and aesthetic pleasure, such as sociology or history, to examine the less than “universal” aspects of identities and culture. So Henry Louis Gates, Jr., sized up the academic professional terrain in his introduction to the landmark volume, *“Race,” Writing, and Difference* (1985), arguing that the “initial response” of most critics was that race had “‘nothing’ or, at the very least, ‘nothing explicitly’” to do with literature and literary theory (2). For critics today of American literary and cultural studies, an era when race did not centrally enter into classrooms or shape research no doubt seems like the ancient past of what truly is another century.

Time seemed to speed up as the millennium drew to a close, however. A decade after his first mapping, Gates, now writing with Kwame Anthony Appiah, anointed race, along with class and gender, “the holy trinity of literary criticism,” the three together serving as “the regnant clichés of our critical discourse” (1). In *Identities* (1995), a follow-up volume to *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, these coeditors observed that race as an intellectual frontier was closed, an announcement made not without a measurable degree of sadness, even worry, that the regularization of race as a topic of study might well presage its slide back into naturalized and unexamined forms. To think of race as a cliché is interesting not in the least because it implies race as pure form to the point where its specific history is rendered unremarkable, commonplace, and opaque. For this reason, it is necessary to “disrupt the cliché-ridden discourse of identity,” write Appiah and Gates (1). Articulation of a new understanding of race—in short, the capacity to “disrupt”—remains a crucial task for the humanities and social sciences. But is a new discourse of race that would

break with the accumulated traditions and set forms of identity possible for American literary and cultural studies research? And, in what ways would such an articulation always be a rearticulation, unable to escape from the clichés that make race both automatically knowable and uncannily artificial?

Never one to shy away from a trite expression, I would say that there is a modest amount and perhaps even a whole lot of disruption—or, at least rearticulation—going on that challenges received notions of race by revealing the ways in which racial identity simultaneously shapes and is shaped by discourses of queerness, science, legalism, nation, and globalization. The books assembled here present a wide but less than panoramic snapshot of such efforts. Stokes's *The Color of Sex* concludes by describing "the queer face of whiteness" (178) as part of an overall gambit to make seamless claims to identity impossible. Similarly, in a chapter on a white jazzman passing as black, Wald's *Crossing the Line* describes the interplay of homophobia and homoeroticism that allows the uneasy transit between white identification and black bodies. Race, in Chinn's *Technology and the Logic of American Racism*, is vitally connected with blood in ways that put the body's flows and seepages at the center of national identity. What opens up the body's text to analysis and interpretation, according to Chinn in a chapter on DNA and the Human Genome Project, is the discourse of science. The discursivity of science, especially in its tendency to characterize human subjects in ways similar to the characterization (and criminalization) of heroes and villains in fictional genres, is explored in Boeckmann's *A Question of Character*. Each of these studies conjoins the cliché of race with another normative structure in an effort to stage the type of disruption that Appiah and Gates advocate. The hope is that the conjunction of race and *x*, where *x* is revealed as an emergent discourse still under construction and not yet fully naturalized, will dislodge whiteness as well as reified versions of blackness from the controlling centers that organize and unequally distribute social justice, entitlement, and self-worth.

The persistence of race and identity as organizing principles in each of these works makes it difficult to realize such hopes. Moreover, it is not taking these studies lightly to ask if their contributions confirm clichés that have installed race, no matter if "race" is ritualistically made unfamiliar, at the center of our (academic) ways of thinking. While I do not believe that interventions in constructions of racial identity need to reject wholesale the concept of race, as the title of Paul Gilroy's recent *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000) implies, readers of the cultural and literary past nonetheless must worry

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that their focus on identity will repeat regulatory logics that set normative limits.<sup>1</sup> That is, to what extent are attempts to disrupt racial identity, because they remain concerned with a *form* of identity, always clichés? Is not identity itself a worn-out form, a series of patterned moves and scripted countermoves, that simultaneously commits and limits us to a politics whose horizons of possibility begin and end with identity? In her contribution to Appiah and Gates's *Identities*, Judith Butler wonders if "the [edited collection's] title was already anachronistic," undermining "our ability to think through the more urgent questions of difference and democracy" (439). Identity is a drawback for our thinking, a liability compounded by its particularization within discourses of race.<sup>2</sup> As a foundation for politics, identity curtails ways of thinking and acting not governed by the modern interplay of subjectivity and subjection.

