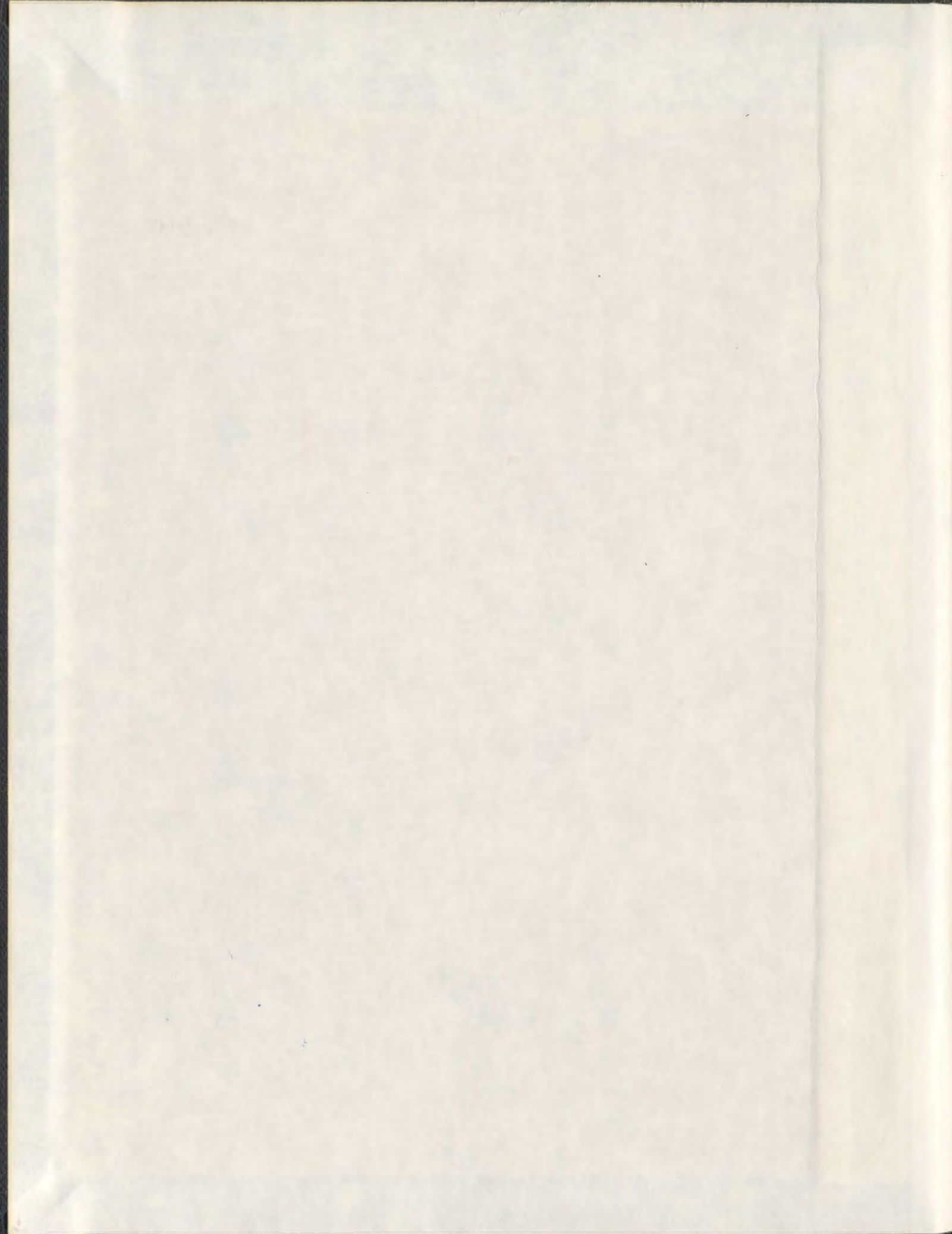


**COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINE:
TRAVERSING THE BOUNDARIES OF
RACE IN AMERICA**

CAROL GOODMAN



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**Coloring Outside the Line:
Traversing the Boundaries of Race in America**

by

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Abstract

“Coloring Outside the Line: Traversing the Boundaries of Race in America” explores how mixed-race individuals who defy categorization disquiet America’s racial footing by challenging the entire social system upon which it is based. In the United States, racial difference is cultivated on the socially constructed color line that separates blacks and whites. This line, however, is not indelible. The existence of mixed-race individuals who do not conform to the parameters of their race illustrates the elusive nature of racial identity and the slippage that occurs between supposedly distinct categories of race. Passing – whereby an individual crosses the color line segregating black from white – subverts notions of racial identity by calling into question the scientific, legal, and social systems upon which such narrow notions of race were founded. A prevalent theme in African-American literature, passing, through its interrogation of essentialism, challenges people’s perceptions of race. Originating during slavery and persisting into the twenty-first century, passing unsettles prevailing assumptions about the determinacy of race. To this end, the phenomenon of passing proves a powerful lens through which to view the constructed nature of race.

Part One of this dissertation is broadly historical in its examination of the epistemological roles of science and the law in the social construction of race. My first chapter charts the evolution of the concept of race from its inception in the sixteenth

century to its current day usage. In my second chapter, I investigate the role of the courts in the perpetuation of the myth of human races. Part Two of this thesis offers an analysis of racial passing in several mixed-race autobiographies from slavery to the present. By virtue of their position on the color line, the autobiographers discussed in this dissertation accentuate the permeability of that line. My motivation for analyzing autobiographical rather than fictional narratives of passing in the second half of my thesis is threefold: to address a void in the scholarship, to provide empirical evidence of the variability of race, and to examine the ways in which mixed-race autobiographers explore the problematic nature of race in their own writings. The fact that almost seven million Americans now identify themselves as mixed race suggests that race is not an inevitable and unalterable entity. Rather, it is a product of human invention, a culturally constructed edifice that must be dismantled if we hope to combat intolerance and eradicate racism.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Figures	viii
List of Appendices	ix
Introduction - Race Matters	1
Part One - “The House That Race Built”	14
Chapter One - Mythmaking: The Scientific Construction of Race	15
1.1 What is Race?	16
1.2 The Pseudoscience of Race: From Inception to Enlightenment	19
1.3 “The Mismeasure of Man”: Race in the Nineteenth Century	28
1.4 Debunking the Myth: Race in the Twentieth Century	31
1.5 “Boxed In”: Race in the New Millennium	38
Chapter Two - “A Fiction of Law and Custom”: The Legal Construction of Race	51
2.1 The <i>Partus</i> Law: Trials of Racial Determination During Slavery	54
2.2 The One-Drop Rule: Trials of Racial Determination During Jim Crow Segregation	71
2.3 The One Black Ancestor Rule: Trials of Racial Determination in the Twentieth Century	78

Part Two - "Using the Master's Tools to Dismantle the Master's House"	86
Chapter Three - Taking Liberties: Passing from Slavery to Freedom	87
3.1 "As White As Their Masters": Visualizing the Color Line	90
3.2 "Passes for a Negro": William Grimes's <i>Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave</i>	106
3.3 "So Much Whiter Than the Other Slaves": Moses Roper's <i>A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery</i>	111
3.4 "Only a Sprinkling of the African": Lewis Clarke's <i>Narrative of Lewis Clarke</i>	118
3.5 "Nothing More Substantial Than Color": Milton Clarke's <i>Narrative of Milton Clarke</i>	125
3.6 "As White As Anyone": William and Ellen Craft's <i>Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery</i>	130
3.7 "She's No Negro": Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: <i>A Tale of Southern Slave Life</i>	139
Chapter Four - Drawing the Line: Leading the Race Against Discrimination	145
4.1 "The Appearance of Whiteness": Walter White's <i>A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White</i>	146
4.2 "As Bright as the Noonday Sun": Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s <i>Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.</i>	162
Chapter Five - Stepping Over the Line: Passing Unbeknownst to Themselves	170
5.1 "Right on the Color Line": Gregory Howard Williams's <i>Life on the Color Line</i>	173
5.2 "An Irreversible Decision": Jillian Sim's "Fading to White"	196

List of Figures

Figure 3.1	Emancipated Slaves, White and Colored, <i>Harper's Weekly</i> , January 30, 1864.	88
Figure 3.2	Emancipated Slaves. 1863. Photographed by M.H. Kimball.	94
Figure 3.3	White and Black Slaves from New Orleans. 1863. Photographed by Kimball.	95
Figure 3.4	Isaac and Rosa, Emancipated Slave Children, from the Free Schools of Louisiana. 1863. Photographed by Kimball.	97
Figure 3.5	Learning is Wealth. Wilson, Charley, Rebecca & Rosa. Slaves from New Orleans. 1864. Photographed by Charles Paxson.	98
Figure 3.6	Rebecca, Charley & Rosa. Slave Children from New Orleans. 1864. Photographed by Charles Paxson.	101
Figure 3.7	Fannie Virginia Casseopia Lawrence. A Redeemed Slave Child, 5 years of age. 1863. Photographed by the Kellogg Brothers.	102
Figure 3.8	Moses Roper. Frontispiece from <i>A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery</i> . 1840.	112
Figure 3.9	Lewis Clarke. Frontispiece from <i>Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke</i> . 1846.	119
Figure 3.10	J. Milton Clarke. From <i>Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke</i> . 1846.	126
Figure 3.11	Ellen Craft, The Fugitive Slave. Frontispiece from <i>Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery</i> . 1860.	131
Figure 3.12	Louisa Picquet. From <i>Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life</i> . 1861.	140

List of Appendices

Appendix A - Census 2000 Summary File 1 Table P3 - Total Population by Race	226
Appendix B - Runaway Slave Advertisements	229
Appendix C - Abolitionist Newspaper Articles	233

Introduction

Race Matters

[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.

– W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)¹

On October 12, 1990, *The New York Times* marked the passing of one of its own – literary critic, editor, and essayist Anatole Broyard. A member of the *Times*'s family for more than eighteen years, Broyard was legendary for his trenchant, often acerbic book reviews. Described by *The New Yorker* as that “famously prickly critic for the *Times*” (qtd. in Staples n. pag.), Broyard was extremely demanding when it came to literature. Despite his “prickly” reputation, Broyard commanded the respect of the literary world. His poignant depiction of his battle with cancer in a series of articles published in *The New York Times Magazine* cemented his reputation as a gifted essayist. In the *Times*'s tribute to the late Broyard, the novelist Herbert Gold describes him as “the image of the Bohemian writer.” “Anatole invented his life as he went along,” continues Gold, “and I admired him for his ironic sense of fun” (qtd. in Mitgang A26). Five and a half years later, Broyard's passing would once again be the topic of conversation in literary circles across

¹ *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 359.

the country. On June 17, 1996, *The New Yorker* magazine published a brief biography of Broyard written by the chairman of Harvard's Afro-American Studies Department, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The article, entitled "White Like Me," shocked readers with the revelation that Anatole Broyard, "one of literary America's foremost gatekeepers," was in fact a Negro² (Gates, "The Passing" 180).³

Anatole Broyard was born in New Orleans on July 16, 1920 to Paul Broyard, a "light-skinned black" man, and his "high-yellow" wife, Edna Miller (182). With the exception of his younger sister, Shirley, Broyard's family was predominately fair-skinned. "In any event," writes Gates, the Broyard family "was identified as Negro, and identified itself as Negro" (182). When Anatole was just a few years old, the family moved to Brooklyn where Paul Broyard passed as white in order to join the carpenter's union.⁴

² The terms African American, black, white, mixed race, Negro, and colored are used throughout this dissertation according to the particular social and historical contexts from which they derive.

³ Gates's allusion to *Black Like Me* – John Howard Griffin's story of his passing as black in order to investigate racial discrimination in the South – is unmistakable. Presumably, Gates was not aware of Eddy Murphy's parody of the same when Gates penned the title for his *New Yorker* article. Also entitled "White Like Me," Murphy's Saturday Night Live comedy sketches depict a black man passing for white easily securing a bank loan without collateral and partying with other whites on a public bus once the last black passenger gets off. Gates later changed the title of his article to "The Passing of Anatole Broyard," when it was reprinted in his collection *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1997). The quotations used here are taken from that publication.

⁴ Gates is quick to assert that, unlike Anatole, Paul Broyard passed because it was expedient for him to do so. "It was a strictly professional decision," explains Gates, "which affected his work and nothing else" (183).

Years later, Anatole would follow suit, enlisting in the military as a white man, where he served as the captain of an all-black stevedore battalion. Following his release from the army, Broyard left his past behind and moved to Greenwich Village where he embarked on a career as a writer.⁵

Dissatisfied with what his old life had to offer, Anatole Broyard had simply invented a new one. Commenting on Broyard's transformation, African-American scholar and dramatist W. F. Lucas remarks, "He was black when he got into the subway in Brooklyn, but as soon as he got out at West Fourth Street he became white" (qtd. in Gates "The Passing" 184). Broyard's decision to cross the color line was inspired by his desire to establish himself as a writer, not a black writer. Why then was it so important for Gates to out Broyard as an African American to the literary world? Defending his decision to write the article, Gates insists, "I was not trying to reclaim him for my race. I was exploring complexity" (qtd. in Schiesel and Turner n. pag.). It is the complexity of which Gates speaks that is the focus of this dissertation.

In the United States, racial difference is cultivated on the socially constructed color line that separates blacks and whites. This line, however, is not indelible. The existence of mixed-race individuals, like Anatole Broyard, who do not conform to the

⁵ With the exception of those he had left behind when he passed into the white world, few people were aware of Broyard's racial heritage. In fact, Broyard's two adult children did not learn their father's secret until shortly before his death. Bliss Broyard reveals the impact of her father's passing on her and her family in an autobiographical essay entitled "The Unmasked Ball: Family Reunion," which is discussed in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

parameters of their race illustrates the elusive nature of racial identity and the slippage that occurs between supposedly distinct categories of race. Passing – whereby an individual crosses the color line segregating black from white – subverts notions of racial identity by calling into question the scientific, legal, and social systems upon which such narrow notions of race were founded. A prevalent theme in African-American literature, passing, through its interrogation of essentialism, challenges people's perceptions of race. Originating during slavery and persisting into the twenty-first century, passing unsettles prevailing assumptions about the determinacy of race. To this end, the phenomenon of passing proves a powerful lens through which to view the constructed nature of race.

Although it is typically inspired “by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities,” writes Elaine K. Ginsberg in her introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996), “the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of perceived awards” (3).⁶ In fictionalized accounts of passing, the passer's motives are as varied as the passers themselves. In William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or The President's Daughter: A*

⁶ In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997), Werner Sollors lists the following reasons why an individual might deliberately choose to pass:

the possibility of economic advancement and benefits (opportunism); interracial courtship or marriage (love); escape from slavery, proscription, discrimination, and the restrictions that segregation imposed on black life (political reasons); the desire to get away from the hypocrisy, narrowness, and double standard of black life; and for many other motives such as curiosity, desire for kicks (an “occasional thrill”), love of deception, preparation for political acts of subversion or revenge, and investigation of white criminal misconduct. (250-51)

Narrative of Slave Life in the United States (1853), Clotel mirrors Ellen Craft's escape by disguising herself as a white man in an effort to free herself and her daughter.⁷

Unfortunately, Brown's heroine does not fare as well as Craft. Trapped by her pursuers, Clotel takes her own life rather than return to a life of slavery. Tragedy also befalls the passers of Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857). Both Mrs. Garie and her son, Clarence, meet tragic ends when the secret of their true racial identities is revealed. Providing a stark contrast with Brown's and Webb's depictions of the tragic mulatto figure is the character of Iola Leroy in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy: or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Although she possesses all of the physical and cultural attributes of a white woman, Iola Leroy rejects the temptation to marry a wealthy white doctor and pass for white. Instead, Harper's heroine embraces her black heritage and dedicates herself to the betterment of her race.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt's interest in the color line and racial ambiguity was the inspiration for his first novel, *The House Behind Cedars* (1900). Chesnutt's narrative recounts the experiences of two mixed-race siblings, John and Rena Walden, who pass in an attempt to access the power and privilege not afforded members of their race. While John's efforts are rewarded, Rena's decision to reject her white identity contributes to her

⁷ William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860) is discussed in detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation. The Crafts' cleverly executed escape involved Ellen masquerading as a white male slave owner and William posing as her slave. Their escape caused such a stir that for years to follow, young masters journeying north with a single slave were often harassed by authorities (Taylor, *I Was Born: Volume Two* 482).

untimely death. Chesnutt's *Mandy Oxendine* (published posthumously in 1997) breaks with the tragic mulatto tradition in that its heroine is not destroyed by her "transgression." Perhaps the most prominent passing novel, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), delineates the psychological effects of its unnamed narrator's decision to permanently "pass into another world." Although he is not devastated by his decision to align himself with the white race, the narrator confesses to feeling small and selfish for abandoning his people. Unlike Chesnutt and Johnson, who seem at times ambivalent toward the subject of passing, Walter White is unequivocal in his rejection of passing in his novel *Flight* (1926). There is no mistaking the sense of liberation Mimi Daquin feels at her decision to return to her family and her community after abandoning them for the white world.

In her novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Nella Larsen uses passing as a tactic of self-discovery for her characters. *Quicksand*'s Helga Crane passes in an effort to unify the various facets of her identity. Unfortunately, Helga fails in her search for an authentic self and becomes trapped in a single, stifling black identity. *Passing*'s Clare Kendry also uses passing as a means of self-exploration. Refusing to be confined by a unitary identity, Clare adopts a series of guises and masks. However, her journey of self-discovery ends tragically when she decides to renounce her white identity and rejoin the African-American community. More radical in its approach to passing, Jessie Fauset's *There Is Confusion* (1924) has its main character pass in order to expose the racist

treatment of black soldiers in the South.⁸ In Fauset's second novel, *Plum Bum* (1929), the heroine, Angela Murray, discovers that she has paid too high a price for passing into the white world. Like White's Mimi Daquin, Angela revels in her decision to cross back over the color line and reclaim her black heritage. In Fauset's *Comedy, American Style* (1933), the Cary family is torn apart by a self-loathing mother who forces her daughter to pass as white. Olivia Blanchard Cary's obsession with blending into white society is so intense that it ultimately destroys her son, Oliver, and dooms her daughter, Teresa, to a life of misery.

Although there was a surge of interest in the theme of passing in African-American literature from the 1850s to the 1930s, relatively little was written about the topic in the years that followed. "Passing," Werner Sollors suggests in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, "was swept aside in social history by the civil rights movement" and in literature by the combined successes of writers "who no longer employed the theme" (284). In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence in interest in the subject of passing. As an increasing number of contemporary writers and critics revisit the phenomenon of racial passing, Sollors deduces that "the time may be ripe for case studies of known individuals who passed as well as for a full-fledged cultural investigation of the period in which 'passing' was a significant feature" (284). While much critical attention

⁸ The perils associated with this kind of passing are delineated in Walter White's autobiography, *A Man Called White* (1948), which is discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Like the hero of Fauset's novel, White poses as a white man in order to investigate the atrocities being committed against members of his race.

has been devoted to literary representations of passing in the decade since Sollors issued his call, there has been no “full-fledged cultural investigation” of the subject to date.⁹ In the interest of filling this void, my dissertation, “Coloring Outside the Line: Traversing the Boundaries of Race in America,” offers a systematic sociohistorical account of the phenomenon of passing and its treatment in mixed-race autobiographies from slavery to the present.

In her essay entitled “Home,” which appears in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, Toni Morrison writes, “I have never lived, nor have any of us, in a world in which race did not matter” (3). Although she concedes that a world “free of racial hierarchy” is a utopian or millennial vision, Morrison is nonetheless hopeful. She applauds the efforts of critical race theorists who are “clearing intellectual and moral space where racial constructs are being forced to reveal their struts and bolts, their technology and the carapace” (11) so that the foundation can be laid for a better world. Like the contributors to the collection from which I borrow the title for Part One of my dissertation, “The House That Race Built,” I am interested in exposing the “struts and

⁹ Several works have been published on the subject of passing in recent years. Among them are Juda Bennett, *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* (1996); Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996); Susan Gubar, *Racechanges* (1997); Pamela Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (1999); Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (2000); Cathy Boeckmann, *A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892-1912* (2000); Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line* (2000); M. Giulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (2001); and Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism* (2003).

bolts” used to construct the concept of race. To this end, my first two chapters investigate the roles of science and the law in the creation and perpetuation of the myth of human races and in the maintenance of racialized social systems.

My first chapter, entitled “Mythmaking: The Scientific Construction of Race,” charts the evolution of the concept of race from its inception in the sixteenth century to its current day usage. This mapping of the term’s development and subsequent deployment over the years offers valuable insight into how race became rationalized as a category of distinction. The inconsistencies in the criteria used to measure racial differences and the lack of consensus among classifiers in the creation of their taxonomies (both in the past and in the present) reflect the arbitrariness of such classifications. Through an analysis of these and other relevant issues, I reveal the extent to which (pseudo)scientific discussions of race reflect and reinforce popular (often dangerous) notions about human variation. I conclude the chapter with a historical account of the shifting racial designations used by the American government in its collection of population data and their implications for society as a whole.

In my second chapter, “‘A Fiction of Law and Custom’: The Legal Construction of Race,” I investigate the role of the courts in the perpetuation of the myth of human races. Through a close examination of specific cases of racial determination from slavery to the present, I explore how the law further reified black and white racial identities. Beginning with the precedent-setting case of *Hudgins v. Wrights*,¹⁰ this chapter reveals how the court

¹⁰ *Hudgins v. Wrights*, 11 Va. 134; 1806 Va. LEXIS 58; 1 Hen. & M. 134.

ascribed meaning to people's physical features in its efforts to determine who belonged to what racial group. In some instances, plaintiffs were forced to disrobe so that the entire courtroom – the judges, the jury, and the medical experts – might discover if they bore some indelible mark of the “inferior” race. The racially ambiguous individuals involved in these cases challenged the court's endeavour to legitimate rigid racial designations.

Extending Morrison's metaphor of the racial house, Part Two of my dissertation explores how mixed-race autobiographers from slavery to the present have been “Using the Master's Tools to Dismantle the Master's House.” In *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (1984), Audre Lorde criticizes feminism's dependence on dominant (white/male) theory to propel its argument. While Lorde is convinced that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,” I would argue that autobiography is a powerful tool through which the individuals discussed in this thesis mount their critique of narrow notions of race. My motivation for analyzing autobiographical rather than fictional narratives of passing in the second half of my thesis is threefold: to address a void in the scholarship, to provide empirical evidence of the variability of race, and to examine the ways in which mixed-race autobiographers explore the problematic nature of race in their own writings.

Chapter Three, “Taking Liberties: Passing from Slavery to Freedom,” begins with an analysis of a series of photographs of all-but-white slaves which were touted by abolitionists in an effort to raise money for public schools for freed slaves. From here, I move to an examination of the testimonies of former slaves whose white pigmentation

enabled them to escape the yoke of slavery. More than a hundred years prior to the publication of fictional passing narratives, slaves like William Grimes, Moses Roper, Lewis and Milton Clarke, and Ellen Craft were living the experiences. Their autobiographies recount several incidents in which their white complexions aided in their flights to freedom. In these narratives, the slaves' impetus for passing is abundantly clear: each is motivated by a desire to trade a life of bondage for one of freedom.

The fourth chapter, "Drawing the Line: Leading the Race Against Discrimination," opens with close scrutiny of Walter White's *A Man Called White*. Through its confrontation of the paradoxical nature of racial identity, White's autobiography offers valuable insight into the normative reality of people's conceptions of race. A self-described white-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired Negro, White epitomizes the ambiguities inherent in the narrow racial designations of black and white. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to an analysis of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s autobiography, *Adam by Adam*. Like White, Powell could easily have passed into the white world. Instead, he rose to an impressive leadership position in the United States House of Representatives from which he lobbied for the passage of anti-discrimination legislation.

Chapter Five, "Stepping Over the Line: Passing Unbeknownst to Themselves," highlights the indeterminacy of race through an analysis of autobiographers who had to be apprised of the fact that they were of African-American descent. Because they were oblivious of their black ancestry, Gregory Howard Williams, Jillian Sim, Bliss Broyard,

and Carol Channing were all unwittingly passing for white. Raised in the white world, they (in Williams's case, erroneously) assume a sense of entitlement to that world and to their whiteness as well. In this sense, these autobiographies, more than any others examined in this dissertation, best exemplify the fluid nature of racial classifications.

Finally, in "The Racial Divide," I explore the stresses and uncertainties associated with choosing or being assigned a particular racial identity at a time when race is no longer supposed to matter. The personal testimonies of Kathleen Cross, Adrian Piper, Naomi Zack, Judy Scales-Trent, and Juanita Brooks highlight the psychological effects of having to negotiate the tightrope between black and white. My conclusion foregrounds the complicated determinants behind each autobiographer's conscious decision to reject passing as an alternative. It is interesting to note that although these autobiographers each balk at society's efforts to pigeonhole them, they all identify themselves as black.

"Coloring Outside the Line: Traversing the Boundaries of Race in America" explores how mixed-race individuals who defy categorization disquiet America's racial footing by challenging the entire social system upon which it is based. Although, in the last few decades, scholars in the biological and anthropological sciences have determined and generally agree that race is a fiction, their findings have not translated into the erasure of the term from either scientific or everyday utterance. And, as a result, the average person remains unaware of the fact that racial categories – based on a combination of phenotypic traits and cultural characteristics (both real and imagined) – are social rather than scientific constructs. By virtue of their position on the color line, the autobiographers

discussed in this dissertation accentuate the permeability of that line. Highlighting the amorphous nature of race, they exist in “a world where the categories do not clarify, but only confuse, a world where one must question the very existence of those categories in order to survive” (Scales-Trent 12).

Part One

“The House That ‘Race’ Built”

Chapter One
Mythmaking:
The Scientific Construction of Race

Where am I to be classified? Or, if you prefer, tucked away?

– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*¹¹

Since its emergence as a definitive principle several hundred years ago, race has masqueraded as a scientifically tenable means of measuring and interpreting human differences. Simplified perceptions of racial difference are so ingrained in our consciousness that most of us think of race as indisputable, never questioning its validity. All but a few are convinced that race is an essential or biological fact. And the majority take it for granted that scientists have long since identified and successfully subdivided the races of humankind into discrete categories. But race is not a biological or natural phenomenon, as we have been persuaded to believe. Nor have hundreds of years of classifying succeeded in producing a viable taxonomy of race. What we have come to associate with and accept as race is in fact a myth.

