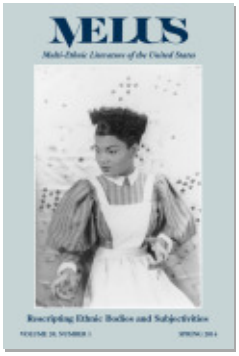
The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880–1930 by Jolie A. Sheffer (review)

Ralina L. Joseph



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The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930. Jolie A. Sheffer. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2013. 248 pages. $72.00 cloth; $24.95 paper; $24.95 electronic.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century multiracial characters in US popular culture almost always have been dismissed by critics as tragic. They are the torn victims of race crossing whose inevitably dismal fates result from their race-infringing parents and are exacerbated by their own romantic adventures across racial lines. Mixed-race characters bear epithets such as the tragic mulatto, the half-caste, and the half-breed; their downfall is unchangeable presumably because of the incompatible white and minority bloods that flow within their veins. Stories about multiracial characters function in US culture as barometers of race relations. Tragic mixed-race tales illuminate the white nation's pathological fear of the deepest and most permanent form of integration: miscegenation.

Jolie A. Sheffer warns that this is not the full story. In *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930*, Sheffer imagines mixed-race subjects in turn-of-the-twentieth-century literature and their women of color (often mixed-race) authors as not just the embodiment of tragedy but the active agents of resistance and change. Sheffer writes that while stories of miscegenation and incest, which she terms *racial romances*, serve the function of "reveal[ing] a history of exploitation of racialized women by . . . white men" (2), they also "offer a multiracial model of national identity that promises a more egalitarian future for minorities in the United States or those affected by its imperial reach" (3). Sheffer links the former claim to the trope of incest, which "functions as the literary test limit for white male privilege and racialized female abjection, since what could more graphically illustrate the dangers of male conquest and female victimization than the horror of father-daughter incest?" (68).

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The latter claim is the more radical of the two, and Sheffer uses it to push forward the notion that "kinship through shared endeavor, not shared blood . . . plot[s] a multicultural future" (120). Sheffer brings the two prongs of her thesis together to contend that both incest (endogamy) and miscegenation (exogamy) "were dangerous and powerful tropes deployed in literature and popular culture as a means to reimagine racial and ethnic minorities as members of the national family" (171).

Sheffer's book is an expansive and ambitious work of comparative ethnic studies. *The Romance of Race* takes a racial case study approach, with chapters focusing on African Americans (tragic mulatta/os), Asian Americans (half-castes), Chicana/os (mestiza/os), Native Americans (half-bloods), and whites. Four of the chapters consider the roles of women of color authors Sheffer names as mixed-race and positions as activists, alongside their fictional work about incest and mixed race. The first chapter analyzes the tragic mulatto and incest tropes in "Boston intellectual of the black bourgeoisie" author Pauline Hopkins's novel *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self* (1902-03), which Sheffer argues "offers a utopian vision of an egalitarian world where black and white, African and American, feminine and masculine, body and mind, are (re)united into a seamless, healthy whole" (28). In *The Romance of Race*'s convincingly argued second chapter, Sheffer investigates the half-caste and incest tropes in a number of romance novels by Chinese and white author Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna. In the third chapter, Sheffer looks at mestiza/o characters developed by Mexican American writer María Cristina Mena's magazine fiction. In Chapter Four, Sheffer examines the trope of the half-blood in the novel *Cogewea* (1927) by Mourning Dove/Christine Quintasket, a Native American woman of Okanogan and Colville descent. The one chapter that deviates in archive and approach is the final chapter on Jane Addams's Hull-House Museum. Not only does this chapter not examine fiction by a woman of color author, but it also differs from the monograph's primary interracial sex/incest argument, as Sheffer positions white Progressive Era reformer Addams as "avoid[ing] the titillation and taboo of interracial sex by transforming the biological family into a cultural 'family' of [white] immigrants and [white] Americans" (151). While including white ethnics in the story of interracial race-making in the United States is an important move, this chapter strays from the thesis Sheffer carefully develops in the previous four chapters.

The Romance of Race takes a thoroughly intersectional approach, considering race, gender, nation, sexuality, and even spirituality in any given reading. Sheffer's book is also impressively multidisciplinary as she scaffolds her close readings with psychoanalysis, history, and the activists'/authors' biographies. One of the book's strengths is Sheffer's careful historicizing as she anchors each case study to a particular ethnic/racial history. For example, she reads her tragic

mulatto through *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) (27), her half-caste through the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act that prevented immigration from the continent until the 1950s (89), her mestiza through the Mexican-American War (1846-48) and Mexican Revolution (c. 1910-17) (92), and her half-breed through the 1887 Dawes Act (131).

Because *The Romance of Race* reframes late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women of color authors and their mixed-race characters as agents of change and potential precursors to multiculturalism, it struck me as a particularly hopeful book. At times, Sheffer romanticizes the authors'—and characters'—resistance, through perhaps naive claims that the racial romance illustrates how turn-of-the-twentieth-century "mixed-race women challenge exploitation, exoticization, and patriarchal privilege" (26). I wonder if Sheffer would have come to any different conclusions had she engaged with contemporary scholarship in critical mixed-race studies, such as that by Michele Elam, LeiLani Nishime, Mary Beltrán, Camilla Fojas, Rainier Spencer, Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, Cherise Smith, and Habiba Ibrahim, to name only a handful of scholars working in this vibrant field. Although most mixed-race studies criticism does not look exclusively at literature from *The Romance of Race*'s era, scholars in this field question positioning mixed-race characters, authors, or activists as exceptional (and as exclusively mixed-race) and read them as integral members of larger communities of collaboration and critique. Nevertheless, *The Romance of Race* is a clearly written and impressively multidisciplinary, comparative, and intersectional contribution to American Studies.

Ralina L. Joseph

University of Washington