

**Bloodshed and Blood-Mixing: Women Writing the Transnational Romance**

[Race, Romance, and Rebellion: Literatures of the Americas in the Nineteenth Century.](#)

Colleen C. O'Brien. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013. 224 pp.

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<1>Holding that “both romanticism and romance are inextricable from the act and idea of rebellion” (ix), Colleen C. O'Brien's *Race, Romance, and Rebellion* reads the historic romance genre as embedded in the connections between cross-racial romance and violent rebellion. As writers such as Elise Lemire, Cassandra Jackson, Debra Rosenthal, Tavia Nyong'o, and Karen Woods Weierman have also acknowledged, cross-racial love was a major theme of nineteenth-century literature. In a compelling move, O'Brien takes up this theme of amalgamation in order to shift focus away from discussions of heterosexual sex or marriage, or mixed-race people, and toward amalgamation's political implications. Reading the literary form of the romance through these implications, O'Brien counts bloodshed and blood-mixing as “essential gothic tropes that characterized the effect of the Haitian Revolution on race and gender relations” (3). Importantly, O'Brien's focus on women writers in this study veers away from earlier monographs whose readings of themes of violence, revolution, and the political tend toward masculinist lists of authors, even when offering a more racially diverse canon.

<2>In the spirit of the transnational turn in nineteenth-century American literary studies, O'Brien extends her selection of texts beyond the scope of the United States to include the Cuban-born Spanish writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda y Arteaga's *Sab* (1841) alongside her discussions of novels published in the United States, where she also recognizes resonances of and responses to the Haitian Revolution. One of the great strengths of O'Brien's study is her incorporation of now-canonized works, including Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), more recently recovered texts, such as Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste* (1865) and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), and still under-studied writing, like Elizabeth Livermore's *Zoë, Or, The Quadroon's Triumph* (1855). Reading these narratives with relation to an even broader selection of essays, speeches, and letters, O'Brien makes a compelling argument for what she calls the nineteenth century's “cultural obsession with

romances and rebellion” (xiv). The three senses of rebellion O’Brien lays out are related: the revolutionary fight for freedom or personhood; rebellion against white, patriarchal authority; and the white-supremacist violence that attempts to contain these fights for justice.

<3>Chapter One takes up this last sense of rebellion, by introducing the connections between romance and rebellion through the cultural-political “project of defining the New World as white space” in antireform print culture (13). Reading resonances of the Haitian Revolution in white anxieties about amalgamation, abolition, and women’s rights, O’Brien synthesizes a variety of texts that include antislavery speeches, scientific texts, and political pamphlets. Coupling anxieties about women’s rights and the abolition of a race-based system of slavery, the theme of amalgamation becomes central to these works. Moving from the imagined threat of the rape of white women by black men and the systemic rape of black women by white men to the possibility of cross-racial romance, O’Brien shows how these texts connect cross-racial sexual relations to acts of rebellion. Here, heterosexual romance works both literally and also as a metaphor through which bodies and geographies became interchangeable as writers used the racial romance to challenge national and colonial oppression.

<4>Reading a text in which the black woman’s body becomes a legal and literal locus of white property, Chapter Two reads Harriet Jacobs’s narrative as a “rebellious romance” (32). O’Brien notes the political significance of Jacobs’s negotiation of her own sexuality; she argues, “Her affair with Sands allegorizes the forms of cultural and geographic expansion that undergird her revolutionary concept of freedom as sexual self-sovereignty, cultural syncretism, and geographic mobility” (32-33). Black women’s bodily rebellion hereby displaces the work of white reformers and even black male revolutionaries such as Toussaint Louverture. In Jacobs’s representations of “an insurgent model of black womanhood,” we see the sovereign space of her grandmother’s home, but also the threat that white men pose to this space in her chapter on the “Fear of Insurrection” inspired by Nat Turner’s rebellion (40). Connecting what she calls the “cult of true white gentlemanhood” in Jacobs’s narrative to her work in the Radical Abolition Party, O’Brien shows how Jacobs re-positions black women at the center of reform discourse (49).