Of the books under review here, only *The Color of Sex* senses the foreclosure of possibilities implicit in any approach that pries open the topic of racial identity. Stokes realizes that any attempt to disrupt clichés about whiteness depends from the get-go on a flawed logic of identity that limits in advance the interpretations derived from any text. In a chapter on polygenesis and the whiteness of Adam and Eve, Stokes turns to one of the more bizarre texts in a long line of biblical exegesis that pointed the finger at a black figure for all the sex and disobedience in Eden. *The Tempter of Eve*, a 1901 tome by Charles Carroll, is distinctive in this tradition because of its identification of "a *negress*, who served Eve in the capacity of maid servant" (qtd. in Stokes 97) as the cunning seducer and not, as was typically the case, an oversexualized negro gardener working in paradise. This switch from black male tempter to black female temptress, Stokes suggests, preserves whiteness by imagining a scene of same-sex seduction that sidesteps the thorny issue of miscegenation. But when the author's identity becomes the subject of interpretation, Stokes acknowledges that the very focus on identity becomes a problem. Confronted by a yellowing photograph of Carroll in tandem with conclusions by Eric Sundquist, Joel Williamson, Forrest Wood, and George Fredrickson that respectively position the author of *The Tempter of Eve* as mulatto, black, and white, Stokes momentarily throws up his hands: "Whether Carroll was black, white, or some combination of the two, I cannot assert with any assurance" (104). His quandary candidly acknowledges the "limits" (105) created by interpretative practices that prioritize identity and then develop a reading from that foundational ground.

Race is both a marker and maker of identity that, no matter

how unstable, abides by certain expectations, responses, and circumscriptions—in short, race has meaning because it takes recognizable and repeatable forms. But as these forms congeal into clichés, race becomes supremely discursive, ripe for formalist analysis that promises to expose its discursivity and constructedness. Once held as concrete and objectively visible, race is recognized as pure form, a “dangerous trope” (Gates 5), whose effects nonetheless exert a realness of brutal dimension. Mark Twain famously pointed to the formal aspects of race when he spoke of a “fiction of law and custom”—a phrase either quoted or alluded to in each of these studies, a stock citation that is itself suggestive of the familiar moves in analyses of racial identity. (Indeed, Chinn and Boeckmann have chapters on *Pudd'nhead Wilson* [1894]; Wald and Chinn both examine Nella Larsen's *Passing* [1929]; Stokes and Boeckmann each discuss Thomas Dixon's romances of the Ku Klux Klan and D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* [1915]). The study of race demands formalist analysis. Any possibility for disruption in the “cliché-ridden discourse of identity” must occur at the level of form because race is so surely a matter of rhetorical convention, cultural stereotype, and social pattern. Just as easily, however, critical attention to identity can reiterate its clichés, solidifying its hold on the real workings of power and hierarchy. This doubleness haunts these studies in their attempts to coordinate—and, in some cases, reconcile—the formal dimensions of race with the formal dimensions of other cultural artifacts, such as novels, films, fingerprints, and genetic codes. Taken together, they exemplify how American literary and cultural studies engages in this sort of ambivalent analysis, reading texts and materials for the various tropes and scripts that imprison subjects.

