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[Introduction to] Race Mixing: Southern Fiction Since the Sixties

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Writing Race Relations since the Civil Rights Movement

> [O]ur fictions are a measuring rod by which one may gauge the historically conditioned changeability of deeply entrenched human desires. . . . literature becomes a panorama of what is possible, because it is not hedged in by the limitations or the considerations that determine the institutionalized organizations within which human life takes its course.
>
> —WOLFGANG ISER, "DO I WRITE FOR AN AUDIENCE?"

In the spring of 1994, African American journalist David Nicholson, who knew the American South only through books, television, and movies, decided to take a trip through the region that was his grandparents' home. He admitted that "in some secret place" in his heart, he had "wanted to be refused service or told to go to the back door just to see what it felt like" and to discover how he would react. He left his desk at the *Washington Post* as a deluge of southern news items poured in: the seemingly endless debates about the Confederate battle flag still flying over various state capitol buildings and the fallout from an Alabama high school principal threatening to cancel the prom rather than suffer interracial couples dancing together. But during Nicholson's three-week journey, he did not find the South he expected: "Everywhere I went, people were far more open and congenial than in the North, even in the most casual interactions. And everywhere in cities and small towns, I saw blacks and whites working together, walking down the street together, talking together. Only once did I witness any ugliness." He found that the "pictures indelibly imprinted" in his imagination of "rabid rednecks, fragile belles and servile blacks co-existing in a place taut with hostility and sudden inexplicable violence" needed updating. But underneath the southern hospitality and interracial bonhomie, Nicholson became aware of a legacy of distrust that lingers alongside efforts to lift the burdens of southern racial history.[1]

About the same time, white journalist Tony Horwitz, who had recently returned from covering civil unrest in Ireland, Bosnia, and the Middle East, awoke one morning to an eerily familiar sound in his own Virginia backyard—the crackle of musket fire. With the sound lingering in his head, Horwitz decided to make sense of the phenomenon that had produced it: the craze to reenact Civil War battles. Roughing it with reenactors over the next few months, he found the modern men in gray to be an odd mix of liberal white southerners disaffected with the pace of contemporary life and unreconstructed neo-Confederates disgruntled with affirmative action. In *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War,* Horwitz details not only periodic battlefield reenactments but also the rebel mania present on a small but troubling scale throughout the rural South. Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy still gather in living rooms laden with Confederate kitsch, Children of the Confederacy meet in rural high schools, weekend bazaars feature Confederate paraphernalia at derelict service stations, and tony international tourist destinations like Charleston are still home to Confederate museums on side streets. But Horwitz also found a parallel strain of black nationalist ideology and activity. In an alternative school for teenagers in Selma, Alabama, students learn that all whites are suspect and that African American activists in favor of integration, like Julian Bond, are sellouts. How does one square Nicholson's dispatches with Horwitz's?[2]

Seeing the South clearly has never been easy, and at the turn of the twenty-first century it may be more difficult than ever to get a handle on race relations in a region that has exported both racism and the civil rights movement, a fondness for guns and the Southern Poverty Law Center, high rates of black imprisonment and Habitat for Humanity. For the most part, black-white relationships in the South today differ little from those in the rest of the country. Although some contend that race relations are different in the South (some think better, others worse), Patricia Williams's belief that "racism is coded differently in the North of the United States than in the South" may help explain that perception of difference, whatever the reality.[3] One point of real difference is the deep need among black and white southern writers to think and write about black-white relationships. Peach farmer Dori Sanders tells of the sight one Saturday afternoon that propelled her to write her first novel, *Clover.* After observing two segregated funeral processions pass by, she became preoccupied with how to bring the sad little black girl at the head of the first line of cars together with the lonely young white woman at the head of the second.[4] Long-

time novelist Josephine Humphreys believes that writing about black-white relationships is one of the few remaining distinctive characteristics of "southern literature."[5]

