Out of a chaos of elements no orderly creation can arise but by the operation of a sound principle: and sound principle here, there is none.
--Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (1837)

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois famously asserts that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (359). We’re now past the twentieth century, and many scholars and other cultural commentators have argued that it is time for us to be past or get beyond or just get over the concept of race. I think that such arguments are ahistorical, or possibly more deeply historical than their proponents appreciate. Many examinations of race in the present are haunted, troubled, and tainted by the philosophical traces, the absurd frameworks, the overdetermined discourse, the studied avoidance, and the rhetorical hat-tricks of the past—and not just by the obvious and easily-dismissed examples of overt racism, pseudoscience (now called), or time-bound political commentary. Although scholars have done much to define and outline the intertwined social, legal, ideological, and linguistic forces that combine to give daily significance to that which we call race, many and perhaps even most literary scholars and historians avoid that complexity by focusing on race simply as an ideological imperative that can be, depending on one’s politics, either promoted, dismissed, transcended, or transformed—a pliable concept receptive to the ministrations of those who are theoretically sharp or politically determined enough to announce the end of the problem of the twentieth century so as to work towards the promise of the twenty first. The problem of the twenty-first century, though, is that the problem of the twentieth century was even more complex than we imagined, and we have barely begun to understand that complexity.

While I disagree with a great deal of recent work on race, I also appreciate its intent—so I do not mean to simplify or undervalue the importance of scholarship that focuses on race as a set of ideological assumptions and priorities that can be reformulated by way of informed intellectual exchange. Rather, I mean to indicate the necessity of mapping out the historical and cultural dynamics within which all commentaries on race must necessarily function, so as to more accurately locate the sites at which and the terms by which such commentaries can be most effectively directed. Ideological critique, I suggest, is always in creative tension with the sheer messiness of history, and usually involves the presentation of a reasonably coherent and summarizable history of racial theory and racist practices so as to imagine a postracial or postracist future. Ideological critiques of racial constructions, that is, usually are devoted to an imagined ideal awaiting in the future, often involving what David Theo Goldberg has identified as “the common contemporary call, at least as the first-level commitment, the causal condition, to erase race from our conceptual apparatus and frame of reference, from all state characterization and concern” (243). Too often, as Goldberg suggests, social progress concerning race is considered to be an approach towards an imagined horizon by which either the color line gradually disappears or an imagined multiculturalist ideal emerges—an escape, in effect, from a social world largely constructed by and long devoted to racial theories and racist practices. In fact, though, the concept of race cannot be so easily controlled, and it certainly
cannot be erased so long as the formidable manifestations of history continue to define various and interconnected cultural, economic, and political landscapes.

In this chapter, accordingly, I want to consider race as a dynamic system, and I want to argue that to understand race it is useful to attend to the guidance of chaos theory, that theory devoted to the patterns created by complex and seemingly irregular systems. An important turning point in the science of chaos,” N. Katherine Hayles has noted, “occurred when complex systems were conceptualized as systems rich in information rather than poor in order” (Introduction 6), and the science has proven an able descriptor in a wide range of fields, from physical forms to complex social interactions. Chaos theory focuses on “extreme sensitivity to . . . initial conditions”--as, for example, in the divergence of the path of two leaves in a running stream that demonstrates the significant difference of their initial positions in the water’s complex currents (Briggs 18). The underlying patterns of those paths of development are what Benoît Mandelbrot has identified as “the fractal geometry of nature.” As John Briggs puts it, “Chaos theory tells the story of the wild things that happen to dynamical systems as they evolve over time; fractal geometry records the images of their movement in space” (22). “Fractals,” Briggs explains, “are images of the way things fold and unfold, feeding back into each other and themselves” (23). Mandelbrot’s great achievement, as James Gleick has noted, was that he specified ways of calculating the fractional dimension of real objects, given some technique of constructing a shape or given some data, and he allowed his geometry to make a claim about the irregular patterns he studied in nature. The claim was that the degree of irregularity remains constant over different scales” (98). The claim was sufficiently trustworthy to describe a wide range of complex systems. As Gleick has written, “Mandelbrot glided matter-of-factly from pulmonary and vascular trees to real botanical trees, trees that need to capture sun and resist wind, with fractal branches and fractal leaves” (110). Indeed, Mandelbrot and others have extended the application of fractal geometry to account not just for natural forms but also for the arrangements and technologies of social systems, ranging from economic practices to literary dynamics.3

I’ve turned to this theory because I believe that it is important to understand that what we call race involves both the process and the effects of cultures that legally, economically, socially, educationally, and at times even theologically define and distinguish between different groups of people.4 Cultures group individuals; individuals and collectives respond to such groupings; those responses often lead to new cultural concepts of and manifestations of racial definition and control; and those new or slightly different cultural dynamics inspire improvisations on established strategies for dominance, resistance, or survival. What we commonly call race, in other words, cannot be limited to physical features or mapped by DNA, for it includes the complex processes by which individuals are positioned, both socially and geographically, sometimes delimiting and sometimes extending privileges, options, mobility, and ideological flexibility--and after all these years, we have still barely begun the study of this dynamic process. Accordingly, I want to sketch out in this chapter a cultural landscape that is overwhelming in its complexity, but I also want to draw attention to the dynamic principles and historical processes that formed that landscape--something like looking at a mountain range and seeing the evidence of glaciers long gone, of still powerful rivers, and of the gradual workings of shifting wind patterns. An understanding of race, I will argue, requires attention to the entire system of events--ideological, social, biological, and historical--involved in its formation. Race, that is, cannot be separated from the dynamic process of its construction, for the formation of race is race.
If we pay attention to race not as product but as process, our maps of the cultural landscape unfold to reveal not a Euclidian delineation of social space—a color line, a problem in need of a solution—but rather a social terrain characterized by fractal patterns. Mandelbrot’s development of fractal geometry emerged in part from his attempt to account for those “mathematical structures,” as F. J. Dyson explains, discovered through the years “that did not fit the patterns of Euclid and Newton” and that accordingly challenged established models of order and measurement (qtd. in Mandelbrot 3). Mandelbrot begins his seminal book *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* with a simple question: “Why is geometry often described as ‘cold’ and ‘dry’?”; and he answers: “One reason lies in its inability to describe the shape of a cloud, a mountain, a coastline, or a tree. Clouds are not spheres, mountains are not cones, coastlines are not circles, and bark is not smooth, nor does lightning travel in a straight line” (1). Similarly, race cannot be defined by color or other physical features, nor can it be reduced to a set of essential features or practices, political positions or allegiances—and yet the history of race, or the cultural processes shaped by the turbulent currents of history, are everywhere evident in cultural life, with patterns of the racial eruptions that regularly punctuate the news familiar enough to be identified and ridiculed, defended and dismissed. I take it as a given, then, that no simple “color line” is adequate to describe the complex racial landscape in which we live, but I will argue as well that our lives are, in fact, defined by color lines that are both irregular and definitive. To appreciate this fact of American history and culture, one need only look at the history of laws and practices by which race has been defined, redefined, and associated with cultural privilege and access—for example, the various laws, court decisions, and treaties that decided, from time to time and place to place, who would count as white. One might begin by looking at the 1790 Naturalization Act, which limited naturalization to “free white persons.” Certainly, one would need to look at the complex legal, economic, and political system of slavery; and one would need to consider as well the ways in which the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law made life very insecure for free African Americans living in the North. One would need to consider the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision in 1857, in which Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, speaking for the majority decision, declared that African Americans had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Probably, one would want to study the process by which the Irish and other social groups were gathered into the pale of whiteness and granted more flexible though often still controlled privilege, and one might want to consider the reality that at various times throughout our history it has been possible to be legally black in one state but not another, or to be white in one decade and nonwhite the next, as was the case with Chinese Americans in Louisiana in 1860 and 1870. One might want to look at the 1909 court decision that rendered Armenians white, or the 1923 Supreme Court decision that Asian Indians were nonwhite. And the list could go on—from the local to the federal level, from one region to the next, and even from one neighborhood and school district to the next. These are laws that supported economic practices and social and political opportunities, laws that led to social arrangements that inspired new laws, with the one consistent concern being the definition and protection of sometimes highly flexible understandings of white privilege and opportunity. These ongoing and complex constructions, the highly contingent dynamics by which racial identity is formed and sustained over time, were especially contorted in serving the needs of the system of slavery. Accounting for these dynamics, though, takes us into chaotic territory, for beyond observing the obvious fact that the color line increasingly could not be definitively tested by actual distinctions of color, following the social geometry of race in the nineteenth
century requires one to explore the complex interrelation of laws pertaining to the system of slavery and laws restricting the rights of nominally free African Americans. This exploration would involve, for example, attending to what William W. Fisher has called “the remarkable degree of inconsistency and instability in the law of slavery” (66), and the process by which “the vocabularies, images, and arguments developed in Southern fiction, political economy, formal defenses of slavery, and popular political debate provided judges and legislators the materials and analytical tools from which they fashioned the rules that regulated the relations of masters and servants” (66). As Fisher suggests, even if one were to focus only on the legal apparatus by which the white supremacist social system was defined, justified, and maintained, one would quickly enter into realms of popular culture, literary representations, and other modes of social interaction--a world of practices, discourses, and assumptions in dynamic interaction. This dynamic process shaped legal practices, which redirected the process in turn as numerous legal decisions, large and small, did not simply verify or support an existing racial distinction but also redefined what it meant to be either white or black, often building on or veering from previous redefinitions.

These overlapping and contradictory laws devoted to both defining and maintaining “the color line” shaped the experience, the performance, of social identity. To say this, of course, is simply to state what has become a commonplace of scholarship—that race is a systemic, historical construction, and that race is also the developing and dynamic response to that complex construction, the traditions, the rhetorical maneuvers, and the ideological methodologies of survival, resistance, and collective self-definition that operate in the fields of the racial state. But the insistent presence of the color line was and is marked by many color lines—the possibility of being legally black in one state but not another, or of being white in one decade and nonwhite the next, or of becoming differently raced by moving from one region or even one situation to another. This chaotic configuration of racializing forces, relations, and institutions has ensured not only that one’s experience would be bound to one’s racial identity but also that one’s racial identity would be a highly contextualized, contingent, and always unstable entity. Quite simply, we can no more avoid the effects of the racial past than we can avoid the lingering effects of carbon dioxide produced in the past by declaring it irrelevant. Institutional race has encouraged cultural race which has shaped cultural practices and new systemic formations, all of which position and shape individuals born into the culture, sometimes inspiring new manifestations of racial affiliations.