The following chapter provides an overview of the scientific construction of race,

¹¹ *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 113.

which is a necessary precursor to understanding how (and why) the term emerged as the foremost conceptual paradigm for identifying and interpreting human diversity. By demonstrating that there is no scientific rationale for separating human beings into distinct racial categories, this chapter attempts to demythologize race. To accomplish this end, I examine the history of race formation, namely the creation and implementation of racial classifications, over the last four hundred years. This process involves analyzing how racial membership is determined, as well as the principles of inclusion and exclusion that this categorization entails. While this overview is by necessity condensed, it is extensive enough to illustrate the subjective nature of racial classifications that, in their concern with separating in order to distinguish, have succeeded only in fragmenting society.¹²

1.1 What Is Race?

What do we mean by race? And what traits or characteristics are used to determine to which race an individual belongs? The answers to these seemingly simple, straightforward questions are anything but. Despite several hundred years of usage, the word race cannot be defined with any degree of accuracy. Nor does there appear to be any consensus as to the exact criterion used to demarcate race. Much of this disputation and uncertainty over the exact definition of the term centres on the popular misconception that

¹² As it is my intention in this chapter to expose the fallacy of typological approaches to human diversity, I confine my discussion of the scientific construction of race to individuals who produced and advanced specific taxonomies of race.

race is something tangible, something that can be measured and described. To illustrate the ambiguous, indeed slippery, nature of race one need look no further than the numerous and contradictory dictionary definitions of the word. Of the multiple definitions of race offered by *The Oxford English Dictionary (The OED)*,¹³ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*,¹⁴ and *Random House Dictionary* the most applicable and comprehensive (as applied to persons) are found in *Random House*:

1. A group of persons related by common descent or heredity.
2. A population so related.
3. Any of the traditional divisions of humankind, the commonest being the Caucasian, Mongoloid, and Negro, characterized by supposedly distinctive and universal physical characteristics.
4. An arbitrary classification of modern humans, sometimes, esp. formerly, based on any or a combination of various physical characteristics, as skin color, facial form, or eye shape, and now frequently based on such genetic markers as blood groups.

¹³ *The OED* offers the following definitions of race:

1. A limited group of persons descended from a common ancestor; a house, family, kindred.
2. A tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock.
3. A group of several tribes or peoples, regarded as forming a distinct ethnical stock.
4. One of the great divisions of mankind, having certain physical peculiarities in common.

¹⁴ The definitions of race found in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* are remarkably similar to *The OED*'s. However, *Webster's* varies in its inclusion of behavioural traits in its delineations:

1. The descendants of a common ancestor: a family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock.
2. A class or kind of individuals with common characteristics, interests, appearance, or habits as if derived from a common ancestor.
3. Any of various infraspecific taxonomic groups.
4. A division of mankind possessing traits that are transmissible by descent and sufficient to characterize it as a distinct human type. (1870)

5. A human population partially isolated from other populations, whose members share a greater degree of physical and genetic similarity with one another than with other humans.
6. A group of tribes or peoples forming an ethnic stock.
7. Any people united by common history, language, cultural traits, etc.
8. The human race or family; humankind. (1590)

Notably, *Random House* is the only one of the three dictionaries to make specific reference to the “traditional divisions of humankind,” which it cites as “Caucasian, Mongoloid, and Negro.” Although *Webster’s* mentions two of the three “divisions” – “Caucasian” and “Mongoloid ” – it cites them as examples, alongside other “more or less clearly defined group[s]” such as “the Malay *race*” and “the Hebrew *race*” (1870).

Random House is also rather blunt in its estimation of the “classification of modern humans” as “arbitrary.” While one might argue that the dictionary’s coupling of inherited physical characteristics (such as “skin color”) with learned behaviours (such as “language”) seems equally arbitrary, the correlation is not unfounded. The practice of linking these rather disparate traits is grounded in the same tradition as that which first inspired the classification of humankind into distinct groups.

The lack of precision or consensus involved in pinning down the meaning of race is further emphasized in the efforts of all three dictionaries to qualify their definitions. For example, *The OED* observes that “the term is often used imprecisely,” and that “even among anthropologists there is no generally accepted classification or terminology.” *Webster’s*, while conceding that definitions of race are subject to distortion, nevertheless

tries to locate some arena in which the term has usefulness:

In technical discriminations, all more or less controversial and often lending themselves to great popular misunderstanding or misuse, race is anthropological and ethnological in force, usu. implying a distinct physical type with certain unchanging characteristics, as a particular color of skin or shape of skull <the Caucasian *race*> <the Malay *race*> <the Ethiopian *race*> although sometimes, and most controversially, other presumed common factors are chosen, as place of origin <the Nordic *race*> or common root language <the Aryan *race*>. (1870)

Finally, *Random House* alludes to the recent controversy in scientific circles concerning the legitimacy and applicability of the term: "In reference to classifying the human species, race is now under dispute among modern biologists and anthropologists. Some feel that the term has no biological validity" (1590). That the term race is "often used imprecisely," is "prone to popular misunderstanding and misuse," and is the focus of such heated debate warrants an investigation into its validity as a category of distinction. The remainder of this chapter investigates the role of science or, more accurately, pseudoscience in the validation and dissemination of race ideologies that persist to this day.¹⁵

1.2 The Pseudoscience of Race: From Inception to Enlightenment

Although it first appeared in the English language in the early 1500s, "race" was

¹⁵ From the first efforts to classify humanity, individuals from all walks of life weighed in on the race issue. In this respect, the term "science" is not limited to the natural or biological sciences, but includes any discipline (i.e. philosophy) accorded scholarly credibility for its contribution to race.

not deployed as a technical term to describe subsets of humanity for another century.¹⁶ Prior to this period, writes anthropologist Audrey Smedley in *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, early taxonomists employed classificatory terms such as “types,” “varieties,” “peoples,” “nations,” and “species,” which were later used interchangeably with “race” (Smedley 162). It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century, however, that race distinguished itself as the “one major symbol and mode of human group differentiation” (39). Esteemed the most applicable of all the classificatory terms, race became increasingly used by classifiers intent on determining the exact number of races and their correlation to one another. Thus, in the span of a few hundred years, race had evolved from a vague interpretive tool into an ostensibly viable, scientifically validated method of differentiating between human beings.

In the latter half of the sixteenth century, scholars in the natural and biological sciences sought to develop a system of human classification not unlike that used to organize the plant and animal kingdoms. Using the simplest method at their disposal, two early taxonomers, Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno and French administrator Jean Bodin, arranged the variegated peoples of the world according to skin color. Bruno produced an elementary taxonomy of the “many colors” of the “species of men,” which

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the etymology of the term race, see Smedley, *Race in North America*, 36–40. According to Smedley, the first recorded use of race in English is found in William Dunbar’s poem “The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis” (1508), in the reference “backbyttaris of sindry racis” (qtd. in Smedley 37). Fellow anthropologist Ashley Montagu cites John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1570), in which the author refers to “the outward race & stock of Abraham,” as the first recorded use of the term (qtd. in Montagu, *The Idea of Race* 8).

included “the black race of the Ethiopians” and “the yellow offspring of America” (qtd. in Slotkin 43).¹⁷ Adopting a more descriptive approach, Bodin observed “four notable differences of people in colour” – “a duskish colour like unto a roasted quince,” “black,” “white,” and “a chestnut colour” (qtd. in Slotkin 43). Although Bruno, Bodin, and others like them made rudimentary attempts to arrange humanity, it was not until the seventeenth century that a more rigid system of classification came into being.

In 1684, François Bernier, a French physician and traveller, began ranking human beings according to physical attributes such as skin color, hair texture, and overall appearance. The “four or five species or races of men” delineated by Bernier included “Europeans,” “Far Easterners,” “Africans,” and “Lapps” (Bernier 360-64). Although Bernier alluded to a fifth “species,” the “Americans,” he did not “find the difference sufficiently great to make of them a peculiar species different from ours” (362). Believing it unnecessary to describe the “Europeans,” Bernier confined his portraiture to the three remaining races. He described the “Africans” as having “thick lips,” “squab noses,” “polished” skin, and hair like “a species of wool, which comes near to the hairs of some

¹⁷ Edited by anthropologist James Sydney Slotkin, *Readings in Early Anthropology* (1965) is particularly useful in its reprinting of excerpts from the works of early figures in the development of anthropology. Although I cite original sources whenever possible, I depend on Slotkin and others for those texts which have not been translated or are not available in their original. Additional works that proved invaluable to my research and the synthesis of my own ideas on race include Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* [1942] (1964); Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* [1963] (1997); Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (1993); and Alain Corcos, *The Myth of Human Races* (1997).

of our dogs" (361-62). The physician was even less objective in his depiction of the "Far Easterners," who were described as having "little pig's-eyes long and deep set," and the "Lapps," who were said to be "little stunted creatures," whose faces were "very ugly and partaking much of the bear" (362). By using animal images to describe each of the non-European races, Bernier implied that these peoples were not only inferior, but that they were somehow less than human. The arbitrariness of his racial groupings is further delineated by the fact that his impression of the "Lapps" as "wretched animals" was based on his observation of only two such individuals (362).

Believed to be the first to classify all of humanity in such a manner, Bernier laid the foundation upon which subsequent, more involved taxonomies of race were built. He also appears to have set the stage for an increasingly subjective approach to racial categorization. In 1735, Carolus Linnaeus (Carl von Linné), a Swedish botanist, developed a classificatory system which separated humankind into four distinct groups: "Europaeus," "Americanus," "Asiaticus," and "Africanus." Like most early taxonomers, Linnaeus did not acquire all of the information he used in his classificatory system firsthand, but was indebted to the writings of explorers, missionaries, and others who had lived or travelled in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. In the tenth edition of his *Systema naturae* (1758-1759), Linnaeus elaborated on the "differentia for the races of man" as follows:

American. Copper-coloured, choleric, erect.
 Hair black, straight, thick; *nostrils* wide; *face* harsh, *beard*
 scanty; *obstinate*, content free; *Paints* himself with fine red lines.
 Regulated by customs.

<i>European.</i>	Fair, sanguine, brawny. <i>Hair</i> yellow, brown, flowing; <i>eyes</i> blue; <i>gentle</i> , acute, inventive. <i>Covered</i> with close vestments. <i>Governed</i> by laws.
<i>Asiatic.</i>	Sooty, melancholy, rigid. <i>Hair</i> black; <i>eyes</i> dark; <i>severe</i> , haughty, covetous. <i>Covered</i> with loose garments. <i>Governed</i> by opinions.
<i>African.</i>	Black, phlegmatic, relaxed. <i>Hair</i> black, frizzled; <i>skin</i> silky; <i>nose</i> flat; <i>lips</i> tumid; <i>crafty</i> , indolent, negligent. <i>Anoints</i> himself with grease. <i>Governed</i> by caprice. (9)

The lack of objectivity (or, rather, blatant subjectivity) with which Linnaeus describes each group is delineated in the haphazard manner in which he orders the characteristics of each race. His interspersing of physical traits with behavioural traits, cultural customs, and ideologies is at once arbitrary and unwarranted. In addition, the adjectives Linnaeus employs to depict certain races do not illuminate his subjects as much as malign them. His disapproval of (if not distaste for) the “Asiaticus” and “Africanus” races is as obvious as his preference for the “Europaeus.” While there appears to be no logical basis for Linnaeus’s organization of traits, his coupling of physical attributes with behavioural characteristics reflects the prevailing attitude of his time – that the two were inextricably linked. Linnaeus and his contemporaries firmly believed that qualities such as obstinacy, melancholia, indolence, and gentility were not only inherent but inherited. These men of “science” did more than simply report the beliefs and opinions of missionaries, explorers, colonizers and the like, they validated them.

Subsequent scholars, such as French naturalist George Louis Leclerc Buffon, dedicated themselves to investigating the effects of the environment on race. Although Buffon established “varieties” of humankind – which included “Laplanders (or the Polar

Race),” “Tartars (or Mongolians),” “Southern Asiatics,” “Europeans,” “Ethiopians,” and “Malays” – he was less concerned with classifying these “varieties” than with explaining their existence. In Buffon’s eyes, whites were the “norm,” and all other races were simply exotic variations emanating from differences in climate and other environmental factors.

Buffon argued:

Upon the whole, every circumstance concurs in proving, that mankind are not composed of species essentially different from each other; that on the contrary, there was originally but one species, who, after multiplying and spreading over the whole surface of the earth, have undergone various changes by the influence of climate, food, mode of living, epidemic diseases, and the mixture of dissimilar individuals... (qtd. in Slotkin 186)

Notwithstanding his rather Eurocentric notion that whites are the benchmark against which all other races are measured, Buffon’s estimation of humankind as a single species and his belief in the environmental causes of human variation reflect the contemporaneity of his views on race.

Buffon’s rather modern sentiments concerning race converge with those of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German professor of medicine, who is credited with laying the foundations of the science of physical anthropology. Echoing Buffon, Blumenbach suggested that the differences that existed between human beings did not negate their relation to one another. In *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1795), Blumenbach argued that “no variety of mankind exists, whether of colour, countenance, or stature, &c., so singular as not to be connected with others of the same kind by such an imperceptible transition, that it is very clear they are all related, or only differ from each other in degree” (264). Although Blumenbach recognized the essential unity of humankind, this

recognition did not preclude him from separating human beings into five distinct racial categories – “Caucasian,” “Mongolian,” “Ethiopian,” “American,” and “Malay” – two of which can still be found in current usage. He does so under the guise that “it will be found serviceable to the memory to have constituted certain classes into which the men of our planet may be divided” (100). While Blumenbach’s justification of his own classificatory scheme as “serviceable” is debatable, his recognition of the artificiality of such systems is noteworthy.

Believing that the “innumerable varieties of mankind run into one another by insensible degrees” (264), Blumenbach argued that it was virtually impossible to make unequivocal distinctions between human beings. Although he himself was guilty of rendering such distinctions, Blumenbach, unlike his predecessors, acknowledged the dangers of dividing humankind along racial lines. He was particularly critical of those who suggested that certain races were superior or inferior, and those who elected to arrange the races in order of their beauty. Apparently oblivious to his own biases in this area, Blumenbach engaged in the very Eurocentric, subjective judgements he railed against. Specifically, his selection of the term “Caucasian” to delineate the white race was done on aesthetic grounds, as he believed that the Caucasus mountain region of Russia produced “the most beautiful race of men” and the most perfect skulls (269).

Blumenbach, as we have seen, was not alone in his conviction that the Europeans were the most appealing of the varieties of humankind. Bernier, Linnaeus, and many others were guilty of similar prejudicial practices in the creation of their own taxonomic systems.

Of all the classificatory schemes advanced, the most enduring is credited to French naturalist Georges Cuvier. In *Le Raegne Animal Distribube d'apraes son Organisation* (1817), Cuvier divided the peoples of the world into three broad categories: the "Caucasian, or white," the "Mongolian, or yellow," and the "Ethiopian, or Negro" (37). Established at the turn of the century, Cuvier's scheme – which did not originate with him but, rather, drew from earlier taxonomies – survives as the principal mode of human classification. What elevated Cuvier's system over the others is not entirely clear. Perhaps its appeal lay in the scheme's relative simplicity, as Cuvier had settled on the fewest number of proposed races. While the majority of taxonomers cited four or five different "races," "species," "varieties," or "types," Cuvier narrowed his divisions of humankind down to three. That some classifiers identified as few as three races, and others as many as two hundred,¹⁸ reflects the variability of such taxonomic schemes. Their subjective nature is further emphasized by the fact that the criterion for each system changed in accordance with the views of its originator.

Well aware of the artificiality of the classificatory schemes they advanced, Blumenbach and his contemporaries understood that their taxonomies offered little more than a convenient means of organizing humanity. Whatever their original purpose, however, the ramifications of such classifications were far-reaching, and their

¹⁸ In "The Biological Race Concept and Diseases of Modern Man," Elizabeth S. Watts reveals that although "attempts at classifying human populations have consistently resulted in a relatively small number (usually between five and ten) of geographically delimited groups," taxonomers have enumerated anywhere "from 2 to 200 races of modern *Homo sapiens*" in the past two hundred years (157).

implications serious.¹⁹ Specifically, the race concept provided the foundation for an ideology aimed at legitimizing the exploitation and oppression of certain peoples on the basis of racial differences. By the close of the eighteenth century, racial theories proffering seemingly substantive proof of the innate inferiority of the African American had made serious inroads into popular thought in the United States. In the hands of Southern apologists for slavery, such theories offered indisputable evidence of African

¹⁹ The taxonomic systems of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did more than just establish boundaries, they erected barriers. Created in the name of science, these taxonomies served to legitimize the prejudice and limited views of those already convinced of the superiority (and subsequent inferiority) of certain races. As Smedley puts it:

1. They gave an aura of permanence and rigidity to conceptions of human differences. Once you classify something, you set it irretrievably in time and space, with a tendency to be transmitted to others as a fixed and unalterable entity.
2. The categories, as drawn up, accepted unquestioningly the linkage of physical characteristics with behavioral ones, along with such psychocultural features as temperament, disposition, and moral character. Such fusion, we have seen, was a trend in the general popular thought of the times; hence it documents the growing strength of this component of the racial worldview in the minds of both the classifiers and their readers.
3. The classifications easily lent themselves to hierarchical structuring, fostering an impression of inequality among the different groups, with the most positive and progressive cultural features associated with Europeans and the least positive ones associated with those called "savages." This clearly fit well with the still expanding racial worldview and accorded with social, economic, and political realities.
4. Finally, such classifications by such reputable and highly renowned scientists (naturalists) as Linnaeus and Blumenbach made humankind part of the natural order of things. They thus legitimized as "natural" and God-given the inferior qualities ascribed to non-Europeans and helped to justify their lower positions in world societies. In other words, they tended to provide the scientific sanctions and scholarly credibility for prevailing popular images and stereotypes of non-Europeans. (Smedley 167-68)

Americans' suitability as slaves. Some went so far as to suggest that the physical and intellectual differences between the two races were so insurmountable that giving a black person his or her freedom was tantamount to destroying him or her. In the minds of these advocates of slavery, white society was doing African Americans a favour by enslaving them. These and other champions of the "positive good" theory argued that slavery was not, as the abolitionists would have everyone believe, an incomprehensible evil but an essential good. In short, they depicted slavery not as the "peculiar institution" it was reputed to be, but as a mutually beneficial relationship between slaveowners and their slaves.

1.3 "The Mismeasure of Man": Race in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, the most exhaustive efforts to classify humankind centred on the study of craniology. Dr. Samuel G. Morton, an American physician and researcher, conducted extensive research into the measurement and comparison of human skulls. From the various techniques he devised for measuring human crania, Morton classified humankind into the following groups according to brain size: "Caucasian," "Mongolian," "Malay," "American," and "Ethiopian."²⁰ In addition to his hierarchical

²⁰ Convinced of the veracity of Blumenbach's classificatory scheme, Morton adopted the system (with full credit to his predecessor) as his own. Further sub-dividing the five geographic races into twenty-two families, "Morton's list is almost exactly the same as that produced more than a century later as the accepted views of American physical anthropology" (Brace 245).

ordering of the races based on putative brain size, Morton reflected upon the mental and moral characteristics of each race. The “Caucasians” were characterized with “the highest intellectual endowments”; the “Mongolians” were distinguished as “ingenious, imitative, and highly susceptible of cultivation”; the “Malays” were said to be “active and ingenious”; the “Americans” were “averse to cultivation, and slow in acquiring knowledge; restless, revengeful, and fond of war”; and the “Ethiopians,” who represented the “lowest grade of humanity,” were described as “joyous, flexible, and indolent” (Morton 3-7). Despite the presumed advances in science, Morton’s schema was every bit as impressionistic as that proposed by Linnaeus a century earlier.

Like Morton (and Blumenbach before him), French diplomat and philosopher Joseph-Arthur Comte de Gobineau also focussed his efforts on the human crania. Gobineau believed that the measurement of skulls and other body parts formed the basis for racial differences in intelligence and morality. Echoing Cuvier, Gobineau divided the races into three groups – the “white,” “yellow,” and “black.” Although he was critical of the “yellow race,” Gobineau was most disparaging of the “black race.” In *The Inequality of Human Races* (1854), Gobineau observed that “The negroid variety is the lowest, and stands at the foot of the ladder. The animal character, that appears in the shape of the pelvis, is stamped on the negro from birth, and foreshadows his destiny” (205). According to Gobineau, “[the negro’s] low receding brow” confirmed that “his mental facilities are dull or even non-existent” (205). Citing the inherent intellectual inferiority of the “dark

racess,” Gobineau advocated against intermixing, promoting racial purity as the key to civilization.

Although studies in physiognomy and phrenology had gained in popularity, by the end of the nineteenth century craniometry was judged to be a complete failure because it neglected to provide a viable means of distinguishing one race from another (Gossett 77). This deficiency did not, however, dissuade taxonomers in their efforts, as some of the more ambitious schemes for measuring racial differences reveal.²¹ Studies pertaining to the texture of human hair, for example, suggested that African Americans comprised a distinct species because their hair was more like wool than like that of white men. Extending this notion to facial hair, American military officer Charles Hamilton Smith divided humankind into three major types: the “Woolly Haired Tropical type,” the “Hyperborean, Beardless, or Mongolic type,” and the “Bearded, Intermediate, or Caucasian type” (Smith xv-xvi).

In the final analysis, nineteenth-century researchers were hard-pressed to find a reliable and accurate method for differentiating between the races. Even though their racial taxonomies were based on more complete (if not more objective) data than previous classifications, the lack of consensus among classifiers persisted. The widespread disagreement over the number of existing races, the inconsistency in the criterion used to

²¹ One of the more bizarre methods of racial classification was the examination of body lice as a possible indicator of race. According to Thomas F. Gossett, in *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, an English entomologist had attempted to prove that “the body lice of some races could not live on the bodies of individuals of other races;” however, the evidence was not sufficient to support a “racial scale” of any kind (81).

measure race, and the sheer proliferation of racial classifications had done more to confuse than to clarify the concept of race. Ruminating on the condition of anthropological research at the close of the century, Ludwig Gumpłowicz, a prominent racial scientist from Germany, remarked in 1883 that “[t]he sorry role played by all anthropological measuring of skulls and the like can be appreciated by anyone who has ever tried to gain enlightenment through these studies of mankind’s different types. Everything is higgledy-piggledy, and the ‘mean’ figures and measurements offer no palpable result” (qtd. in Malik 120). Gumpłowicz’s estimation of nineteenth-century racial studies as “higgledy-piggledy” emphasizes both the elusiveness and the futility of such pursuits. How is it, then, that the classifiers themselves could not see this? The fundamental problem behind the relentless search for methods to calculate racial differences and classify humankind was that the researchers and taxonomers never questioned the legitimacy of their pursuit. Despite the staggering evidence that their classifications were flawed in some way, they refused to consider the possibility that humanity could not be so neatly categorized.

1.4 Debunking the Myth: Race in the Twentieth Century

At the turn of the century, one of the strongest oppositions to racial determinism and the hierarchical ordering of the races was launched by a member of the African-

American intellectual community. Repudiating the oft recited allegations of African American inferiority, W.E.B. Du Bois, in "The Conservation of Races" (1897), asserted that "[t]he American Negro has always felt an intense personal interest in discussions as to the origins and destinies of races: primarily because back of most discussions of race with which he is familiar, have lurked certain assumptions as to his natural abilities, as to his political, intellectual and moral status, which he felt were wrong" (815). Intent on redeeming his race from the mire of "scientific racism," Du Bois advanced his own racial theories. Well-versed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial taxonomies, he recognized the difficulty of classifying humankind according to physical characteristics and other racial criteria which failed to correlate with one other. "Color does not agree with texture of hair," remarked Du Bois, "for many of the dark races have straight hair; nor does color agree with the breadth of the head, for the yellow Tartar has a broader head than the German; nor, again, has the science of language as yet succeeded in clearing up the relative authority of these various and contradictory criteria" (816). Du Bois continued: "The final word of science, so far, is that we have at least two, perhaps three, great families of human beings – the whites and Negroes, possibly the yellow race," with additional races arising from "the intermingling of the blood of these two" (816).

Unwilling to accept "the final word of science," Du Bois devised his own classificatory scheme which was comprised of "eight distinctly differentiated races" and three "minor race groups":

They are, the Slavs of eastern Europe, the Teutons of middle Europe, the English of Great Britain and America, the Romance nations of Southern

and Western Europe, the Negroes of Africa and America, the Semitic people of Western Asia and Northern Africa, the Hindoos of Central Asia and the Mongolians of Eastern Asia. There are, of course, other minor race groups, as the American Indians, the Esquimaux and the South Sea Islanders; these larger races, too, are far from homogeneous; the Slav includes the Czech, the Magyar, the Pole and the Russian; the Teuton includes the German, the Scandinavian and the Dutch; the English include the Scotch, the Irish and the conglomerate American. Under Romance nations the widely-differing Frenchman, Italian, Sicilian and Spaniard are comprehended. The term Negro is, perhaps, the most indefinite of all, combining the Mulattoes and Zamboes of America and the Egyptians, Bantus and Bushmen of Africa. Among the Hindoos are traces of widely differing nations, while the great Chinese, Tartar, Corean and Japanese families fall under the one designation – Mongolian.²² (817-18)

Convinced that race was more of a sociohistorical concept than anything else, Du Bois insisted that the task of dividing humanity into races was better fitted to the historian and the sociologist than to the scientist. In Du Bois's mind, physical characteristics were too indeterminate and elusive to provide the foundation upon which to build an invariable classificatory system. Rather than focussing on "the grosser physical differences of color, hair and bone" (816), then, Du Bois's schema offered a comprehensive geographical/historical arrangement of humankind.

The 1930s saw a return to population genetics in the hopes that geneticist Gregor Mendel's experiments on heredity in the mid-nineteenth century might aid in attempts to classify humanity. As Alain Corcos suggests, in *The Myth of Human Races*, "in order to be able to classify mankind into races," the geneticists had to use "traits whose inheritance was simple and not affected by the environment" (104). It was believed that "blood

²² Du Bois's taxonomy reads almost like a parody of other classificatory schemes. His use of the word "conglomerate," for instance, implies that there are so many distinctions as to render the concept of race totally indeterminate.

groups,” which had been discovered around 1900, would prove extremely useful for this (104). The first person to construct a taxonomy based on “blood groups” was anthropologist William Boyd in 1950. Boyd calculated the “gene frequency” for three “blood groups” to develop the following racial classification: “Early European,” “European (Caucasoid),” “African (Negroid),” “Asiatic (Mongoloid),” “American Indian,” and “Australoid” (268). Although Boyd hoped to discover a gene particular to one race and not the others, he was unsuccessful. In the end, Boyd’s taxonomy merely replicated other geographically-based schemas. This trend would continue with anthropologist Stanley Garn. In 1961, Garn published *Human Races*, in which he delineated three levels of racial subdivisions: “geographical races,” “local races,” and “micro-races.” Garn estimated that there were nine “geographical races,” hundreds of “local races” (of which he identifies thirty-two), and thousands of “micro-races.” The larger “geographical race” groupings included: “Amerindian,” “Polynesian,” “Micronesian,” “Melanesian,” “Australian,” “Asiatic,” “Indian,” “European,” and “African” (Garn 168-78).

Fellow anthropologist Carleton S. Coon also devised a geographically based classificatory scheme, which likely stemmed from an article he collaborated on with Garn, in 1955, entitled “On the Number of Races of Mankind.” In *The Origin of the Races* (1962), Coon traced the evolution of five “geographic groups” which he referred to as the “Caucasoid,” “Mongoloid,” “Australoid,” “Congoid,” and “Capoid” (4). Coon argued that the races evolved independently of one another, that “each had been molded in a different

fashion to meet the needs of different environments, and that each had reached its own level on the evolutionary scale" (vii). According to Coon, the "Congoids (the Negroes)" were the last to be transformed into *Homo sapiens*, which explained why they had not achieved the same level of civilization as the "Caucasoids."