Many writers who grew up in the segregated South or who have family there, as well as a younger generation of writers who graduated from its newly integrated schools, have created fictional worlds in which they examine race relations, analyze interracial relationships, dismantle racial stereotypes, and imagine integrated communities. Their narratives demonstrate how damaging post-1960s de facto segregation is to the human spirit and to any community's health, but they also reveal promising new cross-racial relationships and repressed histories of interracial intimacy. These writers use gender and class and sexual orientation to complicate thinking about race relations. They question the usefulness of monolithic definitions of racial identity, and they reconfigure the racial contours of family life. But the way southern literature is often studied as a regional literature, separate from mainstream American literature, means that many of these southern writers' interesting interventions into current debates about race relations may not be read by as wide an audience as they deserve. Over two decades ago, Michael O'Brien noted that Americans "feel little need to assimilate what may be said [in southern fiction], except when they decide to understand the South, a thing clean different than understanding the United States." More recently Patricia Yaeger persuasively argued that one of the reasons modern southern women's writing needs to be reexamined is its potential to provoke "new ways of thinking about racial epistemologies in American women's literature." With *Dirt and Desire* (2000), Yaeger sought to widen the audience for southern writing because of the South's significance in encoding "American ways of racial knowing: of both overconceptualizing and refusing to conceptualize an obscene racial blindness."[6]

If we look beyond the parameters of Yeager's study, there is another compelling reason to read and study literature about the South. Because the federal government mandated the dismantling of southern apartheid, the South's liberal-minded intellectuals and artists, politicians and educators were forced. unlike those living elsewhere in the United States, to rethink black-white relationships. As a result contemporary fiction set in the South can now help imagine new ways of racial knowing, but this fiction needs a wider audience and a more central place in American literature and in the field of American studies. Ironically, many American studies scholars in Europe have seized on contemporary southern literature's centrality in thinking about race, perhaps

because Faulkner and Welty were already staples in their syllabi, perhaps because southern literature fit neatly into their units on the American civil rights movement, but surely because racial and ethnic relations in European countries have grown more complex and tense in the last two decades.

In this book I examine the cultural work that contemporary literature set in the South—by men and women, blacks and whites—has performed in the ongoing dialogue about black-white relationships. How do these texts read race relations? What contemporary social situations are they attempting to mediate? Do they offer alternative models for interracial relationships? How do they try to change readers' perceptions about racial identity and race relations? And how do some of the works unwittingly reinforce stereotypes? Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued that it is crucial "to understand race as *an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.*"[7] For contemporary writers, native and nonnative to the South, the region continues to be the fictional setting of choice for representing America's evolving thinking about black-white relationships and racial identity. The South's history of slavery and legal segregation and its present demographic changes, which reverse the African American outmigration that began at the turn of the previous century, make the region crucial for examining black-white relationships. In the 1860s Albion Tourgée, a novelist and counsel for the plaintiff in *Plessy v. Ferguson,* predicted that "Southern life would furnish to the future American novelist his richest and most striking material."[8] His prediction has proved true, particularly as regards the representation of race relations—from Tourgée's contemporaries Mark Twain, Charles Chesnutt, and George Washington Cable on through such southern renaissance writers as William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Richard Wright and into the present with the novelists I discuss.

Because of the explosion of such fiction in the past two decades, I am restricting my analysis to black-white relationships, but since 1990 the South's growing population of immigrants from the Caribbean, Mexico, and Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, has complicated the region's predominantly biracial history. In *Natives and Newcomers* (1995), southern historian George Brown Tindall pointed out how these new immigrants have made race relations in the region quite literally less black and white. These new demographics augur a new direction in literature. In Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love* (1987), Lucille Odom spies a Vietnamese family fishing, as she meditates on the havoc new condominiums are wreaking on South Carolina's pristine coast. The Viet-