Indeed, in America’s long history of legally controlling access to social power and economic opportunity, many lines of relations have been established, a sort of genealogy of connections that are central to just about anyone’s understanding of cultural process. When people talk about race, some might say that we shouldn’t dwell on the past, but people who inherit money rarely refuse it on the grounds that the social conditions of the past, when the money was acquired, should have no relevance in the present. And those who benefit from a relative or a friend in getting a job or getting a loan or getting a second chance rarely refuse that help on the grounds that we should leave the historically-developed lines of influence behind us and insist on an absolute model of individual access, ability, and merit. Since the processes of race position people economically, geographically, and historically, it would be difficult to argue that the world shaped by race is now inoperable, that race has played no role in shaping both the connections we enjoy and our understanding of how those connections might function. I agree, then, with Thomas M. Shapiro, who has argued that “the real story of the meaning of race in modern America . . . must include a serious consideration of how one generation passes
advantage and disadvantage to the next—how individuals’ starting points are determined” (8). In his study of “wealth accumulation and utilization,” Shapiro demonstrates that common distinctions between race and class are just too simple to explain the historical effects of the dynamic system of race. “Deeply embedded policies,” he observes, “such as those underlying the Federal Housing Administration and locally funded schools, and market incentives, such as property values, shape how we think about neighborhoods, what we mean by integration, and how we think about educational prospects in ways that reward discrimination” (14). Throughout our lives, we acknowledge in ways large and small, collectively and individually, that the order of the past has a lot to do with the opportunities of the present, but those acknowledgments are largely absent from a great many discussions of race. As Shapiro argues, “without attending to how equal opportunity or even equal achievement does not lead to equal results—especially concerning wealth—we will continue to repeat the deep and disturbing patterns of racial inequality and conflict that plague our republic” (204).

What is white about white people, then, is not the color of their skin (which is not, after all, white) but rather the historical situation which has made “white” bodies such able predictors of experience, understanding, and access to privilege and cultural authority—a whiteness, in other words, that cannot be transcended simply by good intentions or by the reach of an individual’s consciousness. To attend to the historical process by which race has been constructed is, after all, to recognize that instead of race being somewhere, in individuals, race is, in fact, everywhere: in the way we live, the images we encounter in popular culture, the way wealth and access to power are passed on from one generation to the next, the way that schools are funded, and the ways in which justice has been defined in different places and at different times throughout our nation’s history. To talk of white people, then, is not to talk about who they are, but rather to address who, where, when, and perhaps even why they’ve been, people living in a culture in which that most significant of legal and economic identifiers, whiteness, has had and continues to exert considerable force over individual experience and identity formation. It is important, I think, to acknowledge the obvious fact that we live in a culture that neither requires nor encourages those who are “white” to think seriously about race. Too often, indeed, white Americans are not even in a position to engage others in a reasoned and informed dialogue or debate about the issues of the day or about the realities of the past, and so they either fall back on arguments drawn from their chosen race representative or they fall back on the prepackaged race discourse that stands in for serious conversation in the public forum—predictable complaints about Affirmative Action, platitudes about diversity, and the like. In conversations about most other subjects, one might be embarrassed about having so little to offer, but in conversations about race one can be grandly unaware of what more there might be to bring to the subject. Quite simply, the great majority of white Americans lack the historical understanding and cultural self-awareness that identifies the need for a complex set of experiences, a detailed body of information, and a sophisticated and practiced vocabulary.

This is not the case for many others. The great majority of black Americans, for example, cannot avoid thinking about race at various times throughout their lives—not because they embrace the subject, but simply because they cannot avoid it. Now, this is not to say that black Americans always approach racial concerns with knowledge and wisdom and that white Americans are always wrong. This is only to echo and endorse Charles W. Mills’s observation that “the Racial Contract,” the Lockean concept he uses to address the terms and dynamics of white supremacist ideology and society, “prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions
(which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (18). One result, as Mills notes, is that “nonwhites . . . find that race is, paradoxically, both everywhere and nowhere, structuring their lives but not formally recognized in political/moral theory. But in a racially structured polity, the only people who can find it psychologically possible to deny the centrality of race are those who are racially privileged, for whom race is invisible precisely because the world is structured around them, whiteness as the ground against which the figures of other races—those who, unlike us, are raced—appear” (76). Small wonder, then, that those who find race everywhere also find themselves looking for ways to articulate, represent, analyze, and understand what they see—and small wonder, too, that they will have trouble drawing a clear line between “racial” and other issues. One of the results of “a racially structured polity” is interpretive instability. On the one hand, one has developed an awareness of and an ability to analyze racial situations; on the other hand, one cannot always be sure that one is dealing with an intentional or even implicit racial situation. One can argue that race is in the very structure of the situation, but in everyday situations, facing those who see race only in isolated contexts, how does one explain?

Race, indeed, has everything to do with the cultural practices and institutions by which we interact today, for the conditions of the past do not change simply because new laws are passed or old laws are done away with. Our nation’s history is burdened by the weight of the laws by which whiteness was defined and controlled, but our history includes as well various attempts to support and justify those laws. Throughout our history, the most absurd concepts of race have been defined by law, but they have been supported by popular culture—blackface minstrel shows, for example, arguably the most prominent and influential form of entertainment in American history, or other popular media caricatures of black identity. We grow up surrounded by certain images, certain stories, certain ways of envisioning the world and the people around us. Stephen Greenblatt has noted that all cultures are devoted to two central concepts, “constraint and mobility”—that is, “beliefs and practices” that determine the “set of limits within which social behavior must be contained,” models of identity to which individuals are expected to conform (225). Other scholars have called these models and expectations cultural roles or cultural scripts, which simply refers to the ways in which we are given a sense of our place in this world, a sense of what counts as success and of what kind of behavior is valued. The limits on our behavior, Greenblatt observes, “need not be narrow—in certain societies, such as that of the United States, they can seem quite vast—but they are not infinite, and the consequences for straying beyond them can be severe” (225). Indeed, Greenblatt notes that sometimes, for serious offenders, these consequences can be rather dramatically severe—for example, “exile, imprisonment in an insane asylum, penal servitude, or execution” (226). But the most powerful cultural practices for encouraging some forms of behavior and discouraging others, Greenblatt adds, and sometimes be the smallest gestures—for example, “a condescending smile, laughter poised between the genial and the sarcastic, a small dose of indulgent pity laced with contempt, cool silence” (226). “And we should add,” Greenblatt continues, “that a culture’s boundaries are enforced more positively as well: through the system of rewards that range again from the spectacular (grand public honors, glittering prizes) to the apparently modest (a gaze of admiration, a respectful nod, a few words of gratitude)” (226).

This is where we most consciously encounter the complex history of race, and this is how we are most likely to recognize it in our daily lives. That complex history that dwells in us regardless of whether we care to dwell in the past, that cultural history that has shaped our
understanding even beyond our awareness, will make itself felt in daily human interactions. The scholar Marcyliena Morgan has noted that we will be conscious of this history most frequently in conversation, in our observation of different patterns and habits of speech, for language, Morgan reminds us, “reflects social class, region, urban area, gender, generation, education, age, cultural background and speech community. Because language use reflects all of these things,” Morgan adds, “interactions include shifts and switches that are often seamless, sometimes abrupt and awkward but always a reflection of social context, social standing and social face” (134). In other words, the language around us signals the history around us, and we are likely to respond to the recognition of that history with a discomforting combination of an awkward awareness of difference, an inability to understand the source or significance of that difference, and a certain self-consciousness that such differences have played a central, unjust, sometimes violent, and even murderous role in our nation’s history. And one of the most frequent results of that combination of responses will be defensiveness, a defensiveness that will often lead many Americans to replicate the history of whiteness by attempting to assert control over their environment, either by direct intimidation and exclusion or by more subtle means.

The primary divisions at the foundations of U.S. racial history have, in short, bifurcated many times over to produce large-scale interpretive instability—leading to recurring events (Rodney King, the Duke Lacrosse controversy, the reaction to the Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., Barack Obama’s former pastor) in which the media reports that many are shocked, shocked, to discover yet again that black and white Americans can read the same events so differently. Indeed, through the prism of the interpretive instability that is both a condition and consequence of U.S. racial history, interventions into systemic injustice can be read as both critiques and realizations of American political mythology, to the point where individual achievements (African Americans, for example, in the Supreme Court, at the highest levels of the Administration, or in the White House) are read not merely as evidence of progress but as manifest signs that the national history of racial oppression has ended. U.S. racial history is what made it possible for Martin Luther King Jr. to deliver his most famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, and it is of course also the reason why that speech was necessary. U.S. racial history is the reason why most white Americans remember only the last third of that speech, in which King declares “I have a dream,” and it is also the reason why many white Americans continue to live in realities not far removed nor greatly progressed from those that King describes in the first third of his speech. U.S. racial history is the reason why most white Americans can quote King when he speaks of being judged not by the color of one’s skin but by the content of one’s character, but that history is also the reason why most white Americans have no memory of King’s urgent statement, in the same speech, that America has defaulted on its “promissory note” to our citizens of color, that we have failed to honor our sacred obligations, that we cannot afford the “tranquilizing drug of gradualism,” or that “now is the time to make real the promises of democracy” (107). The culture formed by U.S. racial history, in short, can be both productive and destructive, open and restrictive, at the same time; it can be devoted to grand ideals in practical and concrete ways and at the same time violate those very ideals; it can promote opportunity for some and at the same time limit opportunities for others; and it can promote justice and at the same time render invisible even the most obvious injustices around us.

Troubling Race

There should be nothing terribly new or provocative in anything that I’ve said thus far. And yet there remains a need to say it, for race remains such a generalized, floating, and flexible
concept that it is easily simplified, isolated, contained, and applied in what can appear to be very reasonable arguments—often, arguments against the need to continue using such a generalized, floating, and flexible concept in scholarship, in public discourse and policy, and in philosophy. Consider, for example, Walter Benn Michaels’s book *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, published in 2006. As the title indicates, Michaels thinks that the concept of diversity has become a problem, one that keeps us from attending to the more pressing problem of economic inequality. Accordingly, one of the book’s major goals is to shift “our focus from cultural diversity to economic equality,” and in this way “to alter the political terrain of contemporary American intellectual life” (7). Certainly, it’s not a bad thing to focus on economic equality, though I hope (as do some of the book’s critics) that we can manage to focus on more than one thing at a time. I would agree as well that there is reason to talk of the problem with diversity. Like many, I’ve come to distrust the word “diversity,” which has developed into a kind of cultural codeword that signals not a complex social and historical environment, and not a dynamic paradigm for maintaining the stability of collective principles over time, but rather a set of social concerns, superficially considered, that can be identified and isolated in the same breath. Like multiculturalism before it, diversity too often has become a way of referring to a generalized otherness, a way of announcing a kind of cultural fair that requires only our attendance and heartfelt statements of interest, a kind of politically-correct comfort food. This isn’t exactly Michaels’s argument, but I approached the book feeling open to a critique of approaches to “diversity,” and to the diversity industry, in the academic, political, business, and social spheres.