Even as American literary and cultural studies treats all forms—not just textual ones—as fair game, it is deeply anxious about its methodological commitments to formalist interpretation. These worries circulate every year at the annual convention of the American Studies Association, for instance, where in the awkward pauses between English types and historians one hears a series of unuttered questions: Does the analysis of form leave social arrangements, especially those built on persistent inequities, by the wayside? Does attention to literary and aesthetic form come at the expense of cultural politics or even realpolitik? And, perhaps most importantly, does reading configurations such as nationalism and race as thoroughly tropological and discursive, as narratives whose formal properties can be deciphered and critiqued, minimize the seriousness of the hierarchies that these structures generate and sustain?

## 1

Such questions hover in the backgrounds of these four books, each engaging in varying degrees of self-reflection about their use of US literature to explore the formal mechanisms and fictional constructs of race. Although Stokes, Chinn, Boeckmann, and Wald all share a willingness to think through the implications of their respective archives and methodologies, the results for each author are hardly consistent, ranging from forthrightness and cautious optimism to disavowal and mild despair.

As I've already indicated, Stokes considers the stakes of his own study with candor. Realizing that a critique of whiteness built on treatments of virulently racist artifacts is problematic to say the least, he confronts head-on his engagement with plantation romances and swan songs for the defeated Confederacy. If we expunge literary history of its more noxious elements, then we risk obscuring the forces that once installed whiteness as a governing ideology as well as today promise to reveal the tendentiousness and strained artificiality of that ideology. "Although part of me sees this as a perfectly happy occurrence ('Good riddance, racist scum!),' confides Stokes with a bit of wit, "a larger part believes that the disappearance of these white supremacist texts from our vision of the American literary landscape renders that landscape false and incomplete, a testament to a literary history that didn't really happen" (5). A true and complete literary history is by no means a smooth one, however; by insisting on the links between whiteness and exasperated heterosexual performance, Stokes lays bare the rough spots in an ideology whose desire to reproduce itself often ended up in the briar patch of miscegenation and "aberrant" sexuality.

Because *The Color of Sex* attends to a gap in literary history, it inevitably leans heavily on textual interpretations of the forgotten and repressed materials it recovers. Although the book is framed by considerations that situate whiteness as an object of cultural study, the interior chapters examining plots and central metaphors of Metta Victor's *Maum Guinea and Her Plantation "Children"* (1861), Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), and Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* suggest race and racist logic as distinctly textual. *The Color of Sex* thus experiences a type of disconnect between its intended target of cultural study and the materials it surveys. True, if whiteness is a highly elaborated and belabored fiction, then it can best be known and defamiliarized through formalist analysis. Yet as these pages discuss metaphoric mirrors in Victor's bipolar novel of slave community and white slaveholding or textual contortions in proslavery responses to

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the concentration on formal aspects potentially removes these works from culture to a type of New Critical ground that first skewed the American literary landscape by flattening its cultural features. I have no doubt that Stokes explores the intricacies of white-supremacist texts because he wants to shatter the fragile complexity of whiteness. But I also wonder if an effect of studying plot devices in Dixon, to take another example, does not also fetishize the novel, inundating readers with aesthetic details from once popular but now out-of-print texts? Does this accumulation desensitize readers into thinking of racism as an anachronism found in books that are no longer read?

Stokes, however, is way ahead of skeptics on this one. "Intended movements out of whiteness inevitably become retrenchments," he writes (185). *The Color of Sex* treads dangerous ground but such savvy insights, combined with lucid accounts of a hegemonic identity uneasily triangulated amid racial contamination and gender confusion, make it an indispensable guide for anyone revisiting that ground. What's more, as his closing survey on recent scholarship on whiteness hints, a lengthy return to the forgotten literary past is not always necessary to bring us back to an ancient temporal location where the disciplinary effects of white identity remain unquestioned and in full force. There's no time like the present—an era of racial profiling, assaults on affirmative action, and the siege mentality supported by some spins on the data gathered by Census 2000—for witnessing the effects of whiteness.