namese immigrants recede into the background, however, as Lucille and Josephine Humphreys home in on the changes caused by developers and women's liberation. Five years later, however, Vietnamese immigrants appear at the center of the stories in Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from A Strange Mountain* (1992).[9] Now stories about the newest Americans are being written by first- and second-generation immigrants themselves. Roberto G. Fernández's *Holy Radishes!* (1995), Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), and Susan Choi's *The Foreign Student* (1998) see the South through different eyes and tell new stories of race relations that realign racial confrontations and change the mix of cultural cross-pollination. In *Holy Radishes!* Cuban-American writer Fernández tells a story of two displaced women in a small town in the Florida Everglades—one from Tallahassee and the other from Xawa, his fictional Cuba. They connect through the fantasies they share, spun from pasts constructed in large part out of familiar southern and Cuban stereotypes, some overlapping. In Vietnamese immigrant Cao's *Monkey Bridge,* Mai Nguyen finds herself caught between two worlds, much like the Asian-American protagonists in fiction set in California, but Mai lives in the more unfamiliar immigrant literary territory of Virginia. In Choi's *The Foreign Student,* a Korean exchange student at Sewanee "locates himself" in tense moments through the Tennessee hills that remind him of home.[10] But it is his relationship with a wealthy young woman from New Orleans that will not allow him to forget the complexities of border crossings, and it is his presence in America that forces him to rethink the American presence in his homeland. Such new southern novels encourage readers to reconsider the South and southern identity, and they remind readers that in the twenty-first century race relations in southern literature will no longer be simply black and white and that the South through immigrant eyes looks a lot like America.

Despite these recent changes in southern demographics and literary history, race relations in the South for the past three decades have primarily been written in black and white. These narratives look much as Donald Noble suspected they would in the mid-1980s: "The stories of gross cruelty, lynching, and brutality will be fewer and give way to more subtle examinations of race relations in an integrated society."[11] However, I would add that in contemporary fiction set in the urban South, as well as that set in the past, injustice and violence still figure prominently. In *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998) Michael Kreyling persuasively argues that white southern renaissance writers' preoccupation with "race, tragedy, moral turbulence, blood violence, and guilt and expiation" can

be interpreted "as an evasion strategy"—"voiding the need for cultural change or social action."[12] I do not find such evasion in the work of contemporary writers, where models for social action and social change coexist with the injustice and violence that necessitates them. For the generation of black and white writers who grew up during the 1950s and early 1960s, jumpstarting King's dream of integration is one of their main concerns. While contemporary white novelists are writing beyond the "racial conversion narratives" that preoccupied guilty southern white writers before the civil rights movement,[13] a few African American writers are fruitfully exploring this formerly all-white literary terrain by examining black characters' stereotypes about white people. Although variations on older plots still show up, new plots have emerged that turn on previously forbidden romantic desires, on social uncertainties in personal friendships, on questions about how racial identity should be defined, on subtle and institutional racism, and on community conflicts provoked by racial isolation, economic disparity, and residential segregation.

Michael Kreyling, in *Inventing Southern Literature,* rightly sees contemporary parodies of southern modernism as evidence of the end of "southern literature" as it has been defined by many, but parody is not the southern literary line's only issue. Many contemporary white writers are attempting both to reconstruct the South and to interrogate whiteness. Such writers as Elizabeth Spencer and Christine Wiltz have moved beyond white guilt and the sins of the fathers to envision social changes that an earlier generation of southern modernists could only begin to imagine. Others, such as Ellen Douglas and Madison Smartt Bell, are exploring not simply the South's racism but also outsiders' perceptions that all white southerners are racist.[14] These writers create out of a sense not of "inherited exhaustion" but of "unrealized possibility."[15] At the same time they have a healthy ironic sense that life rarely turns out as one hopes. After listening to a smooth-talking Klansman on a radio talk show and hearing of the arrest of a friend who had demonstrated against the Klan, Madison Smartt Bell told a reporter that he was so angry he decided to break his own rule and set his next novel in the South. He wrote *Soldier's Joy* not just to denounce the Klan, but to reclaim the South as a place for liberal-minded whites: "I especially wanted to deny their pretense of representing me or the great majority of other white Southerners—rural or urban, rich or poor—for whom they do not speak and never have." Bell believes that America's lingering persistence in thinking of racism as more prevalent in the South, despite the evidence otherwise, results not only in stereotyping the region but also in ignoring the na-

tional scope of racism, a truth confirmed for him by living much of his adult life in urban slums outside the South.[16]