That twentieth-century taxonomers like Boyd, Garn, and Coon merely replicated earlier racial classifications (to one degree or another) is hardly surprising considering that they, like so many before them, were firmly convinced that human races actually existed. Clinging to this (mis)conception, they too engaged in the well-worn task of trying to establish the criteria by which humanity could be classified – a task which renowned anthropologist Ashley Montagu viewed as "a diverting parlor game in which by arbitrarily selecting the criteria one could nearly always make the 'races' come out exactly as one thought they should" (Montagu *Man's Most* 66). Taking Coon as a contemporary example of a classifier who engaged in such self-fulfilling prophecies, Montagu described his approach as a "kind of overzealous taxonomy, which has its origin principally in the desire to force facts to fit pre-existing theories of this kind" (27).

In the early 1940s, Montagu began singlehandedly battling the concept of race, which he deemed "man's most dangerous myth" (23). Famed for his "omelet" conception of race, Montagu equated the "anthropological process of race-making" with "knocking the individuals together, giving them a good stirring, and then serving the resulting omelet as a 'race'" (67). Montagu extended the metaphor:

It may have been good cooking, but it was not science, since it served to confuse rather than to clarify.... It was an omelet which corresponded to

nothing in nature: an indigestible dish conjured into being by an anthropological chef from a number of ingredients which were extremely varied in character. This omelet conception of "race" had no existence outside the statistical frying pan in which it had been reduced by the heat of the anthropological imagination. (67-8)

Despite Montagu's pioneering efforts in challenging the race concept, it would be twenty years more before his position was adopted by the scientific community. The fruit of his labour is revealed in a collection of essays, by seven physical anthropologists and three biologists, entitled *The Concept of Race* (1964). In his introduction to the volume, Montagu stated that "the biological concept of race has become unacceptable" to a growing number of biologists and anthropologists (Montagu "The Concept of Race" xi). Fellow anthropologist Frank B. Livingstone supported this premise in his contribution to the collection entitled "On the Nonexistence of Human Races," in which he declared that "races do not exist but are only part of a general theory concocted by human beings to explain or render intelligible their observations" (139). That three hundred years of "concocting" failed to produce an objective (not to mention invariable) racial classification attests to the arbitrariness of the race concept.

As a result of the concerted efforts of Montagu and his supporters, the majority of scholars now recognize that the theoretical and methodological problems associated with racial classifications negate their legitimacy.²³ Unfortunately, the task of expunging the

²³ For discussions of the fictive nature of race and the pitfalls of racial categorization, see Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* [1942] (1964); Ashley Montagu, ed., *Statement on Race* [1951] (1972); William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America 1815-59* (1960); Ashley Montagu, ed., *The Concept of Race* (1964); Thomas F. Gosset, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* [1963] (1997); John S. Haller, Jr., *Outcasts from Evolution:*

idea of race from scientific discourse is an arduous one. Biologist Richard C. Lewontin's bid to refute racial categories in an article entitled "The Apportionment of Human Diversity" (1972) emphasizes just how deeply entrenched the race concept is.

Discrediting the work of Boyd and other like-minded geneticists, Lewontin argues that the degree of genetic variation within so-called racial groups renders such distinctions meaningless. Ironically, in his attempt to invalidate the practice of racial categorization, Lewontin is forced to rely on the very thing he is trying to negate. Adopting a "more or less conventional racial classification," Lewontin divides humanity as follows:

Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859-1900 (1971); Michael Banton and Jonathan Harwood, *The Race Concept* (1975); and Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (1982). More recent arguments can be found in Yehudi O. Webster, *The Racialization of America* (1992); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing concepts of race in Britain and the United States between the world wars* (1992); Sandra Harding, ed., *The "Racial" Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future* (1993); Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (1993); Edison J. Trickett, Roderick J. Watts, and Dina Birman, eds., *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context* (1994); Alan Goodman, "The Problematics of 'Race' in Contemporary Biological Anthropology," (1995); Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (1996); Larry T. Reynolds and Leonard Lieberman, eds., *Race and Other Misadventures: Essays in Honor of Ashley Montagu in His Ninetieth Year* (1996); Alain Corcos, *The Myth of Human Races* (1997); E. Nathaniel Gates, ed., *The Concept of "Race" in Natural and Social Science* (1997); *American Anthropologist* 99 (1997); *American Anthropologist* 100 (1998); Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (1998); C. Loring Brace, *Evolution in an Anthropological View* (2000); and Joseph L. Graves, Jr., *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium* (2001).

Despite the widespread consensus concerning the inefficacy of racial classifications, there are a few scholars who advocate the continued use of the race concept. See *American Anthropologist* 99 (1997), particularly Carol C. Mukhopadhyay and Yolanda T. Moses, "Reestablishing 'Race' in Anthropological Discourse," 517-33; *American Anthropologist* 100 (1998), especially Faye V. Harrison, "Introduction: Expanding the Discourse on 'Race,'" 609-31 and Eugenia Shanklin, "The Profession of the Color Blind: Sociocultural Anthropology and Racism in the 21st Century," 669-79.

“Caucasians,” “Black Africans,” “Mongoloids,” “South Asian Aborigines,” “Amerinds,” “Oceanians,” and “Australian Aborigines” (12-13). Although Lewontin’s taxonomy is used for demonstrative purposes, it nonetheless sustains the illusion that humankind can be categorized.

1.5 “Boxed In”: Race in the New Millennium

For more than sixty years, the scientific community has been trying to dispel the notion that human beings can be neatly divided along racial lines. And yet, race remains a powerful social mechanism in the United States. Perhaps the best explanation for the perpetuation of the race concept lies in the American government’s continued use of narrow racial categories in its collection of population data. Since its inception two centuries ago, the U.S. Census Bureau has proven as ineffectual in its creation of distinct racial classifications as the scientists to whom it has looked for guidance. The haphazard changes in the racial designations that have occurred from one census to another reflect not only the inconsistencies in scientific theories over the years, but the arbitrariness of the categories themselves. The remainder of this chapter offers a historical overview of the racial categories implemented by the U.S. Census Bureau²⁴ in order to expose the

²⁴ This overview is drawn from three position papers prepared for the U.S. Department of Commerce and the U.S. Bureau of the Census. See U.S. Department of Commerce, *Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions 1790-1980* (1979); Claudette E. Bennett, “Racial Categories Used in the Decennial Censuses, 1790 to the

American government's role in the perpetuation of the myth of human races.²⁵

The shifting racial designations used by the U.S. Census Bureau over the last two centuries reflect (to varying degrees) the changing political and social climate if not the diversity of American society. Beginning with the first decennial census in 1790, individuals were categorized as follows: "free White males of 16 years and upward," "free White males under 16 years," "free White females," "all other free persons," and "slaves." This process continued until 1850, when enumerators were asked to categorize "Free Inhabitants" and "Slave Inhabitants" according to "Color or race." The letters "B" and "M" were used to indicate if an individual was "Black" or "Mulatto," with the column left blank if the person in question was "White." By the 1860 census, the list had grown to include the following racial distinctions: "White," "Black," "Mulatto," "Indian," and "Chinese." The 1870 census added a sixth category, "Japanese," and instructed enumerators to write "W" for "White" in the column "Color or race," rather than leave the space blank.

These six categories continued until 1890, when the Census Bureau deemed it necessary to categorize the "Black" population by blood quantum. Enumerators were instructed as follows:

Be particularly careful to distinguish between blacks, mulattoes,

Present," *Government Information Quarterly* 17 (2000): 161-180; and Claudette E. Bennett, "Race: Questions and Classifications," 313-17.

²⁵ My purpose here is not to dispute the fact that the U.S. Census Bureau is a valuable resource of information for corporate planning and the allocation of government funds, but to contend that the system of racial classification it employs is flawed.

quadroons, and octoroons. The word "black" should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; "mulatto," those persons who have from three-eighths to five-eighths black blood; "quadroon," those persons who have one-fourth black blood; and "octoroon," those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of black blood. (U.S. Department of Commerce 28)

The 1890 census was also unique in its elimination of the word "race" from the "Color or race" column. By the 1900 census, the Bureau had abandoned its efforts to differentiate between "Blacks," "Mulattoes," "Quadroons," and "Octoroons," and had restored the term the "race" to the "Color or race" column. The "Black" population was now divided into two categories, "Black" and "Negro or of Negro descent." The 1910 census saw the return of the "Mulatto" category. While all "full-blooded Negroes" were counted as "Black," those persons having "some proportion or perceptible trace of Negro blood" were once again listed as "Mulatto." Added to the categories "White," "Black," "Mulatto," "Chinese," "Indian," and "Japanese," was a seventh category, "Other race," which included individuals who did not fit into the other six races.

By the 1930 census, the list of racial categories had increased to ten: "White," "Negro," "Indian," "Chinese," "Japanese," "Mexican," "Filipino," "Hindu," "Korean," and "Other." The removal of the "Mulatto" category coincided with the Bureau's adoption of the "one drop rule" or the "rule of hypo-descent." The guidelines for enumerators stated that

a person of mixed White and Negro blood was to be returned as Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood; someone part Indian and part Negro also was to be listed as Negro unless the Indian blood predominated and the person was generally accepted as an Indian in the community. A person of mixed White and Indian blood was to be returned

as an Indian, except where the percentage of Indian blood was very small or where he or she was regarded as White in the community. (U.S. Department of Commerce 52)

The only change between the 1930 census and 1940 census was the elimination of the "Mexican" category, as "Mexicans" were to be counted as "White." In the 1950 census, the racial designation was changed from "Color or Race" to just "Race," and the number of categories dropped to seven: "White (W)," "Negro (Neg)," "American Indian (Ind)," "Japanese (Jap)," "Chinese (Chi)," "Filipino (Fil)," and "Other race." The enumerator was instructed to specify what "Other race" stood for.

The 1960 census marked the most extensive use of self-enumeration to date. Residents were mailed the census questionnaires ten days prior to an official enumerator visit. If the resident had not responded to the race question, enumerators were directed to "determine the race of the respondent by observation, and to assume that the race of all related individuals living at the residence was the same" (Bennett, "Racial Categories" 172). The categories included: "White," "Negro," "American Indian," "Japanese," "Chinese," "Filipino," "Hawaiian," "Part Hawaiian," "Aleut," "Eskimo," "etc." Presumably, the new "etc." category was meant to replace the "Other race" category. Persons of Latin American descent as well as persons of European descent were to be counted as "White," while "Negroes" and persons of mixed "White" and "Negro" or mixed "Indian" and "Negro" parentage were to be classified as "Negro." By the 1970 census, the Census Bureau had concluded that the data on race collected by means of self-identification was more accurate than that obtained by enumerator observation.

Individuals were asked to indicate with which of the following nine categories under "Color or Race" they most closely identified: "White," "Negro or Black," "Indian (Amer.)," "Japanese," "Chinese," "Filipino," "Hawaiian," "Korean," and "Other." For individuals of mixed parentage who were unsure of their classification, they were directed to identify themselves according to their father's race.

Modifications to the 1980 census included the elimination of the heading "Color or Race" and the addition of six new categories. The fifteen categories were as follows: "White," "Black or Negro," "Japanese," "Chinese," "Filipino," "Korean," "Vietnamese," "Indian (Amer.)," "Asian Indian," "Hawaiian," "Guamanian," "Samoan," "Eskimo," "Aleut," and "Other." In this census, unlike the previous census, persons who were in doubt about their classification or listed more than one race were categorized according to their mother's race. By the 1990 census, the number of categories had grown to sixteen with the addition of an "Other Asian or Pacific Islander" category. The 1990 census also reinstituted the term "Race." Unable to accommodate individuals of mixed parentage, enumerators categorized such persons according to the first racial group they listed.

Finally accepting the fact that the existing racial categories neglected to account for the country's increasing diversity, the Census Bureau conducted an extensive review of these categories in the mid-to-late nineties. In collaboration with a task force representing more than thirty Federal agencies, the U.S. Census Bureau's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) initiated a series of congressional and public hearings and conducted several studies on the subject of racial classification. Of primary concern

was the matter of how multiracial or mixed-race individuals were to be categorized. While interest groups such as the Association of Multiethnic Americans and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) lobbied for the inclusion of a multiracial category on the census 2000 form, others, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), opposed the change on the grounds that a multiracial category could undermine government assistance programs targeted at minorities. The resulting firestorm of debate played out in the media.²⁶

On July 6, 1996, *The New York Times* published a front page article by Linda Mathews claiming that "More Than Identity Rides on a New Racial Category." Mathews' article opens with an account of the turmoil one interracial couple faces whenever they are confronted with the question of their child's race. On the boy's school forms and other official documents, writes Mathews, "his parents sometimes check both the 'white' and

²⁶ In addition to the articles cited here, see Gabrielle Sandor's "The 'Other' Americans," *American Demographics* (June 1994); Lawrence Wright's "One Drop of Blood," *The New Yorker* (24 July 1994): 46-55; Suzann Evinger's "How To Record Race," *American Demographics* (May 1996); Nathan Glazer's "The Hard Questions: Race for the Cure," *The New Republic* (7 October 1996); Eric Schmitt's "Experts Clash Over Need for Changing Census Data by Race," *The New York Times* (24 April 1997), A27; Eric Lindbloom's "On Race, Check 'Mixed,'" *The New York Times* (29 April 1997), A22:6; Stephen A. Holmes, "Poll Finds Few Support Label Of Multiracial," *The New York Times* (16 May 1997), A20:4; Scott Shepard's "Tensions Mount, OMB Nears Decision on Multiracial Category for Census," *Latino Link*; Jerelyn Eddings's "Counting a 'New' Type of American," *U.S. News* (14 July 1997); Jerelyn Eddings's "A Compromise in Racial Politics," *U.S. News* (21 July 1997); Stephen A. Holmes, "People Can Claim One or More Races On Federal Forms," *The New York Times* (30 October 1997), A1; Stephen A. Holmes, "U.S. Officials Are Struggling to Measure Multiracial Heritages," *The New York Times* (14 June 1998), A32; Marianne Makman, "Don't Ask About Race," *The New York Times* (19 June 1998), A28:6; and Naomi Zack's "American Mixed Race: The U.S. 2000 Census and Related Issues," *Harvard BlackLetter Law Journal*, 17 (Spring 2000).

the 'black' boxes. If 'other' is available, they check that and write in 'interracial.' When ordered to choose between 'black' and 'white,' they resolutely leave the form blank" (Mathews 1). According to Mathews, this child is just one of at least five million others – "the three million Americans who told the Census Bureau in 1990 that they were married to or living with someone of a different race, and their two million children" (1) – who will be affected by the OMB's proposed changes to the racial categories on the census 2000 questionnaire. Although this figure represents a relatively small percentage of the total population of the United States, remarks Mathews, it is nonetheless a concern for some of the nation's leading civil rights organizations who fear that the change "would deplete the ranks of blacks and other racial minorities and curtail their political power" (1). In the minds of these civil rights advocates, there is a lot more riding on the OMB's decision than the issue of self-determination.

Four days following the release of Mathews's article, Lise Funderburg published a follow-up article, entitled "Boxed In," addressing many of the same issues. The author of *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity*, Funderburg identifies herself as a "part black and part white" woman who is continually "forced to choose one or the other" (A15). Unlike many of her mixed-race peers, however, Funderburg questions the efficacy of adding a multiracial category to the census. Fearing that the OMB's proposal simply creates another category into which individuals must force themselves, Funderburg proposes that the Census Bureau allow people of mixed racial heritage to "check any boxes that apply" (A15). Funderburg is quick to point out

that, according to recent studies conducted by the Census Bureau, neither her proposal nor the inclusion of a multiracial category would significantly upset the balance of any single category. On December 6, 1996, *New York Times*' columnist Stephen A. Holmes published an article, entitled "Census Tests New Category to Identify Racial Groups," contradicting Funderburg's assertion that the inclusion of a multiracial category would not affect the status quo. According to Holmes, the Census Bureau's test results indicated that "the use of a multiracial category might result in a decrease in the number of people identifying themselves as black or Asian" (A25). Although the Bureau admitted, states Holmes, that their findings could be due "a sampling error," these results nonetheless confirmed many minority leaders' fears that changes to the current system could sap their political clout (A25).

On April 8, 1996, *U.S. News* printed a story on the founder of Project RACE, Susan Graham, and her fight for the implementation of a multiracial category on the census 2000 questionnaire. Written by Hannah Beech, "Don't You Dare List Them As 'Other': Multiracial Americans Seek Full Recognition" accuses the Census Bureau of marginalizing multiracial Americans by refusing to acknowledge their existence. Another article on Susan Graham appeared in the December 2, 1996 edition of *Forbes* magazine. Like Beech's story, Dinesh D'Souza's "The One-Drop-of-Blood Rule" criticizes the Census Bureau for its insensitivity towards multiracial Americans. Rather than support Graham's proposal for a multiracial category, however, D'Souza encourages the Census Bureau to eliminate racial classifications altogether. Although "it makes eminent sense to

get rid of these historically and scientifically absurd classifications,” states D’Souza, the impetus to “protect the racial privileges that the current system provides” is too great (n. pag.). D’Souza goes so far as to question the rationale of civil rights activists, who, in supporting the current system of racial classification, appear oblivious to the irony that they are “perpetuating the racial lexicon of their oppressors and rejecting the colorblind principle for which generations of black leaders from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr. had labored” (n. pag.).

On July 8, 1997, the Federal task force advised that the Census Bureau reject the proposal for the addition of a multiracial category on the upcoming census. Instead, the task force recommended that mixed-race individuals be allowed to choose more than one race category to describe themselves. Reporting on the recommendation, in a July 9, 1997 article entitled “Panel Balks at Multiracial Census Category,” Holmes writes that the task force felt that “creating a multiracial category would ‘add to racial tensions and further fragmentation of our population’” (A12). The final decision, however, rested with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which, according to Holmes, “has jurisdiction over Federal practices regarding racial classifications” (A12). Because the panel’s resolution was unanimous, and “because Congress has been reluctant to insert itself into the issue of racial classifications, the task forces recommendations are likely to become Federal policy,” posits Holmes (A12).

In a follow-up article dated July 11, 1997, Orlando Patterson ridicules the Federal task force’s suggestion that a new multiracial category would “add to racial tensions and

further fragmentation of our population” (Patterson A27). In “The Race Trap,” Patterson, a sociology professor at Harvard and author of *The Ordeal of Integration*, states that the task force’s recommendation “will only intensify and reinforce our misguided obsession with racial categories” (A27). Patterson insists, “Nearly all social scientists, except for those on the fringes, reject the view that ‘racial’ differences have any objective or scientific foundation” (A27). It is only through the elimination of racial categorization, claims Patterson, that we can hope to dispel America’s greatest myth: “that race is a meaningful, valid classification” (A27).

Echoing Patterson’s sentiments, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) has taken an increasingly active role in trying to eradicate racial classifications. Accepting the part that anthropologists played in the past in engendering the race myth, the AAA issued the following “Statement on Race” (1998) in response to the proposed racial categories for the 2000 census:

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies *within* so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic “racial” groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within “racial” groups than between them. In neighboring populations there is much overlapping of genes and their phenotypic (physical) expressions. Throughout history whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species. (American Anthropological Association n. pag.)

With its disavowal of the concept of race, the AAA hoped to encourage the government to eliminate the term from the census. The “effective elimination of discrimination,” asserted the AAA, can only be accomplished by transcending racial classifications that discriminate in their efforts to differentiate (American Anthropological Association n. pag.).

In the end, the OMB decided to accept the Federal task force’s recommendation. Apparently, it would be the policy makers and not the scientists who would have the last word on race. The resulting racial classifications used on the census 2000 form were as follows:

White – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as “White” or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Near Easterner, Arab, or Polish.

Black or African American – A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as “Black, African Am., or Negro,” or provide written entries such as African American, Afro American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian.

American Indian and Alaska Native – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment.

Asian – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes “Asian Indian,” “Chinese,” “Filipino,” “Korean,” “Japanese,” “Vietnamese,” and “Other Asian.”

Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. It includes people who indicate their race as “Native Hawaiian,” “Guamanian or Chamorro,” “Samoan,” and “Other Pacific Islander.”

Some Other Race – Includes all other responses not included in the “White,” “Black or African American,” “American Indian and Alaskan Native,” “Asian,” and the “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” race categories described above.

Two or More Races – “Two or more race” refers to combinations of two or more of the following race categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian and Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, Some Other Race.
(U.S. Census Bureau, “Profiles” 5-3, 5-4)

Although the institution of the category “Two or More Races” reflected the heterogeneity of racial categories, American citizens were still forced to label themselves. Rather than accept that racial categories magnify differences among population groups and fragment society, the Census Bureau chose to place an even greater emphasis on “who’s what.”

Whether or not they agreed with them, the majority of American citizens (the U.S. Census Bureau would have us believe) abided by the aforementioned racial categories. According to the population data reported on the 2000 census, 100% of the total population of 281, 421, 906 could be accounted for by race. 97.6% (or 274, 595, 678) of the population fell into the single race category, while 2.4% (or 6, 826, 228) identified themselves as members of two or more races (See Appendix A). In fact, only 95.9% of the population responded to the question on race.²⁷ The Census Bureau offers the following explanation for such discrepancies:

²⁷ This figure was obtained through email correspondence with Nicholas A. Jones of the Racial Statistics Branch of the U.S. Census Bureau dated June 6, 2003. On May 13, 2003, I sent an email to the Statistical Information Office of the U.S. Census Bureau enquiring as to “how the Census Bureau accounted for the race(s) of 100% of the total population when only 67% of the population participated in the Census 2000?” In an effort to allay my confusion, Mr. Jones offered the following explanation: “The figure that you are referring to (only 67% participated in Census 2000) actually refers to the percentage of all occupied households that returned a mail form in Census 2000. In fact, the response rates to the question on race are very high at 96%.” The email message included a copy of Summary File 1 Table P41, which placed the actual figure at 95.9% (See Appendix B).

Throughout the history of census-taking in the United States, improvements have constantly been made in the census-taking process, not only for efficiency, but also for improved quality. In keeping with this history, for Census 2000, the data shown in this product are based on the actual census enumeration but modified (adjusted) to reflect best estimates of people missed and people counted more than once in the original enumeration. (U.S. Census Bureau, "Census 2000" 8-1)

Unfortunately, the Census Bureau does not expound on how it "modified" or "adjusted" the aforementioned data to account for 100% of the population by race. It would be interesting to know exactly what percentage of the 4.1% of the population who did not respond to the question on race were "people missed" and just how many decided, like the interracial couple in Linda Mathews's article, to "resolutely leave the form blank."

Over the years, race has become so inextricably woven into the social fabric of the United States that most people simply accept its existence. For decades, scholars in the natural and social sciences have asserted that race is an illusion with no scientifically verifiable referents, and yet the practice of physiologically sorting human beings into discrete racial categories persists into the twenty-first century. Although the Census Bureau goes so far as to acknowledge that its racial classifications "are sociopolitical constructs and should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature" (U.S. Census Bureau, "Profiles" 5-2), it does little to challenge the hegemonic view of race in the United States. While it is unreasonable to expect the census people to be the beacons of change – policy rests with the legislators and the courts after all – they nonetheless need to be aware of their role in perpetuating the fiction that by identifying individuals according to these categories they are saying something worth knowing.

Chapter Two

“A Fiction of Law and Custom”: The Legal Construction of Race

To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and saleable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave and, by a fiction of law and custom, a negro.

– Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894)²⁸

At the heart of Mark Twain's novel, suggests Susan Gillman in “‘Sure Identifiers’: Race, Science, and the Law in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*,” is “a problem of knowledge (social, scientific, legal) epitomized by the institution of race slavery” (89). “Committed to maintaining the differences between racial groups as a means of distinguishing the slave from the free,” writes Gillman, “American slavery spawned and then tolerated the anomaly Twain calls the ‘pure-white slave’: the mulatto who, appearing no different racially from his free white relatives, creates a pressing need for the many preposterous social and legal fictions of slave society” (89). Twain's representation of Roxy and her child in fractional terms exposes not only the absurdity of the racial codes governing interracial unions, but also the impact of these precepts on the progeny of such unions. In his delineation of what constitutes a slave, Twain invokes two of the more “preposterous

²⁸ 1894 (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 64.

social and legal fictions” of race associated with slavery: the one-drop rule and the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*.

Instituted during slavery and later used to buttress the Jim Crow system of segregation, the one-drop rule, explains F. James Davis in *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*, classified persons with any degree of African ancestry as black (5). Because slavery was a powerful economic institution, it was in the slaveholder's best interest to be able to define as many individuals as black, and therefore as slaves, as possible.

According to Joel Williamson, in *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, “Slavery had the power to make all slaves black regardless of their seeming whiteness” (75). The antebellum South promoted the one-drop rule as a way of enlarging the slave population by enslaving all racially-mixed persons, regardless of the admixture of white and black blood. Also known as the “one black ancestor rule,” the “traceable amount rule,” and the “rule of hypodescent,” the one-drop rule became the nation's foremost definition of what constituted a black person (Davis 5).

Like the one-drop rule, the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* was also contrived as a means of increasing the number of slaves and of firmly drawing the color line. Established by Virginia law in 1662, the law of *partus sequitur ventrem* decreed that an individual's status as slave or free was to be determined by the status of his or her mother. The law read as follows: “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free, be it therefore enacted and declared by the present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be

held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”²⁹ Universally accepted throughout the Southern United States, the *partus* law sealed the fate of every child whose mother was a slave.

This chapter examines the centrality of the law in the construction of race.³⁰ Specifically, I investigate the extent to which the one-drop rule and the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* became the fundamental criteria for how the courts defined who belonged to what racial group. As with my first chapter, my analysis of the legal construction of race is grounded in historical evidence. Through an examination of the trial transcripts of several seminal cases of racial determination from slavery to the present, this chapter analyzes the role of the law in the creation and maintenance of the color line. These cases are significant because they reveal how the courts ascribed

²⁹ From William Waller Hening’s *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619* (Richmond, Virginia: Printed by and for Samuel Pleasants Junior printer to the Commonwealth, 1809), 2:170.

³⁰ For further reading on the legal construction of race in America see Helen T. Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 5 volumes (1968); A. Leon Higginbotham, *In The Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process, The Colonial Period* (1978); F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation’s Definition* (1991); Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991); Paul Finkelman, “The Crime of Color” (1993); Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property” (1993); Ian F. Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (1996); Ariela J. Gross, “Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South” (1998); Teresa Zackodnik, “Fixing the Color Line: The Mulatto, Southern Courts, and Racial Identity” (2001); J. Allen Douglas, “The ‘Most Valuable Sort of Property’: Constructing White Identity in American Law, 1880-1940” (2003); Jason A. Gillmer, “Suing for Freedom: Interracial Sex, Slave Law, and Racial Identity in the Post-Revolutionary and Antebellum South” (2004); and Frank W. Sweet, *The Legal History of the Color Line: The Rise and Triumph of the One-Drop Rule* (2005).

racialized meanings to people's physical attributes in an effort to delimit racial identity. In doing so, they affirmed the belief that individuals could be divided along racial lines. As the variable rulings in these cases prove, however, the courts were no more successful at defining race than the pseudoscientists on whom they depended for their definitions.

2.1 The *Partus* Law: Trials of Racial Determination During Slavery

Subscribing to the prevailing pseudoscientific theories of race, the court, as early as the mid-eighteenth century, began to define and sanction crucial aspects of racial identity. As Cheryl Harris explains in "Whiteness as Property," "'Black' racial identity marked who was subject to enslavement; 'white' racial identity marked who was 'free' or, at a minimum, not a slave. The ideological and rhetorical move from 'slave' and 'free' to 'Black' and 'white' as polar constructs marked an important step in the social construction of race" (1718). In suits for freedom where the maternal line could not be proven, the court often relied on such *prima facie* evidence as the plaintiff's complexion, facial features, hair texture, and other physical traits in its rulings. The individual in question was often paraded before the court, and "expert" witnesses were called to testify as to whether he or she was white or black.

