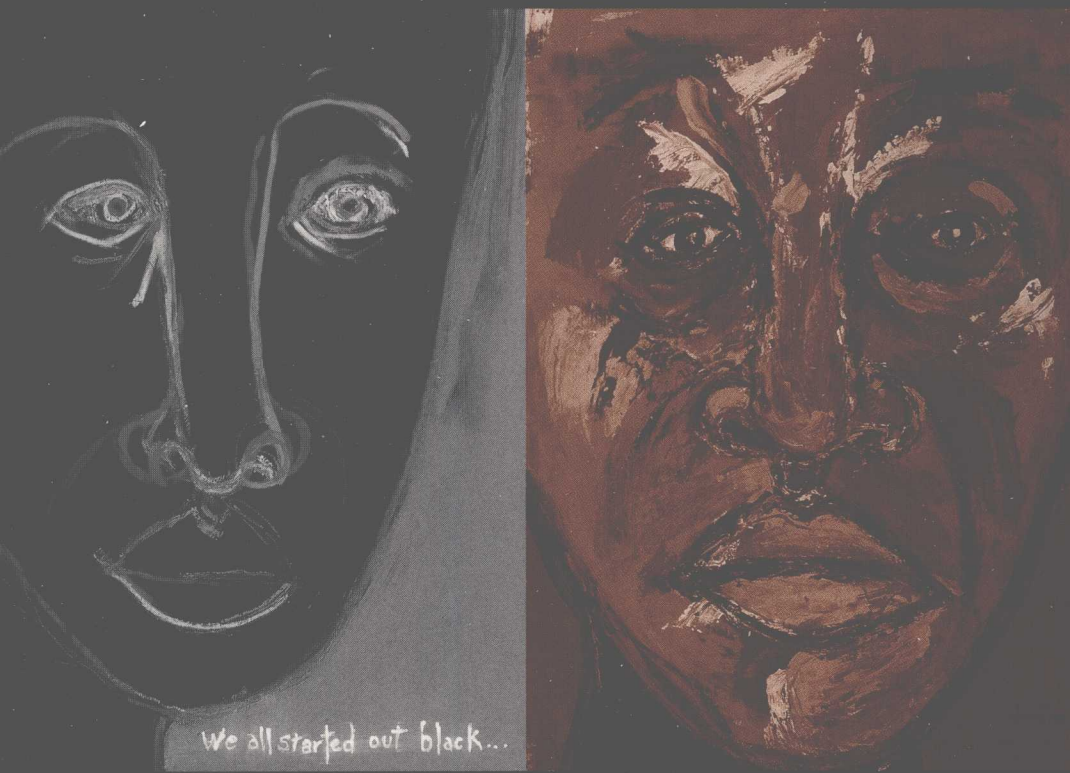
mixedRACE

literature



edited by

JONATHAN BRENNAN

Mixed Race Literature

Edited with an Introduction by

JONATHAN BRENNAN

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Stanford, California 2002

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mixed race literature / edited with an introduction by Jonathan Brennan.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-8047- 3639-1 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8047- 3640-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. American literature—Minority authors—History and criticism.
2. Racially mixed people in literature. 3. Ethnic relations in literature.
4. Race relations in literature. 5. Minorities in literature. 6. Ethnicity in literature. I. Brennan, Jonathan.

PS153.M56M59 2002
810.9'920693—dc21 2001055146

This book is printed on acid-free, archival-quality paper.

Original printing 2002

Last figure below indicates year of this printing:
11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02

Typeset at Stanford University Press in 10/13 Galliard

MIXED RACE LITERATURE

A mi esposa, Natalia. Mi fe, mi luz, mi amor.

