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Habiba Ibrahim

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# The Time of the Multiracial

Habiba Ibrahim\*

These three recent studies all read how mixed racialism expresses and challenges the terms of US nationalism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collectively, they account for a period when the nation developed as a global force through a series of racializing projects, implemented through intra- and international war, imperialist expansion and conquest, and the consolidation of the color line at home. Tropes such as miscegenation, tragic mulatta, and genres of mixedness such as the “racial romance” (Sheffer 3) reveal a key aspect of the cultural imagination during the turbulent era that led up to and inaugurated the “American Century.” Figures of deviant intimacy—interracial sex, incest, same-sex filiation—and figures of gender, such as the mulatto/a, and the tragic muse revealed the cultural outcomes of the unfinished project of nation building. All of these studies take racial mixedness and its correlating categories as key analytical starting points for unmasking the neutrality or invisibility of state power. Thus, they bring to mind the urgency of the current moment: what analytics can interrupt the post-ness—postracialism, postfeminism, and postidentitarianism—of the present?

*Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction.* Diana Rebeccah Paulin. U of Minnesota P, 2012.

*The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880–1930.* Jolie A. Sheffer. Rutgers UP, 2013.

*Transatlantic Spectacles of Race: The Tragic Mulatta and the Tragic Muse.* Kimberly Snyder Manganelli. Rutgers UP, 2012.

## 1. Neoliberalism, Postidentity

Twenty years ago, mixed racialism first appealed to literary scholars because it offered a critical space in which to explore the era’s political contradictions and transitions. During the heyday of the so-called multiracial movement, key developments in the cultural politics of identity were well under way. The culture wars were still raging with neoconservative moralists and left-of-center liberals vying for influence over social and political life. At the same time,

\*Habiba Ibrahim is an associate professor of English at the University of Washington, Seattle. She is the author of *Troubling the Family: The Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Multiracialism* (2012). Her current book project, *Oceanic Lifespans*, examines how age and racial blackness have been mutually constituted.

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neoconservatives and neoliberals converged around the erosion of identitarian categories as social tools for making political and historical critiques. By the neoliberal era of the 1980s and 1990s identity was increasingly viewed as the stuff of separatist and single-issue groupthink, rather than as an instrument through which to analyze the operations and historicity of power. Perhaps this explains the remarkably accelerating cultural and scholarly interest in multiracial identity by the mid-1990s. After all, what did the appearance of the multiracial indicate? Under the umbrella term “multiracialism,” subjects with competing social, political, and cultural views formulated clashing accounts of how to situate race in US discourse. As a diagnostic tool, multiracialism bore the potential to cut through the present.

## 2. Gender, Sexuality, Family

Twenty years later, interdisciplinary scholarship in philosophy, performance studies, literary, and cultural studies increasingly take multiracialism as a starting point for thinking historically about social identities and cultural production. Current literary scholarship retrieves unfamiliar, forgotten history in order to diagnose the present, or to reconsider our present-day relationship to the historical. Some scholars have started with how multiracialism is treated within current US discourse—as the balm of postracial transcendence on the one side, as another separatist identity on the other—to ask how we’ve arrived at these particular interpretations. This line of inquiry denaturalizes present-day meanings attached to the multiracial and clearly departs from work that vehemently argues one position or the other.

What stands out about more recent studies—Kimberly Snyder Manganelli’s *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race* (2012), Jolie A. Sheffer’s *The Romance of Race* (2013), and Diana Rebekkah Paulin’s *Imperfect Unions* (2012)—is the way they represent a decisive turn toward staunchly comparativist, even transnational approach to multiracial literary studies. Comparativism indicates that the field is broadening its spatial and analytical scope to pursue fuller explorations of the historical and historiographical. Such a broadened scope repositions interest in the cultural politics of gender, sexuality, and family as deep engagements with the modern.