In 1806, in the state of Virginia, for example, three generations of women brought suit for their freedom on the basis that they descended from a free ancestor on the maternal line. Although the enslaved women claimed that their lineage could be traced

back to an old Indian woman named Butterwood Nan, “their genealogy,” according to court records, “was very imperfectly stated” (*Hudgins v. Wrights*).³¹ Opposing counsel argued that the appellees were not “lineally descended from a free Indian woman,” but that they were, in fact, “descended from a negro woman by an Indian” (134). Because neither side could prove its case, it fell to the court to determine whether or not the appellees were entitled to their freedom.

When the Wrights were brought before the court for inspection, the Chancellor of the case observed that “the youngest of the appellees was perfectly white, and that there were gradual shades of difference in colour between the grand-mother, mother, and grand-daughter” (134). The grandmother, Hannah, was described as having long black hair and copper-coloured skin, while the “characteristic features, the complexion, the hair and eyes” of the granddaughter “were proven to have been the same with those of whites” (134). Fortunately for the Wrights, Virginia law decreed that “in the case of a person visibly appearing to be a negro, the presumption is, in this country, that he is a slave, and it is incumbent on him to make out his right to freedom: but in the case of a person visibly appearing to be a white man, or an Indian, the presumption is that he is free, and it is necessary for his adversary to shew that he is a slave” (142). As the appellant could not provide substantive proof of the Wrights’ ancestry, the court based its ruling on the physical evidence of the appellants’ appearance.

³¹ *Hudgins v. Wrights*, 11 Va. 134; 1806 Va. LEXIS 58; 1 Hen. & M. 134.

Before rendering his decision, one of the judges in the case, Judge Tucker, while professing that he did not have “an intimate acquaintance with the natural history of the human species” (139), offered the following observation:

Nature has stampt upon the African and his descendants two characteristic marks, besides the difference of complexion, which often remain visible long after the characteristic distinction of color either disappears or becomes doubtful; a flat nose and woolly head of hair. The latter of these characteristics disappears the last of all: and so strong an ingredient in the African constitution is this latter character, that it predominates uniformly where the party is in equal degree descended from parents of different complexions, whether white or Indians; giving to the jet black lank of hair of the Indian a degree of flexure, which never fails to betray that the party distinguished by it, cannot trace his lineage purely from the race of native Americans. (139)

While the other judge in the case, Judge Roane, agreed with Tucker that the human species could be readily discerned from one another, Roane was quick to point out that miscegenation made the distinction process that much more difficult. According to Roane, “when these races become intermingled, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say from inspection only, which race predominates in the offspring, and certainly impossible to determine whether the descent from a given race has been through the paternal or maternal line” (142). Despite his recognition of the problems associated with racial determination, Roane felt confident enough in his own classificatory abilities to rule on the Wrights’ race. “In the present case it is not and cannot be denied that the appellees have entirely the appearance of white people,” insisted Roane, “and how does the appellant attempt to deprive them of the blessing of liberty to which all such persons are

entitled?" (142). In the end, Tucker and Roane decided in favour of the appellees, and the Wrights were manumitted because of the color of their skin and the texture of their hair.

It is clear from Judge Tucker's comment concerning the African's "flat nose" and "wooly head of hair" that his knowledge of prevailing pseudoscientific theories influenced his decision in the case. Tucker's reliance on supposedly objective, scientific evidence in his determination of the appellees' race stemmed from his conviction that natural physical differences separated the races into distinct groups. Although Judge Roane was less ardent when it came to classifying racially mixed individuals, he was nonetheless convinced that an individual's race could be established by observation alone. "The distinguishing characteristics of the different species of the human race are so visibly marked," claimed Roane, "that those species may be readily distinguished from each other by mere inspection only" (142). Both Tucker and Roane agreed that the appellees' race was self-evident – Hannah Wright and her descendants looked white, so they must be white, and, by extension, free.

In "Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South," Ariela J. Gross describes *Hudgins v. Wrights* as "probably the most influential Southern precedent in setting the presumptions for slave/free status on the basis of race" (129). *Hudgins v. Wrights* did more than just establish who was subject to enslavement and who was entitled to freedom, however. As the case of *Hook v. Nanny Pagee and Her Children*³² reveals, Judges Tucker and Roane also set the precedent for

³² *Hook v. Nanny Pagee and Her Children*, 16 Va. 379; 1811 Va. LEXIS 80; 2 Munf. 379.

how race would be determined in the Southern courtroom. In 1811, five years after Hannah Wright and her descendants were set free, another slave, named Nanny Pagee, and her children brought suit on the grounds that they too were white, and, thus, entitled to their freedom. Counsel for the plaintiffs felt that “if the court, in *Hudgins v. Wrights*, 1 Hen. & M. 134, could form its judgement by inspection, so might the jury, in this case” (379). The plaintiffs were exhibited to the court so that the jury might formulate an opinion as to their race. The jury returned the following verdict:

We of the jury find that the plaintiff Nanny Pagee was brought into the commonwealth of Virginia from the state of North Carolina, by Thomas Jones, subsequent to the fifth of October, 1778; that if the said plaintiff was a slave, it doth appear to the jury that the said Thomas Jones did not comply with the provisions of the act, entitled ‘An act for preventing the further importation of slaves.’ We of the jury also find, from inspection, that the said plaintiff Nanny Pagee is a white woman. We of the jury, therefore, find that the plaintiffs are free persons and not slaves; and we find them one penny damages. (379)

Because Nanny Pagee and her children were deemed white upon “inspection,” they were granted their freedom.

Voting in favour of affirming the jury’s verdict, Judge Coalter remarked that had the plaintiff, Nanny Pagee, not been brought before the jury then they would have had to rely on testimony alone to render their judgement. “But here,” remarked Coalter, apparently impressed by the jury’s abilities, “they have the highest evidence, the evidence of their senses” (385). Coalter continued: “The jury believe their own senses, in preference to the opinions of the witnesses; and, if the court were in error on every other point, this fact, being fairly and legally found, must conclude the case” (385). Although he

also affirmed the judgement, another judge in the case, Judge Brooke, cited precedent as the basis for his ruling:

In the case of *Hudgins v. Wrights* it is laid down that, where white persons are claimed as slaves, the onus probandi lies upon the claimant. It is said, also, that the distinguishing characteristics of the different species of the human race are so visibly marked, that those species may be readily discriminated from each other by inspection; and that, in the case of a person visibly appearing to be of a slave race, it is incumbent on him to make out his freedom; but, in the case of a person visibly appearing to be of a free race, it is required of his adversary to show that he is a slave. This I understand to be the doctrine of this court as settled in that case. (386-87)

Judges Coalter and Brooke offered different rationales for their rulings, and yet they arrived at the same conclusion: both men were convinced that the plaintiffs were white, and manumitted them on that basis.

In October 1835, a slaveowner asked the Kentucky Court of Appeals to overturn a decision made by the Circuit Court to release his slave, a woman named Polly McMinnis, from servitude. According to testimony in the case of *Gentry v. Polly McMinnis*,³³ Polly McMinnis was born in Pennsylvania after 1780, which was the year slavery was abolished in that state. She was brought to Kentucky around 1797, at which time she was sold as a slave. After more than thirty years of bondage, Polly McMinnis opted to sue for her freedom on the grounds that "she was born free" (383). When the question arose as to why the appellee "acquiesce[d] so long in her servile condition," the response was "that she was treated and governed as a slave; forced from her kindred and friends, and subjected to the dominion of a master, who made her in fact a slave, she was either kept in

³³ *Gentry v. Polly McMinnis*, 33 Ky. 382; 1835 Ky. LEXIS 109; 3 Dana 382.

ignorance of her rights, or was afraid or unable to assert them” (389). In light of these facts, it was determined that the appellant’s admission that she was a slave could not be held against her. The court also decided that although the appellant was described as “a person of color” (385) in the declaration, that description was immaterial because “the jury had a right to regard the evidence of their own eyes, on inspection in a court” (386). Citing the cases of *Hudgins v. Wrights* and *Hook v. Nanny Pagee and Her Children*, Polly McMinnis’s counsel argued that the same tribunal in both cases “decided, that a view, by the jurors, of the person claiming to be free, was a proper mode of ascertaining the color of the party. We are supported, then, not only by principle, and reason, and analogy, but by adjudged cases” (387). Precedent had been established to the effect that jurors were not only “permitted, but required, to decide on autoptical examination wherever it was practical and convenient” (387).

When Polly McMinnis was brought before the court for examination, however, some doubt arose as to her race. The woman who stood in front of the jury appeared to be white, but, as the court record indicates, the appearance of whiteness was no guarantee:

A white person of unmixed blood cannot be a slave, here, where there can be no conventional slavery. But, as a person apparently white may, nevertheless, have some African taint, and may, consequently, have descended from a mother who was a slave, the apparent color is but prima facie evidence; and, consequently, when a jury, on their view, decide that the color is white, testimony will be admissible to prove that, notwithstanding the visible complexion, there is African blood in the veins sufficient to doom to slavery. (387-88)

Fortunately for the appellee, the evidence of her having been born in a free state was enough to convince the Kentucky Court of Appeals to uphold the earlier verdict. In the

end, Polly McMinnis was granted her freedom not because she was white, but because she had been unlawfully enslaved.

Four years later, in 1839, a similar case was tried before the Kentucky Court of Appeals. According to the Prior History of the case, an ostensibly white female slave named Milly had been granted her freedom following an inspection of her person by a Mason County Circuit Court jury. According to the trial transcript, in the case of *Chancellor v. Milly*,³⁴ “Milly, apparently a white woman, about forty years old, and who had been treated as a slave from her birth, brought an action of trespass against Chancellor, who held and claimed her as his property” (23). After examining the plaintiff, the jury deemed her to be a white woman and manumitted her on that basis. Unwilling to accept the jury’s verdict, opposing counsel appealed the decision on the grounds that evidence to the plaintiff’s ancestry, which had been deemed inadmissible, should have been allowed. “In order to repel any presumption arising in her favor from her color,” the defendant in the case, Chancellor, “offered to prove that, in the family in which she was born and reared from infancy, she had ever been called and reputed the child of a woman of color, who was a slave and the property of that family” (24). In light of the new evidence, the Kentucky Court of Appeals overturned the Circuit Court ruling. Their decision reads as follows:

Milly’s color being only prima facie proof that she is free, the fact that, nevertheless, her mother was a slave, might rebut the presumption arising from her being apparently a white woman.... Wherefore, the judgement in

³⁴ *Chancellor v. Milly*, 39 Ky. 23; 1839 Ky. LEXIS 66; 9 Dana 23.

favor of Milly, must be reversed, and the cause remanded for new trial.
(24)

In the eyes of the Mason County jurors, Milly was a white woman. In the eyes of the law, she was a slave.

The jurors in *Chancellor v. Milly* saw Milly's white complexion as ocular proof of her race, and yet their eyes had deceived them. In an effort to avoid such errors in judgement, medical experts were sometimes called to testify as to whether an individual's blood was pure white or possessed "some African taint." In the case of *Daniel v. Guy et al*,³⁵ for example, a slave woman named Abby Guy and her four children were brought before the court to be examined by two physicians. In his testimony, one of the medical witnesses, Dr. Newton, claimed that he "had read physiology," and, from this, had deduced that

[t]here are five races - - the negro is the lowest in intellect. Some physiologists are of the opinion that in the head of the mulatto, there is some negro hair, and some white hair, and that the negro hair never runs out. It would not run out before it passed the second generation. It may in the third generation have waves. The color, hair, feet, nose, and form of the skull and bones furnish means of distinguishing negro blood or descent.
(127)

The other witness, Dr. Comer, concurred. When William Daniel objected to the testimony on the grounds that "all evidence on physiology was irrelevant" (136), his objection was overruled. The judge declared that if the two medical doctors "were skilled in the natural history of the races of men, it was competent for them to state the distinguishing marks between the negro and the white race, to aid the jury, who had inspected the plaintiffs in

³⁵ *Daniel v. Guy et al*, 19 Ark. 121; 1857 Ark. LEXIS 15.

court, in coming to a correct conclusion as to whether they belonged to the one race, or the other” (136). Although Daniel produced documents to the effect that Abby had descended from a slave woman named Polly, the medical testimony was enough to convince the Supreme Court of Arkansas to uphold the Circuit Court judgement in favour of Abby and her children.

A second appeal to the Supreme Court of Arkansas also ended in a verdict in favour the defendant. According to the trial transcript in the 1861 case of *Daniel v. Guy et al*,³⁶ “the leading point of controversy in the cause was whether the slaves belonged to the white or negro race” (50). In the appeal, Daniel objected to the exhibition of the defendants’ naked feet for the observation of the court. In his ruling, Chief Justice English declared that “it was not improper for the court to permit [the defendants] to pull off their shoes and stockings and exhibit their bare feet to the jury, in order that they might observe their formation, it being proven by competent witnesses, and attested by experience, that the formation of the negro foot is peculiar” (50). So convinced was Chief Justice English of the authority of the two physicians that he went so far as to assert that “the experience of every intelligent observer of the race, whether in the instances of mixed or unmixed negro blood, will doubtless attest the truth of the testimony of the professional witnesses” (52). Three separate courts agreed that Abby Guy and her children must be white because, according to the experts, their feet bore no resemblance to those of the African race.

³⁶ *Daniel v. Guy et al*, 23 Ark. 50; 1861 Ark. LEXIS 40.

Although the early prerequisite courts were convinced that racial determination was simply a matter of inspection, it became increasingly obvious that other factors, such as ancestry or reputation, must also be considered in suits for freedom. If it could be proven that the individual in question descended from a slave on the maternal line then it did not matter how white he or she appeared. Under the law of *partus sequitur ventrem*, if the individual's mother was a slave, then he or she inherited the same abject status. As the cases of *George S. Gaines v. Ann*³⁷ and *Gary v. Stevenson*³⁸ reveal, expert testimony to the effect that an individual was white offered no guarantee of liberty. In 1856, a slaveowner named George S. Gaines brought suit against two men, Thomas and Colton, whom Gaines accused of theft. The defendants in the case were said to have stolen "a negro girl, slave for life" (212) from the plaintiff and induced her to try to recover her freedom. During the course of the trial, the defendants, Thomas and Colton, "made a suggestion to the court that the girl, the subject of the suit, was a free white girl, without negro blood, and moved the court for the appointment of a guardian ad litem, to sustain her rights to her freedom and for a writ of habeas corpus to bring the girl before him" (212). The girl, Ann, was brought before the judge, who, upon inspection, ruled in favour of her freedom.

Gaines appealed the case to the Supreme Court of Texas, claiming that he had evidence pertaining to Ann's ancestry which had not been presented at the first trial. According to Gaines, Ann's grandmother was "a mulatto or a half-breed," her mother was

³⁷ *George S. Gaines v. Ann*, 17 Tex. 211; 1856 Tex. LEXIS 152.

³⁸ *Gary v. Stevenson*, 19 Ark. 580; 1858 Ark. LEXIS 37.

a “quarteroon” and slave, and her father was a white man, which meant that Ann herself possessed “one-eighth of the African blood” (214). In an effort to ascertain the truth of Gaines’s claim that Ann was an “octoroon,” expert witnesses were called to testify as to her race. According to the court record, “the evidence of [Ann] being pure white blood was that of two medical gentlemen, who testified that they had examined her and could not detect any of the indicia of the existence of African blood in her” (214). When pressed on the issue, the medical witnesses admitted “that a person who was only one-eighth of the African blood might not show any signs of the existence of that blood, though in general that degree of blood would show itself” (214). The fact that the medical experts could not detect her African blood was of little consequence. Ann had descended from a slave on the maternal line, which, under the *partus* law, was enough to condemn her to a life of servitude. Before handing down his verdict in the case, Judge Lipscomb, offered the following comment:

This cannot fail to give rise to some grave reflections on the law as it now is, on the subject. The girl Ann is proved to be only one-eighth of African blood, and the third generation, one of each being white, and is the last degree prohibited by law from giving evidence against a white person. Her child, if by a white man, would be a competent witness against a white person, but following the status of its mother, it would be a slave, and it would so descend, ad infinitum, so long as the descent from a slave mother could be traced, though the blood be of the smallest possible amount. Whether it is sound policy to permit the law to remain in its present state is a question to be answered by the wisdom of the legislature, and not by us.
(215)

Despite his misgivings, Judge Lipscomb ruled to reverse the District Court judgement that had granted Ann her freedom.

Just two years after Ann was returned to a life of slavery under the *partus* law, a sixteen-year-old named Thomas Gary brought suit for his freedom on the grounds that he too was white. Like Ann, Gary claimed to be “a white person, and not a negro, or mulatto” (580). According to Gary’s testimony, he was born to a white mother and father in the State of Alabama. When Gary was just a year old, his father married another woman and sent Gary to Louisiana with a guardian named Armstrong. When Armstrong died two years later, the administrator of Armstrong’s estate directed a man named Riley Holman to return Gary to his father. Rather than deliver the boy to his father, Holman brought Gary to New Orleans where he tried to sell him as a slave. According to the trial transcript, Holman was “unable to effect a sale,” because Gary was “white” and bore on his person “no marks indicative of the presence of the African blood” (581). Fortunately for Holman, a slaveowner from Arkansas, named Remson Stevenson, was not deterred by Gary’s fair complexion and agreed to purchase the boy.

When Gary attempted to sue for his freedom some eight years later, Stevenson testified at length that Gary was neither a white person nor a free person. According to Stevenson, Gary was “born of a slave woman named Susan, who was a mulatto, and a slave from her birth” (582-83). Added to Stevenson’s testimony was that of Susan’s former owner, Jesse Turner, who described Susan as having a “very light complexion” and “straight hair” (584). Although Turner asserted that it was “impossible to say” what degree of African blood Susan possessed, he did not believe it to be “more than an eighth or a sixteenth” (585). At any rate, Turner continued, Susan “did not assert any right or

claim to freedom, and did not, so far as he remembered, claim ever to have been in any other condition than that of a state of slavery” (585). Although Turner could not “state upon personal knowledge” that Gary was in fact Susan’s son, Turner assured the court that Gary “was reputed and understood to be so” (585). Two additional witnesses, Calvin Phelps and Ephraim B. Bishop, also testified to the effect that they believed Gary to be Susan’s son. Phelps admitted under oath, however, that he “knew nothing of the complainant being the son of Susan, otherwise than by reputation” (586). Bishop agreed with Phelps that Susan and Gary were “generally reported to be mother and son” (586).

Three medical experts were called to the stand to testify as to whether or not Thomas Gary was of African descent. The first expert, a physician named Doctor Brown, was “well-acquainted with physiology” and “what distinguishes the white from the black race” (583). After examining Gary, Doctor Brown testified that he “could discover no trace of the negro blood in his eyes, nose, mouth or jaws – his hair is smooth and of sandy complexion, perfectly straight and flat, with no indications of the crisp or negro curl: his eyes blue, his jaws thin, his nose slim and long” (583). Had he not been told that Gary was a slave, continued Brown, “he would not have suspected that there was negro blood in him” (583). Although Brown could not say unequivocally that Gary did not possess some minute trace of African blood, the physician added that “it would take at least twenty generations from the black blood to be as white as [Gary]” (583). The other medical experts in the case, Doctor Wilcox and Doctor Dibblell, testified that, although

they could “discover no evidence of negro blood in him” (583), they had both known Gary for five or six years and believed him to be the son of a slave woman named Susan. Although the medical experts could find no physical proof connecting Gary to Susan, the fact that she was reputed to be his mother was enough to convince Judge Felix J. Batson to dismiss Thomas Gary’s suit for freedom.

Given the unpredictability of whiteness as a visible indicator of race, the courts became more and more reluctant to emancipate a slave based on appearance alone, as revealed in one of the most widely known cases of racial determination of the time, *Sally Miller v. Louis Belmonti*.³⁹ In 1845, a slave woman named Sally Miller appeared before the Supreme Court of Louisiana to appeal a decision by the District Court which denied her bid for freedom. Like Thomas Gary, Sally Miller brought suit on the grounds that both her parents were white. The appellant contended that she emigrated with her mother and father, Daniel and Dorothea Miller, to the United States from Germany in 1817 or 1818.

³⁹ *Sally Miller v. Louis Belmonti*, 1845 La. LEXIS 276; 11 Rob. 339. William Craft refers to the case of Dorothea and Salomé Muller at the beginning of his slave narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860). George W. Cable also devotes an entire section to “Salome Müller, The White Slave,” in *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1889). Most recently, in 2003, lawyer and historian John Bailey published *The Lost German Slave Girl: The Extraordinary True Story of Sally Miller and Her Fight for Freedom in Old New Orleans*. In his reexamination of the one hundred and sixty year old case, Bailey concludes that Sally Miller was, in fact, Bridget Wilson, a clever slave girl who “seized the one chance of liberty that was ever likely to come her way, and she hung on to that chance with a tenacity that [Bailey] could only marvel at” (257). Although I am not entirely persuaded that Bailey proves his case, his contention is nonetheless intriguing. The fact remains, however, that the Supreme Court of Louisiana was convinced that Sally Miller was exactly who she claimed to be: a white German immigrant who had been wrongfully enslaved.

According to testimony in the case, Miller's mother died at sea and her father shortly thereafter. Orphaned and alone, Sally and her sister, Dorothea, simply vanished. Although Dorothea was never heard from again, Sally was discovered some twenty years later working in a wine shop. A fellow German immigrant, named Madame Carl, recognized the young slave woman to be the long lost Salomé Müller and offered to help Miller recover her freedom.

As in previous cases of racial determination, the appellant was brought before the court for inspection. One witness, Gen. Lewis, who had known Miller for a number of years, testified that "she is as white as most persons; but that he has seen slaves as bright as the plaintiff" (342). Lewis continued on to say that he "always thought that she had something resembling the colored race in her features, but this opinion may have been induced by the fact, that he had always seen her associating with persons of color" (342). The fact that Lewis admitted that his opinion of Miller's race may have been swayed by her unfortunate condition was not lost on Judge J. Bullard, who declared, "Not only is there no evidence of her having descended from a slave mother, or even a mother of the African race; but no witness has ventured a positive opinion, from inspection, that she is of that race" (341). Although Bullard went so far as to acknowledge that "the proof in the record of the complexion of the plaintiff is very strong," he nonetheless felt it necessary to ascertain "how far that presumption has been weakened, or fortified, or repelled by the testimony, of numerous witnesses, in the record" (341). The fact that Sally Miller *looked* white was inconsequential. Judge Bullard wanted to make sure that she *was* white before he bestowed upon her the rights and privileges associated with that race.

Several witnesses were called to testify on behalf of the plaintiff, Sally Miller, and the defendant, Louis Belmonti. Fortunately for Miller, the witnesses who maintained that she was "a mulattress, of African descent, and a slave for life" (340), could offer no proof of her origins. The fact that Miller was "first known in the condition of a slave, at the age of nine or ten years, separated from her mother" (341) did not bode well for the defendant. Without proof of her having descended from a slave mother, Belmonti stood little chance of convincing the court that Miller was not "the child so long lost sight of" (341).

Numerous witnesses from the German community had already testified to the effect that the plaintiff was, without a doubt, the long lost Salomé Müller. They not only "swore positively to their undoubting conviction of her identity," the witnesses offered concrete proof that went beyond "mere family resemblances and recognitions" (342). Apparently, "the lost child had certain natural marks, or moles, on the inside of her thighs" (342).

When Sally Miller was examined by members of the medical profession, it was discovered that she bore "precisely such congenital marks upon her person" (342). Before rendering his decision, Judge Bullard remarked that "if there be in truth two persons" with "the same identical marks from birth," it is "certainly one of the most extraordinary things in history" (343-44). Ironically, it was not Sally Miller's white skin but the black marks upon her white skin that convinced the Supreme Court of Louisiana to set her free.

2.2 The One-Drop Rule: Trials of Racial Determination During Jim Crow Segregation

The doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* had proven extremely valuable in trials of racial determination during slavery. Once slavery was abolished, however, the courts began to look for an alternate means of establishing race. With the rising numbers of light-skinned African Americans, it had become increasingly obvious that physical appearance was no longer a reliable racial marker. As Cheryl Harris explains, in “Whiteness as Property”:

In adjudicating who was “white,” courts sometimes noted that, by physical characteristics, the individual whose racial identity was at issue appeared to be white and, in fact, had been regarded as white in the community. Yet if an individual’s blood was tainted, she could not claim to be “white” as the law understood, regardless of the fact that ... she may have lived ... as a white person.... Although socially accepted as white, she could not *legally* be white. Blood as “objective fact” dominated over appearance and social acceptance, which were socially fluid and subjective measurements. (1739-40)

In an effort to establish a more “objective” means of classification, the courts adopted blood quantum levels as the primary mode of racial group determination.

Although state legislatures had been defining anyone who possessed one-eighth or more black blood to be a “Negro” since the early 1700s, only a few court cases involved blood fraction levels (Sweet 171-72).⁴⁰ It was not until the precedent-setting case of

⁴⁰ In *The Legal History of the Color Line: The Rise and Triumph of the One-Drop Rule*, Frank W. Sweet cites four such cases: “One was a slavery case, where the person’s endogamous group membership established the burden of proof. Two decided whether a person could testify in a case involving Whites. And one determined the validity of a

*Plessy v. Ferguson*⁴¹ that the courts began using blood quantum levels in its allocation of race and rights. On June 7, 1892, Homer Plessy purchased a first-class ticket aboard the East Louisiana Railway and took possession of a vacant seat in a coach reserved for white passengers. Within minutes of sitting down, Plessy was asked by the conductor to vacate the coach and assume a seat in another car designated "for persons not of the white race" (537). Refusing to comply with the conductor's orders, Plessy was forcibly ejected from the train by a police officer and imprisoned in the parish jail of New Orleans. Plessy was charged with criminally violating an act of the General Assembly of the State of Louisiana which read as follows:

All railway companies carrying passengers in their coaches in this State, shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races, by providing two or more passenger coaches for each passenger train, or by dividing the passenger coaches by a partition so as to secure separate accommodations.... No person or persons, shall be admitted to occupy seats in coaches, other than, assigned, to them on account of the race they belong to. (540)

When Plessy was brought before the District Court of New Orleans to answer the charges against him, he "declined and refused, either by pleading or otherwise, to admit that he was in any sense or in any proportion a colored man" (538). The case was referred to the Supreme Court.

Because he was "seven eighths Caucasian and one eighth African" and "the mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him," Plessy argued that "he was entitled

marriage" (172).

⁴¹ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537; 16 S. Ct. 1138; 41 L. Ed. 256; 1896 U.S. LEXIS 3390.

to every right, privilege and immunity secured to citizens of the United States of the white race" (541). The Supreme Court disagreed. Although it admitted that "the question of the proportion of colored blood necessary to constitute a colored person, as distinguished from a white person" (552), differed from state to state, under Louisiana law Homer Plessy was black.

If the Supreme Court's use of blood fraction levels in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* was intended to make its decision appear more objective and impartial, its efforts were undermined by its assertion that pretty much anyone was qualified to make racial distinctions. In an effort to exempt the Railway from any liability in cases such as these, the Supreme Court bestowed upon its officers the right (if not the ability) to classify passengers by race. As the trial transcript attests, "The power to assign to a particular coach obviously implies the power to determine to which race the passenger belongs, as well as the power to determine who, under the laws of the particular State, is to be deemed a white, and who a colored person" (549). For more than a century, the courts had been relying on the average juror to render racial distinctions; now they trusted the average railway conductor to do the same.