The trouble with *The Trouble with Diversity*, though, is that some might take this to be a book about race. It isn’t. And the trouble is, Michaels himself seems to think he’s written a book about race. To be sure, he begins the book by distinguishing between race and diversity, noting the ways in which the latter has come for many to stand in for the former. But after distinguishing between race and diversity, Michaels quickly embraces the association—as if those who have made the turn from race to diversity were actually right. In “its simplest form,” he tells us, his argument is “that we love race—we love identity—because we don’t love class” (6). By *race*, of course, Michaels means an assumed aspect of identity, something that enables individuals sharing that aspect to identify themselves as groups. *Class*, for him, is largely a function of economic differences, and therefore much more solid. It might be problematic to identify yourself as black or white, but you can certainly know whether you are relatively rich or poor.

The trouble is, race just isn’t that simple, and it needn’t be understood solely as something we carry around. It can be understood more fully as something that awaits us as we move from place to place, something we bump into, something that often influences deeply, historically, how and (of course, even today) where we live. Michaels accounts for this to some extent in noting that people are now expected to recognize (in certain public venues and forums) that “racism is a bad thing (of course it is)” (5). The problem is in his confusion of the discourse and practices gathered under the heading of diversity with the systemic operations that should be gathered under the heading of race, along with his assumption that the concept of race is and has been limited to now-discredited biological theories. “Our enthusiasm for racial identity,” he notes at the beginning of the book, “has been utterly undiminished by scientific skepticism about whether there is any such thing” (5). What follows from this is a conventional commentary on race, commentary focused on the epiphany that there is no such thing, which forms the subject of his first chapter, “The Trouble with Race.” Michaels naturally turns to the
1892 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, noting that “Homer Plessy looked like the other people on the whites-only coach,” and joins Plessy’s case with a “twentieth-century story” about a woman, Susie Guillory Phipps, who had spent her life believing that she was white and then discovers that she is identified as “colored” by her birth certificate, something she contests--and, like Plessy, she loses her case. This leads, of course, to the point that race is, at best, an unstable category of identity; and that point leads, of course, to a brief review of racist and racial history, and the legal, scientific, and philosophical errors of those who have tried to define race in social and/or interrelational terms.

But, of course, one point of Michaels’s argument should be that the 1892 Supreme Court insisted on the existence of race, as did the Louisiana Court of Appeals in the twentieth-century example. Such decisions, of course, have some effect, especially Supreme Court decisions--and they have effect regardless of whether one can be sure of anyone who is being identified as belonging to the group in question. Race as a biological entity did not exist in 1892 any more than it does now--but the Supreme Court decided that race did exist, as was the case as well in the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, and in any number of legal decisions made over the years, the decades, the centuries of the existence of the United States. And those decisions had numerous effects, both in obvious ways (segregation) and in more complex ways--for example, how individuals understood themselves and their position and opportunities, and how they thought about those around them, of whatever complexion. Some individuals were no doubt inspired to declare racial solidarity on the basis of such decisions; others might have been inspired to turn in other directions. The point is not that all white people or all African Americans or all of any putatively racial group thought alike or shared the same perspectives, interests, or values. The point is that the law positioned people differently, or had the potential to position people differently, and this shaped the complex processes of society in ways both large and small--and in 1977, Susie Guillory Phipps was still determined to change her birth certificate when she found that she was identified as “colored.” The point is that if race doesn’t exist scientifically, then it didn’t exist in the past, even when scientists argued that it did. What race was, then, in 1892 was not a biological condition but actually a social or ideological one: it was a framework for reading human life, for organizing society, for directing the principles of social, economic, educational, and political exchange.

As Toni Morrison has written, for quite some time “every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted ‘race’ was the determining factor in human development” (“Unspeakable” 370). It is rather too easy to pass lightly over this institutional history and focus on the embodiment that was its primary concern. As Goldberg has observed, “studies of racism have tended to divide methodologically between those assuming an individually oriented and those accepting a structural approach. Taking individual beliefs and actions as analytically basic tends to commit one to viewing racism in terms of personal prejudice. Structural methodology, by contrast, sees racism embedded in, determined by, or emanating directly, even necessarily, from the prevailing constitution of social formation” (92). Studies of race that address individual beliefs and actions, or even studies based on the recognition that monolithic racial identifications fail to account for the complex genealogy of actual lives, more often than not fail to account for the systemic institutionalization and process of the shifting racial order in U.S. history. This process along with the complex but still-influential historical record, the multitudinous traces of that process, remain the central forces to be accounted for in any discussion of race.

Michaels’s point really is that we are now in the position to create new frameworks, new
constitutions of social formation, which can provide new ways of reading human life, new ways for directing public policy, new ways for understanding and negotiating social interactions. The problem is, those frameworks will require a rather significant revolution—and after the revolution we would still be in the position of constantly trying to declare our independence from the past, a process that hasn’t worked out very well for the United States in its own ongoing declarations of historical independence and uniqueness. The problem is, in short, that frameworks that don’t employ the concept of race don’t come to much when we try to explain the past, and they seem to gesture toward a future in which the past is either irrelevant or is open to dramatic reinterpretation. However much one might want to endorse Michaels’s call for more focused attention to social class, one is still forced to attend to the realities of racial history. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has observed, race and class are deeply intertwined, and one can hardly understand the history of class without understanding the complexities of race. Given that Michaels devotes a book to separating these concerns, it is worth the disruption of a long quotation to consider the broad outlines of Jacobson’s explanation of the necessity of considering class and race together:

First, republican notions of “independence” had both racial and economic valences; the white men’s movement for “Free Labor, Free Soil, and Free Men” was but the flipside of certain racial notions such as a belief in the Indian’s innate “dependency.” Second, racial stereotypes like inborn “laziness,” as applied to Mexicans or Indians, were economic assessments that had economic consequences (in the form, typically, of dispossession). Third, race has been central to American conceptions of property (who can own property and who can be property, for example), and property in its turn is central to republican notions of self-possession and the “stake in society” necessary for democratic participation. Fourth, political standing, doled out on racial terms (such as the naturalization code limiting citizenship to “free white persons”), translates immediately into economic realities such as property rights or labor-market segmentation. And fifth, in cases in American political culture ranging from the Mexican population of Old California to the immigrant Jews of New York’s Lower East Side, class markers have often been read as inborn racial characteristics: members of the working class in these groups have been viewed in more sharply racial terms than have their upper-class compatriots. (20-21)

What Jacobson offers here, of course, is merely a sketch, a broad outline. But one could draw even from this sketch, with an eye towards the extensive research projects suggested by it, to observe that an argument that asks us to turn away from race (pres-ent as identity politics) in order to address the realities of class is not a departure from but a continuation of the practices of the past.

Kwame Anthony Appiah is also interested in changing the frameworks by which we read our lives, and he is more persuasive both about the value of this change and about what this change might entail. Appiah would certainly agree with Michaels that “racism is a bad thing,” but Appiah demonstrates in his work a much sharper, more detailed, and more fervent awareness of the prevalence of racism and the challenges of dealing with it effectively. He has expressed his desire “to make sure that here in America we do not have discussions about race in which racism disappears from view” (Color 82). Moreover, Appiah is more sophisticated than Michaels in addressing the problem of the racial past as a presence in current attempts to understand race. The “current ways of talking about race,” he observes in his contribution to the joint-authored (with Amy Gutmann) Color Conscious, “are the residue, the detritus, so to
speak, of earlier ways of thinking about race; so that it turns out to be easiest to understand contemporary talk about ‘race’ as the pale reflection of a more full-blooded race discourse that flourished in the last [nineteenth] century. The ideational theory can thus be combined with a historical approach; we can explore the ideational structures of which our present talk is, so to speak, the shadow, and then see contemporary uses of the term as drawing from various different structures, sometimes in ways that are not exactly coherent” (38).

Appiah’s historically-informed approach seems, at least in principle, more rigorous than Michaels’s selective snapshots of the past, particularly in that Appiah emphasizes the influence of “various different structures” that have led to current uses of the term race, and “sometimes in ways that are not exactly coherent.” Appiah has three primary goals for his argument. “First,” he states, “I want to explain why American social distinctions cannot be understood in terms of the concept of race: the only human race in the United States, I shall argue, is the human race. Second, I want to show that replacing the notion of race with the notion of culture is not helpful: the American social distinctions that are marked using racial vocabulary do not correspond to cultural groups, either. And third, I want to propose that, for analytical purposes, we should use instead the notion of a racial identity, which I will try to explore and explain” (Color 32).

Appiah, in short, writes with a great awareness of the complexity, historical and philosophical, of the subject of race.

But he is, as he says, interested really in a single race, “the human race,” and is therefore devoted to isolating the all-too-flexible concept of race--certainly, a worthy goal. In pursuit of this goal, he proposes “the idea of racial identity,” which he defines (roughly, he acknowledges) as follows: “a label, \( R \), associated with ascriptions by most people (where ascription involves descriptive criteria for applying the label); and identifications by those that fall under it (where identification implies a shaping role for the label in the intentional acts of the possessors, so that they sometimes act as an \( R \)), where there is a history of associating possessors of the label with an inherited racial essence (even if some who use the label no longer believe in racial essences)” (Color 81-82). Allowing for this calculus of racial identity, Appiah is then free to emphasize that the overall calculus of identity is actually much more complex, and that no single formula should be allowed precedence over the others. “In policing this imperialism of identity--an imperialism as visible in racial identities as anywhere else--it is crucial,” he argues, “to remember always that we are not simply black or white or yellow or brown, gay or straight or bisexual, Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, or Confucian but that we are also brothers and sisters; parents and children; liberals, conservatives, and leftists; teachers and lawyers and auto-makers and gardeners; fans of the Padres and the Bruins; amateurs of grunge rock and lovers of Wagner; movie buffs; MTV-holics, mystery-readers; surfers and singers; poets and pet-lovers; students and teachers; friends and lovers. Racial identity can be the basis of resistance to racism; but even as we struggle against racism--and though we have made great progress, we have further still to go--let us not let our racial identities subject us to new tyrannies” (103). This observation is at the heart of much of Appiah’s work, leading him to gesture “beyond identities” in his recognition of the “potential for conflict between individual freedom and the politics of identity” (99). More recently, this has led Appiah to his meditations on “the ethics of identity” and to his concept of a “rooted cosmopolitanism”--that is, not “a form of humanism that requires us to put our differences aside,” but rather one in which “the cosmopolitan believes . . . that sometimes it is the differences we bring to the table that make it rewarding to interact at all” (Ethics 271).

