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Preface: Erasing the Commas: RaceGenderClassSexualityRegion

Race, gender, class, sexuality has become a veritable mantra as critics indulge in what Judith Butler identifies as the seduction of the "proverbial commas."[1] This issue of *American Literature* testifies that enactments of race, gender, class, sexuality, and, also, region cannot be separated. These essays reveal that the proverbial commas, gesturing superficially to the connections between these points of analysis, often become pure logocentrism, the recreation of the old tired binaries. We are now at the critical juncture of uncovering how the constructs of race, gender, class, sexuality, and region construct *each other*.

This special issue may add new layers to our understanding of what it really means to erase the "proverbial commas" separating these master signifiers, which are incredibly naturalized even as they continue to float. New questions emerge when intersectionality is embraced as both the method of analysis and the content most worthy of analysis. Why did facile equations of the white woman and the slave become so useful in sentimental and abolitionist literature? What are the risks of quick and easy connections between race and gender? How does a nineteenth-century narrative written by a black hairdresser and social critic illuminate the ways in which the privileging of middle-class reform and racial uplift overshadows the complexity of antebellum black women laborers? How does postslavery trauma continue to feminize black masculinity and masculinize black womanhood? Does black masculinity continue to be defined by proximity to or distance from what Amiri Baraka refers to as the "scene of the crime"?[2]

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As the women critics in this volume address these issues that revolve around permutations such as "race, gender, and labor," "region, race, and gender," "sexuality, gender, and race," they rewrite the standard script that adds the second (or third) term only to reinforce the imagined master term. Houston Baker has deftly labeled this process the deformation of mastery: the creation of new tools as opposed to the use of the master's tools.[3] In "Nameless Outrages: Narrative Authority, Rape Rhetoric, and the Dakota Conflict of 1862" and "Emancipating the Lettered Slave: Sentiment and Slavery in Augusta Evans's *St. Elmo*," Janet Dean and Elizabeth Fekete Trubey, respectively, "deform mastery" when they refuse to foreground the privilege of whiteness or the disempowerment of womanhood as they consider white women's subversion of racism, uncovering their complicity as well.

Trubey's analysis of sentimentalism and abolitionist literature exposes simultaneously the dis-connection between white women and black women and their connections across race and gender lines. Within this dizzying space of location and dislocation, Trubey discovers the "imbalanced and tenuous" "impulse to connect through sympathy the plights of women and slaves." She reminds us that the analogizing of white women and slaves is as useful in Southern proslavery treatises as it is in Northern abolitionist literature. Dean's study of the 1862 Dakota Conflict and Sarah Wakefield's captivity narrative, *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees*, reveals the longevity of legal cases adjudicating the rape of a white woman by a Caliban figure. Dean delineates Wakefield's subversion of the racist fear of "native" masculinity as well as her complicity in the racist script. Wakefield's testimony of her captivity reiterates and debunks the privilege of whiteness.

As Deborah Mix explores Harryette Mullen's revision of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, she wrestles with the lingering questions raised by "Melanctha," the literal black bridge in *Three Lives* that sustains the two stories about repressed German women. Mix demonstrates that as Mullen revises Stein's *Tender Buttons*, she achieves intimacy with her predecessor in spite of a necessary critical distance. Mullen achieves real deformation of mastery when she forces *Tender Buttons* to become "useful," to serve her "tender revision," her attempt to liberate the "mammy in the woodpile."[4] Xiomara Santamarina crystallizes the class issues "in the woodpile" of nineteenth-century African American literature as she explores an antebellum black hairdresser's foray into social criticism by means of her manual

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labor. Eliza Potter gains status as an empowered working woman even as her narrative, *A Black Hairdresser's Experience of High Life*, embraces the hegemonic femininity that degrades working women. As Santamarina analyzes the issues of gender, race, and labor emerging in Potter's exposé, she develops a trinary that fully displaces the binary that often takes the shape of *gender or race* and *race or class*.

Victoria Olwell explodes the binary of male intelligence and female intuition. "'It Spoke Itself': Female Genius and Eccentric Politics" demonstrates that women's voices could only be accepted in nineteenth-century political discourse when their force was kept at bay by the fetishism of women's "spontaneous intuition" or women's genius. Sojourner Truth is one of the most famous examples of nineteenth-century female public speakers whose power was relegated to a type of intuition set apart from intellect. As we continue to erase the commas between race and gender, we must place Truth in the larger history that Olwell describes as women's "eccentric rhetorical space." In her groundbreaking study of Truth, Nell Painter argues that white women abolitionists and feminists, drawing upon stereotypes of black women, reconstructed Truth's famous 1851 speech in Akron, Ohio. Painter wonders, for example, about the truth of Frances Dana Gage's depiction of the speech. In a manner strikingly similar to the paradigm, explored by Olwell, of female intuition and male intelligence, Gage imagines Truth separating herself from intellect: "When dey talks 'bout this ting in de head. What dis dey call it? 'Intellect,' whispered some one near. 'Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do with woman's rights or niggers' rights?"[5] The binary of female intuition and male intellect, as Mix explains, is racialized in Stein's primitivist images of black wildness and white control and restraint. Mix's analysis of the relation between Stein's Jewishness, lesbianism, and primitivist images of blackness unveils the sensationalizing of black sexuality that represses Stein's own sexuality and racial identity.