Preface

I am grateful for the support of the many family members who deeply enrich my life. I would like to thank my wife, Natalia, for many years of happiness, for her commitment and collaboration in the work we do together, and for sustaining us both during countless hours of research and writing. I am sustained beyond measure by my children, Carmen Alicia and Liam Rafael, who laugh like geckos, love like lions, and truly appreciate reading a good book. I am grateful to my parents for their support, to my younger brother for his courage, and to my older brother, despite his absence, for the gift of hope. Thank you Susannah and Ken for taking good care of my family, and Maria Dolores por las hierbas y el fu-fu tan fuerte. Y a usted, Titi Carmen Brennan, un abrazo y dos besos. Fernando, te quiero mucho, tio. Y pa' mi suegra, Carmen Rita Menéndez Nuñez Tolivar, pues, me das de todo.

I am also appreciative of the support of faculty, staff, and students at U.C. Berkeley, especially Professor Hertha Dawn Sweet Wong. Thank you, Hertha, for your many careful readings of my work, and for company on the road we walk together. Thanks also to Professors Carlos Muñoz Jr., Waldo E. Martin Jr., Robert Pinsky, John Bishop, and Carolyn Dinshaw. I am indebted to the late Professor Barbara Christian for her constant support and encouragement. Barbara, thank you for your thoughtful questions, your many letters, and your island wisdom. I hope they have *bacalao* (salt cod) in heaven and hot pepper sauce so you can doctor it up.

I would like to thank some of my friends, mentors, and leaders: Siobhan Duffy (mo chara), Rosetta, Steve, Sharene, Dorrie, Rabbi Bender, Donnelle and Wendy, Neil Russack, Manouso and Rita, Robert Allen, Rosemary, John, Claire and Nora, Ito, Piti y Marta, Rossi and Dor-

ian, Kamika, Rob (big music) and Michelle, Joannie Parker, Skip, Samuel Lind de Loiza Aldea, JoeSam., Mrs. Hinda Heller (and Simon), Qa'id, Big Chief Andrew Justin, Tony and John, and of course my Armenian second family: Laura, Eddie, Andre, and Eric.

I am constantly challenged by the ideas, insights, and soul-searching of my students, and I am grateful that they allow me the opportunity to teach.

My big band of musical support includes: the late greats—Tito Puente, John McCormack, Ismael Rivera, Canario, Cortijo, Billie Holiday, and Mon Rivera—and the still moving Celia Cruz, Gloria Estefan, The Chieftains, the Pogues, Stevie Wonder, the Neville Brothers (and all of the Mardi Gras Indians), and all practitioners of the plena, bomba, reel, and jig.

Everything in this world sits on the shoulders of our ancestors: Tomas, Michael, Mary, R. J., Frederick Douglass, Black Elk, Okah Tubbee, Nat Turner, John Brown, William Wells Brown, Coyote, J. D. Green (trickster extraordinaire), Harriet Jacobs, Mark Twain, James Joyce, and the souls of Ireland, Panama, and Puerto Rico.

I would like to thank the contributors to the volume for their hard work, numerous revisions, and supportive dialogue. I also thank the editors and staff at Stanford University Press: especially Laura Comay, Helen Tartar, Nathan MacBrien, and the readers who contributed to the shaping of this volume. I am honored to edit this volume of essays and heartened by the strong interest in this field. Thank you to all of the people who forwarded proposals, suggestions, leads, advice, warnings, and guidance.

Negotiating the field of mixed race studies can be tricky. Only a millipede has more toes to step on. My advice to the reader is as follows: remember who you are, make no assumptions, and listen carefully. In *Black Indians*, author William Loren Katz recalls the words used to describe African-European-Native American frontiersman Edward Rose: "cunning as a prairie wolf." Try it; it worked for Rose.

J.B.

Contributors

SANDRA BARINGER is a lecturer at the University of California, Riverside. She has published essays in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* and *Studies in American Indian Literature*, and most recently an essay in *FemSpec* on Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. Her current book project deals with discourses of persecution and prosecution in late-twentieth-century fiction and law enforcement.

JONATHAN BRENNAN teaches African American and Native American literature at Mission College in Santa Clara, California. He holds an M.A. in English and a Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. He is the editor of *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African-Native American Literature* (forthcoming, University of Illinois Press) and author of essays on African-Native American literature in *A/B Autobiography Studies* and the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*.