In practical terms, much of Appiah’s argument comes down to individual reason and
choice--indeed, to the determination to practice freedom and resist tyranny in one’s performance of identity. “So here are my positive proposals,” he offers in Color Conscious: “live with fractured identities; engage in identity play; find solidarity, yes, but recognize contingency, and, above all, practice irony. In short, I have only the proposals of a banal ‘postmodernism’” (104). But one must wonder what happened to Appiah’s careful sense of history in this postmodern offering. Those whose lives, and the lives of their loved ones, their community, their ancestors, were deeply affected and complexly positioned by race can now “engage in identity play.” Why didn’t someone think of this sooner? The answer, of course, is that someone did, for identity play has historically been a matter of basic survival for many African Americans--in the workplace, on the street, on the stage, in the shadows. Appiah’s list of the many aspects of our identities is, in fact, deceptive. Historically, some have not been allowed to marry, and some have been restricted in their choices. Some who have children have had to negotiate with the institutional and legal aspects of “parents and children” differently from heterosexual couples or from white couples. Some who are students discover that the historical textbooks, films, and classroom lessons don’t account for people who look like they do, and don’t account for the challenges they face or the sense of local, state, national, and international community that they experience; too often, such historical reminders and lessons fail entirely to account for the world they find themselves living in, as if their neighborhoods and their lives are somehow inexplicable, unaccountable. Some, indeed, find the most intimate form of history--genealogy--much more challenging and inaccessible than others do. Some movie buffs encounter a world that requires translation--stories of people whose lives don’t quite correspond to or answer their own, but might with a bit of adjustment here and there. Some encounter on MTV an implicit history of entertainment scripts and roles for black identity, so that some forms of music--hip hop, for example--seem to be rather complexly and often disparagingly “about” them, but in ways that we are not taught to decipher, and other forms of music--country music, for example--are assumed to be about other groups, a product of other cultural histories, at least for those who know little about the history of country music. Some are lawyers, and find themselves grappling with seemingly clear discrepancies concerning those who are disciplined through the legal system, discrepancies for which there is a racial history. Again, some people have always been forced to “engage in identity play,” and they have found it to be a very high-stakes game.

Appiah, in short, isolates racial identity as a concept that accounts for the manifest traces of a now-discredited belief in the existence of race, and this move enables him to propose a new framework, a rooted cosmopolitanism, for reading our lives and for directing social interactions. But Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitan--acknowledging differences, engaging us in conversation, and promoting rewarding interactions--reminds me just a bit too much of the cosmopolitan we encounter in Melville’s The Confidence-Man: very good at conversation, quite aware of differences, devoted to rewarding interactions, and a master at exposing the private character behind the public persona. There’s some value in such interactions, though the devil is in the details, and such interactions might not lead us far beyond where Appiah says that race has led us: still working with “various different structures” inherited from the past, and “sometimes in ways that are not exactly coherent.”

Again, though, my main concern is that Appiah confuses the effects of race with the source. Race as a biological presence never existed, so if we are simply trying to get beyond racial identity, then we are focused on the wrong thing. Race was, in the past, not in the body but in the frameworks through which the body was read, and those frameworks were never...
reducible to easily-replaced philosophical abstractions; they followed from practice and were used to justify systemic assumptions and operations, and they were frameworks that acquired legal authority; and in various other ways they were institutionalized and operationalized in social, economic, political, legal, and educational policies and practices; they were part of—indeed, a dynamic principle in—the machinery, the process, of culture. Moreover, these were frameworks that took on a life of their own, as laws and established practices influenced legal decisions, as policies shaped policies, as institutional or economic trajectories veered in various directions when confronting or capitalizing on minor and major shifts in the cultural process or disruptions in the always-developing historical narrative. It is in this way that race has shaped lives by creating and enforcing racial identities, either overt or implicit, conspicuous or assumed, and people have responded to that shaping influence in various ways, and sometimes in ways that have led to new fluctuations in the frameworks.

In many ways, Appiah’s definition of racial identity makes great sense, but it is important to note that Appiah simplifies a dynamic process by leading to an endpoint: racial identities. Consider again his formula for defining racial identities: “a label, \( R \), associated with ascriptions by most people (where ascription involves descriptive criteria for applying the label); and identifications by those that fall under it (where identification implies a shaping role for the label in the intentional acts of the possessors, so that they sometimes act as an \( R \)), where there is a history of associating possessors of the label with an inherited racial essence (even if some who use the label no longer believe in racial essences).” One assumption here is that of conscious identification—that is, that those who “sometimes act as an \( R \)” are conscious of doing so, and perhaps have even chosen to do so. One wonders how well this applies to the racial group whose interests have dominated virtually all of the laws, social practices, and institutional frameworks associated with the history of race in the United States—that is, white people, those who often “act as an \( R \)” but who can be quite bewildered and even offended if this racial identification is pointed out to them. More seriously, though, Appiah fails to account for the ways in which the results of his formula feed back into the formula in successive iterations over a great span of both time and space. Racial identity simply cannot be isolated in such a way as to restrict it to individual choice; it functions within a world of contingencies that feed back to create new manifestations of racial identity, new configurations of ongoing contingencies.

One encounters a similar problem in any commentary on race that takes as its endpoint a simple or static (or ahistorical) concept of racial identities. In Against Race, Paul Gilroy offers a persuasively sophisticated and historically informed analysis of the limitations of the concept of race, and specifically “the relationship between ‘race’ and fascism” (2). While Michaels and Appiah in many ways direct themselves to a U.S. readership, I should note, Gilroy approaches the topic from other shores and takes in an international historical perspective. His goal is to “engage the pressures and demands of multicultural social and political life, in which . . . the old, modern idea of ‘race’ can have no ethically defensible place” (6). And the book leads, in its closing sentence, to an admirable vision, even a call to action: “Our challenge should now be to bring even more powerful visions of planetary humanity from the future into the present and to reconnect them with democratic and cosmopolitan traditions that have been all but expunged from today’s black political imaginary” (356). One can only appreciate Gilroy’s attempt to release his readers from a tradition of a brighter coming day ahead so as to realize the brighter coming day in the here and now, and in this way Gilroy, like Michaels and Appiah, argues for new frameworks to replace the old—and my argument, decidedly less visionary, remains that any analysis of the world as it could be needs to be grounded in an analysis of the world as it is.
Identity and the complex social institutions that regulate, direct, and provide for the sustenance, the security, and even the perspectives central to identity have always been transnational, and the modern nation-state has never functioned purely within geographical or even political boundaries, and this state of affairs has even led to various visions of cosmopolitanism over time, though such visions generally haven’t led to much in terms of social organization and the possibilities for individual freedom—that is, beyond the lives of a small percentage of people.

Still, Gilroy’s vision is both admirable and desirable, but the problem of its implementation remains, a problem exacerbated by Gilroy’s focus on willful racial identities as the endpoint of racial history. Addressing the condition of “people who have been subordinated by race-thinking and its distinctive social structures (not all of which come tidily color-coded),” Gilroy observes that “under the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose, these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture” (Against Race 12). These traditions, he adds, “have involved elaborate, improvised constructions that have the primary function of absorbing and deflecting abuse” (12). The problem, though, is that “they have gone far beyond merely affording protection and reversed the polarities of insult, brutality, and contempt, which are unexpectedly turned into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength” (12). In this way, Gilroy does in fact account for the dynamic process, the feedback loops, of racial identity. But he notes as well that this dynamic process complicates the process by which the vision to which his analysis is devoted might be realized. “When ideas of racial particularity are inverted in this defensive matter so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation, they become difficult to relinquish. For many racialized populations, ‘race’ and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up” (12). But what to do? Gilroy, whose credentials as a race theorist and proponent for social justice are impeccable, is not about to take lightly this reluctance to relinquish the established terms of social and political solidarity, the improvisational strategies for negotiating oppressed groups through a threatening world, and he hardly believes that the world has become less threatening, though he does believe that the present strategies are both outdated and dangerously limiting. How, then, to proceed towards the realization of a new framework? “These groups,” Gilroy answers, “will need to be persuaded very carefully that there is something worthwhile to be gained from a deliberate renunciation of ‘race’ as the basis for belonging to one another and acting in concert” (12). To be sure, Gilroy wrote the book as a step towards this careful persuasion, but surely he knows that the book’s message will not reach everyone in “these groups.” And how might one envision the moment of “deliberate renunciation of ‘race’”? Perhaps a gathering in a great hall, and a vote—but then one would need to account for those who vote against the proposal.

My point is simply that any attempt to deal with the history of race, and the ongoing effects of that history, needs to look beyond purely discursive or ideological remnants—“the residue,” in Appiah’s approach, “the detritus . . . of earlier ways of thinking about race.” In applying our understanding that there is no such thing as biological races, we should not be too quick to conclude that there is no such thing as race—and a focus on racial identity as the endpoint of our analysis runs the risk of encouraging just such an assumption. One thinks of James Boswell’s description in his Life of Johnson of his 1763 conversation with Samuel Johnson about Berkeley’s theories. “After we came out of the church,” Boswell reports, “we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that
though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget
the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large
stone, till he rebounded from it, ‘I refute it thus’” (333). If one takes a tour of any American
city, if one travels through rural areas, or if one surveys the American political, economic, and
social landscape, one will stumble over a great many large stones and rocks—what Appiah terms
the “obstacles created by sexism, racism, homophobia” (Color 104). Such obstinate rocks have
long been a central presence in the creation, distribution, and reception of that body of work
gathered under the heading of African American literature, and it is useful to come to an
understanding of the concept of race that includes not just the people who live in those urban
neighborhoods and rural areas but also the large stones and rocks that dot and define the
landscape.

What is strange is that, while a great deal of work remains, we don’t lack for studies of
these “obstacles”—that is, studies that attend to both institutionalized racial frameworks and the
identities of those affected and effected by those frameworks. Some of the classic historical
studies are still relevant—especially George M. Fredrickson’s The Black Image in the White
Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (1971) and Thomas F.
Gossett’s Race: The History of an Idea in America (1963). One might supplement these
histories with any number of more recent historical studies—for example, Matthew Frye
Jacobson’s Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race
(1998) and Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and
Abroad, 1876-1917 (2000), or Bruce Dain’s A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race
Theory in the Early Republic (2002). One could examine as well excellent studies of African
Americans or of race generally in the U.S. legal system—for example, John Hope Franklin and
Genna Rae McNeil’s useful collection, African Americans and the Living Constitution (1995); A.
Leon Higginbotham Jr.’s In the Matter of Color: Race & The American Legal Process: The
Colonial Period (1978) and Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the
American Legal Process (1996); and Mark S. Weiner’s Black Trials: Citizenship from the
Beginnings of Slavery to the End of Caste (2004). One could explore the economic and social
dimensions of race by way of such studies as the collaborative effort of Michael K. Brown,
Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz, and
David Wellman, Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society (2003); Thomas M.
Shapiro’s The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality
(2004); or Rodney E. Hero’s Racial Diversity and Social Capital: Equality and Community in
America (2007). One could also explore such important theoretical and ideological studies as
David Theo Goldberg’s Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning (1993) and The
Racial State (2002); Charles W. Mills’s The Racial Contract (1997); Karim Murji’s and John
Solomos’s collection Racialization: Studies in Theory and Practice (2005); Maria Krysan and
Amanda E. Lewis’s valuable collection The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity (2004); or
One could even learn a great deal by following the trail of more popular works—for example,
Finally, one could follow recent bifurcations and iterations of racial history by attending to such
studies as Lisa Nakamura’s Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet (2002) or
the various essays collected in Race in Cyberspace (2000), edited by Beth E. Kolko, Nakamura,
and Gilbert B. Rodman.