Like Suzanne Bost’s *Mulattas and Mestizas* (2003), Teresa Zackodnik’s *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2004), and Eve Allegra Raimon’s *The “Tragic Mulatta” Revisited* (2004), *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race*, investigates early intersections between racial amalgamation and womanhood by exploring how the figurative feminization of racial mixedness has been instrumentalized

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to vie for various nationalist and counter-nationalist outcomes over the long nineteenth century. Manganelli's unique contribution is to read the mixed-race "tragic mulatta" of the Americas alongside its heretofore-unacknowledged counterpart, the Jewish "tragic muse" of Victorian British literature, thereby positioning both blackness and Jewishness along the same axis of modern racializing processes.

Through an analysis of multigeneric representations of mixed racial and Jewish womanhood, this study resituates racial ambiguity across the undifferentiating space of the Atlantic. To that end, Manganelli studies seminal accounts of sexually and financially independent West Indian Creole women in late-eighteenth-century French and British travel narratives, the outgrowth of mid-nineteenth-century British sensation fiction from US abolitionist literature, as well as the racialization that both mulatta and Jewish female figures extend to turn-of-the-century New Woman discourse to demonstrate how racialized female bodies grammatically structure the transatlantic language of imperialist conquest, enslavement, commodity capitalism, and patriarchy. This study thus posits that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, racially amalgamated and Jewish femininities were key to representing developments of modernity.

What this work doesn't do is neatly frame blackness and Jewishness as two congenially equivalent, though differently hued, tiles in a multicultural mosaic. Tracing how the tragic mulatta and tragic muse are mutually constituted is how Manganelli intervenes in conventionally nationalist literary history and constructs refreshingly alternative literary genealogies. Such an intervention is needed to see, for instance, how virtuous mulattas in US abolitionist productions like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) or William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) directly lead to British sensation novels of mystery and intrigue, several years before the appearance of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860). Although mutually produced, the tragic mulatta and the tragic muse also reflect divergent formations of racialized gender over the course of a century. By the mid-nineteenth century, the tragic muse comes together with and transforms the tragic mulatta on both sides of the Atlantic, in Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857) and a decade later in Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic* (1867).<sup>1</sup> Both she and the mulatta are written outside of normative conventions of womanhood, available for public consumption and the targets of patriarchal circumscription, but they are subjected to power differently and are granted differing degrees of agency throughout time. For Manganelli, "The Tragic Muse put up for sale by her father resonates with the Tragic Mulatta put on the auction block. However, the Tragic Muse is not a victim of the market but a participant in it; she sells her talent as the prostitute sells her body" (113). As we

consider mutable processes that determine how forms of embodiment circulate, perhaps we are also being encouraged to consider the divergent afterlives of the two into the twentieth century.

Like Manganelli's work, Sheffer's *The Romance of Race* also draws our attention to multiracial intersections of gender and sexuality. Sheffer argues that between 1880 and 1930 US women writers captured shifting dynamics of national belonging through a genre she terms "racial romance." With miscegenation and/or incest as key narrative elements, this genre depicts the problematized family as the locus of national negotiation. Racial romance appropriates the nation-as-family metaphor so common to the rhetoric of US imperialism during this era and emphasizes sexuality as a central point on which nation-building projects pivoted. The profoundly uneven power dynamics and verboten breaches of social order that both miscegenation and incest announce were often the unacknowledged bedrocks of US ascendancy onto the world stage. While increasing global power and national incorporation through conquest promote the will to assimilate difference, Sheffer reads texts portraying complicated affective responses to nondichotomous notions of sameness and otherness, foreignness and family. A sense of national dissonance and concordance that arose in this period of shifting immigration and demographical trends, Jim Crow segregation (among other vestiges of US slavery), and imperialist conquest lead Sheffer to locate racial romance as the predecessor of late twentieth-century multiculturalism: writers such as Pauline Hopkins, Winnifred Eaton, and María Cristina Mena understood the US family as a site of provocation rather than simply that of neutral pacification.