For southern white writers who were young adults during the civil rights movement or for those who were only children, improving black-white relationships means rethinking whiteness. Whiteness has been rightly equated with racial blindness and prejudice, with power and privilege. But even before the sixties, there were discordant, albeit marginalized, southern white liberal voices, like Lillian Smith's and James McBride Dabbs's. Others were silenced, and some did not have the courage to speak. When Diane McWhorter was researching *Carry Me Home* (2001), a Birmingham resident said, "[T]he difference between now and then is that the good people back then were silenced. Now they've found their voice."[17] There may be some wishful thinking about the "good people back then" in this comment. But when David Shipler was interviewing Americans for *A Country of Strangers* (1997), he made this assessment about the present: "There are few white people in America more passionately perceptive about our vexing national problem than liberal-minded whites from the South, especially those who lived through the turbulent years of the civil rights movement. Lacking the detachment that allowed most Northerners to make judgments without making commitments, Southern whites who valued justice were forced to confront themselves, their families, their place of privilege."[18] Surely the concern about race relations of recent southern presidents Johnson, Carter, and Clinton provides public testimony to this statement.

Because of such white southern racial self-consciousness, feminist philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff has looked to the South, both to think through recent attempts to define whiteness and "to observe attempts at antiracist transformation." Worried about white backlash disrupting efforts to combat racism and construct integrated communities, Alcoff argues that thinking about white identity should probably be revised. She finds problematic both older strategies of antiracism training that raise awareness but offer few ideas for change and newer strategies based on anarchist acts disavowing whiteness, such as those promoted by the journal *Race Traitor.* Inspired by a new mandatory course to combat racism and sexism at the University of Mississippi, Alcoff suggests that whiteness can best be understood by employing a version of double consciousness: "an everpresent acknowledgment of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclu-

sive human community."[19] This is the very strategy that southern white writers who write about race relations have employed, especially in the last two decades.

Not surprisingly, for many African American writers, the South summons deeply troubled memories of "slavery's old backyard," as Eddy Harris terms it in *South of Haunted Dreams*.[20] Many contemporary African American writers, no matter their region of origin, have found that at some time, no matter how briefly, they must go South in their fiction to understand their history, to confront old enemies, and to heal, or at least anneal, old wounds. This turn south for nonnatives is often made in historical fictions recounting slavery or segregation, such as Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose,* Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't like Mine,* and Albert French's *Holly.* In David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident,* Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon,* Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day,* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred,* contemporary northern and western urban characters delve into their ancestors' rural southern pasts in order to understand their family history.

In the 1990s African American writers became increasingly interested in southern self-fashioning. Historian Nell Irvin Painter has pointed out that during the era of segregation, *"[t]he South* meant white people, and *the Negro* meant black people. . . . *The South* did not embrace whites who supported the Union in the Civil War or those who later disliked or opposed segregation."[21] For some today, these limited and limiting connotations of the word *South* still hold. A recently formed white reactionary political party calls itself the Southern Party, and an ultraconservative magazine is entitled *Southern Partisan.* But other southerners, black as well as white, are attempting to loosen the neo-Confederate stranglehold on the word *South.* In her analysis of the recent and more racially inclusive definition of "southern" culture, Thadious Davis argues that the return migration of African Americans to the rural South is not just "flight from the hardships of urban life," which figures in the ending of Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't like Mine,* but also "a laying claim to a culture and a region that though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity."[22]

It is equally important to understand the love-hate relationship with the South that blacks who never left the region have experienced. In Anthony Grooms's *Bombingham* (2001), set in Bull Connor's Birmingham, Uncle Reed explains to eleven-year-old Walter why he stayed put despite the danger for black men:

> [T]here were good jobs in Detroit and Chicago—but we were comfortable in the South. A colored somebody being comfortable in Old Dixie? People up North laugh at that. It ain't that we like Mr. Jim Crow—but this here is our home. This is where we belong—we the ones that tilled the field and built up the buildings, just as much as the white man. So folks who say we crazy for staying here, they just don't have any pride in what we done here. And I tell you one thing—most of them will come crawling on back down here, I can see it in their eyes when they come for a visit how much they miss down here. They always talking about country cooking. . . . Can't they cook collards in Detroit? It's not the collards they're craving—it's the whole thing. It's home. It's in their blood.[23]

