came to depict African Americans, whom she openly denigrated, as a means to confront her own sense of alterity. The collection as a whole, however, stops short of moving beyond the dichotomization of race in America to address the ways in which Asian American, Latino/a, and Native American writers also take part in the cultural mutation of the American canon. Yet, as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy notes in his contribution, the collection should impel readers "to seek out the deeper meanings of conflicts in literary history and not forget that it is the social order of our nation, with its fundamental material inequities, that defines and determines the sites of contestation where those conflicts occur in our national literature" (63).

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In *Our America*, Walter Benn Michaels reads identity as the defining feature of American modernism. In chapters devoted to exegesis of canonical and noncanonical literature, Michaels traces modernist identitarian politics to two transformations: 1) a shift from Progressive-Era notions of race as hierarchical to pluralist commitments to equal differences; and 2) a reconfiguration of personal identity from "who we are" to "what we do." The contradictions embedded here between pluralism and identity as cultural become Michaels's central concern: "it is only once we know who we are that we will be able to tell what we should do; it is only when we know which race we are that we can tell which culture is ours" (14–15).

As this passage demonstrates, the critical style of *Our America* is the logical formulation, which Michaels uses to unearth the racial essentialism of both the modernist turn to cultural identity and its presumed endurance in contemporary identity practices. I say presumed because while the dust jacket asserts that *Our America* "offers a new way of understanding current debates over the meaning of race, identity, multiculturalism, and pluralism," the book never engages these contemporary debates. Instead, Michaels declares in the penultimate chapter that current antinessentialist discourses (such as social construction) are "essentially essentialist" (134) by looking briefly at the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant; eight pages later he ends the book thus: "what's wrong with cultural identity is that, without recourse to the racial identity that (in its current manifestations) it repudiates, it makes no sense" (142).

The non-sense of cultural identity is demonstrated by literary readings that set traps for readers who might want to slow the discursive dissection to consider the historical and political complexities within which identity has moved. When Michaels reads the iconography of skin in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Nigger Heaven* without remarking on the political or social situations of their authors, he has enacted his point: the reader who
wants to claim a difference between Johnson and Van Vechten is merely reproducing the cultural identity model and hence essentializing race. Racial indifference thus seems to be the only sensible way of being antiracist in Our America—a logical conclusion perhaps, but not one that helps us understand the histories, contexts, and rhetorical strategies at work in identity's deployment. As other reviewers have noted (see Modernism/Modernity 3 [September 1996]: 99–105), it is the evacuation of the historical and contextual that allows Michaels his compelling analytic play.

What we arrive at, then, is a highly sophisticated argument about the reversals of racist logic that underlie the historical formation of identity in both aesthetic modernism and political modernity. Others, of course, have made similar points about the shared referentiality of essentialism and anti-essentialism, but where they part company with Michaels is in Michaels's own refusal to be in company with them. Unlike, say, Cornel West or Stuart Hall, Michaels demonstrates little interest in reading racist logic as part of the broader conversation about the complexities—historical, economic, political—that identity has tried to speak for. What use is it to say that identity makes no sense without engaging how and why identity has been mobilized in the first place?

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Truth Commissions and War Crimes Tribunals from South Africa to The Hague, apartheid and “ethnic cleansing”—the past is being investigated, and victims and perpetrators alike are telling their stories, looking ahead, and back, at the various prospects of amnesty and conviction, perhaps somehow coming to terms. But on whose terms? In 1997 the world seems indeed a hurting and hurtful place. *Worlds of Hurt* by Kaii Tal reads, as its subtitle indicates, “literatures of trauma.” These readings suggest important, compelling, and imperative critical demands, requirements currently imposed on those who “profess” literary and cultural studies.

The “literatures of trauma” that ground Tal’s probing critiques derive from three crises from the end of the twentieth century: the Holocaust, the U.S. war in Vietnam, and incest and sexual abuse; in her words, she is examining “three distinct traumatic events and their representation in U.S. culture.” The terms used to refer to these events, as Tal points out, have become “floating signifiers,” their very citation serving to ignite controversy over meaning. Was the Vietnam War an “experience,” or is it a “syndrome”? What has the Holocaust to do with “North American memory” anyway? And why should “rape” be the metaphor that “runs consistently through [George] Bush’s speeches on the [Gulf] War”? We might well ask. And Tal does.

*Worlds of Hurt* considers the literature that has been produced by the sur-