Another response to the perils of analyzing the literary devices that emplot racism would be that aesthetic details are always racial matters. Aesthetic considerations lead to the incorporation of certain details as organic, essential, or beautiful as well as to the exclusion of other details as extraneous, discordant, or impure. Judgment and discrimination play a large role but in ways that do not necessarily seem connected to the cultural specifics of race. Discrimination, we know, is bad, but at the same time we remember that to speak of a person as *discriminating*, to praise his or her ability to *discriminate*, is to acknowledge, as *Webster's* puts it, a capacity "to use good judgment." When Kant declares that "all simple colours are regarded as beautiful so far as pure. Composite colours have not this advantage. . . . [T]here is no standard for estimating whether they should be called pure or impure" (67), he exercises the faculty of judgment at a level of abstruseness and ideal forms beyond the materiality of history. The problem, however, is that aesthetic judgments become particular cultural practices. Kant's reflections on universal criteria of judgment become crudely untranscendent when he later posits that "a negro must necessarily . . . have a different normal idea of the beauty of forms

from what a white man has, and the Chinaman one different from the European” (78). In Virginia, at the furthest reaches of the Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson gave such forms a nicely new-world accent by asserting that whites possessed “superior beauty” in comparison to blacks, as he morosely speculated on the slim prospects of achieving interracial harmony (187). While such wisdom once seemed new in its ability to reconfigure race in terms of aesthetics and anthropological observation, old formulas persist in new forms. The lesson here is that while race may be as hackneyed as any cliché, it also recombines with other forms where it appears as fresh thinking, a break with the usages of the past, that nonetheless exerts considerable pressure in delimiting the possibilities of egalitarian thinking and democratic action.

Recently, signs have been gathering—call them omens, if you will—that humanities discourse is in danger of forgetting this lesson. The 10 years from 1985, when *“Race,” Writing, and Difference* charged that the conceptual force of race had been ignored, to 1995, when *Identities* viewed race as on the verge of becoming a burned-out signifier, match an American sociopolitical landscape that has become tired of race as well. The scuttling of affirmative action programs in states such as Florida and Michigan, in conjunction with the specter of “quotas,” aligns with an academy that approaches race with a “been there, done that” attitude. Affirmative action did what it could to remedy longstanding inequities but now the cure for these inequities (and, by the way, are there truly any inequities left?) precipitates greater injustice by visiting discrimination on white students with desultory MCAT or LSAT scores. In the humanities, we did what we could to examine race but this approach had its victims as well. First, we unfairly imperiled the status of literary works, for example, by turning our attention away from the complexities of form (trope, genre, convention) so that we could turn to the banalities of content (the thematics of identity). Second, we injured ourselves by trumpeting slogans as if they were ideas, succumbing to a predictable, one-size-fits-all methodology that mechanically queried cultural productions in terms of race, class, and gender. So runs the logic of amnesia in an era when cops in the Los Angeles Police Department, urged by the Justice Department, have begun to track what they perceive to be the race of drivers pulled over during traffic stops. Identity still matters to the LAPD, which in this case seems committed to placing persons within preconceived receptacles of victimization or criminalization. An era of racial profiling does not seem the most opportune time to forget about race in its oldest forms. An even more cynical reading would be that nothing

risks being forgotten, for this was a lesson that the academy never learned.

## 2

If formalism is on the return, this is not necessarily a bad thing as these studies indicate. Although we are right to question whether “formalisms are ever really as formal as they purport to be,” work at the intersections of legal studies, political theory, and literary criticism addresses the promises as well as the difficulties of correlating aesthetic versions of formalism with juridical and ethical forms (Butler, “Restaging” 15). Aesthetics and justice both invoke the idea of “the fair” and “fairness,” but can we extend the homology far enough to distill a code of ethical conduct that will unite appreciation of beautiful forms with the duty to act justly? Elaine Scarry believes that we can, asserting that “beauty presses us to justice” in her argument that fairness is simultaneously an aesthetic and ethical quality (“Scholar’s” 25).<sup>3</sup> She seeks to rescue formalism from the abuse it received in the years that race, class, and gender achieved clichéd status. “Beauty is, at the very least, innocent of the charges against it,” she writes, “and it may even be the case that far from damaging our capacity to attend to problems of injustice, it instead intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries” (*Beauty* 57). Scarry throws out the case against beauty, regarding allegations that it fosters inequality and injury as specious and trumped-up. To paraphrase Scarry in the language of Clarence Thomas at his Senate confirmation hearings, beauty has been the victim of a high-powered academic lynching.