This is a highly selective list, but while one can often sense the influence of some partial
configuration of this varied and detailed body of scholarship in studies of African American literature, one will rarely encounter traces any of these works mentioned in studies of white American authors. Often, one will not encounter these studies where one has the most reason to expect to. They play no role in Michaels’s book, for example, and Appiah includes no sustained discussion of the concerns raised in this body of scholarship in his work. Generally, we have little sense of, or perhaps little regard for, the need to construct a sound and comprehensive approach to the subject of race, and few attempts have been made to apply this complex body of scholarship to the subject of American literary history, beyond discussions of cultural wars, identity politics, or the superficialities of the concept of race. Part of the reason for such omissions—beyond the assumption that race history and theory has little to do with white American literature—is that “race” is generally considered to be a kind of floating concept with some historical baggage attached rather than a ongoing historical and social dynamic in and of U.S. culture. There is no need give a progress report, an overview of what we know so far, and where we might go from here. Accordingly, one can easily reference the concept of race-as-embodiment and locate it historically so as to discredit race as a valid consideration for rigorous philosophical discourse.

Of course, one could argue that the overwhelming complexity of the historical process of race makes any stable or coherent approach to the subject virtually impossible. Certainly, this is a problem noted by Goldberg, who has pieced together, in his several studies, the most rigorous, systematic, and detailed account of racism available. “Paul Gilroy,” Goldberg notes, “has argued that because racisms vary so widely and are by nature historically specific, no general theory of ‘race relations and race and politics’ can be sustained. Gilroy’s criticism is primarily directed at a specific tradition that has prevailed in social theorizing about race and racism, namely, the race relations industry, though the criticism potentially applies to any attempted analysis of racial phenomena” (41). Goldberg’s response to Gilroy’s argument is instructive. “One direction to explore in responding to Gilroy’s challenge,” he suggests, “and in accounting for the ways in which racisms become normalized involves developing a general but open-ended theory concerning race and racism. The theory would have to account for historical alterations and discontinuities in the modes of racial formation, in the disparate phenomena commonly expressed in racial terms, as well as in those expressions properly considered racist. It must also enable and encourage opposition to racist expression, for ultimately the efficacy of a theory about race and racism is to be assessed in terms of the ways in which it renders possible resistance to racisms. Moreover, architectural safeguards against the theoretical imperative to closure must be built into this framework so that it will be open to identifying and theorizing continuities or new additions to transforming racialized discourse, as well as discontinuities and aberrant expressions” (41). This, I suggest, is the approach we need if we are to get at the dynamic complexity of U.S. racial history.

Indeed, one might say that Goldberg here looks for a model that brings a useful complexity to the various categories of Appiah’s formula for defining racial identity, and a model as well that accounts for the recursive, nonlinear, and iterative development of “modes of racial formation.” Accordingly, Goldberg lays out his own calculus in Racist Culture, one that accounts for a more dynamic and iterative historical and cultural process than that outlined by Appiah: “So whether any social group—Arabs or Aborigenes, say, American Indians or Irish, Blacks or Hispanics, Japanese or Jews, Polish or Gypsies—is identifiable as a race at any spatiotemporal conjuncture turns on the prevailing weight of interacting formative considerations. These considerations include (a) a history of being so named; (b) the processes
and criteria of their boundary construction; (c) the rhetoric of their genesis; (d) the sorts of contestational and exclusionary relations the group so circumscribed has with other groups at the time; and (e) the terms of self-identification and self-ascription, given (a) through (d).” (76-77). The challenges outlined here, of course, are considerable, for behind every key concept here is a complex and often nonlinear historical process and set of contingencies that limit the terms of this explanation of group identification, especially given that the formula assumes a conceptually stable group identity in the form of collective self-identifications and self-ascriptions.

Chaotic Race and Affiliated Networks

Ultimately, I will argue that what Gilroy recognizes as a “profound and urgent theoretical and political challenge” is amply met in African American literature, but before I turn to that argument in the rest of this book, I want to suggest that there exists a framework for gathering together the dynamic properties of racial history and identity. Let’s begin with that problematic concept, the African American community. While I will have more to say about this concept over the course of this book, here let me begin by noting that the blended self-consciousness and self-awareness that follows from their individual but interrelated cultural positions, joined with the unavoidable necessity of addressing issues of race, social justice, and cultural incoherence, are the most prominent characteristics of anything that might be termed the African American community. But the dynamics here trouble the potential comforts of group designation. As Hartman has argued, we need to look beyond the usual racial logic supported by the usual historical narratives to recognize the more complex communities lost to the narration of the past, what she terms “the networks of affiliation enacted in performance.” These networks, Hartman explains, “sometimes referred to as the ‘community among ourselves,’ are defined not by the centrality of racial identity or the selfsameness or transparency of blackness nor merely by the condition of enslavement but by the connections forged in the context of disrupted affiliations, socially amid the constant threat of separation, and shifting sets of identification particular to site, location, and action. In other words, the ‘community’ or the networks of affiliation constructed in practice are not reducible to race—as if race a priori gave meaning to community or as if community was the expression of race—but are to be understood in terms of the possibilities of resistance conditioned by relations of power and the very purposeful and self-conscious effort to build community” (59). Hartman’s concept of a nonhomogeneous community constantly in flux and “conditioned by relations of power” is a particularly apt description of the complexity of what is often more simply referred to as the African American or black community, a complexity that those thus affiliated will readily recognize. This imagined but fragmented community, and this difficult recognition, constituted, in fact, the defining framework in which most nineteenth-century African American political activism (including literary activism) functioned.12

Eddie Glaude, a scholar who has attended carefully to that framework, has recognized that central to any work devoted to the lives and rights of this imagined community must be the attempt to theorize both African American history and the concepts of agency, moral responsibility, identity, and community that have been shaped by that history. And Glaude appropriately looks for an approach that does not rely on essentialist notions of black identity, on the one hand, or, on the other, that does not theorize black history, experience, and identity beyond the reach of both recognition and relevant social action. “How we think about black identity,” Glaude argues, “how we imagine black history, and how we conceive of black agency can be rendered in ways that escape bad racial reasoning—reasoning that assumes a tendentious
unity among African Americans simply because they are black, or that short-circuits imaginative responses to problems confronting actual black people” (In a Shade x). Glaude is of course responding to numerous approaches to African American history, identity, and community that rely on what he calls bad racial reasoning, noting that “black history, for some, constitutes a reservoir of meaning that predetermines our orientation to problems, irrespective of their particulars, and black agency is imagined from the start as bound up with an emancipatory politics. When identity is determined by way of reference to a fixed racial self, the complexity of African American life is denied. Moreover, the actual moral dilemmas African Americans face are reduced to a crude racial calculus in which the answers are somehow genetically or culturally encoded” (8-9). I share Glaude’s concern about a fixed racial self, and I share as well his search for something beyond a “crude racial calculus.”

By what calculus, then, can we define the contours and follow the trajectory of the history that has shaped African American identities and experiences so as to determine the solutions we need to the problems that are so statistically obvious? This is a question largely unaddressed by those who, like Walter Benn Michaels, rightly identify the problem with the diversity industry and with the bad racial reasoning that supports that industry but who use that analysis to return to the comforting calculus of a politics or an ideological position based on the assumption that it is possible to transcend, get beyond, or otherwise evade the racial past. In his own search for an approach to these concerns, Glaude turns to the philosophical promise of pragmatism. “History,” he observes, “should not be invoked to fortify our actions with the supposed certainty of past doings and sufferings. Instead, to use Emerson’s wonderfully rich formulation, we draw circles around our inheritance, with history providing the instrumentalities to invade the future with a little more than luck. We understand more fully why certain features of our lives have lapsed into incoherence, how varying and competing approaches impact our form of life, and how the choices, beliefs, and actions of our fellows, as well as impinging events, turn us around and cast us off in new directions. We stand not as servants to History but as historically conditioned organisms transacting with environments, for weal or woe, in the hope of securing a better life” (In a Shade 82-83). I agree with this formulation, though I have to observe as well that History here operates as a rather unproblematic category—a world of information to marshal together for a strategic invasion of the future. We will need a more complex understanding of history if we are to understand ourselves as “historically conditioned organisms transacting with environments,” and we will need concepts of race and community capable of defining the terms by which the overwhelming data of history can be accessed and applied. But at the center of these complex interactions remains the difficult reality of African American experience—that “African Americans were forced to create themselves amid the absurdity of a nation committed, at once, to freedom and unfreedom” (48). “Theirs was a blue note,” Glaude observes, “an unstable chord that called attention to the unbridled chaos at the heart of American democracy” (48).

In attempting to account for the history and effects of the concept of race, then, we need to trace the constantly varying course of this “unbridled chaos.” We might approach this challenge simply by turning again to existing attempts to account for this complexity, now listening for the hint of those features of social interaction and historical process familiar to those involved in studies of chaotic phenomena and complexity. Consider, for example, Charles Mills’s notion of the Racial Contract, which he presents as “a visible or hidden operator that restricts and modifies the scope of its prescriptions” (72). Mills notes that “there is both synchronic and diachronic variation” in the Racial Contract, “many different versions or local
instantiations” that “evolve over time, so that the effective force of the social contract itself changes, and the kind of cognitive dissonance between the two alters” (72). Goldberg similarly defines racist culture as “fluid,” something that “grows and ebbs” (Racist Culture 222, 8). “Its transforming natures,” he observes, “are deeply connected as cause and manifestation to reconstructed and restructured identities, to changing conditions in social structure and organization, as well as to anxieties about impending changes” (222). Accordingly, his project is to immerse himself in and chart the course of that fluidity--that is, “to account for the emergence, transformation, and extension, in a word, the (continuing re-)invention of racist culture, and for the varying kinds of discursive expression that it prompts and supports” (8).

Paul Gilroy looks beyond the tides that ebb and flow to observe that “the pressure to associate [with a group identity], like the desires to remember or forget, may vary with changes in the economic and political atmosphere. Unlike the tides, the weather cannot be predicted accurately” (Against Race 126). Exploring such complex and unpredictable associations which “trouble” any concept of group identity, Gilroy suggests a turn to “the celebrated ‘butterfly effect’ in which tiny, almost insignificant forces can, in defiance of conventional expectations, precipitate unpredictable, larger changes in other locations” (126).

Since the rhetoric of dynamic systems is already being applied to the study of race, I suggest simply that there is some value in stepping back and drawing from chaos theory to consider the implications, and the possibilities, of the rhetorical models we find ourselves using. In commentary by Mills, Goldberg, Gilroy, and others on the history and process of race, we can see references to the operation of what Mark S. Mosko has noted as the six “interrelated characteristics” widely accepted as basic to “chaotic phenomena”: “(1) sensitive dependence on initial conditions, (2) complex, unstable relations among variables, (3) fractal or self-similar patterning on different scales, (4) dynamical transformations in accordance with nonlinear (rather than linear) equations, (5) self-organization or ‘dissipative structures,’ and (6) universality or previously undetected numerical constants” (7). These characteristics certainly pertain to the process by which the concept of race has been and is applied, developed, and transformed in U.S. culture, and I will briefly return to each of these categories to suggest their appropriateness in considerations of this process. I’ll note here, though, the view that I have been arguing for in this chapter, that an understanding of universality in human life does not require a transcendence of race or a theoretical turn to cosmopolitanism, for such gestures, in my view, reduce the vital element of history, of process and time, in the above categories. Universality can rather be found in the ways that humans create and are shaped by systems of social organization, the ways in which this interactive process organizes humans into groups as well as the ways in which they self-organize or otherwise respond to these conceptual frameworks and institutional pressures, individuality interacting with collectivity.

