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Brigitte Fielder’s *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America* (2020) deliberately reads against a dominant theory of racial formation in the nineteenth century—*partus sequitur ventrem* and hypodescent, where in interracial unions racial assignment is inherited from the mother—to trace alternative kinship formations that trouble these legal and political definitions. Indeed, *interracial kinship* is Fielder’s key frame for thinking about race in the long nineteenth century, because it brings into relief *racialization* or the “processes of race-making” that subtend racial taxonomies and groups in nineteenth-century literary production. Racialization is not always a function of biology in nineteenth-century literature, she argues, but often an outcome of familial intimacy and social proximity. More than a matter of phenotype or embodiment, racialization does not always travel from parents to children, but moves in surprising and malleable ways across conjugal or sibling partnerships, across scenes of adoption or residency with other families and communities, and across cultural sites and literary genres. Racialization, and Blackness in particular, accrue nonlinear—and hence queer—movements across space and time. As Fielder puts it in the introduction: “[Race] itself is relative, formed through genealogies of racial inheritance, relations of racialized domesticity, and in larger structures of racial belonging,” and is revealed in the “directional flow between people, across generational time, and through ever-expanding spatial scales” (4).

In her reconsiderations of kinship and racialization, Fielder brilliantly constellates important critical emphases central to recent interventions in queer theory, such as considerations of non-linear futurities and temporalities, and Native studies, such as investigations on the spatial formations of racial governance that index matters of tribal-national sovereignty within settler nationhood and domesticity. Fielder’s conception of racialization further parallels the insights of other critics in Black studies, including scholars like Michelle Wright, who contends in *Physics of Blackness* (2015) that Blackness manifests as a “when and where” of subjecthood and shifts according to different historically conditioned sets of relations in both time and space. For Fielder, the stakes of these alternative formations of race and kin are powerfully urgent, given the space and time in which she is writing (and we are reading)—in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of
2020, of Indigenous sovereignty struggles (at Standing Rock and elsewhere) and ongoing violence against Native women, and of the acute economic and health disparities of a global pandemic. Indeed, Fielder draws from Christina Sharpe to argue that “for white people to show anti-racist solidarity, ‘One must refuse to repair a familial rift on the bodies cast out as not kin’” (qtd. in Fielder 12). She does this to extend the ethical exigences of African American literature, then and now. Fielder also builds on the imperatives of kinship that inform contemporary Native studies scholarship in works by Audra Simpson (Mohawk), Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw), Kimberly Tallbear (Dakota), and Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), among others, who similarly draw on Indigenous kinship formations to ground political praxes of illegibility and refusal to the normative horizons of settler family- and state-formation. In this way, Fielder shows how nineteenth-century literary texts offer potent possibilities for rethinking the terms of racialization and kinship in ways that reverberate culturally and politically today.

Within the disciplinary and critical affordances of queer theory and Black and Native studies, then, Fielder turns to three emblematic scenes in the book’s six chapters for grappling with race and racialization: romance, reproduction, and residency. Each frame illuminates different sites for thinking eroticism and intimacy, maternity and generation, and domesticity and spatiality. Individual chapters take up, respectively, nineteenth-century adaptations of William Shakespeare’s Othello, depictions of mixed-race women’s erotic lives in novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the mother-mammy figure in Mark Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson and Charles Chesnutt’s “Her Virginia Mammy,” Black maternity and queer relations in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Iola Leroy and Chesnutt’s The Marrow of Tradition, and figures of adoption and residency in James E. Seaver’s A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison, and in Lydia Maria Child’s Romance of the Republic and William Wells Brown’s Clotel. This archive—generically capacious and with dense literary portrayals of racialization—summons compelling case studies for Fielder in her efforts to trace Black kinship improvisations across space and time.

