

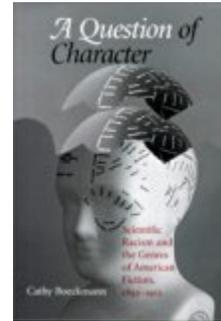
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cathy Boeckmann. *A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892-1912*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000. vii + 238 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1021-9.

Reviewed by Raymond J. Haberski (Department of History and Political Science, Marian College)

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How Race Was Written

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When Americans think about race today, who do they turn to for guidance? Do they look to Toni Morrison, or has she faded from the spotlight? Do they listen to rap groups, or are they too polarizing? Perhaps they seek out Patricia Williams or Cornel West or Henry Louis Gates, but probably not. When many Americans think about race, they do so through the creative lens of a prolific and lonely filmmaker, Spike Lee. Consider what Lee provides: need something on race riots, see *Do the Right Thing*; want to tackle the delicate subject of interracial relationships, rent *Jungle Fever*; and if civil rights is the issue, use *Four Little Black Girls*, *Malcolm X*, or *Get On the Bus*. The point is, movies more than any other medium shape how Americans see race. All the writers in the country could join forces to discuss race, and sometimes seem as if they do, and their collective work would not hit with as much force as one of Spike Lee's movies.

It seems to me that Cathy Boeckmann would like what Spike Lee has been doing, not only because he is a good filmmaker, but because he works with a medium that incorporates words, sounds, and images, and, therefore, has broken away from a literary construction that can be dangerously constraining when dealing with race. Boeckmann is a scholar of spliced disciplines. She works in both literary theory and race studies (especially the part that investigates the creation of "whiteness" and "blackness"), and, as she makes very clear in her first

book, race is a topic of such immeasurable complexity that words—no matter how carefully one uses them—almost inevitably create an understanding of race that perpetuates stereotypes. Words are inadequate, especially when they can trap society in a binary construction: black means one thing, white means something different.

In *A Question of Character*, Boeckmann asks a very simple but expansive question: "Why does the depiction of racial difference seem to necessitate a discussion of artistic form?" (p. 207). In answering that question, she collects an interesting cast of characters, including Thomas Dixon, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Charles Chesnutt, and James Weldon Johnson. All were writers from the late-nineteenth century who worked in a variety of literary genres and who dealt with the question of race. In short, she argues that literary representations of race have consistently fallen into a trap of relating physical characteristics—one's skin color—to a person's deeper character. Hence the title of her book: "character" was the term most often used in the late-nineteenth century to describe a broad spectrum of acquired traits, whether biological or social. Boeckmann rightly picks the literary subject of mixed race or "passing" (a person of one race passing as a person of another race) as the field of inquiry on which to investigate her panel of writers. She explains: "Mixed race raises the fundamental question of what blackness and whiteness are, leading rather logically to anxiety about whether

their essences have been captured and represented adequately. One imagines a novelist wondering if some other art form—especially a visual or non-written one—might have done better” (pp. 208-209). Indeed, for Boeckmann the writers she surveys worked during an age of anxiety about race and in a period when visual media grew in sophistication. These writers tried to engage two problems at the same time: the evolving definition of race and the challenge of capturing that issue as realistically in words as photographs and moving pictures seemingly promised to do.

The larger implications of how race was written are clear. To Boeckmann, “the dynamics of language create the lines of connection between the bodily basis of race and its artistic representation and thus set the parameters for how we conceive of it” (p. 211). Americans came to understand what race was through how it was written. Based on that understanding, American society as a whole made assumptions about race, based political decisions on those assumptions, and ultimately took action on issues of race based on literary representations that might be woefully inadequate. Boeckmann concludes that “art perhaps has become race: we experience race through physical description and characterization because it is how we conceptualize it” (p. 211). So how did these writers characterize race?

Boeckmann begins with a long first chapter covering the prevailing pseudo-scientific theories on race and how those ideas were filtered through the prevailing literary genres of the age. Thus, she moves from discussions of social Darwinism and the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Joseph Le Conte to fiction writers who were influenced by scientific racism. “The confluence of scientific discourse and literary commentary that brought about the conceptual connections between character, characters, and characterization,” Boeckmann argues, “resulted from a shared and pervasive concern to represent the invisible aspects of racial character” (p. 61). Turning to science made it possible for writers to make their racial claims seem more legitimate. It is Boeckmann’s contention that no matter what genre a writer worked within, scientific racism made some sort of appearance. In the work of the white supremacist author Thomas Dixon, pseudo-scientific evidence supported the argument that skin color, character, and, ultimately, moral authority were all connected. Other writers such as

Twain, Howells, and Chesnut did not follow Dixon’s political agenda, but could not escape the fallacy of literary realism. While each provided an alternative to the romantic, sentimentalized version of Dixon’s south, the realists all worked “within an understanding of racial difference constrained by the notion of racial character” (p. 8).

Even James Weldon Johnson’s innovative approach to race in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) falls a bit short. Johnson attempted to skirt the problematic connection between physical description and inner character by using a non-representational figure as the narrator. But, Boeckmann argues, because Johnson wanted his whole text to stand as a representation of the black experience, his approach ended up being ironic. While Johnson effectively undermined his narrator’s ability to represent an entire people, the notion of representation through a single form—such as the novel itself—was also called into question.

Boeckmann contributes to literary criticism by providing more evidence that words do not exist in a value-neutral world—they create, represent, and constitute meaning and thus demand scrutiny. But I think a fair question to ask is, scrutiny to what end? Other than the academic exercise that Boeckmann conducts, is there a larger significance to her findings? Yes, there is, and she hints at in her conclusion. But those conclusions are left to stand alone without connection to their possible political and social dimensions. There is too little attention paid to the influence these writers had on their times. Yes, scientific racism did surge during this period, and yes, these writers implicitly supported its agenda, but there is room left to push the argument further. It is fair and important to reiterate that racism was reflected in all genres of fiction, even those such as realism that presumed to be a more sophisticated rendering of race. But because ideas do have power, one must illustrate the effects of that power. Theory can help reveal arguments, but different types of evidence can suggest the implications of an argument. Since Boeckmann argues that fiction from this period became “a lightning rod for discussions of ... scientific, political, and even aesthetic transitions” (p. 62), the book would have been stronger if the author had done more to assess the specific damage caused by those bolts of lightning.

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