And yet Grooms makes very plain the complexity of Uncle Reed's relationship to his "home," because this praise of place prefaces the telling of a long-suppressed story about the injustice that befell Walter's grandfather, who died in jail for a crime he did not commit. The prediction Uncle Reed makes in 1963 about reverse migration is a safe one, since Grooms completed his novel at the end of a decade in which record numbers of African Americans returned "home."

The 2000 U.S. census revealed that in the 1990s more African Americans moved to the South than to any other region in the country, making it the only region where more black Americans arrived than left. Encouraged by better economic opportunities, improved race relations, and old family ties, the gradual return of African Americans to the South, which began in the 1970s, increased dramatically in the 1990s, giving the South 55 percent of the country's black population.[24] And yet the statistics do not tell the whole story. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed that Americans would live together with mutual respect in a "beloved community," but desegregation, affirmative action, and reverse migration have not yet totally fulfilled that dream in either the South or the rest of the country. In fact, as communication scholars Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown point out, "it is entirely possible to desegregate without integrating," since integration, after all, is about "the realm of life governed by behavior and choice, not by statutes and institutions."[25]

In interviewing both blacks and whites, David Shipler was struck by "how easily an experiential gulf translates into a racial caricature, imputing personal traits to all those of a certain color."[26] In the United States, race continues to be the too-easy way to explain differences between people who do not know each other. Differences caused by class, age, politics, hometown, and an individual's attitude and temperament continue to be overlooked. But at the same

time selectively looking for similarities such as class or gender or politics can also create problems. As whites see more blacks on television and at the office and in the job market competing with them for the same jobs, many perceive economic disparity between the races as a thing of the past. A 2001 national survey found that large numbers of white Americans believe that blacks are as well off as whites in terms of jobs, schooling, incomes, and health care. However, government statistics show that "blacks have narrowed the gap but continue to lag significantly behind whites in employment, income, education and access to health care."[27] Such white misperceptions create problems in personal interactions as well as in debates about public policy.

Cultural critic Benjamin DeMott argues that contemporary advertising and the popular media have promulgated a misleading and simplistic assumption: that racism has to do "solely with the conditions of personal feeling" between blacks and whites—a shallow understanding of the problem that omits racism's "institutional, historical and political ramifications" and ignores the survival strategies many black people have adopted to cope with racism, in both its current and its past forms. Setting fiction or film in the South means that the troubled history of race relations in America can more easily be invoked. But a southern setting does not guarantee that institutional racism will emerge as a concern or that a southern narrative will delve much beyond what DeMott terms "friendship orthodoxy." Although *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) won accolades from the white establishment (a Pulitzer Prize for the play and several Oscars for the film, including best screenplay and best picture), many African Americans judged it a feel-good film for whites. In telling examples ranging from television's *The Cosby Show* to Hollywood's *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) to a smorgasbord of Madison Avenue's commercials, DeMott argues that popular culture never moves beyond fantasy about black-white friendships.[28] Even the provocative and well-acted *Monster's Ball* (2001), which was nominated for an Academy Award for best original screenplay and won Halle Berry a best-actress Oscar, is ultimately disappointing in its treatment of interracial love, because the film facilely uses sex to work through racial tensions and solidifies the interracial union only by creating a social vacuum.