In this genealogy of multiculturalism and, by extension, multi-racialism, the unexpected revelation is that the cultural roots of both phenomena were more critical of nationalist inclusion than the successive discourse a decade later. Unlike the multicultural mosaic that seemed to be either disingenuously or misguidedly political, and that seemed to privilege the image (often as commodity) over historical or intellectual depth, Sheffer retrieves the version avoiding these pitfalls by appealing to the affect of popular readerships: "just as nineteenth-century sentimental fiction presumed that intense emotional responses . . . could inspire social change, racial romances depend upon their readers' 'natural' responses to stories of family formation as a tool to change hearts and minds" (173–74). So the intended outcome of this genre is to incite or awaken a racial politics in its predominantly white, middle-class, and female readership. Plot lines involving white fathers of Japanese "half-castes," or Native and Anglo "half-breeds" who marry each other, all should capture the political complications of US interest in the Pacific or conquest in the New World through the lure of intimacy.

Almost as an analogue to the genealogy Manganelli traces, Sheffer reads the Progressive Era through the cultural productions of mixed-race women (historical applicability of that racial designation notwithstanding), who in general, place mixed-race females at the center of their family dramas, of which women were the primary readers. In this way, gender is the precondition for politicizing and aestheticizing mixed-racial intimacy. But what of this? Sheffer concisely explains that the study focuses on women writers because they were the ones writing popular fictions about intimacy. Moreover, “women writers had long relied upon so-called ‘female’ and feminized discourses to make more socially acceptable political engagement with issues of race and belonging” (21). But if racial/ethnic interaction without assimilation is integral to the racial romance and lives again in the relatively vapid cultural pluralism of the late twentieth century, what is the afterlife of race’s intersection with the so-called female?

One answer, for Sheffer, comes in the form of aesthetics, particularly the 1990 Benetton ad called “Blanket.” The ad features a black/white female interracial couple, with one woman’s hand on top of the other woman’s, and both hands on the abdomen of the Asian baby between them. All three are wrapped in a single blanket. All of the elements of the racial romance are here, yet the advertisement effectively aestheticizes a nonpolitics about race and its intersections with gender, sexuality, and family. We get a tableau of difference uncritically wrapped in a blanket of now-normatively filial coherence. In the neoliberal era, the self-sustaining family can be a number of things—transnational, interracial, and same-sexed— but it is also consumerist, conservative, and private.

Sheffer’s study clarifies why contemporary multiculturalism as well as the cultural politics of multiracialism raged in the 1990s. Although it is beyond the scope of her study to compare how fin-de-siècle women writers and twentieth-century mothers of multiracial children politicized affect, Sheffer’s argument will prompt scholars of mixed racial studies to make explicit connections. Such scholars will be aware that a number of multiracial organizations (like Biracial Family Network, Project RACE, also Interracial Family Pride) were support networks for interracial families, and many of their leaders were white mothers of multiracial children.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary politicizing of multiracialism arose after the 1967 Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia*, which struck down antimiscegenation laws nationwide; *Loving* legitimated multiracial offspring, along with interracial marriages. With the growth of multiracial families came parental interest in appropriately classifying their children’s race on school forms, the self-esteem of their children, and other multiracial families. If fin-de-siècle women romance writers presumed that affect could produce social change, the women

who led and participated in the multiracial movement also made affect—love for their spouses and children of different races—a mobilizing tool for political recognition.

The “Blanket” ad may well be a fitting paradigm of multiracial discourse of its era: it almost appears as if the natural—even the only—channel for negotiating racial and ethnic differences is the cordoned-off nuclear family, not the public sphere. Indeed, there is no interaction between the private space of family and public life; there is no public, period. Behind the image of the self-contained family is nothing but white (historically), empty space. If one takes the ad seriously, a series of questions may arise to implicate this absent public sphere: how did these two racially different women meet? What social spaces or public practices bring them together? What analytics about race, gender, or lesbian sexuality underpin those public practices? Other than having a child—the one subject their hands overlap on—what do these women want, privately, politically, or socially? Have their (queer) desires been shrunk to fit the small world inside that blanket? Such questioning is really about the refused alternatives and lost potentials that this ad image unwittingly announces.