Thinking about intersectionality—erasing the "proverbial commas"—destroys the binaries that structure race, gender, class, sexuality, and regionalism. These essays reveal that enactments of these "distinct spheres of power" overdetermine each other to such an extent that we need the new conceptual webs and interfaces signaled by Riché Richardson's focus on the geographies mapped by the coordinates North-South, black-white, and masculine-feminine in Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play*.[6] As Richardson interrogates geographical for-

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mulations of black masculinity, she also critiques "black antiracist discourse" that imagines the gender of blackness as "essentially male." The gender of blackness, within the antiblack script, is also often imagined as sheer masculinity (the notion that the "black beast" is simply not the "pretty woman") as Mix reveals in her analysis of Mullen's "tender revisions." Engaging Stein's *Three Lives*, Mullen wrestles with its images of the darker-skinned "beast," Rose, and the "mysterious" and "subtle" femininity that Stein attributes to Melanctha, who is "half made with real white blood."[7] Santamarina interrogates the gender of blackness as she explains that Potter, located outside hegemonic femininity, assumes the role of identifying the "real ladies" and the impostors. Metaquestions about the gender of blackness connect Santamarina's analysis of the nexus of gender, race, and labor issues in *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* with Trubey's analysis of the conflations of the oppression of white women and black slaves in sentimental and abolitionist literature and Mix's analysis of Mullen's "tender revisions" of *Three Lives* and *Tender Buttons*. In *Three Lives*, the imagined signs of white womanhood, attached to Melanctha's "yellowness," redeem her blackness and make her the unlikely servant to the darker-skinned Rose.[8] Melanctha helps Rose "deliver" her baby, and Stein's interest in the "negro" is first sparked when she "delivers" "negro" babies. Stein explains in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that she first "noticed the negroes" when she assisted in childbirth as part of her studies at Johns Hopkins Medical School.[9] The image of white midwife–black woman in labor evokes both cross-racial connections and the possibility of alienated labor. Through this nuanced lens of both cross-racial connection and racial appropriation, we must continue to compare images of race and gender in modernist primitivism and nineteenth-century sentimental and abolitionist literature. Making the connections between the essays in this issue is as crucial as connecting the "proverbial commas" that separate race, gender, class, sexuality, and regionalism.

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Notes

1 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 168.

2 Amiri Baraka, "Black Literature and the Afro-American Nation: The

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Urban Voice," in *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, ed. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1981), 142.

3 Houston A. Baker Jr., introduction to *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), xvi.

4 In the spirit of Mullen's revisions, I am, of course, invoking the infamous "nigger in the woodpile" in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

5 Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: Norton, 1996), 167.

6 "Distinct spheres of power" is Butler's phrase (*Bodies That Matter*, 168),

7 Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives* (New York: Vintage, 1909), 86.

8 Stein emphasizes the "peculiar" nature of this servitude: "Why did the subtle, intelligent, half white girl Melanctha Herbert love and do for and demean herself in service to this coarse, decent, sullen, ordinary, black childish Rose, and why was this unmoral, promiscuous, shiftless Rose married, and that's not so common either, to a good man of the negroes, while Melanctha with her white blood and attraction and her desire for a right position had not yet been really married" ("Melanctha," *Three Lives*, 86). As opposed to the imagined peculiarity of Melanctha's catering to Rose, Rose's maternal support of Melanctha is naturalized by the dark-skinned black mammy stereotype: "Melanctha badly needed to have Rose always there to save her. Melanctha wanted badly to cling to her and Rose had always been so solid for her" (231). As Stein repeatedly uses the word "wander" to describe Melanctha's insatiable desire and quest for "knowledge and power" (97), Rose emerges as the more submissive and domestic woman, the dark-skinned black woman who is "stuck" at home as the "yellow" black woman "wanders."

9 In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes: "It was then that she had to take her turn in the delivering of babies and it was at that time that she noticed the negroes and the places that she afterwards used in the second of the *Three Lives* stories, Melanctha Herbert, the story that was the beginning of her revolutionary work" (New York: Vintage, 1990), 82.

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