And yet fantasy can transform thinking even as it offers up illusions. Afrikaner policeman Eric Taylor confessed to the unsolved killing and burning of four black activists in Craddock, South Africa, after he saw *Mississippi Burning* (1988), a film in which a southern white sheriff aids in the murder of three

American civil rights activists. Moved by the film, Taylor was prompted to read Nelson Mandela's autobiography, which eventually led to his appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where he publicly confessed and expressed remorse.[29] That the families of Taylor's victims refused to meet with him as he had hoped and assumed seems to confirm DeMott's thesis that "historically oriented cultural productions" like *Mississippi Burning* in actuality twist history to support "friendship orthodoxy." DeMott argues that such films diminish black grievances and restage black life in accordance with white mythology—refiguring the main conflict as one not between blacks and whites but between good and evil whites, most of whom at this stage in the history of race relations want to think of themselves as good.[30] Obviously such films can also work to increase familiarity, to improve understanding, and to dismantle some stereotypes, as *Mississippi Burning* did for Eric Taylor, even though, to take the same example, they may make the solutions to problems involving race appear too easy.

In the decades since the civil rights movement, the United States has passed laws to foster racial equality, but real economic and social inequities still exist. During the 1990s it became obvious that blacks' and whites' perceptions of the problems as well as the solutions to racism were troublesomely divergent. Many whites have come to believe that America's race problems were solved with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s and the affirmative action programs instituted shortly thereafter. Most African Americans, however, continue to experience subtle racism and at times outright discrimination. Where whites see blacks as overly sensitive, blacks see whites as oblivious to the daily stresses of blacks' lives caused by the color of their skin. Recently scholars have been debating just how much progress the United States, and particularly the South, has made since the civil rights legislation of the 1960s ended legal segregation and outlawed discrimination. Some scholars, like Andrew Hacker in *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992), focus on how far we have to go, while others, like Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom in *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (1997), emphasize how far we have come, protesting what they believe to be Hacker's distortion. In the 1990s a few scholars, such as Shelby Steele, began to argue that African Americans' continued preoccupation with white racism obscures personal responsibility for their failure to get ahead and that their continued reliance on racial preferences fosters dependency. But still others, like Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton,

see racism deeply embedded in such American institutions as banks and real estate agencies, which not only continue to discriminate racially but actually work to discourage integration.[31]

How American scholars could have such different perspectives on the same problem can be explained in large part by ideological differences, which Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown believe are influenced by how readily Americans buy into the "integration illusion": images of racial integration served up ubiquitously by whites in power, from the rhetoric of politicians to the color-blind casting of Broadway shows to the black and white buddies that are de rigueur in television commercials and big-budget films. Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown worry that white Americans especially have allowed the rhetoric and images of integration to blind them to the reality that despite working together, many black and white Americans do not choose to live together, socialize together, worship together, or go to school together (if whites can afford not to). They argue that since the sixties black and white Americans have learned "to accommodate one another in the public spheres that required interaction" but "remain distant in the private spheres that involved choice and any form of intimacy." Because it is no longer socially acceptable to exhibit prejudice, Americans, particularly whites, do not fully realize the extent of distrust and disrespect between blacks and whites. It takes highly publicized events like the O. J. Simpson trials or the beating of Rodney King to reveal the depth of misunderstanding that underlies the mannered way we have come to "coexist in separate realms, interacting when necessary and occasionally crossing over, but ultimately retreating to our different worlds."[32] The contemporary fiction that I am interested in takes readers beyond the "friendship orthodoxy" DeMott has identified and penetrates the "integration illusion" Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown have observed. It accomplishes this goal by giving readers varied perspectives on the same situations. To better understand self and other, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that we must know the other's language, because understanding occurs "on the *boundary* between one's own and someone else's consciousness."[33] Narrative techniques such as dialogue and multiple perspectives allow readers to enter vicariously a dialogic process that at the very least can provide what reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser calls "anxiety free access" to the unspoken and the unknown and at the most can reformulate thinking about race relations and racial identity.[34]