In this review, I want to linger with chapter four and its discussions of Iola Leroy and The Marrow of Tradition, as well as literary adaptations of Margaret Garner’s history, because Fielder’s development of “kinfullness” offers new sites for understanding the production and reproduction of white supremacy in the long nineteenth century. A concept central to Black studies, kinlessness denotes what Hortense Spillers describes as the evacuation of meaning and matter from flesh through the displacements and ruptures of slavery and the Middle Passage, what Saidiya Hartman further names a condition of “losing your mother” through “the
isolation of being severed from . . . kin and denied ancestors.” Orlando Patterson contends that Blackness thereby emerged through procedures in which a captive is “violently uprooted from his milieu” and “desocialized and depersonalized” in a world of “social death.” Frank B. Wilderson argues that slavery thus denies generational time, preventing African and African-descended peoples the opportunity to meaningfully assemble a past, present, or future: “[T]he capacity to redeem time and space is foreclosed to the Black because redemption requires a ‘heritage’ of temporality and spatiality, rather than a past of boundless time and indeterminate space.”

Yet for Fielder, “kinfullness” builds on these historical forces to trace kinship’s “racializing powers”—powers that both deny Black persons attachments to ancestors and descendants and assemble the forces of racialization. As Fielder puts it: “While Spillers uses kinlessness to articulate the prevention of enslaved people from full participation in kinship relations, I introduce the alternative concept, kinfullness, in order to attend to the additional content of racialized kinship” (123). In this, Fielder draws on Nancy Bentley’s discussion of kinlessness, particularly her insight that kinlessness is a “source of interminable life, an unbounded ‘future increase’ detached from any enforceable claims or obligations that belong to heirs”’ (qtd. in Fielder 123). Fielder uses “unbounded increase” to point out that Black mothers offer an excess of kinship, not only in terms of reproduction but also for “racially productive futurity” (123). Kinfullness, in other words, enables Fielder to chart “kinship as racially pregnant,” as an “excess of mere interpersonal relations” that “[bears] the weight of larger racializing scales” in both space and time (123). Yet for Fielder, acknowledging these excesses sometimes brings into relief queer alternatives, as Black family members and social practices extend non-heteronormative constructions of intimacy and generation at odds with dominant white, patriarchal, and settler colonial family routines. Fielder further argues that kinfullness and its excesses sometimes prompt cultural and literary adaptations, as Black writers improvise new languages, tropes, and genres to assemble attachments and affiliations otherwise to U.S. normative horizons. Given these interventions, Fielder closes chapter four by analyzing retellings of Margaret Garner’s history, including Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved and her libretto for Richard Danielpour’s Margaret Garner: A New American Opera in Two Acts. Fielder argues that in both texts, Margaret orients to time and futurity differently by referring to temporal scales at odds with anti-Black futures: “[W]e can reimagine kinlessness as a theft not only of relations as slavery absents the very bodies of loved ones, but also a theft of time—not only of laboring time, but also of relating time” (153). As Fielder contends, many nineteenth-century literary and visual depictions of Margaret Garner’s history problematically proliferate her pain and
suffering—an excess inherent to both racialization and reproduction in the period—, and yet Garner’s attempt to remove her children from a trajectory of racial capitalism is also an effort to imagine the future differently, as Morrison and Danielpour show.

Fielder concludes *Relative Races* by discussing the failures of white feminism and its foreclosures of interracial and sororal solidarities, both then and now. As Fielder puts it, “White women’s and white feminism’s ties to white supremacy are the lynchpin of interracial kinship’s racial trajectories” in their most dominant formations, and yet, “the cultural racial baggage with which this position has been weighed down . . . must be skewed, redirected, queered, and perhaps wrested away for the sake of future racial relations” (232). Fielder’s nineteenth-century archive suggests possibilities for improvising relations beyond the production and reproduction of whiteness and its myriad violence. Her point at the close of *Relative Races*, therefore, could not be clearer or more urgent: White feminists must heed the call to labor towards futurities at odds with white supremacy and racial capitalism. Such a reorientation requires not only active commitment in community politics and mutual aid, but also a deep engagement with the intellectual itineraries of Black studies and Native American and Indigenous studies, as well as critical interventions in gender, sexuality, and queer theory, as Fielder models so brilliantly throughout *Relative Races*. In this way, Fielder’s work is both a call and an itinerary—a praxis and a map—for productively unsettling normative relations in the U.S.