In the aftermath of the "separate but equal" ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the one-drop rule became virtually synonymous with Jim Crow segregation, particularly where public education was concerned. In April 1914, for example, George W. Tucker appealed to the Supreme Court of South Carolina to review the dismissal of Herbert, Eugene, and Dudley Kirby from the Dalcho public school by the State Board of Education. In the case

of *Tucker v. Blease et al*,⁴² Tucker, the children's guardian, argued that the Board had acted unfairly in its decision to expel them on the grounds that they were rumoured to be black. According to Tucker, the children had been attending white schools ever since they began their education, and that they "did not belong to the colored race, but were white and associated with white people" (305). When the chairman of the Board, John D. Coleman, was asked to testify as to why the children were dismissed, he said the reason for expulsion was that "the children were not white" (310). Coleman continued: "In dismissing them we did not have to investigate what mixture of blood was in them. We didn't have to do that. I have known that [the family is] mixed for 20 years, from what I have heard people say" (310). He concluded by saying that the Board felt that it was in everyone's best interests that the Kirby children find another school, "as the patrons would not want their children raised up with them" (311). Coleman's final sentiments were confirmed by the testimony of several parents whose children attended the Dalcho school, many of whom threatened to withdraw their children from the school if the Kirby children were reinstated. Another member of the board, J. F. Williams, stated that, as he had explained to Mr. Tucker, they "had dismissed the children on account of their ancestry, associations, and reputation in the community" (312). Although the Kirby children were only rumoured to have some affinity with the African race, the mere suspicion of "tainted blood" was enough to warrant their dismissal.

⁴² *Tucker v. Blease et al*, 97 S.C. 303; 81 S.E. 668; 1914 S.C. LEXIS 189.

Because the “evidence that they appeared white and held themselves out as white” conflicted with the evidence that “they were considered mixed or mulatto,” the court declared that the “racial composition of the children” could not be determined (328). In his ruling, however, Chief Justice Gary, did exactly what he claimed could not be done – he assigned the Kirby children a race:

While the testimony shows that the children are entitled to be classed as white, nevertheless the action of the board of trustees was neither capricious nor arbitrary, as they are willing to provide equal accommodations for the Kirby children and those in the same class with them. The testimony also shows that the decided majority of the patrons would refuse to send their children to the Dalcho school if the Kirby children were allowed to continue in attendance. Tested by the maxim, “The greatest good to the largest number,” it would seem to be far better that the children in question should be segregated than that the large majority of the children attending that school should be denied educational advantages. (331-32)

Despite his acknowledgement that the Kirby children were “entitled to be classed as white,” Chief Justice Gary felt that it was in the best interest of all parties if Herbert, Eugene, and Dudley were placed in another school.

Just five months later, in September 1914, a similar case was brought before the Supreme Court of North Carolina. The plaintiff in the case of *J. S. Johnson v. Board of Education Wilson County*⁴³ claimed that the defendant had refused to admit his four children to the public school for white children. Defending its decision, the Wilson County Board of Education declared that “said children are not entitled to attend the public schools for the white race, for the reason that they have negro blood in their veins”

⁴³ *J. S. Johnson v. Board of Education Wilson County*, 166 N.C. 468; 82 S.E. 832; 1914 N.C. LEXIS 427.

(468). When it was determined that the Johnson children possessed less than one-sixteenth of "negro blood," the trial judge ruled that they were to be admitted to the public school for white children, where they were to be granted the same privileges as any other student in attendance. When the Wilson County Board of Education refused to comply with the judge's ruling, Johnson appealed the case to the Supreme Court of North Carolina. Unfortunately for Johnson, the Supreme Court disagreed with the lower court's decision, stating that "the learned judge erred in deciding with the plaintiff" (476). In his ruling, Supreme Court Justice Walker argued that the "policy of racial separation in the schools is not only fixed by law in plain terms, but is commended by every consideration upon which the prosperity and happiness of the two races is founded" (476). Walker cited section 4086 of the Revisal of the Constitution as follows:

The children of the white race and the children of the colored race shall be taught in separate schools; but there shall be no discrimination in favor or to the prejudice of either race. All white children shall be taught in the public schools provided for the white race, and all colored children shall be taught in the public schools provided for the colored race; but no child with negro blood in his veins, however remote the strain, shall attend a school for the white race; and no such child shall be considered a white child. (471)

Unequivocal in its definition of what constitutes a colored child, section 4086 of the Revisal cemented the fate of the Johnson children. The children may have been the legitimate offspring of a legal marriage between a "white man" and a woman who possessed "less than one-eighth admixture of negro blood" (470), but they were still black. According to Justice Walker, "by no subtle alchemy known to the laboratory of logic can [their legitimacy] be claimed to have extracted the negro element from the blood

in the veins of such offspring and made it pure" (471). It did not matter how white the children appeared to be, the single drop of black blood coursing through their veins would prevent them from attending a school for white children.

Although the presiding judges in the cases of *Tucker v. Blease et al* and *J. S. Johnson v. Board of Education Wilson County* claimed that the "separate but equal" doctrine was intended to protect the rights of all children, white or black, clearly that was not the case. Justice Walker insisted that the segregation of the schools was necessary "for the peace, harmony, and welfare of the two races" (473). What the courts were really concerned about, however, was accommodating the white community. As Chief Justice Gary put it, "the greatest good to the largest number" (n. pag.). It would be another forty years before the Supreme Court of the United States would rule, in *Brown et al v. Board of Education of Topeka et al*,⁴⁴ that the "segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the *Fourteenth Amendment*" (483). Until then, the courts would do everything in their power to prevent the "commingling of the two races," all the while insisting that "laws permitting, and even requiring" their separation did not "necessarily imply the inferiority" of the black race (*J. S. Johnson v. Board of Education Wilson County* 475).

⁴⁴ *Brown et al v. Board of Education of Topeka et al*, 347 U.S. 483; 74 S. Ct. 686; 98 L. Ed. 873; 1954 U.S. LEXIS 2094; 53 Ohio Op. 326; 38 A.L.R. 2d 1180.

2.3 The One Black Ancestor Rule: Trials of Racial Determination in the Twentieth Century

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Southern states had begun to worry about more than just the “commingling of the two races.” “Vigilante committees and anti-miscegenation leagues” began to crop up all over the South, claims F. James Davis in *Who Is Black?* (55). Although many state legislatures had already passed statutes prohibiting interracial marriage, the pressure to enforce these anti-miscegenation laws intensified. As the 1949 case of *Knight v. State*⁴⁵ reveals, the courts would stop at nothing short of criminal prosecution to prevent the mixing of the two races. In 1948, a young man named Davis Knight was arrested for violating the State of Mississippi’s anti-miscegenation statute, which prohibited a person possessing one-eighth or more black blood from marrying a white person. Although Knight had always considered himself to be white, it was rumored that his great-grandmother had been a “Negro,” which meant that his marriage to a white woman was unlawful. Knight was convicted for his offense and sentenced to five years in prison. Fortunately for Knight, the Supreme Court of Mississippi ruled that the Attorney General had failed to “establish beyond every reasonable doubt that the defendant had one-eighth or more Negro blood” (568), and the judgement of the lower court was reversed and remanded.

Ten years after Davis Knight was convicted of unlawful cohabitation with a white woman, another interracial couple, Mildred Jeter and Richard Loving, were indicted for

⁴⁵ *Knight v. State*, 207 Miss. 564; 42 So. 2d 747; 1949 Miss. LEXIS 366.

violating Virginia's ban on interracial marriages. On January 6, 1959, the couple pleaded guilty to the charge and were sentenced to one year in jail. The trial judge offered to suspend the sentence if the Lovings agreed to leave the State of Virginia and not return for a period of twenty-five years. Abiding by the court's decision, the couple moved to the District of Columbia where they had been legally married the year before. A few years later, on November 6, 1963, the Lovings filed a motion "to vacate the judgement and set aside the sentence on the ground that the statutes which they had violated were repugnant to the Fourteenth Amendment" (3). Four years and several appeals later, the case of *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia*⁴⁶ was brought before the United States Supreme Court, which ruled that "restricting the freedom to marry solely because of racial classifications violates the central meaning of the Equal Protection Clause" (11).

In his ruling, Chief Justice Warren made it abundantly clear how he felt about the invidiousness of racial classifications:

Over the years, this Court has consistently repudiated "[d]istinctions between citizens solely because of their ancestry" as being "odious to a free people whose institutions are founded upon the doctrine of equality." At the very least, the Equal Protection Clause demands that racial classifications, especially suspect in criminal statutes, be subjected to the "most rigid scrutiny," and, if they are ever to be upheld, they must be shown to be necessary to the accomplishment of some permissible state objective, independent of the racial discrimination which it was the object of the Fourteenth Amendment to eliminate. (10)⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1; 87 S. Ct. 1817; 18 L. Ed. 2d 1010; 1967 U.S. LEXIS 1082.

⁴⁷ Chief Justice Warren's recognition of the Court's progressive attitude towards race conveniently ignores the Court's history of racial discrimination.

Because Warren deemed racial classifications to be “repugnant” (11), he decreed that they should only be used if they could be proven “necessary to the accomplishment of some permissible state objective” (10). The Supreme Court had already prohibited the use of racial distinctions in two previous cases. In the 1944 case of *Korematsu v. United States*,⁴⁸ Justice Black ruled that “[a]ll legal restrictions which curtail the civil rights of a single racial group, although not necessarily unconstitutional, are immediately suspect, and must be subject to the most rigid scrutiny by the courts” (214). In the 1954 case of *Bolling et al. v. Sharpe et al.*,⁴⁹ Chief Justice Warren himself ruled that “[c]lassifications based solely upon race must be scrutinized with particular care, since they are contrary to American traditions and hence continually suspect” (497). Although it acknowledged the constitutionally “suspect” nature of racial classifications, the Supreme Court chose to place greater restrictions on their usage rather than ban them altogether. Specifically, the Court required, in the case of *City of Richmond, Appellant v. J. A. Croson Company*,⁵⁰ that “the reasons for any racial classification be clearly identified and unquestionably legitimate” (469). In keeping with this regulation, the court permitted the use of “benign” (469) racial classifications on documents such as birth certificates. As the cases of Suzy

⁴⁸ *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214; 65 S. Ct. 193; 89 L. Ed. 194; 1944 U.S. LEXIS 1341.

⁴⁹ *Bolling et al. v. Sharpe et al.*, 347 U.S. 497; 74 S. Ct. 693; 98 L. Ed. 884; 1954 U.S. LEXIS 2095; 53 Ohio Op. 331.

⁵⁰ *City of Richmond, Appellant v. J. A. Croson Company*, 488 U.S. 469; 109 S. Ct. 706; 102 L. Ed. 2d 854; 1989 U.S. LEXIS 579.

Guillory Phipps and Mary Christine Walker reveal, however, even the most “benign” racial distinctions were problematic.

In the 1985 case of *Jane Doe v. State of Louisiana Department of Health and Human Resources, Office of Vital Statistics and Registrar of Vital Statistics*,⁵¹ Suzy Guillory Phipps and several members of her family sought to compel the Louisiana Department of Health and Human Resources to change her deceased parents’ “race designations on their birth certificates from ‘colored’ to ‘white’” (369). The fair-skinned Phipps testified that she had only recently learned of her black heritage when she applied for a passport. Phipps had claimed on her passport application that she was white. It was not until her application was rejected that she discovered that her birth certificate listed her as “colored.” The racial classification came as a shock to Phipps, who had lived her entire life as white. Despite a preponderance of evidence – which included the testimonies of several relatives and neighbours of the Guillory family, detailed genealogical charts spanning some two hundred years, official and unofficial records, and scores of photographs – Judge Charles R. Ward ruled that the appellants did not meet the burden of proof. Judge Ward agreed with the appellants that Louisiana’s “infamous ‘one-thirty second’ statute” was “constitutionally defective” (372).⁵² Ward even went so far as to say

⁵¹ *Jane Doe v. State of Louisiana Department of Health and Human Resources, Office of Vital Statistics and Registrar of Vital Statistics*, 479 So. 2d 369; 1985 La. App. LEXIS 10022.

⁵² The Louisiana Statute (La. R.S. 42:267), which was enacted in 1970 and later repealed in 1983, reads as follows: “In signifying race, a person having one-thirty second or less of Negro blood shall not be deemed, described or designated by any public official in the state of Louisiana as ‘colored,’ a ‘mulatto,’ a ‘black,’ a ‘negro,’ a ‘griffe,’ an ‘Afro-

that "the statute was based upon wholly irrational and scientifically insupportable foundations" (372). This observation did not, however, negate the fact that there was "no proof in the records that Simea and Dominique Guillory preferred to be designated as white" (372). "They might well have been proud to be described as colored," Ward continued. "Indeed, we have no evidence that during their lifetimes they objected to the racial designations in dispute in this case" (372). Hence, the Louisiana Department of Health and Human Resources was under no obligation or legal duty to change the birth certificates.

Three years after the court refused to change the Guillory family's birth certificates, an interesting reversal of the Louisiana case was brought before a Colorado judge. In 1988, a teacher named Mary Christine Walker applied for a job at a Denver school. On her application, the fair-skinned Walker listed her race as black. When her prospective employer checked Walker's birth certificate, however, her race was listed as white. Convinced that Walker had intentionally deceived them, the Denver school board accused her of "lying to take advantage of policies that encourage the hiring of minorities" (AP n. pag.). Tired of having to defend her racial heritage, Walker filed suit in Federal District Court to have her racial designation on her birth certificate changed from white to black. According to Walker, her parents claimed that she was white on her birth certificate in an effort to protect her from racial bias. "They knew what it was to be black," insisted Walker, "They knew the problems" (qtd. in AP n. pag.). Walker's parents,

American,' a 'quadroon,' a 'mestizo,' a 'colored person,' or a 'person of color'" (370).

who were themselves passing as white, began the "deception" so that their daughter could take advantage of the opportunities available to members of the white community.

Although she did not blame her parents for what they did, Walker wanted to set the record straight. On September 6, 1989, she got her wish; Federal District Court Judge John Brooks directed the Kansas Department of Vital Statistics to issue Walker a new birth certificate.

In addition to sanctioning the use of racial designations on official government documents such as birth certificates, the Supreme Court also permitted the use of racial classifications for "remedial" purposes. In an effort to remedy the wrongs committed against minorities in the past, the American government instituted affirmative action programs and other anti-discrimination measures designed to even the playing field. In the mid-seventies, twin brothers, Philip and Paul Malone, took advantage of the city of Boston's newly instituted affirmative action program when they applied to become firefighters. Initially rejected by the Boston Fire Department as a result of their low test scores, the brothers reapplied two years later as minority candidates and were appointed to the Department. Although their test scores had not improved to any degree, the Malones were hired in accordance with the Department's minority preference hiring policy.

After ten years of service with the Boston Fire Department, the Malones were fired when it was discovered that they had identified themselves as white on their original applications. The brothers appealed their dismissal, claiming they had changed their racial classification from white to black after they had discovered that their great-grandmother was African American. After a two-day evidentiary hearing, the hearing officer who was

appointed to the case concluded that the Malones did not qualify as "black" under the established criteria for "determining a claim of racial identity": "(i) visual observation of physical features; (ii) documentary evidence establishing black ancestry, such as birth certificates; and (iii) evidence that the Malones or their families held themselves out to be black and are considered to be black in the community" (148).⁵³ Not only did the fair-haired, fair-skinned Malone brothers not appear to be black, but birth certificates established their "white racial identity for three generations" (148). The only evidence of "black ancestry offered by the Malones was the questionable and inconclusive photograph of a woman they claimed to be Sarah Carroll, their maternal great-grandmother" (148). The hearing officer resolved that "the Malones had wilfully and falsely identified themselves as black in order to receive appointments to the department" (148), and denied their appeal for reappointment. Dissatisfied with the outcome of the hearing, the Malones filed a civil suit against the Civil Service Commission and the Department of Personnel Administration on the grounds that the hearing officer, who was a member of the Boston chapter of the NAACP, "was biased against them" (149). On February 15, 1995, the Appeals Court of Massachusetts determined that the Malones's allegations against the hearing officer had "no probative value" (154) and dismissed the case.

As the cases examined in this chapter reveal, the courts' blind deference to racial classifications over the years helped perpetuate the fallacy that race is something concrete, something that can be measured. The shifting concept of race in America is reflected in

⁵³ *Philip Malone & another vs. Civil Service Commission & another*, 38 Mass. App. Ct. 147; 646 N.E.2d 150; 1995 Mass. App. LEXIS 34.

the various tests and indices used by the courts in trials of racial determination. Factors such as physical appearance, parentage, blood, ancestry, and reputation were elevated at different periods in history in order to satisfy a particular agenda. It was not until the late twentieth century that the courts began to recognize the inefficacy of racial classifications and attempted to restrict their usage. In the case of *City of Richmond, Appellant v. J. A. Croson Company*, the United States Supreme Court went so far as to admit that "(1) racial characteristics so seldom provide relevant basis for disparate treatment, and (2) classifications based on race are potentially so harmful to the entire body politic" (469). Despite its acknowledgement that racial distinctions are in direct violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court continues to uphold the myth that people can be divided along racial lines. As the autobiographies discussed in Part Two of this dissertation reveal, however, successive generations of miscegenation have produced a population of racially indeterminate individuals who thwart any efforts to fix the color line.

Part Two

“Using the Master’s Tools to Dismantle the Master’s House”

Chapter Three

Taking Liberties: Passing from Slavery to Freedom

People at the North are disposed to be incredulous when they hear of *white* slaves at the South: and yet a little reflection would convince them not only that there must be such slaves under the present system, but that in process of time a large proportion of the slaves must be as white as their masters.

– William Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery* (1853)⁵⁴

On January 30, 1864, *Harper's Weekly* printed an engraving of a photograph, entitled "Emancipated Slaves, White and Colored," depicting three adults and five children who had been brought north from Louisiana by Colonel George H. Hanks and set free by Major General N.P. Banks (See Figure 3.1). The group made a series of public appearances and were photographed as part of a campaign to raise funds for public schools for freed slaves, the first of which was established by Major General Banks in 1863. The hope was, writes Kathleen Collins in "Portraits of Slave Children," that "these enigmatic portraits of Caucasian-featured children" would galvanize "Northern benefactors to contribute to the future of a race to which these children found themselves arbitrarily confined" (207). The fair-skinned slaves depicted in the engraving were described by the editor of *Harper's* as being "as white, as intelligent, as docile, as most of our own children" (66). "Yet," he continued, "the 'chivalry,' the 'gentlemen' of the Slave

⁵⁴ 1853 (New York: Negro UP, 1968), 261.



Figure 3.1 Emancipated Slaves, White and Colored, *Harper's Weekly*, January 30, 1864. Illustration courtesy of www.sonofthesouth.net, used with permission.

States, by the awful logic of the system, doom them all to the fate of swine; and, so far as they can, the parents and brothers of these little ones destroy the light of humanity in their souls" (66). In comparing these unfortunate slave children to those of its subscribers, the magazine hoped to stir their emotions against a system so unconscionable that it doomed its own children to a life of unspeakable cruelty.

Building upon my discussion of the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* in the previous chapter, my third chapter investigates the genealogy of miscegenation and, more notably, the origins of passing. Through an analysis of the racially ambiguous subjects of the carte-de-visite portraits reproduced herein, I reveal how generations of miscegenation rendered skin color immaterial in the slave economy. Children born of the victimization of female slaves, writes Elaine K. Ginsberg in her introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, "inherited the abject status of the mother even as, through successive generations, a visible, albeit culturally inauthentic, 'whiteness' was produced from 'black' female bodies" (5). The remainder of the chapter closely scrutinizes the testimonies of former slaves whose visible whiteness facilitated their escapes from bondage. Passing from slavery to freedom, the authors of these narratives exposed the slipperiness of the binaries black/white, slave/free, and, in the case of Ellen Craft, servant/master.

3.1 "As White As Their Masters": Visualizing the Color Line

Substantiating the existence of "white slaves" in the South, the *Harper's* engraving unveiled what the accompanying editorial referred to as one of the most loathsome secrets of the slave system – the "seduction" of "the most friendless and defenseless of women" by Southern "gentlemen" (66). These "white slaves" were the incarnation of racial transgression in the South, extant proof of the sexual exploitation of black slave women by their white masters. As historian Mary Niall Mitchell contends, in "'Rosebloom and Pure White,' Or So It Seemed," "The domestic disorder slavery produced—slaveowning fathers who sold their own children, slave women forever subject to the sexual desires of their owners, and slave families torn apart by the market in human beings—made enslavement terrifying, both for slaves themselves and in the eyes of northern abolitionists" (380). Bent on exposing the depravity of the slave system, *Harper's* afforded its subscribers "a terrible illustration of this truth of the outrage of all natural human affections" (66) in the form of the engraving. As if to reassure readers of its authenticity, the magazine printed brief biographies of the engraving's subjects. The four "colored slaves," three adults and one child, were described as follows:

WILSON CHINN is about 60 years old, he was "raised" by Isaac Howard of Woodford County, Kentucky. When 21 years old he was taken down the river and sold to Volsey B. Marmillion, a sugar planter about 45 miles above New Orleans. This man was accustomed to brand his negroes, and Wilson has on his forehead the letters "V. B. M." Of the 210 slaves on this plantation 105 left at one time and came into the Union camp. Thirty of them had been branded like cattle with a hot iron, four of them on the forehead, and the others on the breast or arm.

MARY JOHNSON was cook in her master's family in New Orleans. On her left arm are scars of three cuts given to her by her mistress with a rawhide. On her back are scars of more than fifty cuts given by her master. The occasion was that one morning she was half an hour behind time in bringing up his five o'clock cup of coffee. As the Union army approached she ran away from her master, and has since been employed by Colonel Hanks as cook.

ROBERT WHITEHEAD—the Reverend Mr. Whitehead perhaps we ought to style him, since he is a regularly-ordained preacher—was born in Baltimore. He was taken to Norfolk, Virginia, by a Dr. A. F. N. Cook, and sold for \$1525; from Norfolk he was taken to New Orleans, where he was bought for \$1775 by a Dr. Leslie, who hired him out as house and ship painter. When he had earned and paid over that sum to his master, he suggested that a small present for himself would be quite appropriate. Dr. Leslie thought the request reasonable, and made him a donation of a whole quarter of a dollar. The reverend gentleman can read and write well, and is a very stirring speaker. Just now he belongs to the church militant, having enlisted in the United States army.

ISAAC WHITE is a black boy of eight years; but none the less intelligent than his whiter companions. He has been in school about seven months, and I venture to say that not one boy in fifty would have made as much improvement in that space of time. (*Harper's* 71)

Of the four portraiture, the most disturbing are those depicting the slaves' maltreatment at the hands of their owners. Because the scars on Mary Johnson's arm and back are not visible in the engraving, the reader must rely on his or her imagination to envision the suffering she must have endured under her tyrannical master. In contrast, the initials "V. B. M" branded on Wilson Chinn's forehead offer indisputable evidence of the torture inflicted upon him by the sadistic Volsey B. Marmillion.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ It should be noted that the branding on Wilson Chinn's forehead has (for obvious purposes) been enhanced by the engraver, as it is not visible in the original photograph (See Figure 3.2). Another of M. H. Kimball's photographs, entitled "Wilson Chinn, a branded slave from Louisiana," depicts a manacled Wilson with a noose around his neck and various instruments of torture at his feet to emphasize the extent of his (and, by extension, other slaves') persecution.

In contrast to the “colored slaves,” who are racially marked by the color of their skin – and in the case of Wilson Chinn by his physical scars – the “white slaves” are free of any such racial signifiers. They are – with the exception of Augusta Broujey, who was slightly darker than the other three children – “to all appearance of unmixed white race” (71). The four all-but-white slave children were delineated as follows:

REBECCA HUGER is eleven years old, and was a slave in her father’s house, the special attendant of a girl a little older than herself. To all appearance she is perfectly white. Her complexion, hair, and features show not the slightest trace of negro blood. In the few months during which she has been at school she has learned to read well, and writes as neatly as most children of her age. Her mother and grandmother live in New Orleans, where they support themselves comfortably by their own labor. The grandmother, an intelligent mulatto, told Mr. Bacon that she had “raised” a large family of children, but these are all that are left to her.

ROSINA DOWNS is not quite seven years old. She is a fair child, with blonde complexion and silky hair. Her father is in the rebel army. She has one sister as white as herself, and three brothers who are darker. Her mother, a bright mulatto, lives in New Orleans in a poor hut, and has hard work to support her family.

CHARLES TAYLOR is eight years old. His complexion is very fair, his hair light and silky. Three out of five boys in any school in New York are darker than he. Yet this white boy, with his mother, as he declares, has been twice sold as a slave. First by his father and “owner,” Alexander Wethers, of Lewis County, Virginia, to a slave-trader named Harrison, who sold them to Mr. Thornhill of New Orleans. This man fled at the approach of our army, and his slaves were liberated by General Butler. The boy is decidedly intelligent, and though he has been at school less than a year he reads and writes very well. His mother is a mulatto; she had one daughter sold into Texas before she herself left Virginia, and one son who, she supposes, is with his father in Virginia.

AUGUSTA BROUJEY is nine years old. Her mother, who is almost white, was owned by her half-brother, named Solamon, who still retains two of her children. (71)

Each of the three portraiture of Rebecca Huger, Rosina Downs, and Charles Taylor describes the subject as either “white” or “perfectly white.” Although she is considerably whiter than the “colored slaves” depicted in the engraving (and in the original), Augusta Broujey is not described.⁵⁶

Immediately following the brief histories of these children was a plea to the public to purchase copies of the photograph which inspired the engraving (See Figure 3.2). As striking as the engraving was, it in no way compared to the arresting quality of the original photograph, which breathed life into the figures depicted in *Harper’s*. The embodiment of slavery, M. H. Kimball’s subjects revealed more about their subjugation in their facial expressions than *Harper’s* could pen in a year.

In addition to the group photograph, several individual and smaller group photographs were also offered for sale, with the proceeds going to the Louisiana schools that supported the children. The first of the smaller group portraits shown here is entitled “White and Black Slaves from New Orleans,” and features Isaac, Mary, and Augusta (See Figure 3.3).⁵⁷ The fact that Augusta is quite obviously the “white slave” referred to in the caption is interesting considering she was not white enough for inclusion in the publicity

⁵⁶ According to Kathleen Collins, Augusta was excluded from the Philadelphia tour, and appeared in “far fewer photographs than the others,” because she was “apparently too dark to move Philadelphia audiences” (189).

⁵⁷ In “Portraits of Slave Children,” Kathleen Collins erroneously remarks that “no portraits of two of the adults in the group, Mary Johnson and Robert Whitehead, have been found, except in the large group photograph” (192). While Collins may be correct in her assumption that no additional portraits have been discovered of Robert Whitehead, she is obviously mistaken concerning Mary Johnson.