MARTHA J. CUTTER is an Associate Professor at Kent State University, where she teaches classes on Ethnic Literature, African American Literature, and Women's Literature. Her book, *Unruly Tongue: Identity and Voice in American Women's Fiction, 1850–1930*, was published by the University of Mississippi Press in 1999, and she is currently at work on a book on multilingualism in contemporary ethnic literature. She has published articles in *American Literature*, *Criticism*, *Women's Studies*, *African American Literature*, *Callaloo*, *MELUS*, and many other journals.

WEI MING DARIOTIS is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian American Studies in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University. She teaches courses in Asians of Mixed Heritage, Asian American Literature and Culture, and Asian American Gender Issues.

Since 1999, Dariotis has facilitated the San Francisco Chapter of Hapa Issues Forum, and she is the Faculty Advisor of the Hapa Club at SFSU. As a member of the Advisory Board of Kearny Street Workshop, the oldest ongoing Asian American arts organization, she acts as a curator for both performing and visual arts, and is herself a visual artist and creative writer.

MICHELE JANETTE is an Assistant Professor of English at Kansas State University, where she teaches courses in Asian American Literature, Women's Literature, Contemporary American Literature, and Vietnamese Literature in Translation. She is currently creating an anthology of Vietnamese American literature in English, and has published articles on the novels of Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Lan Cao, as well as interviews with Maxine Hong Kingston and le thi diem thuy.

ISABELLE THUY PELAUD is a graduate student in Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, writing a doctoral dissertation on Vietnamese American narratives and identity politics. She is active in the promotion and production of Vietnamese American cultural work. She initially left France as a young adult to live with her Vietnamese American refugee family in Orange County. Her essays have been published in *Making More Waves* and *Tilting the Continent*.

PATRICIA RILEY, a poet and writer of Cherokee and Irish descent, is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Idaho, where she teaches courses in Native American and other ethnic literatures. She is the editor of *Growing Up Native American*, an anthology of fiction and nonfiction. She has published articles in *Fiction International* and in collections of essays such as *Understanding Others: Cultural and Cross-Cultural Studies and the Teaching of Literature* and *Our Voices: Essays in Culture, Ethnicity and Communication*. Her poetry has appeared in *Northeast Indian Quarterly* and *Studies in American Indian Literature*, and her short fiction has been included in *Earth Song, Sky Spirit: An Anthology of Native American Fiction*, and *Blue Dawn, Red Earth: New Native American Storytellers*.

WERNER SOLLORS (http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~amciv/faculty/sollors.shtlml) teaches Afro-American Studies and English at Harvard University. Most recently he published *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1999) and edited *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity and the Languages of America* (1998),

Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature and Law (2000), *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans* (expanded edition 2000), *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (co-edited 2000), and the Norton Critical Edition of *Olaudah Equiano* (2000). His electronic publications include "From 'English-Only' to 'English-Plus'" in American Studies *Interroads* website at http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/interroads/sollors1.html and "Americans All!" at http://www.nyupress.nyu.edu/americansall.html.

ALICE TEPUNGA SOMERVILLE, Māori (Te Atiawa)/Pākehā, has an M.A. (1st class honors) from the University of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and is now studying for her Ph.D. in English at Cornell University. She has taught at the University of Auckland and Massey University, working specifically with Māori students at the former, and NESB (non–English speaking background) students at the latter. She also established the Kaitautoko position at University of Auckland's Centre for Professional Development. In 1999, she published *Ngā Take Atawhai*, a report about the provision of learning support for Māori tertiary students through Massey's Student Learning Centre, and has poetry in a forthcoming volume of Polynesian writing. Her current research focuses on developing critical approaches to indigenous literature.

HERTHA D. SWEET WONG, Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author/editor of numerous works on autobiography and Native American literatures, including: *(Post)ethnicity and Its Discontents: A Reader*, *Louise Erdrich: A Casebook* (2000), and *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (1992). She is currently writing a book on visual autobiography.

