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Susan Gubar. *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. xxiii + 327 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511002-9.

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## From “Sexchanges” to “Racechanges”: Transgressive Scholarship on Racial Boundaries

Susan Gubar’s reputation as a literary scholar is firmly established. In collaboration with Sandra Gilbert, Gubar has co-authored or co-edited several landmark works in feminist literary criticism, including *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, and *No Man’s Land*, which included a volume entitled *Sexchanges*. Gubar’s latest work and her first “solo flight,” *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, represents another significant contribution to the study of American literature and culture.

Focusing on the pre-seventies decades of the twentieth century, *Racechanges* analyzes vaudeville, television, film, sculpture, paintings, photography, advertisements, book covers, poetry, fiction, and autobiography. The examples from visual media are well documented, as the book contains close to a hundred illustrations, including Shirley Temple, Bing Crosby, and Josephine Baker in blackface, Dick Gregory in whiteface, Ide Uke’s parodic “Man in Polyester Suit” as well as Robert Mapplethorpe’s original version, and racechanged representations of Marilyn Monroe and Queen Elizabeth. Gubar’s thorough research is evidenced by the book’s extensive documentation and substantial list of works cited. *Racechanges* has an encyclopedic quality, and the overview presented in the introductory chapter surveys the history of racechange in twentieth-century American culture.

Gubar uses the term *racechange* “to suggest the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or imper-

sonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black posing as white, pan-racial mutuality” (p. 5). According to Gubar, racechange allows artists to explore racial parameters, and she argues that “representations of racechange test the boundaries between racially defined identities, functioning paradoxically to reinforce and to challenge the Manichean meanings Western societies give to color” (pp. 5-6).

Gubar claims that prohibitions against white impersonations of blackness have also served to discourage scholarship about its ongoing impact on American culture (p. xviii). “Ironically,” she writes, “the boundaries of area studies and their methodologies have begun to be policed more rigidly at a time when many other scholars have become fascinated, on the one hand, with the elasticity or permeability of categories of race and gender and sexual preference and, on the other, with the transgressive or liminal aesthetic experiments produced throughout our cultural history” (p. xviii). “[V]arious intransigent categories at work in contemporary cultural criticism” make an investigation of transracial crossing suspect, “if not unthinkable” (p. xvii). If one accepts Gubar’s analysis of racechanges in American culture and academic discourse, her work can be seen as transgressive scholarship on a taboo subject.

The first chapter of *Racechanges* begins by asking, “Can human beings (and the culture they create) be defined as either black or white?” (p. 3). Through an overview of “white posing and black passing,” Gubar ad-

dresses this question by problematizing understandings of race that are totalizing and monolithic. Her analysis of the history of racechange shows that race is not a fixed category and that racial boundaries are, in fact, permeable. Besides presenting an overview and outline of the book, Gubar summarizes the primary goals of *Racechanges* in the first chapter. She argues that white performances of blackness have figured and disfigured African Americans. Her subtitle, *White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, not only shows her indebtedness to Frantz Fanon (she writes that her greatest intellectual indebtedness for *Racechanges* is to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*), but also highlights the emphasis on black face rather than black masks. Gubar chooses to talk of black face rather than black masks "because it is not as easy to take off a face as a mask" (p. xx). Indeed, Gubar's analysis shows that the myths produced by white representation of African Americans are hard to eradicate. At the same time, however, she maintains that racechange shows the importance of African American contributions to American culture and offers a possible bridge between black and white.

In the second chapter, Gubar illustrates the legacy of white "spirit murder" of blacks, which is the result of whites embodying and dispossessing African Americans. According to Gubar, the representations of racechange in such films as *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Jazz Singer* obliterate the black body and substitute "the white man's parodic imitation-black-body" (p. 56). In *The Birth of a Nation*, the black man is a hypermasculine, amoral monster who must be destroyed so that the United States can survive; in *The Jazz Singer*, the blackface actor becomes an emasculated "boy," infantilized by the black mask. Gubar also analyzes the degradation of African Americans through the blatant mockery inherent in minstrel shows. She offers "an anatomy of blackface," which shows the influence of minstrelsy on subsequent portrayals of African Americans by blackface actors.