I suppose that, according to Scarry’s argument, American literary and cultural studies would be among the specializations bearing false witness against beauty. To take Stokes, Boeckmann, Chinn, and Wald as representative of recent work in this area, however, it’s not American literary and cultural studies that has no use for aesthetic questions. (To be sure, these four books use aesthetic considerations to underpin their methodologies and conclusions). Rather, it is Scarry who has a rarefied—even sanitized—version of use when it comes to formalism. As she makes her ideas of beauty specific, Scarry assembles examples from Henri Matisse’s paintings in the south of France to gardens of flowers. In these cases beauty is essential: “Gardens exist for the sake of being beautiful and for the sake of having that beauty looked at, walked through, lingered in” (*Beauty* 70). Her inviting appreciation of aesthetic properties—that is, her ability to dis-

criminate—also sets limits by excluding material concerns that would lead to very different criteria, judging gardens for their ability to supply food provided that labor sees to it that the plants are tended and the fruit harvested. Discerning beauty is not automatic; it is something to work at. Beauty is innocent only if it is disconnected from other forms.

Perhaps because the books under consideration in this review do not assume a level of abstraction as great as Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, they implicitly examine the relationship between literary form and other forms of knowledge privileged by the social order. Situating turn-of-the-century novels amid burgeoning pseudoscientific understandings of racial identity, Boeckmann argues the original thesis that generic instability is linked to racial indeterminacy in mixed-race characters. This confusion of literary representation and technical observation shifts concepts of identity away from the visible to the invisible, directing race inward so that it acquires an insidious hold upon individuals. Chapters on Dixon, Twain, Charles Chesnutt, William Dean Howells, and James Weldon Johnson capitalize on the slippage between character as an effect of literary psychology and character as a neo-Lamarckian term that stands for "all of the invisible, nonphysical inheritances of race" (36). Theories of fiction and theories of race converge: characterization, she claims, invents racial difference even where race is not visibly in evidence. Her readings of individual authors build to an epilogue asserting that race is bound by mimesis, that it has no existence apart from formal modes of representation that breathe life into the mulatto characters passing in and out of American fiction from 1892–1912. "Art perhaps has become race," she provocatively concludes (211).

Given that the novels within her time frame are so heavily invested in realism and its sentimental variants, it's difficult for Boeckmann to imagine a mode of representation that does not confirm what the prevailing social order thinks that it already knows about race. If race is a construct, can the fictions that construct it work in nonrealist modes and take forms that are not strictly representative? In a world of unending formalism, what are the possibilities for transformation? The strength of Boeckmann's vision in providing answers here is also its liability: in arguing so forcefully for the formal aspects of racial character, she obscures how literature itself depends, not on aspects of reality as in realist representation, but on other cultural forms. Though her opening chapter describes the rise of scientific racism, as she takes up each of the authors in turn this cultural focus tends to fade. The result is that the science of this era—while no one, least of all Boeckmann, would give it any credence—assumes reified propor-

tions and seemingly determines in advance the social arrangements envisioned in any of the novels she discusses. Absent is a triangular structure that might unsettle the easy correspondence between literature and science. The formal properties of these disciplines are also dependent on cultural forms of nationalism, the state, gender, and heterosexuality: the introduction of such complicating terms might disrupt this one-to-one correlation and, in the process, lead to reevaluations that challenge the representation of race as reality.