And so when she asked me, "What part Indian are you?"
I said, "I think it is my heart."

Inez Petersen (*As We Are Now* 86)

Contents

Introduction

> When I am East, my heart is West. When I am West, my heart is East.
>
> —Sui Sin Far, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian"

One of the seminal works of early-twentieth-century fiction in the canon of African American (and American) literature is the novel *Cane* (1923), by Jean Toomer. *Cane*, often acknowledged as the first African American modernist novel, exerted a strong influence both on Toomer's contemporaries and on later generations of African American writers. Henry Louis Gates argues that *Cane* was an important forerunner in the African American literary tradition due to its complex form and multiple literary strategies:

> Not only are tropes such as repetition, catachesis, parataxis and chiasmus and modes of mimesis used by Toomer but his work serves as a critical literary influence on writers in the African American tradition such as Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison.[1]

Yet in 1930, Toomer refuses James Weldon Johnson permission to publish his work in the *Book of American Negro Poetry* and writes to Nancy Cunard, editing the anthology *Negro*, that "though I am interested in and deeply value the Negro, I am not a Negro" (Gates 205). Toomer's stance creates a dilemma for critics of African American literature: Was Toomer an African American writer, despite his denial that he was a Negro? Was Toomer passing as European American? Is *Cane* an African American text?

In fact, there are no easy answers to the question as to whether Toomer was African American or European American. The problem, however, lies not in the answer, but in the question. Toomer was not *either* African American or European American but *both* African American and European American, and Native American as well. Like other mixed race writers, he refused to allow himself to be corralled into a singular

identity, because he experienced himself through multiple identities. In an essay on mixed race writer Hum-ishu-ma (Mourning Dove), Carol Roh Spaulding cites the mixed blood protagonist of Mourning Dove's novel, *Cogewea* (1927), in her description of the limitations imposed on mixed race Indians by both Native Americans and European Americans: "We despised breeds are in a zone of our own and when we break from the corral erected about us we meet up with trouble."[2] Roh Spaulding argues that this corral, despite its limitations, proves to be "a freely chosen space beyond the reservation and the white man's world" (106), a site where Cogewea and her half-blood husband, Jim, have an opportunity to exist beyond the constraints of racial designations, in a liminal state that promises opportunity in place of tragedy.

In spite of the potential liberation that movement beyond racial designation can bring, as Cogewea states, "we meet up with trouble." Because most mixed race people have been categorized according to the prevailing mode of hypodescent, a policy that assigns mixed race individuals to the race that has been saddled with the lowest social status, any attempts to move beyond racial proscription have traditionally been viewed as a threat to already threatened communities. In *Who is Black?* F. James Davis discusses both African American acceptance and rejection of the one-drop rule, and examines the situation of a former student discussing her identity in a panel on racial discrimination:

> "I am part French, part Cherokee Indian, part Filipino and part black. Our family taught us to be aware of all of these groups, and just to be ourselves." ... As this panelist tried to describe her feelings of group marginality, a young black woman student (who appeared to be about half white, biologically) raised her hand and asserted strongly, "You don't have any problem. You are black." There was a murmur of approval and nodding of heads, especially among the black students, but the panelist replied softly, "No. No. Not just black. I am the other things too. All of them."[3]

Davis also notes that in a discussion following the class, some of his African American students were "frustrated and disturbed by this questioning of the one-drop rule, which had provided them with a clear guide to their own group identity"; some students accused the (openly) mixed race student of attempting to "deny her race" (134). In fact, for many mixed race members of marginalized communities, their attempts to assert a mixed race identity are often met with concern or derision because the marginalized community believes (often rightly) that it cannot afford to lose additional members in the face of centuries of sustained genocide

(or allow unknown potential members to join), and that because the vast majority of the members of Native American and African American communities are of mixed race, such an assertion might lead to the disintegration of their communities (and/or nations), and to a disruption or dissolution of their cultural traditions, social fabric, and political power.