After examining the destructive racechanges of blackface movie actors, minstrel shows, and vaudeville acts, Gubar traces the "various efforts of twentieth-century artists to grapple with the Othering blackface symbolically inflicted on African Americans" (p. 43). In Chapter Three, she examines black resistance to white representation, focusing on the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Gubar analyzes critiques of whiteness and the alternative versions of racial origins purposed by Zora Neale Hurston and others. According to Gubar, Hurston's alternatives to the biblical story of Ham attribute the origin of the black race to a failure on the

part of the people. In Hurston's mythography, the people either misunderstood God (the *Mules and Men* version) or arrived too late when God was determining the skin color of the various races (*Dust Tracks on a Road*). In addition, Gubar explores black imitations of white portrayals of African Americans, in which black impersonation of "blackness" often exposed the artificial nature of white representations. Attempts by blacks to "pass" as white clearly reveal white skin privilege, although passing narratives can also contribute to a rejection of white supremacy.

Chapter Four analyzes the appropriation of "black talk" by white modernists. Such ventriloquism, Gubar concludes, exploits black rhythms and vernacular in an attempt to tap "a dissident lexicon of subversive power" (p. 136). Yet, these performances of racechange remain inauthentic and offer another white portrayal of blackness. Although the political motives of modernists such as John Berryman were quite different from the aims of the creators of *The Birth of a Nation*, Gubar argues that "all texts exploiting racial ventriloquism inevitably shuttle between defending against and welcoming energies of Otherness" (p. 137). In the beginning of the chapter, Gubar juxtaposes Berryman's "Mr Bones, you too advancer with your songs / muching of which are wrong" with lines from minstrel shows. She argues that modernist appropriation of "black" speech "reinforces an image of the ignorant, stumbling, bumbling fool whose ungrammatical malapropisms were spouted by the black-faced minstrel" (p. 135). Gubar also supports her thesis about the contribution of African Americans to American culture by claiming that "white artists' fascination with permeable boundaries of racial markers means that their work documents their indebtedness to African American culture" (p. 45).

Chapter Five describes the criminalizing and eroticizing of the black body, which reveals both white envy of black sexuality and the denial of power to African Americans. According to Gubar, Terry Southern's novel *Blue Movie* manifests male envy of the "hypermasculine black stud," represented, in the words of one of Southern's characters, as a "spade-rape bag." Gubar also examines white female fears of the "spade-rape bag" and the criminalized and pathologized representation of black male sexuality. Her analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe's "Man in Polyester Suit," an artistic photograph which centers on an exposed black penis, discusses how African American men are equated with physicality and identified specifically with their genitalia. Mapplethorpe's work illustrates desire for the black male body and envy of black

sexuality while blurring racial and sexual boundaries. In a subsequent chapter, Gubar discusses Ike Ude's circumcised and racechanged version of Mapplethorpe's "Man in Polyester Suit," which she considers Ude's "most parodic approach to 'ethnic iconicity'" (p. 254).

Having mounted an argument that calls into question fixed categories of racial identity, Gubar discusses the possibility of a post-racist society in the last two chapters of the book. According to Gubar, a post-racist America requires the separation of color from race as well as the rejection of racial bifurcation. She writes, "A post-racist society cannot possibly come into being until Americans comprehend how the dualism of 'black' versus 'white' has operated to hide the cross-racial dynamics of our interwoven cultural posts" (p. 45). Gubar argues that the combination of cross-racial passing and posing forms a dialectic of self and Other. From this dialectic one can posit an alternative transraciality, in which "performers

seek neither to become the Other nor to flaunt their alienation from the Other" (p. 248).

Moreover, the rejection of dualistic conceptions of race fosters understandings of culture that are neither totalizing nor monolithic. Gubar's study of racechange ultimately problematizes the notion of a "genuine, uncontaminated white cultural identity or a unique black racial autonomy" (p. 247). "What the history of racechange teaches," she concludes, "is that race and color are not immutable categories but classifications with permeable boundaries" (p. 246). Gubar's analysis of white posing and black passing explores the permeability of racial boundaries, and *Racechanges* is a fascinating and provocative study of racial identity in American culture.

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