As it thematizes race as a formal construct, *A Question of Character* is the most far-reaching of the books under review here. Yet, the readings of texts it offers are also the most formulaic and predictable. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is largely read as a story about racial instability, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) as a melodrama about the contingency of the one-drop rule, and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1927) as a novel about the reinvention of blackness through art. Because her interpretations depend so heavily on descriptions of fictional character or plot analysis, Boeckmann's study tends to hypostatize and even isolate literature as a category, as a "pure" form invulnerable to other cultural accretions of meaning. Under this scenario, literature and race become categorical, only capable of confirming their mutual constructions of one another.

Chinn avoids this "trap" of the literary if only because the materials she studies are in many cases decidedly nonliterary. She balances an analysis of Larsen's *Passing* with the sensational Rhinelander case of the 1920s, a case in which the scion of a New York family sought to have his marriage to a woman of African descent voided by suing her for fraud, alleging that she duped him into believing she was "white." In contrast to Boeckmann's neat alignment of science and literature, Chinn's reading of courtroom transcripts, journalistic coverage, and literary sources suggests that "dominant discourses were not homogenous, and in fact different streams of white supremacist rhetoric occasionally came into conflict with one another" (68). More often than not, racial individuals are asked to negotiate this conflict, handed cultural scripts and required to take roles that serve the interests of white society. "Bodies were recruited to testify against themselves to support systems of subordination that viewed racially marked bodies as evidence for their own marginalization," writes Chinn (7). Against this compulsive legibility, however, Chinn gestures to "occulted sociolects" used by bodies that refuse to be read in ways that confirm the second-class status of their bearers (22).

Reading both the body's exterior and interior, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism* looks at the construction of

racial interiority from the time of Twain's fascination with the mysteries of palm reading to our contemporary interest in the mysteries of genetic mapping. Whether she is examining how people read the lines on human hands or are invested in the "narratability of DNA," Chinn alludes to the body in formalist terms (150). Her work situates identity amid a series of inscriptions ranging across film, criminology, and literature. As no single form is given ascendancy or fetishized in this discussion, it becomes easier to document the fissures—what might be called the illogic of American racism—in other cultural forms such as marriage or citizenship. During World War II, for instance, when the US government encouraged the patriotic conflation between body and body politic as part of a campaign to encourage blood donation, blood drawn from African Americans was routinely kept separate from the rest of the blood supply. Inclusive forms of citizenship, explored by Chinn in her treatment of government pamphlets, newsreels, and memos from the Red Cross, are predicated on exclusion.

In spite—or perhaps because—of its willingness to consider all sorts of forms, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism* does not necessarily probe the differences among them. Though an "overlap" exists between "scientific and legal modes of evidence," what exactly is the relationship between science and law (79)? If their convergence depends upon uses of evidence, what needs to be addressed are the tropes that allow law and science to function similarly in revealing the "truths" of identity. Likewise, if the pairing of the Rhinelander case and *Passing* produces echoes between courtroom drama and racial drama, what is the specific relationship between events narrated in a juridical theater and literary form? Words uttered in a courtroom have a different social force than words appearing in a novel. Chinn's intent, in part, would seem to be to disclose the fictiveness of legal discourse, but this conclusion also implies that there are multiple genres of fiction. How do these genres contest as well as reinforce one another? Is the fictiveness of the law more like the fiction that is Larsen's novel or the fiction that constructs race as real?

As race not only gets associated with fiction but also is revealed as fiction, it becomes incumbent to inquire into its formal properties. By focusing on closure in narratives about racial indeterminacy, Wald undertakes a "formalist interpretation" (32) of several renditions of passing, including cinematic representations of a fluid color line, stories of whites who passed as black, and postpassing confessions of blacks who, after fooling the white world, refuse to engage further in fraudulent self-representation. If passing narratives open a breach in the social strictures that

regulate identity, they also draw upon other strictures of gender, heterosexuality, and class to seal the rupture. *Crossing the Line* supplements definitions of what counts as transgressive identity and what polices it, a revisionary gesture that is argued first and foremost in terms of the texts taken up in its pages. For in addition to examining works by Jessie Fauset and Larsen as one would expect, Wald turns to postwar films and black magazines that highlighted persons of indeterminate racial background and challenged readers and viewers, much like the LAPD in traffic stops today, to guess at subjects' race.