This is not to say that this process produces stable categories of identity in relation to the dynamic structures of racial ideology--indeed, quite the opposite. As Jack Morava has observed, chaos theory offers instead the opportunity “to speculate in principled ways about mechanistic models for social phenomena, without chaining those models to notions of determinism.” “The hostility to determinism in the humanistic sciences is so strong,” Morava rightly notes, “that it naturally leads to the repudiation of mechanistic models in general. Chaos theory offers mechanistic but not deterministic models to social scientists” (62). In discussions of race, in which the repudiation of any assumption of an inevitable or essential set of characteristics is so often and so rightly emphasized, chaos theory offers a useful approach to a cultural process that follows general patterns without leading to absolute or unchanging
results—that is, patterns of identifiable configurations of specifically unpredictable results known as strange attractors, “the fractal form embedded in any nonlinear feedback process” (F. Turner xxiv).

While my turn to chaos theory might seem unusual or even contrived, it hardly requires a great leap to suggest that this approach can lead us to a better understanding of the nonlinear processes, the recurrent patterns, and generally the dynamic and chaotic phenomena involved in the social history of race. Jeffery A. Bell, in his consideration of ways in which Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of difference functions “at the edge of chaos,” notes that his own application of dynamic systems theory to philosophical method does not constitute a significant change from the usual process by which one might “set forth points of instability (i.e., definitions) which may lead to further work and ‘thinking’ in other areas (possible bifurcations).” “This,” Bell notes, “is doing philosophy” (209). Stuart Kauffman similarly observes that “historians do not think of themselves as merely recounting the record, but as looking for the web of influences that kaleidoscopically interact with one another to create the patterns that unfold” (300). Noting that “we lack a theory of how the elements of our public lives link into webs of elements that act on one another and transform one another,” Kauffman adds simply, “We call these transformations ‘history’” (299). Certainly, it is no great innovation, then, to suggest that we simply consider the cultural history of race as involving an interactive web of elements—a dynamic central to the concept of emergence in both science and philosophy. The value of drawing from chaos or complexity theory is that it enables us—indeed, given the nature of many discussions about race, the value is that it forces us—to account for an overwhelmingly complex process of interactions and iterations. As Frederick Turner has noted, if we can recognize that we are “probably dealing with a certain type of iterative process in a highly communicative system,” then “we can begin to ask the right questions about it” (xxii). “Chaos,” as Raymond Eve, Sara Horsfall, and Mary Lee note, “is not a static theory, but a dynamic one that captures movement and change, and as such, represents a powerful ally to more traditional theories of social phenomena” (Preface xxxi).

Drawing on chaos theory, then, one can turn from a simple notion of race—be it biological destiny, cultural affiliation, or a floating signifier in critical discourse—and consider race as a dynamic system obfuscated by an overabundance of information. Born into this systemic racial complex, individuals and groups reveal their sensitivity to initial conditions, their positionality in social time and space. The racial system can be characterized as a system rich in feedback, folding in on itself regularly as various eruptions resituate the racial landscape or redirect the cultural current, as apparently isolated or local or otherwise self-contained “racial incidents”—a local act of violence, or an apparently localized or limited interpretation of law—lead to seemingly disproportionate effects. In science, it is through the examination of fractal dimensions that one is able to see the regularity of what might appear to be chaotic, a regularity not only of surface feature but of scale, a “recursive symmetry” at various magnifications of the object of study (Hayles Introduction 10). In nineteenth-century African American history, as A. Leon Higginbotham Jr. has noted, this regularity appears in “the mechanisms of control through judicial decisions and statutes” that “span the sanctioning of slavery and the special limitations imposed on free blacks, to the prohibitions against interracial marriage and sexual activity, to the eliminating of the legal significance of blacks’ ‘conversions to Christianity,’ to generally restricting any activities or aspirations of blacks that might threaten the groups in control” (Shades of Freedom 14). To map, then, the historical construction (and reconstructions) of race in various regions and through various times, one would need to trace a
complex process of recursion— that is, “a sort of feedback loop, with the end result of one stage brought back as the starting point for the next” (Eglash 8).

This sort of feedback loop is evident even in the nation’s foundational concepts. As Edmund Morgan, Kathleen Brown, and other scholars have demonstrated, liberty was from colonial times on a racial concept, and as Eva Sheppard Wolf has observed in her study of Virginia through the early national period, this was a concept that necessarily shifted to accommodate significant changes in the social landscape. “The construction of liberty in Virginia as white occurred,” Wolf argues, “not at a single moment but repeatedly and with extra vigor when political and social changes made possible some new arrangement. In part, the problems inherent in racializing liberty . . . necessitated the repetitive process. White Virginians also found it necessary to insist repeatedly on the privilege of whites over blacks because over time more and more people of African descent came to resemble free white Virginians in status, manners, and even appearance” (xiv). Wolf here points to the central dynamic involved in the phenomena of race, the ongoing and mutually-modifying tension between race as embodiment and race as a systemic principle. As the concept of race as embodiment becomes less stable or more ambiguous or porous, the systemic controls for race become more pronounced and more complex— various manifestations, one might say, of the laws devoted to increasingly refined and absurd increments of racial affiliation, from the early politics of miscegenation to the one drop rule.13 What I am presenting as race refers to the always shifting and contingent relation between race as embodiment and race as systemic, and I am suggesting that chaos theory offers a means for studying the operations and patterns of this relationship. The patterns that follow from the repetitive processes central to the racialization of liberty, equality, and opportunity constitute “the changing same” of American history, and it is important that we not overlook or underestimate these patterns in our desire to get beyond the equally predictable instantiations of racial politics.14

As the studies of American foundational ideals suggest, perhaps the most obvious characteristic of racial experience is sensitivity to initial conditions. In terms of individuals, quite simply, it matters where and when you were born in terms of race as in terms of class and gender. Environment and early experiences, along with the acculturated guidance of those around you, will influence how you understand certain aspects of your identity, how you understand and experience your relation to the historical narratives you encounter, and how you perform or find yourself performing as an individual associated (by yourself or by others, through interpersonal associations or through legal identifications) with certain racial, economic, class, or gender classifications. This is not to say that you are bound and determined by your initial position in life, but only to say that there is a reason why political polls and sociological statistical analyses are reasonably (within identifiable limits) trustworthy as predictors of human behavior. Certainly, there are areas in U.S. culture where this process seems particularly and tragically obvious. As the authors of Whitewashing Race observe, “it is abundantly clear . . . that race still helps to determine who will enter the formal justice system in the first place and thus powerfully shapes what will happen thereafter. And what the research shows clearly is how persistent racial stereotyping meshes with the effect of long-term structural disadvantages to ensure that blacks wind up more often in the criminal justice system” (Brown 152). Sensitivity to initial conditions applies as well to the institutional recognitions of race over space and time— the effects of the fact that some racial groups were initially isolated and restricted by law in terms of social and economic mobility or professional opportunity, leading to a historical process of gradual and sometimes indirect entrance that is different from the historical process of
assumed access experienced by others. One might say that there is a reason why affirmative action and preferential treatment are phrases applied to some groups but almost never applied to the long history of legal and social facilitation available to certain classes of white men.

I hope it is clear, too, that central to the process I am describing are “complex, unstable relations among variables.” Since a central dynamic in U.S. culture has been an invented category of human identity, and since individuals in U.S. culture variously revealed their recognition that they were devoted to a false ideology with porous boundaries, the category or categories of race were quickly multiplied and eventually extended to absurd and unstable distinctions. This instability and the multiple relations produced by it become part of the social and legal environment through which racial identity is both experienced and comprehended.

Central to this process, of course—indeed, central to the institutionalization of race and racism—is ongoing feedback. William F. Stroup’s explanation of this process and its effects is useful here. “System process,” he notes, “becomes structure under feedback or iteration. . . . Feedback simply refers to the fact that a portion of model, machine, or system output returns to be used again as input” (126-127). The legal history of race, when considered in this light, might be very well understood in terms of feedback or iteration. The Dred Scott Supreme Court case, for example, was produced by regional variations in laws concerning enslavement. In its decision, the Court drew from operating assumptions concerning race and established these assumptions as a ruling framework for law—that black Americans had no rights that white Americans were obligated to respect. But this institutionalization of operating assumptions created a fundamentally different, if not new, set of conditions for black Americans, as did the Supreme Court decision on Plessy vs. Ferguson later in the century. Nothing was changed but everything was changed as the results of white supremacist assumptions and practices were, in effect, used as input for the national legal machine. And that legal machine itself promotes an ongoing iterative process that both draws from and produces certain configurations of a racialized process. If, in studying this legal history, we limit our understanding of race to a false identifier of the individuals involved, then we will miss the complex and multiple variables interacting here, all of which should be understood as the results and producers of racial process.

It is beyond my purposes in this chapter, and beyond my current abilities, to identify and apply the variables by which chaos theory might offer a useful explanation of specific events in American cultural history. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has written, “the vicissitudes of race represent glacial, nonlinear cultural movements” (Whiteness 7), and many scholars seem to agree, for they often find themselves writing about shifting foundations, redirected currents, and layered landscapes when they look back on the racial past. Mapping out that past, I’ve tried to suggest, will require a labyrinthine narrative that brings together and addresses numerous configurations of relations, contingencies, and shifts. To account for this complexity, one needs to account for a complex social process, and chaos theory is a useful and, I believe, methodologically appropriate way to approach this. Through chaos theory, one might reimagine progress as infinite possibility within a social world bounded by the effects of a racialized past, a progress that involves most fundamentally the ongoing attempt to describe accurately how the manifestations of racial history position individuals, create highly variable concepts of identity, and organize variable standards of social justice. Although I want to approach the possibilities with some caution, I still cautiously share David Byrne’s view of “the profoundly optimistic implication of the possibility of the understanding of the domain of complexity as characterized by robust chaos. We can come to see what makes the difference. And if we can see what makes the difference, then we can make the difference” (41-42). This, I
think, is the challenge that awaits us, the problem of the twenty-first century, the fractal color
line that has drawn us into the world of both awesome complexity and infinite possibility.