But note Davis's student's response to the offer of community extended by the other student: "Not just black. I am the other things too." She did not try to deny her African American heritage but to assert her other affiliations as well, to occupy multiple spaces, and this is precisely what Toomer often attempted to do when challenged to define his identity as either black or white. In response to the question posed by Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press, "are you Negroid?" Toomer responded that "the true and complete answer is one of some complexity and for this reason perhaps it will not be seen and accepted until after I am dead"; he goes on to recall his African American grandfather and acknowledge that he (Toomer) had "peeped behind the veil ... and my deepest impulse to literature ... is the direct result of what I saw."[4] He also argues that "insofar as the old folk-songs, syncopated rhythms, the rich sweet taste of dark-skinned life, insofar as these are Negro, I am, body and soul, negroid" (Gates 205). Toomer believed that "in time, in its social phase, my art will aid in giving the Negro to himself" (196).

Toomer refused to observe established racial categories, despite the strong hold they maintain over most Americans, and insisted on both cultural affiliations and a complex identity, yet this complexity does not deny African American heritage; in fact, Toomer clearly celebrates his "deepest impulse to literature" and his cultural roots, believes that he writes for the benefit of an African American community, and claims his Negro soul quite openly. An assertion of multiple identities does not entail a destruction of all identities, but an insistence on the right to claim one's true self. Toomer claims this self when he also acknowledges the influence of "the entire body of contemporary literature" (205), not just African American literature, and when he writes himself as "an American with Negro blood in his veins" (205). Toomer insisted upon an American identity alongside his others, to achieve a "spiritual fusion" (204) of racial selves, and to argue as well that America's future was one of mixed race. About his poem "The First American" Toomer wrote, "In America, we are in the process of forming a new race. ... I was one of the first conscious members of this race" (201). With a conscious stance as a mixed race writer, he records the reality of America's mixed race population, arguing that the corral re-

served for mixed race subjects might also promise the opportunity to expand the restricted definitions of race.

In spite of Toomer's proclamations, we again meet up with "trouble" in the form of resistance or skepticism. Henry Louis Gates (one of many in a long line of critics) notes Toomer's marriages to "two white women" (208), and posits that Toomer's racial assertions were oscillations between Toomer's "black and his erased black self" (209), maintaining that, in a "rhetorical gesture" (205), Toomer has denied his African American heritage. Gates goes on to argue that "Toomer's was a gesture of racial castration, which, if not silencing his voice literally, then at least transformed his deep black bass into a false soprano. Toomer did not want so much to be white as most of us, like his fellow 'colored of more than ordinary mental grasp,' would have it; rather he sought to be racially indeterminate, which Johnson suggests to be the nature of the castrato" (208).

In response to these strong accusations of racial abandonment, I would argue that Toomer is only one of many writers to have published successful work early in his career and struggled throughout the rest to find his writing voice, or to find a receptive audience for his later writing (if that was indeed his intention). Gates assigns this struggle to Toomer's refusal to be racially "determined," thereby rewriting the mixed race writer, Toomer, precisely in the emplotment of the tragic mulatto that Toomer sought to avoid, representing his tragic literary fate as stemming from his choice to follow a (European?) false soprano rather than an (African?) deep bass literary voice. Gates's argument raises many issues, including his accusations of Toomer's "passing" through marrying white women (arguments leveled against Frederick Douglass and many other mixed race writers as well), a romanticized trumpeting of African American culture/literary tradition over European American culture/literary tradition (an unlikely argument when set beside Toomer's French, Dutch, Welsh, German, and Jewish ancestries) coupled with a gendered analysis of Toomer's literary intentions (soprano versus bass) that assigns the mixed race writer, following a long tradition, apparently negative female characteristics, and that even suggests a self-lynching through castration. Gates also assumes that Toomer refused a single racial categorization only after *Cane* was written (which he did not), and he reinforces the old and prevailing myth that mixed race writers are indeed mulatto (from mules) and thus sterile (castrato), lacking a definitive writing voice.

I do not mean to single out Gates, for in spite of these shortcomings he also provides in his essay an often deep, nuanced, and penetrating