Despite exposing racial boundaries that can be crossed from multiple subject locations, Wald is careful not to conclude that a more fluid color line necessarily results in greater freedom. Though it would be tempting to read the refusal by persons of visibly indeterminate racial heritage to pass as an unambiguous assault on a public sphere that devalued blackness, the politics of their repudiation is unclear. Wald exercises caution in turning to films about passing that promise a utopian space that transcends race even as they "continue to use 'race' as a means of social discipline and control" (87). Intervention only goes so far: blacks in postpassing narratives do not so much "critique existing social structures, but rather posit the right of 'black' people . . . to inhabit these structures" (130). Passing is also a normative act, one capable of reiterating parochial bourgeois values and myths of individualism.

From the outset Wald has argued that we need to be able to read not only passing narratives but also the metacritical narrative that we construct about passing. "We need to practice a self-consciousness in the ways we use the concept of race," she writes, "lest the practice of putting *race* in quotation marks as a sign of anti-essentialist critique become rhetorical" (24). But whether italicized or set off by quotes, race, it seems to me, remains rhetorical, a cliché as Appiah and Gates suggest, only made subject to critique because of the formal processes that establish it as natural or transparent. Wald here betrays an anxiety to get beyond "formalist interpretation," to see the rhetorical as a pit stop on the way to politics. This impulse gets the best of her when she reads as empty rhetoric an ironic jab that the author of *Black Like Me* (1961), John Howard Griffin, leveled at Lyndon Johnson after the president seemingly prioritized ecological conservation over civil rights. She chalks up the text of Griffin's telegram—"AM TIRED OF BEING A LOSER. FROM NOW ON I'M GOING TO FORGET HUMANITY AND WORK FOR THE TREES"—as misguided because of its inability to "produce alternative narratives of humanity and coalition, including those that might

include trees” (180–81). What gets obscured by Wald’s inclusiveness is how politics, perhaps like race itself, is a *form* of demarcation: unless “humanity” can prioritize options and hierarchize concerns, how can persons strategically encounter the impersonal structures that govern their bodies, communities, and memories? Unless critics read the rhetoric and formal mechanisms that constitute identity, they run the risk of giving up on an important facet of the political field.

### 3

It is difficult to remain immune to the sentiment that a governmental lock on various forms of identity should make us impatient with form, prompting us to embark on a search for new coalitions and new conceptualizations of race. But it is also difficult not to view the possibility of a new world uncolonized by prior cultural forms as illusory. The issue is not a circumscribed set of forms versus a fresh landscape of informal arrangements, or in Wald’s terms, a world of tired rhetoric versus real political possibility. Though artificial, the formal logic of identity is about as real—but certainly not as good—as it gets. In his discussion of genetic research, Paul Gilroy contends that “if ‘race’ is to endure, it will be in a new form” lived below the skin, in what “nano-politics” posits as our interior essence (46–47). We might well contend a similar point in terms of American literary and cultural studies to ask in what form race will endure in interdisciplinary work in the humanities. The important thing to remember is that it will still be a form, one no doubt clinging to the clichés it has given up.

### Notes

1. Gilroy argues that “the old, modern idea of ‘race’ can have no ethically defensible place” (6). So thoroughly worn out is race—by fascism, imperialism, and eugenics—that race cannot be freed from the burden of history to work in liberatory ways. Gilroy instead urges “postracial and postanthropological versions of what it means to be human” (25).
2. Identity no doubt delimits the political field, but recognition of this fact does not necessarily mean as well that race is only delimiting. Racial affiliation can provide senses of community, memory, and power even as it also marks a site of governmental or social oppression.
3. Brenkman makes a similar move when he suggests that the statement “*this is beautiful*” prompts recognition of “the worth of others” in ways that correlate with concern for nurturing the “self-realizing citizenship of others” (133).

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