Much more could be said about both complexity and possibility, but I’ll conclude here
with a comment on the construction of the social or institutional manifestations of racial ideology
that facilitates the process that I am identifying as central to race—indeed, the process which is
race. In her important study of the role of analogy in science, Nancy Leys Stepan captures well
the interactive process by which assumptions about human nature, character, and cultural position
developed into institutional frameworks which promoted new configurations of established
views and practices. I’ll reprint here a central paragraph of Stepan’s analysis, and simply note
that she returns to different configurations of the process she here describes in greater detail
throughout the essay:

When scientists in the nineteenth century . . . proposed an analogy between racial and
sexual differences, or between racial and class differences, and began to generate new
data on the basis of such analogies, their interpretations of human difference and
similarity were widely accepted, partly because of their fundamental congruence with
cultural expectations. In this particular science, the metaphors and analogies were not
strikingly new but old, if unexamined and diffuse. The scientists’ contribution was to
 elevate hitherto unconsciously held analogies into self-conscious theory, to extend the
meanings attached to the analogies, to expand their range through new observations and
comparisons, and to give them precision through specialized vocabularies and new
technologies. Another result was that the analogies became “naturalized” in the
language of science, and their metaphorical nature disguised. (42)

The process that Stepan here describes should not seem new to anyone who has attended to the
history of race, though her analysis of that history is exemplary. Still, I would suggest that too
often those of us who have attended to this history fall into a largely linear model of historical
understanding. We see the effects of this process, and our understanding of the process itself is
either omitted or placed at the periphery of our discussions. My purpose in emphasizing the
chaotic nature of this history is to emphasize the centrality of the process itself as our primary
subject, a process that cannot be known through or understood in terms of a simple or neatly
linear cause and effect model.

Old Guidebooks and New Maps

One is tempted to argue that trying to examine race is brings one to something like the
experience of Melville’s young protagonist in Redburn, who finds himself in Liverpool,
England, with a revered copy of his father’s guidebook, The Picture of Liverpool. Redburn
wanders through the city, looking in vain for the landmarks promised by the guidebook, and
eventually comes to the inevitable conclusion that his “precious book,” “full of fine old family
associations,” is “next to useless” (157). “The thing that had guided the father,” Redburn
concludes, “could not guide the son” (157)—and he sits for a moment of meditation to take in the
lesson: “This world, my boy, is a moving world; . . . it never stands still; and its sands are forever
shifting. This very harbor of Liverpool is gradually filling up, they say; and who knows what
your son (if you ever have one) may behold, when he comes to visit Liverpool, as long after you
as you come after his grandfather. . . . Guide-books, Wellingborough, are the least reliable
books in all literature; and nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books” (157).
The lesson, one is tempted to argue, still applies, and those who learn it would do well to throw
away the guidebooks of the past and trust the ones of the present. But we might want to think
twice before doing so. Unlike a guidebook for a changing city, contemporary commentary on race is designed more often than not to help one find one’s way around a promising present and a brighter future built on the imagined foundations of a generally stable past. Indeed, the attraction of the turn away from race as a viable critical or political category is precisely that it rejects the father’s guidebook. The problem, though, is that the father’s guidebook still works, though it leads not to recognizable edifices but rather to ongoing foundations, and we discard that book at our peril.

Discard it, though, we do. Viewed on a larger scale, the lack of correspondence between guidebook and landscape that Redburn discovers characterizes the nation’s tenuous acknowledgment of its heritage of slavery and racial control. Increasingly, for example, the complex social, economic, political, and theological complexities of the system of slavery and the racial ideologies that supported it are being addressed primarily through an ever-expansive and flexible return to the story of the Underground Railroad. This return to an all-too-familiar commemorative paradigm is organized primarily through the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, supported in part by federal legislation passed in 1990 and 1998. The program claims, in its brochure, to be “illustrative of a basic founding principle of this Nation, that all human beings embrace the right to self-determination and freedom from oppression.” Sites associated with the network include everything from “a site that might be a water or overland route” to “a plantation where an escape began,” and those familiar with the representation of slavery at plantation museums can attest to the freedom that this network, taken as a whole, is most likely to commemorate. In other words, Americans are encouraged to follow a carefully-marked heritage trail while the social, economic, political, and theological traces of the past, along with the racial ideologies that supported it, continue to map out the present in ways that are either safely removed from or carefully contained in public memory. Guided by the historical markers that join highways to historical sites to historical tourism areas, people can continue to hold their marriage ceremonies on former plantations, or stay in bed-and-breakfast inns modeled after slave cabins, or shop for gifts in renovated slave quarters, or imagine the North as either the refuge of freedom or a conduit to a possible freedom, or perhaps even believe that the nation’s mythology as a land of justice and liberty was momentarily disrupted but ultimately untroubled by its reliance on the system of slavery and white supremacist ideology. Public memory is, in short, linked to the conditions of its financial support and the cultural imperatives of its presentation, and is more often than not directed to promote the ideological mission of national and/or regional “official stories” about the past while obscuring the capitalist and white supremacist structures behind those ideological screens.15

To a great extent, as I’ve suggested, my purpose in this book is to offer a different kind of map by exploring the enduring value of the African American fathers’ and mothers’ guidebooks. Against the simple stories we sometimes tell about this body of literature is a world of complexity that has everything to do with the fragmented narratives, the sudden narrative shifts, the often unexplained juxtapositions, the generic complexity, and the frequently unstable or elusive narrative perspective so common to nineteenth-century African American narratives, fiction, histories, and other texts. In her study of nineteenth-century Rhode Island, Joanne Pope Melish has outlined the significant resistance to the black-white racial binary then very much under development both regionally and nationally. “Racial designations,” Melish observes, were locally inflected and relational, indexed by local readings of a host of different factors--cultural conventions, economic relationships, gender conventions, status relationships, national identities, citizenship status, religion, and perhaps others.
and social context could give similarly descended people variant racialized identities; very specific circumstances could produce different racial identities for closely related people and could change either an official or a colloquial racial identity of the same person. Well into the antebellum period, an increasingly rigid set of abstract racial categories defined by the state sat uneasily upon a much more complex and contradictory set of racial characterizations in practice, reflecting not only local meanings of distinctions based on color, descent, and class among long-settled U.S. populations but also attempts to coin racialized social identities for a shifting matrix of new immigrants. (“Racial Vernacular” 18)

Those involved in various regional studies will no doubt observe in turn that Melish’s conclusions are not exclusive to Rhode Island, though the particular features of this racial complexity might be regionally distinct while still inflected by the influence of various forms of interstate intercourse. “Such a set of locally inflected, negotiated, complex, contradictory, and polymorphous racial characterizations,” Melish suggests, “may be called a ‘racial vernacular’”—and different regions might speak in different racial vernaculars (18).

Nineteenth-century African American activists and writers understood this and other racial vernaculars, a world of “locally inflected, negotiated, complex, contradictory, and polymorphous” characterizations, social roles, historical possibilities, narrative lines, and philosophical ideals. To draw again from Hartman, identifying, negotiating, and articulating the “community among ourselves” was always a complex affair—for it was a community “defined not by the centrality of racial identity or the selfsameness or transparency of blackness nor merely by the condition of enslavement but by the connections forged in the context of disrupted affiliations, socially amid the constant threat of separation, and shifting sets of identification particular to site, location, and action” (59). These attempted identifications, negotiations, and articulations are central to nineteenth-century African American literature. This is a body of literature that involves fundamentally the exploration of the relations, connections, and tensions that Melish describes—a process defined by the binary and complicated by the more complex social landscape, as well as by habits, associations, and rituals that have either tended towards the mainstream African American traditions, fed directly into them, or departed from them. It involves as well a world of white writers who have directly or indirectly enforced, commented on, or been defined by the structures, assumptions, and networks of race.

As is the case with other literary traditions in the context of United States history, that is, including literature usually viewed as having nothing to do with race, the history and interactions I am gathering under the concept of race have been central to the development of African American literary history. Indeed, African Americans have worked hard to recognize the kinds of concerns I have outlined in this chapter, since doing so was often a matter of fundamental survival, and often a basic necessity for individual and collective self-determination. And they brought those recognitions to a world of writing, where the world of contingencies involved in “the unbridled chaos at the heart of American democracy” could be viewed, considered, and reconfigured. Raymond Eve has noted that chaos theory can seem to only emphasize an overwhelming and unpredictable complexity, and so might not seem especially encouraging to those just entering into an understanding of it. But “on the other hand,” Eve notes, “we now may be able to at least describe many of the actions of complex systems that we see around us, those that hitherto remained mysterious. The signature of chaos is no longer written in invisible ink. We may not be able to predict the result of the next iteration of a set of equations that describes a chaotic system, or when a system will be in chaos and when not. However, we can
at least now understand what a chaotic system is doing, and how it is doing it, when we see it” (278). There is, of course, great value in this—and throughout this book, I will suggest that nineteenth-century African American writers were devoted to doing just that: describe the actions of the complex systems that they experienced.

I have in mind Hayles’s distinction between the kinds of representations one might construct in the face of overwhelming complexity. Working from the proposition that “no unambiguous or necessary connection can be forged between reality and our representations,” Hayles suggests that “within the range of representations available at a given time, we can ask, ‘Is this representation consistent with the aspects of reality under interrogation?’” “If the answer is affirmative,” Hayles allows, “we still know only our representations, not reality itself. But if it is negative, we know that the representation does not mesh with reality in a way that is meaningful to us in that context” (Chaos Bound 223). One might note simply that African Americans in the antebellum United States (and long afterwards) regularly observed that the literature, the national mythology and textbook histories, the rhetoric of Fourth of July celebrations, the discourse of churches, and a host of other public documents, proclamations, and stories were rather drastically inconsistent with the realities of nineteenth-century U.S. cultural life. In trying to account for the realities of race that cannot be reduced to simple crossings of a racial line or heroic performances in the otherwise stable theater of the Other—that is, those narrative lines expected and celebrated by those who gathered in fascination to witness, as if first hand, the spectacular horrors of African American oppression—African American writers attempted to construct representations that were consistent with reality. In a nation of strategic (as Toni Morrison would have it, pathological16) misrepresentations of reality, African American writers faced the challenge of representing the stories, the assumptions, and the complex social forces that first made their stories necessary and then directed the available means for telling them.17

These representations remain valuable over time, drawing us into the complex history of the dynamics of a chaotic system and enabling us to ask the right questions about more recent configurations and manifestations of that system. In making the case for chaos theory as a framework for sociological research, Eve, Horsfall, and Lee observe, “The complex pattern of a strange attractor is produced by the repetitive iteration of very simple rules. Often the total system resulting from the operation of simple equations with feedback terms included begins to manifest emergent properties that could never have been predicted ahead of time by looking only at the original very simple rules for interaction among concepts. Could this be telling us, for example, that social structure is actually composed of emergent properties that very simple rules for individual interactions create in ways that we have but dimly understood? If so, it follows that changes in very simple rules about how we interact with one another socially, politically, or economically might result in a completely different social structure after a few million cycles of interaction” (Preface xxx–xxxi). The point here, in part, is that chaos theory has highlighted, as Turner puts it, “the primacy of history” (xvii), the necessary recognition “that time is irreducible, irreversible, and asymmetrical” (xix). But the point as well is that there is great value in identifying basic patterns of human interaction within a cultural system, and the underlying hope in a great deal of nineteenth-century African American literature in an otherwise hopeless context is that simple recognitions, simple changes, shifts in the terms of human interactions “might result in a completely different social structure,” if only after the brighter day coming of “a few million cycles of interaction” (Eve, Horsfall, and Lee xxx).