Figure 3.2 Emancipated Slaves. 1863. Photographed by M. H. Kimball. Courtesy of the Collection of the New York Historical Society (neg. no. 46085)



Figure 3.3 White and Black Slaves from New Orleans. 1863. Photographed by Kimball. Courtesy of the Collection of Greg French.

tour. The next photograph, which is of “Isaac and Rosa,” reveals a stark contrast between the complexions of these two “Emancipated slave Children from the Free Schools of Louisiana” (See Figure 3.4). Posed arm in arm with her decidedly darker companion, Rosa appears undeniably white. And yet, as Mary Niall Mitchell points out in ““Rosebloom and Pure White,”” the girl “could not have been ‘white’ since a white girl never would have appeared on the arm of a black boy” (374). Rosa’s racially ambiguous image, Mitchell contends, served as “the perfect metaphor” for, among other things, “blackness and whiteness,” “racial mixture and racial purity,” and “slavery and freedom” (374). It bears mentioning that the portrait of “Isaac and Rosa” to which Mitchell refers differs significantly from the photograph shown here. In the Kimball photograph reproduced in Mitchell’s article, Rosa is clad in a large hat and heavy cape that is buttoned up to her chin. In contrast, the photograph reproduced here depicts a bare-shouldered, bare-armed, and thus decidedly more vulnerable girl. Although Rosa’s arm is entangled with Isaac’s in both portraits, the photograph shown here would have disturbed the sensibilities of Northern audiences much more than the one Mitchell depicts.

One of the more intriguing photographs of the New Orleans slaves is one taken by Charles Paxson called “Learning is Wealth” (See Figure 3.5). Featuring Charley, Rebecca, and Rosa at the knee of Wilson Chinn, the portrait recognizes the importance of education to the slave’s salvation. With the exception of Rosa – whose wearied look more than likely stemmed from her exhaustion at having to pose for so many photographs – the group appears to be engaged in the lesson at hand. Commenting on the photograph in



Figure 3.4 Isaac and Rosa, Emancipated Slave Children, from the Free Schools of Louisiana. 1863. Photographed by Kimball. Courtesy of the Collection of Greg French.



Figure 3.5 Learning is Wealth. Wilson, Charley, Rebecca & Rosa. Slaves from New Orleans. 1864. Photographed by Charles Paxson. Courtesy of the Collection of Greg French.

Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century,

Gwendolyn Du Bois Shaw writes:

the implication of the dark-skinned Wilson studying with a group of children implies a not-so-subtle racial hierarchy at work regarding ideas of race and in-born abilities to learn. In the photograph, which formally places Wilson on the same line as young Charley, he is presented as being at the same intellectual level as his lighter-skinned companions. (160)

As it was illegal in the South to teach a slave to read or write, it is significant that each of the emancipated slaves has in his or her possession a book. Whereas in Kimball's portrait, "Wilson Chinn, a branded slave from Louisiana," Chinn is surrounded by instruments of torture, here he is surrounded by implements of learning (Supra note 55).

The photographers' fascination with the three whitest-looking of the slave children, as seen in "Learning is Wealth," is underscored by the numerous individual and group portraits of them in existence. The most propagandistic of these photographs, taken by Charles Paxson, had the children posing with the American flag. The first was a portrait of "Rebecca, A Slave Girl from New Orleans," sitting adoringly before the flag with her arms crossed over her bosom. The caption read, "Oh! How I Love The Old Flag." The second was a portrait of "Charley, A Slave Boy from New Orleans," sitting solemnly before the flag, or "Freedom's Banner" as the caption referred to it. The third was a portrait of all three children, "Rosa, Charley, Rebecca. Slave Children from New Orleans," each enshrouded in an American flag, with the caption "Our Protection" printed

below.⁵⁸ The portraits of the children posing with Old Glory were obviously meant to appeal to the potential donors' patriotism.

Vignettes like the one of "Rebecca, Charley & Rosa, Slave Children from New Orleans" shown here captivated Northern viewers (See Figure 3.6). The ethereal quality of the vignette gave the children an almost cherubic appearance, which is perhaps why Charles Paxson and fellow photographer J. E. McClees were so fond of the technique.⁵⁹ Recognizing the popularity of portraiture, the photographers also opted to shoot the children in more traditional poses and settings. Aware of the success of portraits like the one of Fanny Virginia Casseopia Lawrence reprinted here, they capitalized on this image of Victorian girlhood (See Figure 3.7). "With each child framed in the vignettes and parlor scenes associated with white northern middle-class girlhood," writes Mary Niall Mitchell, "these images of 'slave girls' brought antislavery into the homes, perhaps even the family photograph albums, of many white northerners" (379). A decade earlier, Harriet Beecher Stowe had introduced the all-but-white slave into the homes of Northern readers in the character of Eliza. But Stowe's fictional character from *Uncle Tom's*

⁵⁸ The individual portraits of Rebecca and Charley posed with the American flag are reproduced in Shaw's *Portraits of a People* on page 159. The corresponding group portrait of Rosa, Charley, and Rebecca can be found in Mitchell's "'Rosebloom and Pure White'" on page 400.

⁵⁹ In "'Rosebloom and Pure White,'" Mitchell defines a vignette as "a style popular at the time in which only the head of the sitter was visible, surrounded by soft white space—a style that made young children look very much like angels" (369). Various individual and group vignettes of Rebecca, Rosa, and Charley, taken by both Paxson and McClees, are reproduced in Collins's "Portraits of Slave Children" on pages 193, 194, 195, 198, and 199.



Figure 3.6 Rebecca, Charley & Rosa. Slave Children from New Orleans. 1864. Photographed by Charles Paxson. Courtesy of the Collection of Greg French.



Figure 3.7 Fannie Virginia Casseopia Lawrence.
A Redeemed Slave Child, 5 years of age. 1863.
Photographed by the Kellogg Brothers. Courtesy
of the Collection of Greg French.

Cabin (1852) only existed in the readers' imaginations. Staring back at them from these photographs, Rebecca, Rosa, and Fanny became as real to Northern viewers as their own daughters and nieces.

As the caption beneath her image indicates, Fanny Virginia Casseopia Lawrence was redeemed by Catherine S. Lawrence and baptized by Henry Ward Beecher, the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, in May 1863. In her autobiography, *Sketch of Life and Labors of Miss Catherine S. Lawrence, Who In Early Life Distinguished Herself as a Bitter Opponent of Slavery and Intemperance, and Later in Life as a Nurse in the Late War; and for Other Patriotic and Philanthropic Services* (1893), Lawrence recalls the first time she saw young Fanny, or Virga as she refers to her. Inquiring as to the identity of a child she sees on the grounds of the hospital where she works, Lawrence asks, "But, Helen, see there, where did that white child come from?" (124). The washer woman tells Lawrence that the girl and her two older sisters were left in the care of slaves and told to go into the Union lines. The woman then implores Lawrence to take the young girl, saying, "that little girl has no one to see to her. She will be glad to live with you, and then she is white and more like you white folks" (124). A few days later, Helen returns with the girl's older sister, who, with a tremor in her voice, tells Lawrence that she is unable to support herself and her two younger siblings. The twelve-year-old girl says that she thinks her sister will be better off with Lawrence, and beseeches her to take the girl. Remarking on the situation, Lawrence says, "They were represented to me as slave children. The little girl had flaxen hair and dark blue eyes, but dark complexion or terribly sunburned. I at

once took the child, thinking I would find a home for her. She was a beautiful child and I soon became very much attached to her. She was not yet three years old" (126). Lawrence agrees to take the girl with the intention of finding a suitable place for her to live.

A short time later, Lawrence goes to Washington where she meets a gentleman from Brooklyn, who inquires about Virga. Lawrence offers the man a brief account of the girl's history, telling him that Virga and her sisters had been freed by their grandmother shortly before her death, and that they had made their way to the Union lines soon after she was buried. "She was born in slavery?" the man asks incredulously, to which Lawrence replies, "I cannot say, for at this time of excitement in connection with my duties, and in the midst of war, I have no means of ascertaining" (130). "Well," the man returns, "let me have her. I'll give you my gold watch for her" (130). Scandalized by the gentleman's offer, Lawrence retorts, "Oh my! That would be selling her; no, indeed, never" (130). The casual manner in which the man offers to trade his gold watch for the young girl accentuates Virga's status as nothing more than a commodity.

Although they made numerous public appearances, little is known about the New Orleans slave children and Fanny (Virga) Lawrence. Unlike the autobiographers discussed in the remainder of this chapter, these children were not afforded the opportunity to tell their stories. The abolitionists, it seems, were more interested in what these all-but-white slaves represented than they were in the children themselves. They were living proof that generations of miscegenation had indeed produced a significant number of slaves who were every bit "as white as their masters" and every bit as enslaved as their mothers. They

were not, however, the only proof. The antebellum papers were replete with advertisements for runaway slaves, who were described as “white,” “quite white,” and “nearly white” (See Appendix B). In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, Werner Sollors asserts that “The first American instances in which the word ‘passing’ was used to signify ‘crossing the color line’ would seem to have appeared in notices concerning runaway slaves” (255). One of the earliest historical instances in which the phrase “to pass” appeared in print was in the following advertisement:

\$100 *Reward*.—Ran away from the subscriber, a bright mulatto man slave, named Sam. *Light sandy hair, blue eyes, ruddy complexion, is so white as very easily to pass for a free white man.* Edwin Peck, Mobile, Ala., April 22, 1837.

The indeterminacy of race was further emphasized in abolitionist newspapers, like the *Liberator* and the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, which scandalized readers with reports of “white” slaves in their midst (See Appendix C). Added to these advertisements and articles were the testimonies of former slaves, like William Grimes, Moses Roper, Lewis and Milton Clarke, and Ellen Craft, whose invisible blackness enabled them to avoid detection and pass to freedom. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to an examination of the narratives of these all-but-white slaves.

3.2 “Passes for a Negro”: William Grimes’s *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*

If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will, leave my skin a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy *and free* America. Let the skin of an American slave, bind the charter of American Liberty.

– William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes* (1825)⁶⁰

In his prefatory remarks to his readers, William Grimes identifies himself as a forty-year-old man, who “passes for a negro, though three parts white” (186). Grimes’s depiction of himself as someone who “passes for a negro” presents an interesting inversion of the conventional passing scenario whereby an individual who is predominately white passes for white. “[T]hough three parts white,” Grimes is condemned to a life of servitude under the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*. His awareness of the inequity of the *partus* law is reflected in the discussion of his lineage that opens his narrative. *Life* begins:

I was born in the year 1784, in J—, County of King George, Virginia; in a land boasting its freedom, and under a government whose motto is Liberty and Equality. I was yet born a slave. My father, ———, was one of the most wealthy planters in Virginia. He had four sons; two by his wife, one, myself, by a slave of Doct. Steward, and another by his own servant maid. In all the Slave States, the children follow the condition of their mother; so that, although in fact, the son of ———, I was in law, a bastard and slave, and owned by Doct. Steward. (187)

⁶⁰ Ed. Yuval Taylor. *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume One, 1770-1849* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 232.

Whereas his father's legitimate children are granted all the advantages that their birth bestows upon them, Grimes is, by law and custom, "a bastard and slave" and entitled to nothing.

At the age of ten, Grimes was forced to leave the only home he had ever known when he was sold to his master's brother-in-law for £65. Although it pains him to leave his grief-stricken mother behind, Grimes is relieved to be free of an abusive mistress. Unfortunately, Grimes does not fare much better in his new home. Undermined in his efforts as a house servant by a fellow slave who wishes to usurp his position, Grimes is sent to work in the fields under an extremely cruel overseer. Throughout the remainder of his years in slavery, Grimes suffered under more than half a dozen different masters. Chronicling the "hard treatment, ill usage and horrid abuse" (205) he endured as a slave, Grimes admits that he had all but given up when the opportunity for escape presents itself.

While living in Savannah, Georgia, Grimes becomes acquainted with a beloved parson who holds meetings in the evenings to uplift the spirits of the downtrodden. Although slaves are not permitted to wander the streets after nightfall, Grimes is never accosted by the guards who monitor the streets after dark. Grimes reveals how he avoided detection by assuming the guise of a white gentleman:

... the guard never attempted to meddle with me, they always took me to be a *white man*. I have frequently walked the streets of Savannah in an evening, and being pretty well dressed, (generally having on a good decent suit of clothes,) and having a light complexion, (being at least three parts white,) on meeting the guard I would walk as bold as I knew how, and as much like a gentleman; they would always give me the wall. (213)

On one occasion, Grimes recalls accidentally brushing the guard in passing, for which they ask his pardon. So effective is his "disguise" that the slave is asked to excuse the guard's discourtesy. On another occasion, Grimes escorts a free colored man from Richmond past the guard: "I told him the guard were all out at their posts, and it would be dangerous for him to attempt it alone; but if he would consent to walk behind me in the capacity of a servant, (to all appearances) I would accompany him home, and I had no doubt but I could deceive the watch as I had done before" (213). The guards are easily duped, and Grimes and free companion arrive safely at their destination.

The relative ease with which Grimes temporarily crosses over the color line in the South induces him to employ the same tactics to facilitate his escape from bondage. Using his deceptive physical appearance once again to his advantage, Grimes stows away on a Brig from Boston by convincing a colored Yankee sailor to "walk behind [him] in the capacity of servant" as he boards the vessel (220). In the evening, Grimes would leave his hiding place and go up on deck, knowing that "the night being dark, the captain would not distinguish [him] from the hands, having a number on board of different complexions" (220). With the aid of the sailors, Grimes manages to secure passage on a second vessel bound for New York, eventually making his way to Connecticut. Upon his arrival in New Haven, Grimes deceives the owner of a boarding house into giving him a room. Of the landlady, Mrs. W., Grimes says, "she never knew to this day, but what it was a white man that lodged there that night" (222). The landlady's obliviousness to the fact that she

housed a slave under her roof testifies not only to Grimes's racial ambiguity but to the questionable properties of race.

Although Grimes has escaped the yoke of slavery, his experiences in the land of the free prove less satisfying than he had hoped. After eluding his captors for almost a decade, Grimes is eventually recognized and seized by some acquaintances of his master. Confronted with the prospect of being returned to a life of bondage, Grimes agrees to give his former owner everything he has in exchange for his liberty. Grimes's extreme bitterness at being forced to purchase his freedom is revealed in his appeal "To the Public":

Let any one suppose himself a husband and father, possessed of a house, home, and livelihood: a stranger enters that house; before his children, and in fair day light, puts the chain on his leg, where it remains till the last cent of his property buys from avarice and cruelty, the remnant of a life, whose best years had been spent in misery! Let any one imagine this, and think what I have felt. (186)

The bitterness he feels at having been victimized yet again, and in a free state no less, permeates Grimes's entire narrative.

Unlike subsequent narratives which condemned the South but tended to romanticize the North, Grimes's autobiography criticized the entire country for the inhumane treatment he suffered both before and after his escape from slavery. Grimes's implication of the North in his suffering succeeded in alienating those who could have aided him the most – the abolitionists. As William L. Andrews explains in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*:

The fugitive slave narratives that abolitionists popularized demanded radical socioeconomic reform in the South, not in the North. Romantic, nationalistic ideals, epitomized in the fugitive as symbol of individualism triumphant over corrupt institutions, were the stock-in-trade of the famous slave narratives of the 1830s and 1840s. Because Grimes did not subscribe to these myths, it is not surprising that he had to publish his story on his own and that the antislavery movement ignored it both when it first appeared and in 1855, when Grimes reprinted a somewhat expanded edition. (78)

Grimes had chronicled the consummate misery that he and his fellow slaves had suffered under the tyranny of the South, but he had indicted all of America in the process.

Its failure to praise the North for its progressive attitudes was not the only reason why the *Life of William Grimes* was not championed by the abolitionists. Grimes's narrative neglected to furnish its readers with the proverbial happy ending that would become standard fare in later slave narratives. As Andrews reveals, "autobiography became for Grimes a means of venting his outrage and baring the bitterness that he had accumulated during forty years of life in 'a land boasting its freedom'" (*To Tell a Free Story* 78). The resentment that Grimes felt at having to sacrifice all that he had worked for to purchase his freedom is exemplified in the counsel he offers his fellow slaves at the end of his narrative:

I would advise no slave to leave his master. If he runs away, he is most sure to be taken. If he is not, he will ever be in the apprehension of it. And I do think there is no inducement for a slave to leave his master, and be set free in the northern states. I have had to work hard; I have been often cheated, insulted, abused, and injured. (232-33)⁶¹

⁶¹ In 1855, Grimes reprinted a slightly expanded edition of his autobiography which included a cursory overview of his experiences in the thirty years following the initial publication of the *Life of William Grimes*. One of the experiences Grimes recounts involves an altercation with a butcher, whom Grimes is charged with assaulting. In his

It is not surprising that the *Life of William Grimes* was ignored by the abolitionists, given the fact that its message was antithetical to that of the anti-slavery movement. "From the standpoint of the advancement of the cause," writes Andrews, "abolitionists naturally felt that the most useful black autobiographies would be the ones that forced the ugly facts of 'the peculiar institution' to the forefront of a reader's attention and kept them there throughout the story" (*To Tell a Free Story* 6). Perhaps the final disturbing image of Grimes's tortured body being used to enshroud the Constitution was a little too "ugly" for the abolitionists.

3.3 "So Much Whiter Than the Other Slaves": Moses Roper's *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery*

The determination of laying this little narrative before the public did not arise from any desire to make myself conspicuous, but with the view of exposing the cruel system of slavery, as will here be laid before my readers.

— Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper* (1838)⁶²

In the introduction to his narrative, Moses Roper insists that his purpose for setting down his tale was not to make himself "conspicuous." But, as the account of his

own defence, Grimes claims that he "did no more than any one would do when abused" (Grimes 86). Grimes continues: "but I being a *negro*, as they called me, and the butcher a *white* man, although his skin was a great deal blacker than mine, I was put under \$500 bonds" (86).

⁶² Ed. Yuval Taylor. *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume One, 1770-1849*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 492.



Figure 3.8 Moses Roper. Frontispiece from *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery*. 1840. Courtesy of Documenting the American South.

origins reveals, Roper could not have been more conspicuous. Although his narrative begins in the usual manner, with the proclamation “I was born ...,” Roper’s entrance into the world was anything but ordinary. At the news of his birth, Roper’s mistress sends another slave to inquire as to whether he is “white or black” (493). When the slave reports back to her mistress that the newborn is white, and bears a strong resemblance to Mr. Roper, an enraged Mrs. Roper races to the location of the birth, armed with a club and a knife. Rather than blame Mr. Roper for his perfidy, Mrs. Roper attacks the innocent victims of her husband’s licentious behaviour. Fortunately, Moses Roper’s maternal grandmother is able to prevent the would-be assailant from harming mother and child. Shortly thereafter, Roper and his mother are sold to conceal any evidence of infidelity and miscegenation.

Following the death of his new master, Roper is bequeathed to another family member, who, disconcerted by his appearance, sells him once again. As the product of a white father and a half-white mother, Roper admits to being “very white” (493) as a child. He explains:

My resembling my father so very much, and being whiter than the other slaves, caused me to be soon sold to what they call a negro trader, who took me to the southern states of America, several hundred miles from my mother. As well as I can recollect, I was then about six years old. The trader, Mr. Michael, after travelling several hundred miles and selling a good many of his slaves, found that he could not sell me very well, (as I was so much whiter than the other slaves were,) for he had been trying for several months—left me with a Mr. Sneed, who kept a large boarding-house, who took me to wait at table, and sell me if he could. (493)

Determined to rid himself of the slave, Roper's new owner convinces a cotton planter to take the boy to his plantation so that he "might be burnt darker by the sun" (494).

Apparently dissatisfied with his new acquisition, the planter sells Roper, along with some bales of cotton, to another gentleman who later exchanges the boy for a female slave. The slave traders who purchase Roper also meet with resistance when trying to sell him. As Roper explains, the traders "took me for sale, but could not sell me, people objecting to my being rather white" (494). The men take Roper to North Carolina, where they trade him for a boy whose skin is darker.

Over the next few years, Roper is bought and sold numerous times, and forced to work on various plantations under horrific conditions. Subjected to unspeakable cruelty, Roper makes several escape attempts. Unfortunately for Roper, he is punished more and more severely each time he is recaptured. Despite repeated attempts to beat him into submission, Roper persists in his efforts to escape. As soon as another opportunity presents itself, the young man sets out for the free states. When he is discovered by the overseer of another plantation, Roper tries to persuade the man that he is not an escaped slave but an indentured servant:

Though I was white at the time, he would not believe my story on account of my hair being curly and woolly, which led him to conclude I was possessed of enslaved blood. The overseer's wife, however, who seemed much interested in me, said she did not think I was of African origin, and that she had seen white men still darker than me. (499)

Because of the texture of Roper's hair, the overseer is convinced that the man before him must be of African descent. The slave's white complexion, however, persuades the

overseer's wife to believe otherwise. She is so certain that Roper is a white man that she insists that he sup with them before continuing on his journey.

Roper is apprehended a few days later and confined to an underground dungeon. More than a month passes before anyone is sent to retrieve the runaway. In an effort to secure his property, Roper's master has him fitted with an iron collar and shackled to a horse for the ride home. "I was very weak, and could hardly sit the horse," writes Roper. "Having been in prison so long, I had lost the southern tan; and, as the people could not see my hair, having my hat on, they thought I was a white man, a criminal, and asked what crime I had committed" (502). Because his skin color belies his race, passers-by perceive the manacled Roper to be a criminal rather than a fugitive slave.

Roper is put on the auction block several more times over the course of the next few years until, in 1834, at the age of eighteen, he finally manages to escape. Knowing that he can pass as a white man, Roper devises a scheme to secure a passport for himself. En route to Savannah, Georgia, Roper meets a cotton planter who mistakes the slave for a white man. Roper convinces the man to write him a pass to replace the one he claims to have lost crossing the Chattahoochee River. The cotton planter furnishes Roper with the following recommendation:

John Roper, a very interesting young lad, whom I have seen and travelled with for eighty or ninety miles on his road from Florida, is a free man, descended from Indian and white. I trust, he will be allowed to pass on without interruption, being convinced from what I have seen that he is free, and though dark, is not an African. I had seen his papers before they were wetted. (514)

The identity document Roper procures from the cotton planter grants the bearer freedom of travel. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, the expression “to pass” was derived from the all-but-white slave’s use of such documents to facilitate his or her escape. In this context, claims Juda Bennett in *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* (1996), “the ‘pass’ is a slip of paper that allows for free movement, but the white skin is itself a ‘pass’ that allowed for some light-skinned slaves to escape their masters” (36). Recommendation in hand, Roper easily secures “passage” for himself aboard a vessel bound for New York.

In his introduction to *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery*, Ian Frederick Finseth comments on Roper’s resourcefulness: “Roper simply, or cleverly, treats his light color as a practical asset or resource. In a society whose dominant racial ideology and system of labor depended on the legibility of the ‘black’ body, Roper quickly recognizes the advantages of illegibility” (31). As Finseth suggests, Roper’s invisible blackness is instrumental in that it allows him, on several occasions, to persuade suspicious whites that he is not a runaway. It is through his clever manipulation of the color line that Roper is ultimately able to slip the yoke of slavery.

Roper’s first thought upon his arrival in New York is that he is finally free. He soon discovers, however, that, under the Fugitive Slave Law, he can be captured and forcibly returned to the South.⁶³ Afraid of being re-enslaved, Roper moves first to

⁶³ In an effort to protect the rights of the slaveholding states, Congress enacted the first Fugitive Slave Law in 1793. The law decreed that a slaveholder, or agent thereof, could seize a fugitive owing labour or service, and, upon satisfactory proof of ownership, remove said fugitive to the state from which he or she had fled. In addition, any

Vermont and then to Boston, where he finds work in a shop. Roper's fear of detection is so great that he shaves his head and purchases a wig. When it is discovered that he is wearing a wig, Roper is accused of being a runaway slave. Fortunately, insists Roper, "the neighbors all around thought I was a white, to prove which, I have a document in my possession to call me to military duty" (517).⁶⁴ The fact that Roper's shaved head draws suspicion indicates just how aware the average person was, at the time, of the perceived racially-coded features of the Negro. Roper's earlier encounter with the overseer reveals how the man understood kinky hair to be a racial signifier. Later, when Roper is shackled to the horse and mistaken for a criminal, the hat he is wearing conceals his hair and, thus,

individual found guilty of aiding and abetting a fugitive, or obstructing the removal of a fugitive, was liable to a \$500 penalty to be paid to the claimant. In retaliation, many of the Northern states passed personal liberty laws to protect runaway slaves and freedmen by hindering the law's execution. Frustrated by the fact that the Fugitive Slave Law was only loosely enforced, Southern slaveholders pushed for a more exacting law. In order to appease them, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which forced officials to assume a more proactive role in the seizure of fugitive slaves, and imposed harsher penalties on individuals who aided in their escape. The revised law also decreed that a fugitive could be seized and removed to the state from which he or she allegedly escaped without due process of law. The only evidence required was the sworn testimony of the claimant or a representative thereof. There was no jury trial, and the fugitive was not permitted to testify in his or her own defence. For further reading on the Fugitive Slave Laws, see Stanley Campbell, *Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (1972); Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (1975); Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865* (1994); Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Law* (1997); Lawrence R. Tenzer's *The Forgotten Cause of the Civil War: A New Look at the Slavery Issue* (1997); Larry Gara, "The Fugitive Slave Law: A Double Paradox" in *Abolitionism and American Law* (1999); John R. McKivigan, ed., *Abolitionism and American Law* (1999); and Stephen Middleton, *Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio* (2005).

⁶⁴ Roper continues: "The law is, that no slave or colored person performs this, but every other person in America of the age of twenty-one is called upon to perform military duty, once or twice in the year, or pay a fine" (517).

his race. Ironically, when Roper's kinky hair is concealed people believe him to be white and when it is absent people believe him to be black. The signifier proves to be an inadequate and unreliable racial determinant.

Following this incident, Roper becomes so anxious that his true identity will be discovered that he sets sail for England. It is not until he reaches Liverpool, a full sixteen months after his escape, that Moses Roper gets his first taste of freedom. Roper writes: "My feelings when I first touched the shores of Britain were indescribable, and can only be properly understood by those who have escaped from the cruel bondage of slavery" (518). But, as the sentiments that close his narrative reveal, the fruits of freedom were bittersweet for Roper. The "deep stain" of slavery, he writes, must be wiped from the Constitution, for only then can America truly be "the land of the free" (520).

3.4 "Only a Sprinkling of the African": Lewis Clarke's *Narrative of Lewis Clarke*

Mr. Cyrus Clarke, a brother of the well-known Milton and Lewis Clarke, (all of whom, till within a short time since, for some twenty-five years, were slaves in Kentucky,) mildly, but firmly, presented his ballot at the town meeting board. Be it known that said Cyrus, as well as his brothers, are *white*, with only a sprinkling of the African; just enough to make them bright, quick, and intelligent, and scarcely observable in the color except by the keen and scenting slaveholder.

— J. Thompson, qtd. in *Narrative of Lewis Clarke* (1846)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America: Dictated by Themselves*. 1846. Ed. Yuval Taylor. *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume One, 1770-1849*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 631.

