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White Trash, as a whole, is an important contribution, despite the variable effectiveness of its "parts." One question remained relatively untouched, however. In every essay in this book, White Trash is described as related to "rurality" and hicks, rubes, hillbillies, etc. and their undisputed and necessary lack of urban sophistication and accompanying ignorance of urban mores which maintain both their worthlessness and position as perpetual outsiders from the middle class urban sensibility. Yet the question of rurality and rural identity is never discussed as more than an incidental point (with the exception of Barbara Ching's article), despite its continuous appearance. In the very urbanized sensibilities which drive many of these articles, the rural is theoretically untouched and critically taken-for-granted. In that sense, there is much more work on the cultural and social deconstruction of white trash to be done.

David E. Magill

Book Review


Most essay collections achieve what the name suggests: they collect essays together on one subject. E. Nathaniel Gates's collection, however, collects important essays on race from past and present in order to bring about new dialogue on the cultural critiques of race mounted by prominent writers and scholars of the past twenty years. Gates includes 19 essays in this volume, drawn from the fields of sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and literary criticism. He reproduces important essays by Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West, as well as seminal essays by Michael Omi and Howard Winant and Lucius Outlaw, to name just a few. Each essay quotes, discusses, and rewrites other essays, producing a space of critique.

In his introduction, Gates notes "the power of metaphor to reproduce or reinforce a socialized order of dominion" (vii). He outlines the processes by which racialized order is stated linguistically and demarcated physically, neatly summarizing current views on the cultural construction of race. As Gates notes, however, "modern social history suggests that there is often a considerable lag between the abandonment of untenable scientific postulates and the evisceration of their cultural impact" (viii). With hopes of shortening this lag time, Gates constructs his volume as a means to explode racial metaphors and fallacious beliefs through critical dialogue, and as a reminder that we must "remain alert to [racialized others'] social and historical status, to their heterogeneity and dynamism" (viii).

Gates organizes the volume into undelineated sections; though he does not provide headings to link certain texts, each group of essays connects thematically around a particular topic within race studies. Gates's choices address such subjects as identity politics, community, ethnicity, and culture theory. The collection opens with James Baldwin's "On Being White and Other Lies," followed by Richard Dyer's germinal essay "White," both considered classic essays on the cultural production of whiteness. Their juxtaposition allows a critical exchange on whiteness by a black writer and a white scholar. These essays speak to one another. The next two essays, bell hooks's "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination" and Harriette Mullen's "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness," stand on opposite sides of the same coin. They both look at the ways in which productions of whiteness are inextricably linked to notions of blackness in a Hegelian dialectic. The third pair of essays, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's "By the Rivers of Babylon: Race in the United States" and Barry Goldberg's "Slavery, Race, and the Languages of Class: 'Wage Slaves' and White 'Niggers'" recount the historical construction of racial categories within the United States.

Gates also includes Walter Benn Michaels's essay "The No-Drop Rule" and the response it garnered, Christopher Newfield and Avery Gordon's "White Philosophy." Gates allows these articles to stand together, emphasizing the dialogue they create with one another. Another particularly interesting grouping is a set of four texts on African-American cultural theory: Elliott Butler-Evans's "Beyond Essentialism: Rethinking Afro-American Cultural Theory," David Lloyd's "Race Under Representation," Toni Morrison's "Romancing the Shadow," and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "What's Love Got to Do with It?: Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom." These four essays draw from cultural, historical, and literary theory in order to theorize the African-American experience. These groupings, however, are not editorially reinforced; by not labeling, Gates allows each essay the freedom to interact with the other works. As an entirety, the book is an assemblage of voices that outlines the history of cultural productions of race and explores the ways in which this production can be critiqued and altered.

What is most interesting about Gates's editing is that he reprints his
chosen essays as they appeared when first printed. Thus, the book is a compendium of photostats of the essays from their original publications. Gates’s decision seems to come from an unwillingness to tamper with what he sees as cultural documents. In a book that seeks to “explore and critique the continuing hold of racial tropes and metaphors,” Gates chooses to approach his text metonymically; the texts are reproduced, not translated in any way.

The sole critique of the volume is that it focuses on black-white relations to the exclusion of other categories; Latino, Native American, and Asian “races” are not represented well. His choice of essays, however, allows for a clear view of the multiple critiques made against “whiteness,” a move which indirectly involves all minority races as the others against which whiteness is matched. Furthermore, by including the various critiques of whiteness, Gates continues the work done to expose whiteness as a cultural construct. E. Nathaniel Gates has produced an exceptional collection of essays, representing an array of approaches to the cultural construction of race. His book is important reading for anyone wishing to enter this dynamic field.

Julie A. Cary

Book Review


This collection of essays aims to expand the current discourse on the phenomenon of “passing” from one which has largely focused on (black/white) race passing, into one which understands “passing” as a means of both fixing and resisting various categories of identity. As a group, the essays investigate ways in which designations of race, gender, sex, and nationality are historically—and inextricably—linked to and in the formation of both individual and cultural identity. Ginsberg notes that “the assumption underlying this volume is that critical to the American cultural imaginary are the status and privileges associated with being white and being male” (5). Indeed, as “passing” is recognized as a means to social and political empowerment through resistance to and appropriation of a status of power, it becomes a threat to the current white, male hegemony that generates and sustains category boundaries. In addition to investigating how “passing” enables potentially subversive acts, the essays also skillfully investigate the psychological impact of such boundary crossings on the fictional and historical individuals examined. In addition to those essays discussed in more detail below, the collection includes analyses of the autobiographical The Life of Olaudah Equiano, James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, the fiction of Nella Larsen, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, E. D. E. N. Southworth’s The Hidden Hand, John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me, and James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room.

Of the essays in the collection, perhaps the most serviceable are those which emphasize the interdependency of race, gender, sex, and nationality in the construction of identity. For example, in “A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman: Passing, Possession, and Transgression in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,” Ellen M. Weinauer discusses William Craft’s 1860 narrative which details how he and his wife, Ellen Craft, escape from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. The couple affect their escape by having Ellen Craft pose as a feeble white, male aristocrat traveling with her black manservant. Ellen’s performance allows her to transgress simultaneously and successfully several identity boundaries—she moves from black to white, from female to male, from property to citizen—and thus to reveal those identities as performative rather than constitutive. According to Weinauer, in order to negotiate and control her (threatening) performance and reinstate the dichotomies of male/female and property owner/owned (realized here through a husband/wife relationship), however, William Craft must in his own narrative insist on Ellen’s fundamental “femaleness” and stress her abhorrence to the role(s) she must assume. In other words, he must insist that the transgression of those boundaries was only tenuously achieved and the restitution of he and his wife into their “natural” roles is fundamentally necessary. Weinauer recognizes that “in the context of an America that equates proprietorship with selfishness, selfishness with masculinity, and masculinity with whiteness, this black slave narrator stakes the only claim available to him” (52). Thus, Weinauer illustrates how Craft both destabilizes and reestablishes identity categories and how those categories are inextricably raced, sexed, and gendered in America.

In “Confederate Counterfeit: The Case of the Cross-Dressed Civil War Soldier,” Elizabeth Young uses a 1991-93 sexual discrimination lawsuit to reexamine constructions of race, gender, sex, and nation since the Civil War. The lawsuit, brought by Lauren Cook Burgess against the National Park Service for its refusal to allow Burgess to perform the role of a white, male soldier in a Civil War Reenactment, al-