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[Introduction to] Crossing the Color Line: Readings in Black and White

Suzanne W. Jones
University of Richmond, sjones@richmond.edu

CROSSING THE COLOR LINE

Readings in Black and White

EDITED BY

Suzanne W. Jones

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Introduction

At the turn of the last century, W. E. B. Du Bois predicted that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Since the hopeful years of the civil rights movement, the United States has made uneven progress toward solving this problem. In 1968, at the end of a turbulent decade, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders concluded, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal." Although we have since passed laws to foster racial equality, real economic, social, and emotional gulfs still exist. Strains between blacks and whites, which were partially hidden for a couple of decades, have become painfully evident in the last few years. The highly publicized and legally complex cases of Rodney King and O. J. Simpson and the divergent public reactions their trials generated suggest just how vexing the problem of the color line remains.

In an increasingly multiethnic nation, a focus on relationships between blacks and whites may seem incomplete, but our history of slavery and legal segregation creates a unique difference between minority groups that continues to confront us despite our current, and certainly important, attempts to address the problems of all minority groups in the United States. It seems especially appropriate at the turn of a new century to reflect on what Du Bois so accurately predicted would be America's gravest and most frustrating twentieth-century problem by examining fiction written since the movement that marked our country's concerted efforts to rectify the problem.

With such frequent calls for dialogue across racial lines, so many pleas for cross-racial understanding, and so much desire for a more inclusive American culture, the time seems right for a new collection of stories about relationships that cross the color line. Because of our country's painful racial history and the complexity of our current economic and social problems, these relationships are difficult to think about and to discuss, but the representation of race relations and racial identity in *Crossing the Color Line* will, I hope, help to provoke both thought and discussion. In *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that we live in a world divided by race, class, nationality, and gender, but he goes on to argue that "the only way to transcend these divisions—to forge for once a civic culture that respects both differences and common-

alities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture." The stories in this collection not only illuminate both differences and commonalities, but also have the potential to alter perceptions of our world and to reshape values.

After the Civil War, Walt Whitman said that laws were not enough to make America a democracy; he believed the country needed a national literature that would build bridges between diverse peoples. While Whitman's faith in the written word may seem somewhat idealistic today, no other medium is more effective than literature in allowing us to enter the minds and hearts of people who are different from ourselves. When I was a student in a segregated high school in the 1960s, I discovered that reading about race relations can be transforming, both intellectually and emotionally. Today, as a teacher, I know that teaching stories about race relations can foster cross-racial understanding. The stories in *Crossing the Color Line* will give readers encounters with others that may not be part of their daily lives.

I have divided *Crossing the Color Line* into three parts: "Misreadings," "Rereadings," and "New Readings." These headings highlight the way characters in the stories perceive members of other races, and the divisions are roughly chronological in the evolution of representing black–white relationships since the civil rights movement. While most selections in "Misreadings" were published in the 1960s and 1970s, most selections in "New Readings" were published in the 1990s. The stories in "Misreadings" concern relationships between lower-class and working-class blacks and the white people who employ them or otherwise have authority over them, while the stories in "New Readings" involve relationships between blacks and whites of the middle and professional classes. A comparison reveals that the likelihood of meaningful relationships between blacks and whites increases as the equations between race and class, race and power, change.

The stories in "Misreadings" focus on white characters' misreadings of black people and their experiences. Because white skin has afforded economic power and social privilege for many, the white characters rarely look beyond racial stereotypes. Yet while these stories involve cross-racial misunderstandings that the white characters fail to perceive, the authors make such misreadings plain for their readers through narrative point of view or narrative irony. Alice Adams and Reynolds Price employ multiple perspectives so that readers can understand the thoughts and emotions of both black and white characters, even when they do not talk about their feelings with each other. Although the other writers in this section relate their stories from a single point of view, they employ unrelenting irony to highlight the injustices of prejudice and discrimination, proving simultaneously that people on both sides of the color line are harmed by white racism. In all of these stories readers witness the misunderstandings that occur across the color line when peo-

ple mislabel social and cultural differences as biological, or when they equate race and class.

The protagonists of the stories in "Rereadings" eventually realize their misperceptions about race and difference. Stories by Alice Walker, Anthony Grooms, and Randall Kenan involve black characters who initially misread white characters. Stories by James Alan McPherson, Joan Williams, and Frances Sherwood take white characters beyond misperceptions that are caused by objectifying black people, viewing them either as inferior or exotic. The stories in this section examine situations that promote understanding across racial lines. Their endings are cautiously optimistic, although the conflicts are far from simplistically resolved. Race relations in these stories are always complicated by issues such as politics, religion, class, gender, and sexual orientation, to say nothing of a variety of individual concerns involving love and money. These stories give readers the opportunity to witness the misunderstandings that occur when complex experiences are simplified and when unfamiliar life stories are misinterpreted. They also model ways for readers to understand the life stories of those who are different from themselves and to redefine difference so as to understand it, not fear it. In "Recitatif" Toni Morrison provokes readers to read without foregrounding race, by undermining attempts to racially identify her characters and by making their class differences starkly obvious. When reading the stories in this section, readers actually dwell in the possibility of cross-racial understanding.

In "New Readings" the stories turn on personal similarities as often as on racial differences. For example, Clifford Thompson focuses on changing gender role expectations in dating relationships and Alyce Miller concentrates on marital troubles. But even here the legacy of racism lingers and tests the emerging friendship of Alyce Miller's female characters, the professional relationship of David Means's male characters, the love relationship of Reginald McKnight's black man and white woman, and the strictly business venture of Elizabeth Spencer's white woman and black man. Strains occur across the color line both because characters try so hard to relate to each other (whites wary of saying anything that might be construed as offensive, blacks on guard for offenses) and because family, friends, and colleagues continue to harbor misunderstandings about race and stereotypes about cross-racial relationships. However, a large measure of the power and the promise of these recent stories comes from the possibility that equal and amiable relationships can exist across the color line.

SUZANNE W. JONES