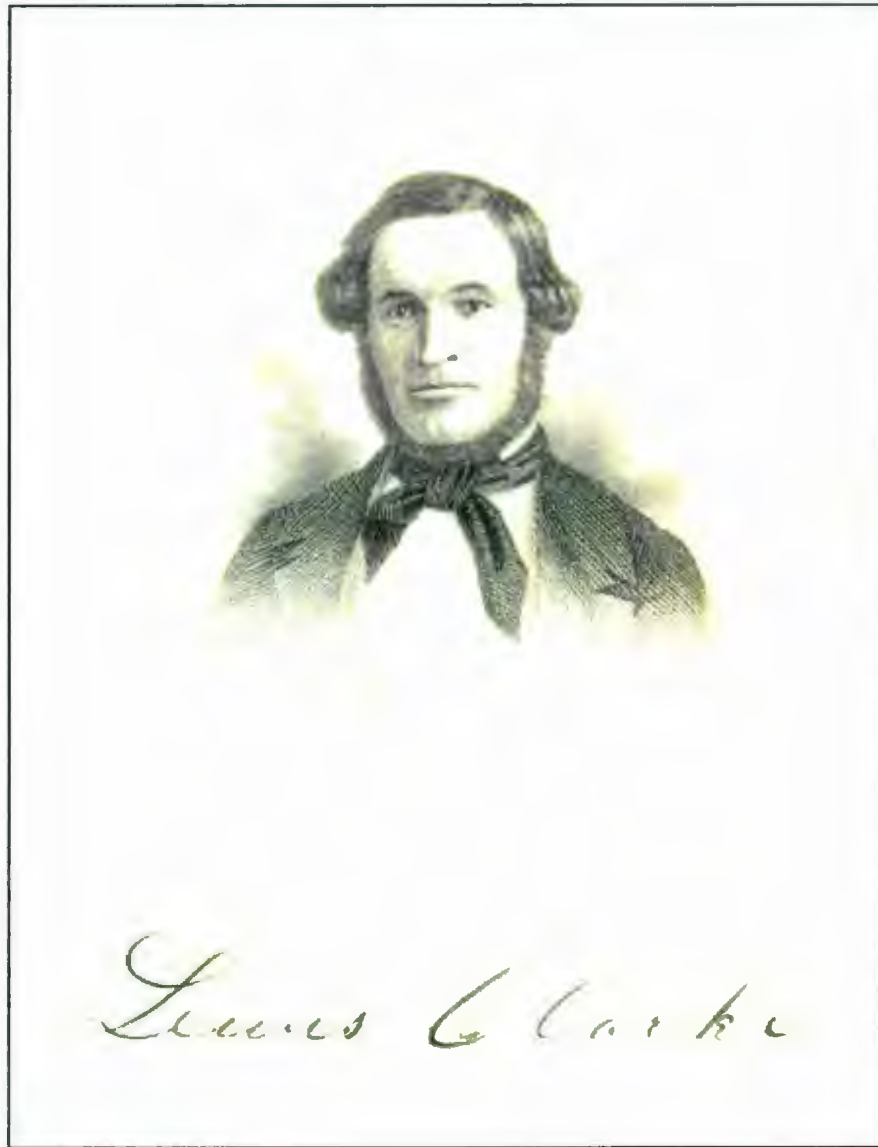


Figure 3.9 Lewis Clarke. Frontispiece from *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke*. 1846. Courtesy of Documenting the American South.

In his introduction to Lewis Clarke's narrative, Yuval Taylor claims that it embodies "much the same flavor, the same combination of outrage and wit" as found in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, which was published the same year (Taylor, *I Was Born: Volume One* 602). Although Clarke lacked Douglass's eloquence, he captivated his listeners all the same. Clarke's popularity on the anti-slavery lecture circuit is evidenced by the fact that he was interviewed several times by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe was apparently so fascinated by Clarke that "she based the character of George Harris in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on his personality" (603).⁶⁶

Lewis Clarke was born in 1815 in Madison County, Kentucky. At the age of six or seven, Clarke falls into the hands of his half-sister, Mrs. Betsey Banton. Commenting on the cruelty of his new mistress, Clarke writes: "Mrs. Banton, as is common among slaveholding women, seemed to hate and abuse me all the more, because I had some of

⁶⁶ In Chapter Eleven of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the reader is informed that George Harris "was, by his father's side, of white descent" and that "he had inherited a set of fine European features, and a high, indomitable spirit" from one of the finest families in Kentucky (114). Having "received only a slight mulatto tinge" from his mother, George facilitates his escape from bondage by assuming the guise of "a Spanish-looking fellow" (115). The handbill advertising George's escape – which closely resembles the runaway slave advertisements provided in Appendix C of this dissertation – delineates the slave as follows:

Ran away from the subscriber, my mulatto boy, George. Said George six feet in height, a very light mulatto, brown curly hair; is very intelligent, speaks handsomely, can read and write; will probably try to pass for a white man; is deeply scarred on his back and shoulders; has been branded in his right hand with the letter H.

I will give four hundred dollars for him alive, and the same sum for satisfactory proof that he has been killed. (111)

the blood of her father in my veins. There are no slaves that are so badly abused, as those that are related to some of the women, or the children of their own husband; it seems as though they never could hate these quite bad enough" (Clarke, Lewis 613).⁶⁷ Echoing Clarke's sentiments, Frances Smith Foster asserts, in *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*, that the mulatto slave "was living proof that the sins of the father are visited upon the sons. Not only was he a product of evil, but evil was visited upon him because his complexion was a constant reminder of his origins" (128). While light-skinned slaves were sometimes afforded better treatment than their darker brethren, as Clarke attests, this was not always the case.

The family resemblance between the legitimate and illegitimate offspring is so obvious that a gentleman caller mistakes one of Clarke's sisters for one of Mrs. Banton's

⁶⁷ In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Frederick Douglass offers the following observation on the plight of the mulatto slave:

I know of such cases; and it is worthy of remark that such slaves invariably suffer greater hardships, and have more to contend with, than others. They are, in the first place, a constant offence to their mistress. She is ever disposed to find fault with them; they can seldom do any thing to please her; she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing his mulatto children favors which he withholds from his black slaves. The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife; and, cruel as the deed may strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers, it is often the dictate of humanity for him to do so; for, unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but a few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his back; and if he lisp one word of disapproval, it is set down to his parental partiality, and only makes matters worse, both for himself and the slave whom he would protect and defend. (41)

sisters (which, of course, she is). "My sisters were as white and good looking as any of the ladies in Kentucky," Clarke explains. "Seeing one of my sisters in the house, and pretty well dressed, with a strong family look, he thought it was Miss Campbell" (613-14).

Scandalized by the incident, Mrs. Banton turns her fury on Clarke:

She must wreak her vengeance, for this innocent mistake of the young man, upon me. "She would fix me, so that nobody should ever think I was white." Accordingly, in a burning hot day, she *made me take off every rag of clothes, go out into the garden*, and pick herbs for hours, in order to *burn* me black. When I went out, she threw cold water on me, so that the sun might take effect upon me; when I came in, she gave me a severe beating on my blistered back. (614)

Mrs. Banton's efforts to "race" Clarke by darkening his skin is a testament to how disturbed the white community was by the existence of such "raceless" slaves. His mistress is so threatened by Clarke's invisible blackness that she must render him visible. Although Moses Roper's owner is also desirous that his slave "be burnt darker by the sun" (Roper 494), it is for practical reasons – Roper's white appearance makes him difficult to sell. Mrs. Banton is motivated by the desire to distance herself from the product of miscegenation, to draw the color line between her and her illegitimate half-brother and slave.

Although Clarke suffers terribly under his tyrannical mistress and often dreams of liberty, he knows that if he tries to escape and is caught he will be beaten unmercifully. It is not until he learns that he is to be sold further South that Clarke formulates an escape plan with a fellow slave: "Isaac proposed to take one of the horses of his mistress, and I was to take my pony, and we were to ride off together; I as master, and he as slave"

(Clarke, Lewis 619). The two slaves only get a few miles away before Clarke becomes nervous and turns back. Two weeks later, Clarke makes a second escape attempt. After riding about fifteen miles, he is overtaken by a Baptist minister, who says to Clarke, "How do you do boy? are you free? I always thought you were free, till I saw them try to sell you the other day" (619). Recalling the conversation, Clarke writes:

At length, I mustered resolution to make some kind of a reply. "What made you think I was free?" He replied, that he noticed I had great privileges, that I did much as I liked, and that I was almost white. "Oh yes," I said, "but there are a great many slaves as white as I am." "Yes," he said, and then went on to name several; among others, one who had lately, as he said, run away. This was touching altogether too near upon what I was thinking of. Now, said I, he must know, or at least reckons, what I am at — *running away*. (619-20)

In an effort to throw the minister off track, Clarke comments that he cannot imagine why a slave would want to run away, especially one as well-treated as himself. So convincing is Clarke that the Baptist minister bids him farewell and continues on his journey.

Armed with a pass from an administrator for whom he had worked on occasion, Clarke is able to make it as far as the Ohio River without being accosted. From there, he makes his way to Cincinnati, where he takes a room under the guise of being a white man from Kentucky. When the neighbors learn that a Kentuckian is in their midst, they become alarmed. "Kentuckians sometimes came there to kidnap their citizens," reveals Clarke. "I at length satisfied them, by assuring them that I was not, nor my father before me, any slaveholder at all; but, lest their suspicions be excited in another direction, I added, my grandfather was a slaveholder" (621). The irony here is not just that the slave must convince the neighbours he is not a slaveholder, but that he must also persuade them

that his father, who was in fact his master, was not one either. While the kink in Moses Roper's hair is a tell-tale sign of his race, Lewis Clarke is so devoid of any such racial markers that the neighbours view him as a potential threat to other runaway slaves.

Clarke eventually finds his way to Canada, where he remains for a few months. When he learns that his brother, Milton, is living in Ohio, he decides to make his way back across the border. Once he is reunited with Milton, Clarke makes up his mind to go to Kentucky to rescue his younger brother, Cyrus, from bondage. At great personal risk to himself, Clarke successfully liberates Cyrus, and together they make their way back to Ohio. Soon after he is liberated, Cyrus begins to exercise his rights as a free citizen. The details of Cyrus's clash with authority over his right to vote were published in the *Liberty Press* in a piece called "Progress of Freedom":

Slave. Gentlemen, here is my ballot; I wish to vote. (Board and by-standers well knowing him, all were aghast — the waters were troubled — the slave legions were "up in their might.")

Judge E. You can't vote! Are you not, and have you not been a slave?

Slave. I shall not *lie* to vote. I am and have been a slave, so called; but I wish to vote, and I believe it my right and duty.

Judge E. Slaves can't vote.

Slave. Will you show me in your books, constitution, or whatever you call them, where it says a slave can't vote?

Judge E. (Pretending to look over the law, &c., well knowing he was "used up.") Well, well, you are a colored man, and can't vote without you are worth \$250.

Slave. I am as white as *you*; and don't *you* vote?

(Mr. E. is well known to be very dark; indeed as dark or darker than Clarke. The current began to set against Mr. E. by murmurs, sneers, laughs, and many other demonstrations of dislike.)

Judge E. Are you not a *colored man*? and is your hair not curly?

Slave. We are both colored men; and all we differ is, that you have not the handsome wavy curl; you raise *Goat's wool*, and I come, as you see, a little nearer *Saxony*.

At this time the fire and fun was at its height, and was fast consuming the judge with public opprobrium.

Judge E. I challenge this man's vote, he being a colored man, and not worth \$250.

Friends and foes warmly contested what constituted a colored man by the New York statute. The board finally came to the honorable conclusion that, to be a *colored* man, he must be at least one half blood African. Mr. Clarke, the SLAVE, then voted, he being nearly full white. (qtd. in Clarke, Lewis 632)

Refusing to be intimidated by the electoral process, Cyrus insists upon exercising his constitutional right to vote. Through a combination of logic and biting sarcasm, Cyrus not only manages to convince the board to let him vote, but also induces them to declare him a white man.

3.5 "Nothing More Substantial Than Color": Milton Clarke's *Narrative of Milton Clarke*

One night I went out and slept upon the haystack in the field, fearing they might search the house. The man who owned it came next day to Mr. Austin's, where I stopped, to know if it was so; said, if he had known that a nigger slept there, he would have burned the hay and him all up together. "Let him go back where he belongs." He then turned to me, and asked me if I had seen that nigger. I told him I had; I knew him very well. Mr. Austin asked him what he would say, if they should come and attempt to take me into slavery; why, he said, "I would shoot them." His philanthropy was graduated, like many others, upon nothing more substantial than color.

— Milton Clarke, *Narrative of Milton Clarke* (1846)⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *Narratives of the sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America: Dictated by Themselves.* 1846. Ed. Yuval Taylor. *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume One, 1770-1849.* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 651.

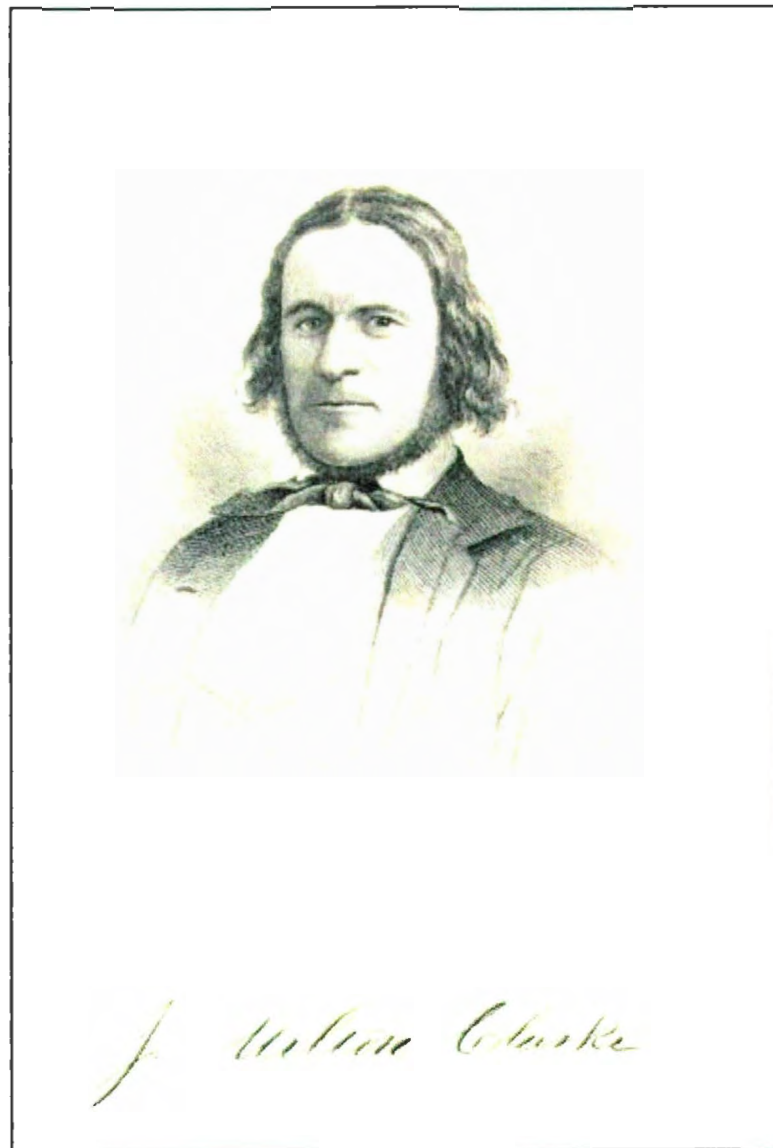


Figure 3.10 J. Milton Clarke. From *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke*. 1846. Courtesy of Documenting the American South.

When Milton Clarke is about six years old, his grandfather's estate, including the slaves, is auctioned off. Clarke's mother is reassured that her family will be divided among the heirs rather than sold. Although Milton's brother, Lewis, is given to "that paragon of excellence, Mrs. Banton" (638), Milton, his mother, his brother Cyrus, and his sister Delia are fortunate enough to fall into the hands of the kindly Judith Logan. Of his half sister, Judith, Clarke writes, "She was the only one of all the family that I was ever willing to own" (640). Unfortunately, the merciful Judith dies two years later, and Clarke and his family fall into the hands of Judith's husband, the merciless Joseph Logan. So violent is his new master that when Clarke tries to defend himself during a beating, Logan comes dangerously close to slitting Clarke's throat. Unwilling to part with such a valuable commodity, however, Logan opts to give the boy three hundred lashes instead. Fortunately for Clarke, he and his family are sold a few months later to Logan's father, Deacon Archibald Logan.

Although the Deacon is cruel to Clarke's brother, Cyrus, he is more humane to Clarke, whom he makes his personal servant. In his travels with the Deacon, Clarke, as a result of his light complexion, is "often supposed to be his son" (641). Trusting that his kindly treatment of Clarke has secured the slave's loyalty, the Deacon permits Clarke to take a job aboard a steamboat on the Ohio River. Clarke states, "he gave me a free paper, to pass up and down the river as I pleased, and to transact any business as though I was free" (644). As a result of the Deacon's "free pass," Clarke is both literally and metaphorically able "to pass up and down the river." Quick to take advantage of his

newfound freedom, Clarke decides to “strike for liberty” (644).

Opting to remain in Oberlin, Ohio, rather than continue on to Canada following his escape, Clarke resolves to help other slaves free themselves. He writes:

I had the pleasure of giving the “right hand of fellowship” to a goodly number of my former acquaintances and fellow-sufferers. The masters accused me of *stealing* several of them. This is a great lie. I never stole one in my life. I have assisted several to get into possession of the true owner, but I never assisted any man to steal another away from himself. God has given every man the true title-deed to himself, written upon his face. It cannot be blotted entirely out. The slaveholders try hard to do it, but it can yet be read; all other titles are shams and forgeries. (645)

Unfortunately for Clarke, his philanthropic efforts almost cost him his freedom. When it is discovered that Clarke has been aiding slaves in their efforts to escape, a posse is sent to Ohio to retrieve him. The “crack slavebreaker” (646), Postlewaite, and his henchmen are informed of Clarke’s whereabouts, and capture him with relative ease.

Keeping to the letter of the Fugitive Slave Law, the slave catchers bring the shackled Clarke before the local magistrate, Judge Page. When the county sheriff asks Clarke what he has done, the slave informs the sheriff that he has committed no crime. The sheriff tells Postlewaite to release Clarke, but Postlewaite refuses on the grounds that he has been sent by Clarke’s owner to seize the fugitive slave. Wishing to review the evidence, Judge Page remands the case for trial that same afternoon. When word spreads through the community that “the kidnappers had got the white nigger” (647), a large crowd gathers at the courthouse. Clarke’s friends insist that he should “have a trial as a *white* man” (648). Although he does not officially grant their request, Judge Page allows

Clarke to testify on his own behalf.⁶⁹ At the commencement of the trial, Clarke's lawyer asks the slave catchers "by what law they claimed [him]" (648). They respond, "under the black law of Ohio" (648). Clarke's lawyer counters their claim with the assertion that his client "was not a black man" (648). As rebuttal, the slave catchers offer the following evidence of Clarke's condition:

Postlewaite said he arrested me, as the property of Archibald Logan, under the article of the constitution, that persons "*owing service*," and fleeing from one state to another, shall be given up to the person to whom such service is due. He then read the power of attorney, from Deacon Logan to him, authorizing him to seize one Milton Clarke — describing me as a person five feet two and a half inches tall, probably trying to pass myself off as white. "His hair is straight, but curls a little at the lower end." After reading this, he read other papers, showing I was a slave of Logan. He produced a bill of sale, from Joseph to Deacon Logan. (648)

Clarke's lawyer advises him to answer the charges against him, with "the whole story — that [he] had a free pass to go where [he] chose" (648). The lawyer argues that "Mr. Clarke had permission to come to the free states" (649). "Yes," replies Postlewaite, "but not to *stay* so long" (649). Although Clarke had a "free pass," as Postlewaite insists, he was not free to pass.

Given the preponderance of evidence in favour of the slave catchers, Judge Page rules that Deacon Logan, having proven his claim, is entitled to reclaim his "*goods and chattels*" (649). Refusing to accept the judge's ruling, Clarke's friends hatch a plan to ambush the slave catchers' carriage and liberate Clarke once again. Although Postlewaite threatens to shoot anyone who lays a hand on Deacon Logan's property, Clarke's rescuers

⁶⁹ As a slave was not permitted to testify under the rubric of the Fugitive Slave Law, it is clear that Judge Page affords Clarke the same legal rights as a white man (Supra note 63).

do not back down. When a bystander learns that the mob is trying to free a slave, he sides with slave catchers, insisting that “he wanted no niggers there” (650). Clarke’s friends ask the man to look inside the carriage and “pick out the nigger, if there was any there” (650). Taking his time to scrutinize the carriage’s passengers, the man finally points to Postlewaite, asserting, “That is the nigger” (650). If the white man is the “nigger,” then, conversely, the “nigger” must be the white man. Greatly offended by the insult, Postlewaite threatens the man’s life, which incites the growing mob. Knowing they are outnumbered, and fearing for their safety, the slave catchers release their prey. “Soon as my feet touched the ground,” writes Clarke, “the rope was cut, and once more I felt free” (650). Despite the harrowing nature of this experience, Milton Clarke continues to help his enslaved brethren to escape the yoke and taste the freedom to which they are entitled.

3.6 “As White As Anyone”: William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*

It may be remembered that slavery in America is not at all confined to persons of any particular complexion; there are a very large number of slaves as white as anyone.

– William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860)⁷⁰

Published in 1860, William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* opens with a description of Ellen Craft: “Notwithstanding my wife being of African extraction on her

⁷⁰ (London: William Tweedie, 1860), 487.



Figure 3.11 Ellen Craft, The Fugitive Slave. Frontispiece from *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*. 1860. Courtesy of Documenting the American South.

mother's side, she is almost white — in fact, she is so nearly so that the tyrannical old lady to whom she first belonged became so annoyed, at finding her frequently mistaken for a child of the family, that she gave her when eleven years of age to a daughter, as a wedding present" (487). The young Ellen's inadvertent passing is viewed as a trespass, and she is punished accordingly. "To keep her in chains," explains Majorie Garber in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, "it becomes necessary to break the chain of signification" (282). Ellen is given away so as to prevent her from being mistaken for a member of the family, which, in fact, she is.

In an effort to convince his readers that a white complexion is no more a safeguard against enslavement than it is a reliable indicator of race, William Craft goes on say that "it is almost impossible for a white child, after having been kidnapped and sold into or reduced to slavery," to "recover its freedom" (Craft 487). Giving a brief history of the renowned Salomé Muller case, Craft informs his readers that "the case was argued on both sides, but was at length decided in favor of the girl, by the Supreme Court declaring that 'she was free and white, and therefore unlawfully held in bondage'" (489). Offering further evidence of the illicit enslavement of whites, Craft relates the story of a white boy, who was stolen from his home in Ohio, "tanned and stained in such a way that he could not be distinguished from a person of colour, and then sold as a slave in Virginia" (489). Given the sensational nature of the case — the details of which were published in the Reverend George Bourne's *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America* (1834)⁷¹

⁷¹ In his 1834 anti-slavery treatise *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America*, the Reverend George Bourne offers several examples of white slavery in an effort to persuade his readers that slavery did indeed pose a threat to white citizens.

and recounted again in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1854)⁷² – it is not surprising that Craft would use this incident to prove that slavery was a condition that could befall almost anyone. As Dawn Keetley contends in “Racial Conviction, Racial Confusion: Indeterminate Identities in Women's Slave Narratives and Southern Courts,” the Crafts' narrative begins, then, “by upsetting beliefs that its readers might take for granted: that whites and blacks are naturally distinct and only the latter enslaved and that parents do not sell their children. The most unlikely things are often true; the most sacred categories often do not hold” (13). Destabilizing the racial binaries of black/white and slave/free, the stories of Salomé Muller and the young boy offer interesting examples of reverse passing. As white people who are forced to live as black, Muller and the boy move from entitlement to disenfranchisement, from freedom to subjugation. Their

Bourne writes that in addition to tattooing, painting, and tanning the seven-year-old boy of whom Craft speaks, “every other method was also adopted which wickedness could devise, to change the exterior appearance of the unfortunate creature, into one uniform dark tinge” (146). The boy's captors, it seems, were not satisfied with the effects the sun produced on his appearance. After fourteen years of being “driven, starved, and scourged, like the coloured people with whom he was obliged to associate” (146), Bourne informs his readers, the boy eventually escaped to Ohio.

⁷² Reiterating the Reverend George Bourne's account of the young boy, Stowe writes, “It is no less certain that white children have sometimes been kidnapped and sold into slavery” (364). Ruminating on the kidnapper's efforts to disguise the boy, she asserts that “the tanning process is not necessary now, as a fair skin is no presumption against slavery” (364). In an effort to convince her readers that slavery was not confined to individuals of a particular visage, Stowe reprinted a series of advertisements for fugitive slaves of various complexions, which led her to deduce: “When the mind once becomes familiarized with the process of slavery—of enslaving first black, then Indian, then mulatto, then quadroon, and when blue eyes and golden hair are advertised as properties of *negroes*—what protection will there be for poor white people, especially as under the present fugitive law they can be carried away without a jury trial?” (364).

movement over the color line, regardless of the direction, underscores the permeability of that line and the instability of dichotomized racial identities.

Intent on liberating themselves, William and Ellen Craft devise plan after plan, “puzzling [their] brains for years” (498), before resigning themselves to the fact that they will never be free: “We resolved to get the consent of our owners, be married, settle down in slavery, and endeavour to make ourselves as comfortable as possible under that system” (498). Despite having convinced themselves that escape is futile, they cannot help but hold on to “the glimmering hope of liberty” (498). Shortly after they are married, William Craft formulates a scheme so clever that within eight days of executing the plan he and his wife are free. Explaining the ruse, Craft writes: “Knowing that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape” (498). It is interesting to note that although Ellen dons a disguise for the purposes of escape, the suit of men’s clothes she wears masks her gender, not her complexion. As Ellen Samuels points out in “‘A Complication of Complaints’: Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*,” “In the case of Ellen Craft, race is at once shown to be arbitrary and constructed—since she is defined as black yet appears to be white—and physically inherent, since her body itself is all the disguise she needs to appear white” (24). Ellen may be legally black, but she is phenotypically white. This

ambiguity of face and race is what enables the Crafts to successfully execute their plan and pass from slavery to freedom.

So complete is Ellen's transformation that, throughout his account of their escape, William only speaks of his wife in masculine terms. From the moment she assumes the disguise, William refers to her as his master. "With the act of Ellen's passing," asserts Daneen Wardrop in "Ellen Craft and the Case of Salomé Muller in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," the text displaces such classifications and mobilizes new avenues of thought; her passing from one gender to another and passing from one race to another vectors a restlessness and fluidity that runs between conditions formerly thought to be static" (979). William's altered perception of Ellen speaks to the fluidity of her racial and gender border crossing. It is not until they are finally free and Ellen sheds her male attire that William reverts back to calling her his wife.

Although Ellen is sceptical of the plan at first, her desire for freedom pushes aside any doubts she may have. As it is close to Christmas, the Crafts are able to secure passes from their respective owners permitting them to be away for a few days. From the moment William pronounces her "a most respectable looking gentlemen" (500), Ellen is treated with the utmost courtesy and respect. When the Crafts board a steamer bound for Charleston, South Carolina, Ellen is invited to dine with the vessel's captain. Noticing how attentive William is to his "master," the captain warns Ellen to "watch him like a hawk" when they get to the North (505). Echoing the captain's sentiments, a slave trader exclaims, "He will do you no good if you take him across Mason's and Dixon's line; he is a keen nigger, and I can see from the cut of his eye that he is certain to run away" (505).