Such refusals and loss are what a historical emphasis on miscegenation has obscured, as Paulin reveals in *Imperfect Unions*. Her study focuses on an era that begins with the Civil War and the closes with the start of World War I to explain how the notion of a coherent US nationalism was culturally constituted. Theatrical performances, which diverse populations took part in and which occurred on the stage, in the streets, and in private homes, represented dynamic relationships to US nationalism. Theater production and fiction mutually informed each other, and both contributed to the spectacular nature of miscegenation, the nation’s favorite taboo. Although we know very well that law and custom prohibited intimacy across the black–white binary throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this prohibition, Paulin argues, was inextricable from the obsession with staging encounters across the racial divide. While the salaciousness of black/white bonding—always implicitly sexualized—encouraged denizens to keep their eyes on a racial binary that the trope of miscegenation constituted again and again. Other dramas that were shaping the nation played out behind the scenes: social and political interests and investments that drew populations together were more complicated than the black/white dichotomy captured. Through a method, she terms “miscegenated reading,” Paulin gives a comparative consideration to seemingly disparate texts to reveal the unseen motives—implicit ambivalences and assumptions—underlying the overt spectacle of miscegenation (104).



To us, miscegenation may seem always already to arise unchanged from US racialization, but how it operated as a trope is entirely contingent on a given era's attitudes and anxieties. Although literary and dramatic works of the Civil War period uphold the color line as demarcating citizenship and noncitizenship, how it does so was more open-ended than work produced after the war. For instance, as Paulin interprets the relationship between the mulatto Paul and the Native American Wahnotee in Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859), their intimacy "seems logical, given their shared exclusion from ongoing reconfigurations of nation and empire that excluded slaves, free people of color, and indigenous populations, both domestically and globally" (25). She usefully reminds us that miscegenation, beyond black and white, is reanimated through black and Indian affinity at least until the turn of the century. Here the trope of miscegenation opens the possibility of reading US nationalism against the grain, even as it is transformed into a tool of national and racial consolidation decades later. Works of seemingly oppositional ideological strains, like Charles Chesnut's 1901 *The Marrow of Tradition* and Thomas Dixon's 1905 *The Clansmen*, are both engaged in the polarizing logic of the color line and "relied on patriarchal, upper-class, and sexist/gendered models of family and reproduction" in ways that foreclose other modes of filiation (140). Still, then as now, so much depends on these other modes.

### 3. Postscripts

Like many studies on racial mixedness written over the last few years, *Imperfect Unions* briefly reflects on Barack Obama's prominence. He has been squarely fit into the persistent logic of the black-white binary while simultaneously hailed as the supreme exemplar of transcendence. Yet multiple experiential influences contribute to the making of our first "black" president: "The mosaic of his multiracial, transnational, and transregional familial constellation reveals the complexity of miscegenation that challenges the binarized perspective that we have been so conditioned to see as a culture and as a nation" (Paulin 240). This mosaic constellates the outcome of events that brought some territory into the US through imperialist conquest, and some people, through the end of British empire. Thus, "miscegenation" is the word for the coming together of many things, like the distant touch of a Kenyan grandmother, postcolonial nationhood, and histories of violent coercion and sexual consent. It describes familial intimacy but alludes to so much more, those invisible things in the wreckage of history.



Post-ness calls for a remote stance from which to view these disparate elements. But it's only from a distance, up in the clouds, that the separate pieces of a mosaic appear to be coherent. Each of these studies poses a challenge to what we've been conditioned to see or not see. In various ways, they describe how the image of nationhood has been put together, and they take the pieces apart, if only to interrupt the coherence we know very well. They assemble other potentials, or focus on the space in between the pieces. The space between the pieces, however, isn't nothing. There's something there.

### Notes

1. For a complementary account of a figurative variation of the tragic muse—the “sensational Jewess”—and its popularity in antebellum America, see David Anthony’s “Fantasies of Conversion: The Sensational Jewess in Poe and Hawthorne’s America,” *American Literary History* 26.3 (Fall 2014): 431–61.
2. See Kim Williams, *More One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America* (2006), 86–87.

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