

male characters' respectively feminist and postfeminist responses to gender asymmetry.

Clear and ambitious, Kafka's book engenders (as it were) reconsiderations of Asian American women's writing vis-a-vis gender. It understandably says little about race itself in that it focuses on gender; it surprisingly says little about cultural differences between the Asian American ethnic groups it discusses (Chinese American and Japanese American). Nonetheless, by complicating the often oversimplified and sometimes wholly overlooked multiple ways that gender asymmetry is depicted by Asian American women writers, Kafka's book—which includes endnotes, a list of works cited, and an index that are nicely arranged and useful—provides an illuminating, new perspective.

David Goldstein-Shirley
University of Washington

Wahneema Lubiano, ed. *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain.* (New York: Random House, 1997). 323 pp., \$26.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

The House that Race Built is a fascinating account of race and racism upon the terrain of United States' culture in the 1990s. Seventeen scholars, brought together at a Race Matters Conference at Princeton University, produced various essays and were evidently given plenty of leeway by the book's editor, Wahneema Lubiano. Various disciplines of law, history, sociology, fine arts, ethnic studies, literature, divinity, and politics are represented. Contributors addressed issues ranging from homosexuality, affirmative action, O.J. Simpson and religion, to perspectives on work vis-a-vis play, culture, Black Nationalism, whiteness, crime, and the black diaspora. A common denominator, in my view, was the theme from Cornel West's perspective that race matters. The conference took its name from his work.

Stephen Steinberg mounted an impressive and passionate attack on the liberal retreat during the decades following the modern black-led Civil Rights Movement. Similar to Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams* or Herbert J. Gans' *The War Against the Poor*, Steinberg took no prisoners in his analysis of a right-wing backlash to the social turbulence of the 1980s-1990s, and more specifically, the left's and/or liberal establishment's lack of a proper response. Particular issue is taken with West's perspective on "nihilism" expressed in *Race Matters*. Steinberg sees it as an inappropriate descriptor and reaction to black inner-city crime and youth violence. Similarly, Gitlin reported how "culture war" infighting allowed the Religious Right to gain a moral and political high-ground during the 1990s, and Gans articulated how academics (and others) permitted a war to be waged against the so-called

underclass. These scholars lament how such social issues, which disproportionately affect black Americans, are too often decontextualized from the political economy that spawned them.

Kendall Thomas points to West's failure to address Louis Farrakhan's homophobia, citing that the loquacious minister had "inflicted (black suffering) on the bodies of gay and lesbian African Americans" by his rhetoric. Angela Davis' excellent essay on the Capitalization of the criminal justice system does not even mention West, nor does Rhonda Williams' personal thesis on lesbianism. Perhaps they should have, whether in support of their views or as a critique. David Lionel Smith defended the Harvard scholar, pointing out that "West's conception (of nihilism) . . . has only the most superficial connections to such arguments" (of underclass black pathology). Stuart Hall rose to referee Steinberg's attack on West, but Hall's rambling discourse is almost incoherent.

Though West is given the last word, he does not produce any substantive responses to any of the specific points made by Thomas and especially by Steinberg, noting that their criticisms are a "misreading" of his work. This is a weak defense, particularly given the depth, breadth, and yes, validity of the criticisms. West should have mounted a far more viable response than what he leaves in a mere two and one-fifth pages at the book's end.

The House that Race Built succeeds admirably in breaking new ground on the terrain of racial ideology in the United States. However, the last word on the subject unfortunately falls short.

Clarence Spigner
University of Washington

Charles W. Mills. *The Racial Contract*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). 171 pp, \$19.95 paper.

Over the past few years I have read a number of articles by Professor Charles Mills. I have found him to be a stimulating thinker and lucid writer. In fact, I had the opportunity to use his article, "Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African American Experience" (*Teaching Philosophy*, September 1994) in an NEH seminar that I conducted on multicultural approaches to Honor College teaching. Mills is a significant voice among the small cadre of Black philosophers committed to correction of and expansion beyond the Eurocentric myopia of professional philosophy. In his previous scholarship he demonstrates not only that he is insightful, critical and creative, but that he also grapples with questions and issues that few other philosophers, (including fellow Black philosophers), have dared to address. Of particular note is his