<5>In Chapter Three, O’Brien turns from the domestic spaces and bodily autonomy that prove rebellious in Jacobs’s narrative to amalgamation’s implications for national spaces. Reading *Avellaneda’s* novel *Sab*, O’Brien links the amalgamated body to geographic amalgamation, reading “the simultaneous occupation of a colonial landscape and of a young woman’s body” in Avellaneda’s critique (57). Both the Cuban landscape and the Creole woman are white spaces in O’Brien’s reading, which come under threat by the “dangerous” cultural and literary trope of the male mulatto figure. Locating *Sab* among Atlantic antislavery literatures like Richard Hildreth’s *The Slave; or,*

*Memoirs of Archie Moore* (1834) and also among writing by Margaret Fuller and Lydia Maria Child, O'Brien reads "a set of romantic and revolutionary concepts" in both Cuban and U.S. antislavery literature (59). The most foundational of these to O'Brien's study are blood mixing and bloodshed, which she calls "two radical and sanguine prospects for challenging patriarchal Creole culture" (63). The radical prospects of such a challenge are also the possibilities of *Sab's* plot: an insurrection or a wedding. Like a wedding, O'Brien argues, insurrection is characterized as exciting and hopeful to *Sab's* protagonist, Teresa. Likewise, "an imagined cross-racial romance signifies the potential for a modern Cuba and a radically egalitarian political future" (73).

<6>O'Brien's fourth chapter reads Elizabeth Livermore's *Zoë, Or, The Quadroon's Triumph* and other writing as advocating "a romantic, amalgamated, millennial, and expansionist vision of racial equality and women's rights" (9). In *Zoë*, Livermore presents a reorganization of human taxonomies that works simultaneously against gender and racial essentialism, in her "four great divisions of humanity," which counter white patriarchal supremacy (92). Contrasting Livermore's writing with more moderate antislavery literature by writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, and challenging nineteenth-century tendencies toward the division of sexual and racial justice, O'Brien characterizes this writing as doing not only antislavery, but also both antiracist and antisexist work. O'Brien reads *Zoë* against Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-52) but also alongside lesser-known texts such as Livermore's play based on Margaret Garner's story, *The Fugitive: A Tragedy in Six Scenes* (1856) and Maturin Murray Ballou's story, "The Sea Witch, or; The African Quadroon" (1855), where themes of infanticide and cannibalism reveal white anxieties about amalgamation and black power.

<7>Chapter Five turns to the "specter of Creole excess" in Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste* (112). Departing from readings of the "tragic mulatta" trope, O'Brien does not read the creolization of the white Tracy family in terms of their son Richard's entry into a cross-racial relationship, but via their susceptibility to "the contagion of racism and greed that New Orleans represents in the novel" (111). Still, romance is central to this gothic family drama that is haunted by both the recent aftermath of the Civil War and the memory of the Haitian Revolution, and romance and rebellion are inextricable. O'Brien reads Collins's novel alongside her political essays, showing how notions of civic and sexual virtue were intertwined on the pages of the *Christian Recorder*, where *The Curse of Caste* was serialized. O'Brien reads Collins's revolutionary ideals as hopeful, and, as in Jacobs's narrative, "to reform the nation, a black woman's voice must come to the fore" (120).

<8>O'Brien's final chapter, on Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* marks what she refers to as "the end of romance" in Reconstruction-era activist writing (133). O'Brien reads Harper's novel as working against earlier literary romances by white

women, such as E.D.E.N. Southworth's *Retribution* (1849). She reads Harper's rewriting of creole heroines alongside Harper's role in the nineteenth-century suffrage debates of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), in which white women reformers' critique of the Fifteenth Amendment worked to feed racist ideologies about black male sexuality as threat and alienated black women in the suffrage movement. O'Brien argues that the issues addressed in this novel were "almost identical to the ones Harper faced as an activist in the Reconstruction South" (156). Reading *Minnie's Sacrifice's* argument for black women's rights and expression of their susceptibility to sexual/racial violence, O'Brien also connects Harper's vision of African American economic uplift to Haiti; as a result, she reads Harper as inspired by not only the Revolution but also by Haiti's recognition as a nation and its contemporary agrarian workforce.

<9>Turning to Lydia Maria Child's *Romance of the Republic* (1867) in her conclusion, O'Brien reads this novel as an expression of the failure of reform and a post-emancipation pedagogy of passivity. Rather than suggesting the triumph of rebellion in racial progress, O'Brien shows that "the insidious racist images that romance and rebellion had challenged during the era of reform continued to evolve and thrive in a newly redefined white space" (157). Gesturing toward the work that would be continued by African American writers such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Pauline Hopkins, and Charles Chesnutt at the turn of the century, O'Brien ends with a brief discussion of Isabel Allende's *Island beneath the Sea* (2010) to show the continued literary resonances of Haiti in the historical romance. O'Brien's study breathes new life into the genre of the romance, showing us what is compelling about the genre and reorienting it around a set of women writers whose work was historically significant beyond their literary production. In this, O'Brien presents a compelling argument that also invites us to delve back into these writers' works to explore or re-explore their complexities for ourselves.