In his essential study African Fractals, Ron Eglash demonstrates the centrality of fractal
knowledge systems in African cultures and offers a thoughtful approach to negotiating what he
terms “the politics of African fractals” (192). Drawing on the work of Paul Gilroy, Eglash
notes that in representing “the ability for geometric expansion within bounded space” fractals
offer a productive “analogy for oppositional political expansion in human bondage” (200). This
expansion, I’m suggesting, can begin with the challenge of literary representation, the means by
which a representation consistent with reality itself shifts the terms by which the cultural
landscape, including notions of both human bondage and freedom, can be understood. It is no
surprise that the overwhelming majority of African American works published before the Civil
War are characterized by fractal narrative methods. Perhaps, too, it is no surprise that this body
of literature is so often viewed as rough, awkward, or otherwise uncrafted. In the face of an
overwhelming and killing complexity, many African American writers struggled simply for an
accurate representation—perhaps aware that the escape from slavery so often considered to be the
end of their story was simply the beginning of an infinite journey that would require a literature
adequate to the task. In the chapters that follow, I will examine the dynamic properties of that
literature, consider the difficulty of confining those properties to a linear narrative of literary
history, and suggest that when we recover the complexity that is central to an understanding of
nineteenth-century African American literary performances we will remind ourselves of the
equally complex but compelling concept of justice to which this literature was devoted.

Notes

1. The scholarship on the construction of race in the nineteenth century covers a wide range of
disciplines. For legal background, see Franklin and McNeil; Gross, What Blood and Double
Character; A Leon Higginbotham; and Rogers Smith. For scientific background, see Stanton.
For general cultural background on the United States as a “racial state,” see Fredrickson;
Gossett; Horsman; Jacobson; Roediger; Saxton, and Takaki. For general philosophical and
theoretical frameworks that are especially relevant in this regard, see Goldberg, Racial State
and Racist Culture; and Charles Mills.

2. Ron Eglash, in his consideration of the presence and significance of fractal knowledge
systems in African cultures, provides the best overview of scholarship that draws from chaos
theory and fractal geometry to explore the cultural effects of racial ideologies and racially
oppressive systems. See especially his commentary on Paul Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and
others, 179-202.

It is at least interesting and possibly revealing to note that much of the best work on race came out at the same time that many scholars, literary and beyond, were turning to chaos theory. No connections between the two were made at the time, but there are significant connections to make and possibilities to be realized. Chaos theory in literary studies had a rather short life, but I’ve been struck by the developing importance of chaos and complexity theory in the social sciences--as indicated, for example, by Ramond Eve, Sara Horsfall, and Mary Lee’s *Chaos, Complexity, and Sociology* (1997); David Byrne’s truly wonderful *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences* (1998); or, more recently, Mark Mosko and Frederick Damon’s *On the Order of Chaos: Social Anthropology and the Science of Chaos* (2005).

4. As variationist sociolinguist Kirk Hazen has observed (in an email exchange), “The language system is so complex that we are still mucking with the foundations of our theories. When we consider subsocial systems like race, operating throughout the mind, then tie together how race is represented through language and how the social forces of racial identity constrain synchronic language variation and possibly diachronic variation, then we just hit points of bewildering complexity.” For useful background on theological approaches to race in the nineteenth century, see Sylvester Johnson; Daly; and Irons.

5. For a usefully accessible and concise introduction to fractals, see Eglash, 8-19.

6. Even if we focus on race as embodiment, which I will argue is a superficial approach, we face a history of racism that goes beyond skin color or visual markers to include the full range of
senses. As Mark Smith has demonstrated in his cogent study of the racial past, nineteenth-century Americans, “particularly whites of all classes, racialized the senses in a deliberate effort to impose and maintain the artificial binary between ‘black’ and ‘white.’ . . . The senses were central to the creation of that clumsy world even as it was belied by everyday contingencies, compromises, and complications” (*How Race is Made* 9). I discuss Smith’s work at greater length in chapter 5.

7. I’ve noted above useful studies of the legal history of race in the United States. For a useful overview of the shifting racial determinations of U.S. courts, see Okihiro.

8. It is no wonder, after all, that the Black Arts Movement stressed the centrality of language in their attempts to define a black aesthetic. See especially Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones), “Expressive Language”; and Stephen Henderson, “Inside the Funk Shop,” and “Saturation.” Similarly important are the attempts of later scholars to define a black vernacular, of which the most direct and extended examples might be Baker, *Blues*; and Gundaker.

9. Appiah, of course, understands very well the issues he addresses, and he understands also the kinds of responses he can anticipate to his approach. Indeed, he includes an example of those response in his analysis:

And there is a regular response to these ideas from those who speak for the identities that now demand recognition, identities toward which so many people have struggled in dealing with the obstacles created by sexism, racism, homophobia. “It’s all very well for you. You academics live a privileged life; you have steady jobs; solid incomes; status from your place in maintaining cultural capital. Trifle with your own identities, if you like; but leave mine alone.”
To which I answer only: my job as an intellectual is to call it as I see it. I owe my fellow citizens respect, certainly, but not a feigned acquiescence. I have a duty to reflect on the probable consequences of what I say; and then, if I still think it worth saying, to accept responsibility for them. If I am wrong, I say, you do not need to plead that I should tolerate error for the sake of human liberation; you need only correct me. But if I am right, so it seems to me, there is a work of the imagination that we need to begin.

*(Color Conscious 104-5)*

One wishes, of course, that one could live in the world guided by philosophy that Appiah imagines here. But behind his simple choice, I would argue, is a world of complexity that would complicate, in turn, the stance that Appiah wants to assume here. The wrongness of one’s opponents, of course, is not evidence of the rightness of one’s approach, for both sides can be shortsighted about the numerous other historically-informed perspectives that need to be part of the overall consideration of even philosophical possible approaches to the question of identity, let alone the realities of communities bound by the interplay of historical forces, misconceptions, and collective affiliations or allegiances.

10. I should note here that I largely agree with Stuart Hall that “racism is always historically specific. Though it may draw on the cultural traces deposited by previous historical phases, it always takes on specific forms. It arises out of present—not past—conditions. Its effects are specific to the present organization of society, to the present unfolding of its dynamic political and cultural processes—not simply to its repressed past” (qtd in Gilroy, “One Nation” 265). I would, though, and will argue that racism arises out of past as well as present conditions, and that it is impossible to isolate present from past conditions. On such concerns, Goldberg observes, “It strikes me accordingly as altogether misleading to inquire into the determinants or
causes of racism as such, for I want to insist that there is no generic racism, only historically specific racisms each with their own sociotemporally specific causes. There is no single (set of) transcendental determinant(s) that inevitably causes the occurrence of racism--be it nature, or drive, or mode of production, or class formation. There are only the minutiae that make up the fabric of daily life and specific interests and values, the cultures out of which racialized discourse and racist expressions arise. Racist expressions become normalized in and through the prevailing categories of modernity’s epistemes and institutionalized in modernity’s various modes of social articulation and power” (Racist Culture 90). The process that Goldberg describes here is one of my primary concerns in this chapter.

11. I should note that Goldberg’s critique of Gilroy should not be taken as a sign that Gilroy simply didn’t appreciate the importance of conceptualizing a theory of race that would enable us to account for its historical development and its various manifestations. Indeed, though he would later argue against the usefulness of race as a conceptual framework, Gilroy has always been both clear and sharp on the phenomena gathered under this heading. “Races are not,” Gilroy asserted in an earlier essay,

    simple expressions of either biological or cultural sameness. They are imagined--socially and politically constructed--and the contingent processes from which they emerge may be tied to equally uneven patterns of class formation to which they, in turn, contribute. Thus ideas about race may articulate political and economic relations in a particular society that go beyond the distinct experiences or interests of racial groups to symbolize wider identities and conflicts. Discussion of racial domination cannot therefore be falsely separated from wider considerations of social sovereignty such as the conflict between men and women, the antagonisms between capital and labor, or the
manner in which modes of production develop and combine. Nor can the complexities of racial politics be reduced to the effect of these other relations. Dealing with these issues in their specificity and in their articulation with other relations and practices constitutes a profound and urgent theoretical and political challenge. It requires a theory of racisms that does not depend on an essentialist theory of races themselves. (264)

More recently, Gilroy has similarly emphasized the importance of a historically-informed, systemic understanding of race. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, he pauses to be clear about his views: “This is probably a good opportunity to emphasize that by ‘race’ I do not mean physical variations or differences commonsensically coded in, on, or around the body. For me, ‘race’ refers primarily to an impersonal, discursive arrangement, the brutal result of the raciological ordering of the world, not its cause. Tracking the term directs attention toward the manifold structures of a racial nomos—a legal, governmental, and spatial order—that, as we have seen, is now reviving the geopolitical habits of the old imperial system in discomforting ways” (39).

12. For a discussion of early African American literary responses to the vision of a fragmented community, see Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*, pp. 39-93, 136-138. It is also, and just as significantly, the field of relations that has informed much of the fractal development of African American literary and cultural scholarship. Beyond obvious (and obviously problematic) examples such as the Black Arts Movement, I am thinking, for example, of the vision of community presented in literary scholarship by Gibson in “Individualism and Community in Black History and Fiction” and Christian in “The Highs and the Lows of Black Feminist Criticism”; and in theology by Cone, pp. 82-109. For an important admonition about the need to avoid visions of a homogeneous black community, see Santamarina, “Thinkable Alternatives,” pp. 245-253.
13. For useful studies of “ethnic impersonators” and other reminders of the porous but insistent boundaries of racial identity, see Browder, 1-11; and Cassuto, 1-29.

14. In his examination of imperial violence in the early national period, Doolen argues that “these practices occur when the state converts skin and blood into the legal justifications for slavery, when it polices racial hierarchies with a special class of penal laws, when it reinforces ideals of white racial purity through official rituals of execution and banishment, and finally when the state invents official narratives of insurrection and invasion as a strategy for reinforcing political authority. These racial fictions--taking the form of the official discourse of law, policy, proclamation, and public ritual--constitute the logic of U.S. imperialism in the late colonial and early national periods, transforming the terror of white supremacy into a rational and permanent presence” (xxi).

For a related but different approach to the concerns Doolen examines, see Goddu. For historical background on the concerns Doolen raises, see Allen’s two-volume study of “the invention of the white race”; Saxton; and Horsman.

15. For a more sympathetic overview of the National Park Service Network to Freedom program, see Miller.


17. For a useful study of the white cultural appetite for spectacular presentations of racial others, see Frost.

Chapter Two