Critics have debated how best to represent southern race relations for a century, beginning with Mark Twain's early critique of the South's propensity for

the romance, which ironically gave *Huckleberry Finn* its odd schizophrenic form: realism in the first half of the novel when Huck decides he will go to hell rather than help to reenslave Jim, and romance in the concluding chapters when Huck goes along with his white friend Tom Sawyer to stage Jim's prolonged fantasy escape. Like Twain, Sterling Brown and Alain Locke also praised realism as the form mostly likely to dismantle stereotypes about black people. But Albion Tourgée argued that the intensity of southern life was more suited to the heightened effects of romance than to the "trivialities" favored by realists. Seventy years later Leslie Fiedler agreed, pronouncing "symbolic gothicism" the only form adequate to the complexities of life in the American South.[35] Most recently Henry Louis Gates Jr. has praised Toni Morrison's use of myth in *Beloved,* arguing that black writers have too rigidly produced works of social realism and in doing so "have conceived their task to be the creation of an art that reports and directly reflects brute, irreducible, and ineffable 'black reality,' a reality that in fact was often merely the formulaic fictions spawned by social scientists whose work intended to reveal a black America dehumanized by slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination, in a one-to-one relationship of art to life."[36]

Rather than using myth or gothic romance or social realism, some of the writers I discuss experiment with other forms. Ellen Douglas turns to metafiction, Connie Mae Fowler to magical realism, Raymond Andrews and Lewis Nordan to parody, and Dori Sanders to the novel of manners. The unfamiliarity of reading race relations written in these forms may have produced some of the debate about their novels. On one hand, certainly it is false to assume that literary forms themselves are direct reflections of ideology; such forms are always used within historical contexts and to address aesthetic problems. On the other hand, given the increasing racial tensions of the last decade, I can see how the techniques of metafiction could be misunderstood, how magical realism could be seen as promoting easy solutions, how parody may seem to diminish the subject's seriousness, and how the novel of manners could be viewed as revealing only a small portion of the story. But each of these new fictions tells an overlooked part of the complex story of contemporary race relations.

Wolfgang Iser argues: "The production of the meaning of literary texts . . . does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness."[37] And much regarding race relations needs

reformulating in the minds of Americans. Readers will find some of these reformulations in this fiction set in the South. But while some readers will read themselves, their communities, and race relations anew through this fiction, others reading from old paradigms may misread these new narratives, as the rare criticism of Sanders's *Clover* makes obvious. Although reviewers were almost unanimous in their praise of *Clover,* the story of a black girl and her white stepmother, an African American writer questioned Sanders as to why she had chosen social customs rather than social justice for her focus, while another doubted the reality of a black family owning a peach orchard in the South, unaware that Sanders had modeled the orchard after her own family farm.[38] Whereas Iser believes that by revealing "unrecognizable realities" and by repatterning "culturally conditioned shapes," writers perform their most imaginative work, Peter Rabinowitz reminds us that misreadings can occur when readers apply the wrong paradigms or read their formal or ideological presuppositions into texts.[39]

In an interview with a *Washington Post* reporter, Sanders defended the optimistic ending she chose for *Clover:* "If I write from the view that things can work out between the races it's because I'm drawing on my youth." She explained, using an example from her background as a peach farmer, that "all farmers are affected by the weather, so if you need help to harvest before a storm, you call in the other farmers, you don't think black or white."[40] The suspicion of the happy ending may have something to do with the present dichotomous thinking that attaches the happy ending to popular fiction and rarely to serious literature, but it surely has something to do with writers' fears that readers will lapse into the "integration illusion" if a story about race relations ends happily. Does this fear mean that readers should find suspect those narratives in which relationships between blacks and whites work out and thus should only want narratives in which interracial relationships fail? The criteria for judging novels that end happily should center on how intricately conflict is presented and how believably conflict is resolved, rather than simply whether the conflict ends happily. In the case of *Clover,* the happy ending between the black girl Clover and her white stepmother, Sara Kate, seems justified and earned, given their misinterpretations and reinterpretations, confrontations and growing communication. But the grand finale in which Sara Kate becomes a full-fledged member of the rural black community by saving her black brother-in-law's life after a bee sting and learning to drive his tractor so that she can keep the farm going during his recovery seems not only far

too facile but even far-fetched. In Alison Light's discussion of feminist utopian fiction, she argues that part of the "fear of the happy ending" has been a definition of radical politics that "conceives its job as one solely of critique" and rarely of desire fulfilled.[41] Could the same be said of fictions about race relations? In writing about race relations, many writers that I discuss in the following chapters have found a way to model better interracial relationships or to promote racial reconciliation without succumbing to "friendship orthodoxy" or "the integration illusion." They often manage this difficult feat through double endings, which produce a happy ending for an interracial pair even as they withhold racial reconciliation for the larger community. Such endings suggest that solutions are not simple and yet simultaneously engage readers' desires to produce them. The result is fiction that haunts readers long after the last word.

Embedded within many of these recent narratives are concerns with how best to tell stories about race relations and how to read race more sensitively. These preoccupations suggest not only that race relations and constructions of racial identity must be rethought, but that new narratives of race relations, perhaps these very stories, are necessary for reading race anew. Unfortunately, public policies and economic changes have produced behaviors that can confirm stereotypes on both sides of the color line. Predominantly white calls to end affirmative action seem insensitive to African Americans who see the black middle class as only finally beginning to grow *because* of affirmative action. White misperceptions of life for the majority of blacks in the United States make African Americans lose hope that whites will ever really see beyond the images on *The Cosby Show.* Ironically, the problem of status that began for African Americans when white slave ships brought them to America was exacerbated after the civil rights movement when the urban industrial economy throughout the country began a downturn from which it has never recovered. As a result, many see contemporary race relations as caught in the vicious circle that Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown aptly describe: "The resulting rise of the urban underclass defied easy solutions, fed racial stereotypes, reinforced antisocial behaviors among [lower-class] blacks, further divided black and white opinions on how to achieve racial progress, and offered white Americans yet another reason to retreat into their protected suburban enclaves."[42]

The fictions that I analyze disrupt the popular discourse about race and race relations, but their representations of race relations vary depending on the nature of the relationship portrayed. Chapter 1 takes a backward glance at the

civil rights era through recent coming-of-age novels that feature young protagonists who seek racial equality but who sustain painful personal loses in the process. It concludes with a forecast of how novels about children and race relations might take shape in years to come. Chapter 2 examines strategies for dismantling stereotypes and imagining interracial friendships between women, both fostered and complicated by the politics of the contemporary women's movement. Chapter 3 suggests that something more than the comradeship black and white men have experienced in war and sports is needed to produce real interracial friendship. Several novelists suggest that rethinking masculinity may be the best way to move beyond superficial male connections. Chapter 4 shows contemporary southern fiction eager to uncover repressed stories about past interracial love but reticent to investigate contemporary romance other than in pulp fictions. Chapter 5 explores the reemergence of the racially mixed character in interesting new guises as a provocative figure for new understanding of racial identity. Even such novels that foreground personal relationships before a segregated communal backdrop could run the risk, as Benjamin DeMott has argued, of making us unable to "think straight about race" because they carry the potential of suggesting that "the race situation in America is governed by the state of personal relations between blacks and whites."[43] But new narratives about the urban South as well as new stories about familiar rural communities, which I discuss in chapter 6, prevent readers from growing sanguine about the integrated small worlds of friends and lovers and take them into the larger political, economic, and social realities that perpetuate segregation.

Pierre Nora argues that history has become the substitute for imagination in contemporary France, that memoirs, oral history, and historical novels are "stand-ins for faltering fiction."[44] The fiction I discuss in this book is evidence that despite the same vogue for historical forms in the United States, there is no call yet to mourn the loss of imaginative literature, especially not literature about black-white relationships. Novelists who write about the South are too busy seeking "beyond history" for what Audre Lorde called "a new and more possible meeting."[45] And those who embrace historical forms are not recycling old stories. For as Ralph Ellison has argued, "one of the important roles which fiction has played, especially the fiction of southern writers," is "to tell that part of the human truth which we could not accept or face up to in much historical writing because of social, racial, and political considerations."[46] If Wolfgang Iser is right that "literature becomes a panorama of what is possible, be-

cause it is not hedged in by the limitations or the considerations that determine the institutionalized organizations within which human life takes its course,"[47] we need these fictions to help us imagine our way out of the social structures and mind-sets that mythologize the past, fragment individuals, prejudge people, and divide communities.