Ellen receives further advice concerning her manservant from another passenger aboard the steamer. A young military officer, who is also travelling with a slave, warns Ellen not to be so polite to William: "I assure you, sir, nothing spoils a slave so soon as saying, 'thank you' and 'if you please' to him. The only way to make a nigger toe the mark, and to keep him in his place, is to storm at him like thunder, and keep him trembling like a leaf" (506). If every slave was "drilled in this manner," continues the officer, then "they would be as humble as dogs, and never dare run away" (506). As he bids farewell to Ellen, the unwitting officer tells the runaway slave to have a safe and pleasant journey.

The intimate manner in which the other passengers address Ellen regarding William reveals how convincing she is in her role as a slave owner. The ease with which she crosses racial, gender, and class boundaries is further exemplified when Ellen meets two ladies aboard a train in Virginia and engages them in "a little cosy chat" (509). So impressed are the young ladies with the distinguished gentleman that one of them confesses to her father, "Oh! dear me, I never felt so much for a gentleman in my life!" (510). The irony of the ladies' infatuation with the disguised slave woman is not lost on William Craft who remarks, "To use an American expression, 'they fell in love with the wrong chap'" (510).

The Crafts soon discover that the regulations become more rigorous the further north they travel. When they arrive in Baltimore, Ellen is informed that she must prove her right to William before she is allowed to board the train to Philadelphia. Mustering all her courage, Ellen boldly tells the railway officer, "I bought tickets in Charleston to pass us through to Philadelphia, and therefore you have no right to detain us here" (514). The

officer replies, "right or no right, we shan't let you go" (514). Overhearing the exchange, some of the other passengers freely express their disdain. William writes, "After the officer had finished, a few of them said, 'Chit, chit, chit;' not because they thought we were slaves endeavouring to escape, but merely because they thought my master was a slaveholder and invalid gentleman, and therefore it was wrong to detain him" (514). When the bell rings for the train to leave, the exacerbad officer finally acquiesces. He orders the clerk "to run and tell the conductor to 'let this gentleman and slave pass;'" adding, 'As he is not well, it is a pity to stop him here. We will let him go" (515). In permitting them to board the train, the railway officer inadvertently helps the Crafts pass to freedom.

When the Crafts arrive in Philadelphia, Ellen is so overwhelmed with emotion that she collapses in her husband's arms, exclaiming, "Thank God, William, we are safe!" (517). The moment the couple is settled in their boarding house, Ellen throws off her disguise and assumes her "own apparel" (517). Although, as Charles J. Helgar points out in *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (2001), "her ability to pass for white makes it possible for her to surreptitiously enter the white race, if she wishes to" (101), Ellen willingly resumes a black racial identity once she and William are free. With the assistance of the abolitionists, the Crafts make their way to Boston where they remain for almost two years. When they are informed that their masters have sent agents to Boston to recover them, the Crafts make immediate plans to head to Canada. Although Ellen is treated with respect and kindness when they arrive in New Brunswick, William is subject to "the influence of

the low Yankee prejudice” (526). Having shed her white racial identity along with her disguise, Ellen makes no pretense about the fact that she and William are husband and wife. When the landlady of a boarding house they enter asks Ellen if she knows “the dark man downstairs,” she answers, “Yes, he is my husband” (526). “Oh!” exclaims the landlady, “I mean the black man — the *nigger*?” (526). Ellen replies, “I quite understand you; he is my husband” (526). The next morning, the landlady tells the Crafts that she can no longer accommodate them. Unwilling to further subject themselves to the “vulgar prejudice of the town” (527), the Crafts make their way to England, where they are encouraged to share and publish the story of their daring bid for freedom.

3.7 “She’s No Negro”: *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*

No one, not apprised of the fact, would suspect that she had a drop of African blood in her veins; indeed, few will believe it, at first, even when told of it.

– Rev. H. Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1861)⁷³

In *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*, Reverend H. Mattison, describes the subject of the narrative as “easy and graceful in her manners, of fair complexion and rosy cheeks, with dark eyes, a flowing head of hair with no perceptible inclination to curl, and every appearance, at first view, of an accomplished white lady” (5). Although her race is clearly demarcated in the narrative’s title, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon*, in the accompanying frontispiece Picquet is the image of white Victorian womanhood. Lest there be any doubt as to which race Picquet belongs, Mattison is quick to point out that she is “of African descent on her mother’s side – an

⁷³ (New York: Published by the Author, 1861), 5. Although it is not technically a passing narrative, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* offers compelling testimony as to the indeterminacy of race, which is why I have chosen to include it here. This said, I have some reservations about the narrative that bear mentioning. Although any slave narrative “involves the unreliability natural to the autobiographic form, particularly when the autobiographer is in need of editorial assistance” (Starling 221), Picquet’s narrative is especially problematic. First, Picquet’s story is relayed through Reverend H. Mattison, who credits himself (rather than Picquet) as the author of the narrative. Second, rather than having Picquet dictate her story to him (as Lewis and Milton Clarke and several others do with their narratives), Mattison employs an interview style in which he asks Picquet questions, and then records her responses. Third, Mattison’s interview technique means that he is in control of the direction of Picquet’s story, which becomes increasingly apparent as the narrative unfolds. Finally, about half-way through the narrative, Mattison abandons the interview approach, and, taking full control, finishes the work as Picquet’s biographer of sorts.

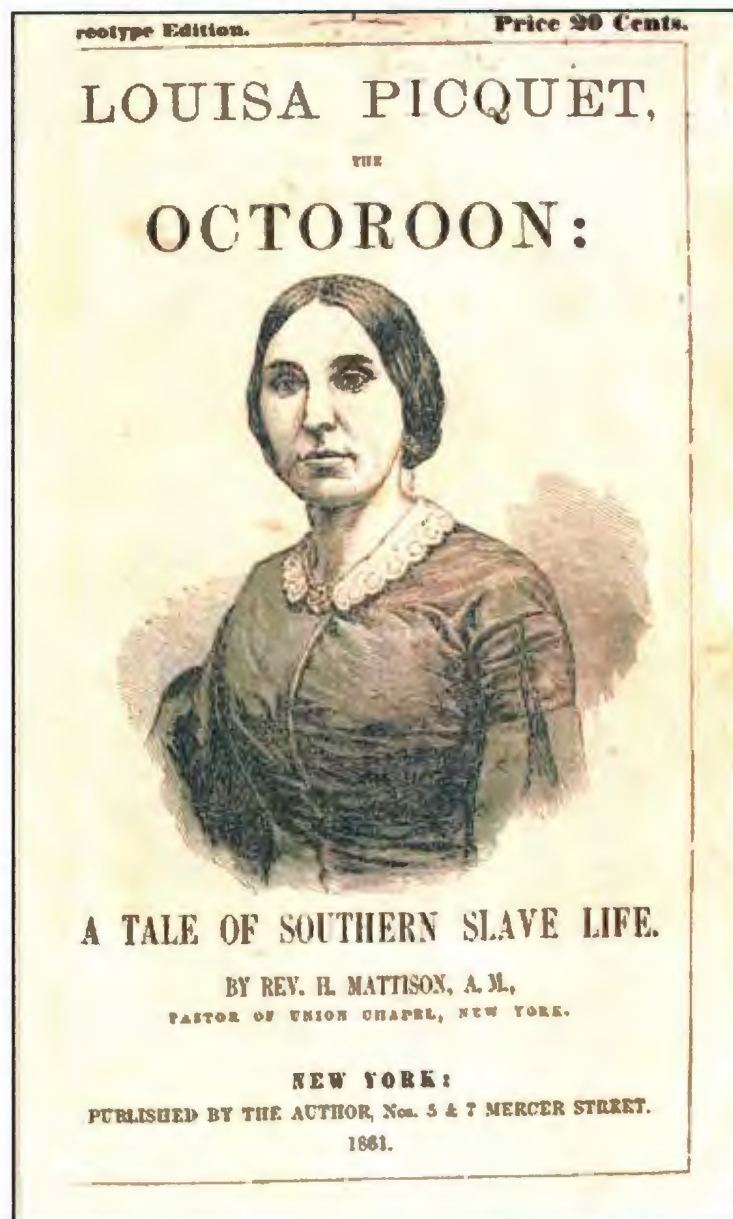


Figure 3.12 Louisa Picquet. From *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*. 1861. Courtesy of Documenting the American South.

octoroon, or eighth blood – and, consequently,” a slave (6). So intent is the amanuensis on establishing a definitive racial identity for Picquet that he contradicts his earlier description of her as “accomplished.” Mattison insists that a “certain menial-like diffidence, her plantation expression and pronunciation,” and Picquet’s “inability to read or write,” all attest to the “truthfulness of her declaration that she has been most of her life a slave” (5).

Like Mattison, Picquet’s owner is so convinced that people will readily assume she is white that he advises her to pass once he manumits her. “He said that if I would promise him that I would go to New York, he would leave me and the children free,” explains Picquet (qtd. in Maddison 23). “Then he told me how to conduct myself, and not to live as I had lived with him, with any person. He told me to come out this way (North), and not to let any one know who I was, or that I was colored. He said no person would know it, if I didn’t tell it” (23). Although there is nothing in the narrative to suggest that Picquet makes a conscious effort to pass, there is little doubt that the majority of people she encounters are ignorant of her status as an African American.

As a result of her white complexion, Picquet finds herself having to persuade others that she is in fact colored. Arriving in the North, after she has been freed, Picquet seeks assistance from a Baptist minister and “friend of the colored people” (Mattison 42). Describing the encounter between Picquet and the minister, Mattison writes:

The Rev. Henry Slicer looked sternly at Mrs. P., and with an imperious air said, “You a colored woman? You’re no Negro. Where did you come from? If you are a negro, where are your free papers to show it?” At the same time, looking over her book of letters, he asked, “Who wrote these letters? Where is the envelope that came on them, to show the postmark? You’ve got no envelope here.” Then he handed back the book and papers,

and said he could not do anything about it. As he went away he looked at [the other minister] and said, "She's no negro;" and thus ended the assistance from Rev. Henry Slicer. (43)

The minister is unwilling to accept that Picquet is a Negro without tangible evidence. Although the letters in Picquet's possession would have been enough to convince a Southern jury she is black, they are not enough to persuade the Baptist minister. The Reverend Henry Slicer relies solely on visual cues to determine the race of the woman standing before him. Picquet looks white; so, she must be white.

Throughout the narrative, Picquet offers details of slaves she has known or met who are as white as she. When Mattison inquires, "Was your mother white?" (8), Piquet responds, "Yes, she was pretty white; not white enough for white people. She have long hair, but it was kind a wavy" (qtd. in Mattison 8). Picquet then informs him that while living in Mobile she became acquainted with "a colored man that was more white than [she was]" (8). According to Picquet, neither she nor the gentleman was at first aware that the other was colored. When questioned as to whether there were others "white like [her]" on the auction block when she was sold, Picquet replies, "Oh yes, plenty of them. There was only Lucy of our lot, but others!" (16). Asked to describe Lucy's coloring, Picquet states that Lucy was "right white – light hair and blue eyes. All her children were right white" (20). When Mattison asks if her own children are mulattoes, Picquet retorts, "No, sir! They were all white. They look just like aim. The neighbors all see that" (19). Picquet's indignity at the suggestion that her children are mulattoes does not, however, compare to the outrage Reverend Mattison expresses at the end of the narrative concerning her children's paternity in particular and miscegenation in general.

Following his assurances about the truthfulness of Picquet's story, Mattison takes it upon himself to point out what he deems to be the moral of the narrative. "The darkest and most prominent feature of the whole story," insists Mattison, "is the deep moral corruption which it reveals in the families concerned, resulting from the institution of slavery" (50). Then, if there is any doubt as to the "deep moral corruption" of which he speaks, the minister lists (in bold type) ten separate instances of miscegenation that occur in the narrative, with the corresponding page numbers printed in parentheses. "And all this in the brief narrative of a single individual who has been but a few years behind the scenes," rebukes Reverend Mattison. "There is not a family mentioned, from first to last, that does not reek with fornication and adultery" (51). Mattison continues:

Now, if such are the glimpses of southern domestic life which a single brief narrative reveals, what must the remainder be, which is hidden from our "Abolition" eyes? Alas for those tell-tale mulatto, and quadroon, and octoroon faces! They stand out unimpeached, and still augmenting as God's testimony to the deep moral pollution of the Slave States. We may shudder at the "heathenism" of a Turkish harem, and send missionaries to convert the Mohammedans; we may stand aghast at the idea of twenty thousand Syrian women sold to supply the harems of the Mussulmans, and pour out our money like water to relieve or release them; but wherein is all this a whit worse than what is constantly practiced, with scarce a word of unfavorable comment, in our own "Christian" (?) land? If there is any difference, it is certainly in favor of the Turk; for neither his concubines nor his children by them are slaves; while, in this country, our chivalrous "southern gentlemen" beget thousands of slaves; and hundreds of the children of our free white citizens are sold in the southern slave markets every year. (51-52)

Rather than pay genuine tribute to the narrative's heroine, Mattison uses the "Conclusion and Moral of the Whole Story" as a forum for his self-righteous abolitionist views.

Arguably more interested in exposing the immorality associated with slavery than he was in the person of Louisa Picquet, Reverend Hiram Mattison undermines the narrative's

subject. In this sense, *Louisa Picquet* raises as many questions about the efficacy of its narrative form as it does about racial determinacy.

In *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom*, Russ Castronovo remarks that “passing is an exercise of critical authorship in which the slave narrator usurps a legitimate history of freedom and whiteness and rewrites the self with the rights and privileges of historical presence” (210). Writing themselves into existence, William Grimes, Moses Roper, Lewis and Milton Clarke, and Ellen Craft used their autobiographies as vehicles for creative self-determination. Because slave narrators were expected to present themselves as both “representatives of their race” and as “embodiments of the injustices visited upon the race,” posits Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr. in his introduction to *African American Slave Narratives: An Anthology* (13), this rubric had the potential to muffle the voice of the individual narrator. While Louisa Picquet’s authorial voice was certainly muffled by her amanuensis, Reverend Mattison, this was not the case for Grimes, Roper, the Clarkes, and Craft. Rather, these former slaves found it profoundly liberating to claim their subjectivity in a society that refused to see them as anything but objects. The act of passing enabled them to facilitate their escapes, but the act of writing set them free.

Chapter Four

Drawing the Line: Leading the Race Against Discrimination

Walter White, a dapper, highly strung man, can pass for a white person. But his sympathies and outlook are those of a black man.

Roi Ottley, *'New World A-Coming': Inside Black America* (1943)⁷⁴

Big, booming Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., preacher, editor, and legislator, is one of the handsomest men in Black America. Women sometimes call him "Mr. Jesus." Therein lies the source of his extraordinary popularity. He is six feet three inches in height, and weighs two hundred and ten pounds. Sloppy tweeds hang on his powerful frame with *Esquire* distinction. He is a white man to all appearances, having blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and light, almost blond hair. At thirty-four years of age, he is going places in a rush.

Roi Ottley, *'New World A-Coming': Inside Black America* (1943)⁷⁵

This chapter examines the autobiographies of two of the most influential leaders of the Civil Rights Movement – Walter White and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The

⁷⁴ (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 244.

⁷⁵ (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 220. In the third chapter of his autobiography, Powell comments on Ottley's portraiture of him in *New World A-Coming*: "But I do remember that it was shortly after moving into the new house that Roi Ottley, the gifted author of *New World A-Coming* and *Black Odyssey*, saw me for the first time and was confused about my gender because of the way my mother dressed me, the big straw hat with streamers, the way they carried me around by the hand, my blond hair that hadn't yet darkened much. Roi never could get this first picture of me out of his mind. Although he remained one of my closest friends for over a quarter of a century, when he wrote a chapter about me in *New World A-Coming*, he described me as blond-haired and blue-eyed. My hair had long since turned brown, and my eyes were never blue – they are hazel" (Powell 23). Careful to correct the inaccuracies in Ottley's physical description, Powell says nothing of Ottley's estimation of him as "a white man."

experiences White and Powell recount in their autobiographies serve as testimonials of their loyalty and dedication to their community. Their commitment to their people, and the African-American community's appreciation of this commitment, is reflected in their elevated status as community leaders. In *'New World A-Coming,'* Roi Ottley characterizes White and Powell as two of the "shrewdest negotiators of the race" (244). The race for which they negotiate is the black race, the community with which they identify, not the race they most resemble.

4.1 "The Appearance of Whiteness": Walter White's *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White*

I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me I am not white. There is nothing within my mind and heart which tempts me to think I am. Yet I realize acutely that the only characteristic which matters to the white or the colored race – the appearance of whiteness – is mine.

– Walter White, *A Man Called White* (1948)⁷⁶

While it might seem redundant for an executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to insist he is a Negro, Walter White's white-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired appearance compels him to do so.⁷⁷ White recognizes that his physical aspect necessitates such a declaration in a society

⁷⁶ (New York: The Viking Press, 1948), 3.

⁷⁷ In *Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance* (1978), Edward E. Waldron states that "through some marvel of computation, the Harvard anthropologist Earnest Hooton arrived at the conclusion that White was 63/64 white, enough to make him 'legally white'

conditioned to accept the presence of such traits as evidence of race. In an effort to illustrate the kind of conditioned response his physical appearance frequently evokes, White opens his autobiography by recounting an incident in which he accidentally steps on the toe of a "Negro" at a Harlem subway station. Turning to apologize, White is arrested by the man's facial expression which he describes as "hard and full of the piled-up bitterness of a thousand lynchings and a million nights in shacks and tenements and 'nigger towns'" (3).⁷⁸ As the anger and bitterness he directs towards his assailant reveals, there is no doubt in this man's mind as to which race White belongs. "Why don't you look where you're going?" he says, rebuking White. "You white folks are always trampling on colored people" (3). It is not until he overhears one of White's associates mention a filibuster in Washington that the man recognizes his error and apologizes for

in most states; this idea was evidently so fascinating to people that it was inevitably noted in White's obituaries" (3). Hooton's estimation of Walter White as 1/64 black differs from that of fellow anthropologist Caroline Bond Day, however. In *A Study of Some Negro-White Families in the United States*, Day calculates White's ancestry as 5/32 Negro, 1/32 Indian, and 26/32 White (Plate 36). "Of the union of Dr. E. Harrison, 4/4W, and Marie Harrison, 1/8N 1/8I 6/8W," reveals Day, "were born three children, Nathaniel, Madeline, and Alice Madeline married George White, supposedly a quadroon, and they have seven children: George, Alice, Olive, Walter, Ruby, Helen, and Madeline" (32). The discrepancy between Hooton's and Day's calculations is puzzling, especially considering the fact that the "Foreword and Notes on the Anthropometric Data" for Day's *Study* were written by Hooton.

⁷⁸ Gazing into the face of the Negro, White registers a great deal more than the individual's physical discomfort at having been walked on. In White's eyes, the man's expression reflects the oppression and persecution of the entire Negro race at the hands of the white man and, by extension, at the hands of White himself. Given his impression of the incident, it is almost as if White has internalized the white man's guilt and feels somehow accountable.

his impropriety. Penitently addressing White, he asks: "Are you Walter White of the NAACP? I'm sorry I spoke to you that way. I thought you were white" (3).

Clearly, the man's initial perception of White is based upon what he observes to be his decidedly "Caucasian" features. A single glance discerns the presence of such racial markers as white skin, blue eyes, and blond hair, which are accepted as concrete evidence of White's membership in the "dominant" race. Because the intangible evidence of White's true racial heritage – that which is found in his mind and heart, not in his countenance – cannot be discerned, the man formulates his opinion on appearance alone. It is only when he is afforded tangible proof of White's reputation that he alters his perception of the individual who has "trespassed" against him.

Few of the people White encounters on a daily basis are as easily convinced of his racial identity as the man on whose toes he treads. White people in particular find it difficult to disassociate themselves from their first impressions, and often resist White's efforts to persuade them of his origins. Their bewilderment is further compounded by the fact that White does not conform to their preconceived notions about members of his race. "Informed that I am a Negro," says White, "they find it impossible suddenly to endow me with the skin, the odor, the dialect, the shuffle, the imbecile good nature, traditionally attributed to Negroes. Instantly they are aware that these things are *not* part of me. They think there must be some mistake" (4). Because of the obvious disparity between their opinions of White and those they have formulated of other Negroes, they have difficulty accepting the validity of his claim.

The incredulity with which such individuals react to White is due, in part, to their inability to accept that he feels a need to declare himself an African American. Conditioned to believe that "there is magic in a white skin," and only "tragedy, loneliness, exile, in a black skin" (3), they cannot comprehend White's willingness to forsake the power and privilege of the dominant culture to align himself with the oppressed and persecuted. Striving to understand this impulse, White muses, "I have tried to imagine what it is like to have me presented to a white person as a Negro, by supposing a Negro were suddenly to say to me, 'I am white.' But the reversal does not work, for whites can see no reason for a white man ever wanting to be black; there is only reason for a black man wanting to be white. That is the way whites think; that is the way their values are set up" (4). In the eyes of the white community, it is more reasonable to assume that a black man would want to be white than for an ostensibly white man to insist he is black.

White's conscious decision to shed his "magical" white skin and embrace his racial heritage is not one he has come to lightly. Recalling that pivotal moment in his youth when he first discovered what it meant to be a Negro, White explains, "I know the night when, in terror and bitterness of soul, I discovered that I was set apart by the pigmentation of my skin (invisible though it was in my case) and the moment at which I decided that I would infinitely rather be what I was than, through taking advantage of the way of escape that was open to me, be one of the race which had forced the decision upon me" (4-5). Thirteen at the time, White admits to being too naive to fully appreciate the ramifications of the mounting racial tension that preceded the Atlanta riot and the pivotal moment of which he speaks. He recalls reading the "inflammatory headlines in the

Atlanta News,” which fuelled the flames of racial hatred with their accounts of “alleged rapes and other crimes committed by Negroes” (5-6). But, as White reveals, such stories were so prevalent in those days that they failed to impress upon him the gravity of the situation in Atlanta.

Not even when his father informs him of the rumours of an impending race riot does White comprehend the magnitude of the threat at hand. Recollecting that fateful day, White insists, “I was too young that morning to understand the background of the riot. I became much older during the next thirty-six hours, under circumstances which I now recognize as the inevitable outcome of what had preceded” (6). Anxious to accompany his father (a mail carrier) on his rounds that day, White remembers feeling a mixture of fear and excitement at the first signs of unrest. But as the violence escalates, White’s anticipation turns to apprehension, and finally to horror and revulsion, as he and his father witness the brutal murder of a lame black man at the hands of an angry white mob: “We saw clubs and fists descending to the accompaniment of savage shouting and cursing. Suddenly a voice cried, ‘There goes another nigger!’ Its work done, the mob went after new prey. The body with the withered foot lay dead in a pool of blood on the street” (9).

Despite their proximity to the violent upheaval, White explains that he and his father were shielded from the blows that rained down upon other members of their race by the color of their skin: “Father’s apprehension and mine steadily increased during the evening, although the fact that our skins were white kept us from attack” (9). Protected as much by their anonymity as their invisible blackness, father and son return home that evening relatively unscathed. The tolling of the church bells the following morning,

however, fails to comfort or convince the Whites and other victims of the previous day's reign of terror "that the hatred and the lust for blood had been appeased" (10). Their fears are confirmed when they learn that a mob is planning to march on their neighbourhood that night with the intention of "clean[ing] out the niggers" (10). Barricaded in their home, the White family anxiously awaits the mayhem they know to be snaking its way towards them.

As the mob's cries reverberate through the silent house, a frightened Walter White realizes that the veil of anonymity that had protected him and his father the day before has been lifted: "That's where that nigger mail carrier lives! Let's burn it down! It's too nice for a nigger to live in!" (11). In that moment of terror, the thirteen-year-old White is made painfully aware of who and what he is:

In that instant there opened up within me a great awareness; I knew then who I was. I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance, in order that those whose skin was white would have readily at hand a proof of their superiority, a proof patent and inclusive, accessible to the moron and the idiot as well as to the wise man and the genius. No matter how low a white man fell, he could always hold fast to that smug conviction that he was superior to two-thirds of the world's population, for those two-thirds were not white. (11)

Engulfed in a darkness tapered only by the light of the torches borne by the mob, White is enlightened to the fact that he belongs to a race condemned to suffering and abuse for no less a reason than the pigmentation of their skin. Yet, even as a boy, White recognizes the inexplicable – "that [his] skin was as white as the skin of those who were coming at [him]" (12). What the young man does not realize is that his status as a Negro is determined not by the pigmentation of his skin, but by the single drop of black blood

coursing through his veins. The fact that in White's case the trace of black blood is so minute as to be undetectable is of no consequence; in these terms, he is black just the same.

As a white-skinned Negro, Walter White represents the paradox of the color line, which separates white from black and measures "an individual's identity and social sense of being strictly by skin pigmentation or racial origin" (Peters 163). Although White's racial origin (as defined by the one-drop rule) assigns him to one side of the color line, his skin pigmentation (or lack thereof) enables him to pass to the other. In *Portraits in Color*, sociologist Mary White Ovington discusses Walter White's oscillations along the color line as a child:

When [the White family] walked east, toward Piedmont Avenue and down into Darktown, as the poorer Negro section was called, they were all colored. But when they walked west, toward Cortlandt Street where the white people lived, the others remained colored, but Walter was white. Passersby were amazed to see him playing with black children. If he went west alone on an errand, he was unmistakably white. White women smiled at him – he was such a rosy-cheeked little boy; and in the shop the clerk served him with all the celerity due a white customer. If he had requisite pennies, no soda-water fountain in the city was closed to him. He was white, too, when he went shopping with his mother; but when he drove with his father, who was a mail-carrier, sometimes he was white; but again sometimes people on the route knew that his father was colored, and then he became colored, too. It was rather like a game. (Ovington 104-105)⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ovington's revelation that in a white neighbourhood the rest of the White family "remained colored" while Walter became white is somewhat misleading. Earlier in her discussion of White's family, Ovington states that both of his parents are "light enough in coloring to pass" (104). Are we to assume then that one or more of White's six siblings are the reason the family could not pass en masse? Not if we are to believe White himself, who claims that there were nine light-skinned Negroes in his family any of whom could easily have passed.

The fact that White can be colored one minute and white the next challenges our prevailing assumptions about the discernability of race. White is not a chameleon; it is people's perceptions of him that change, not White himself.

In their son's words, George and Madeline White "were both so light-skinned that either could have passed for white" (White, *A Man* 13). His father's skin, White claims, was "naturally very light," although it was "deeply tanned from many years of exposure to sun and wind in his work as a mail carrier" (21).⁸⁰ Evidently, as the circumstances surrounding his death reveal, George White's skin was not so "deeply tanned" as to prevent him from being mistaken for white. The doctor who struck George White with his car does not hesitate to rush the unconscious man to the white wing of the hospital, where he is attended to by the best physicians. When White's son-in-law, "whose skin is brown," identifies the injured party as his father-in-law, the medical staff is mortified to have "put a nigger in the white ward" (135). A mortally wounded George White is hurried across the street in a heavy downpour to the poorly equipped black ward, where he succumbs to his injuries a few weeks later. Reflecting upon his father's untimely death – in a place where "dinginess, misery, and poverty pressed so hard on one from every side that even a well person could not avoid feeling a little sick" (136) – Walter White is angered by the indignity George White suffered at being "ushered out of life in the

⁸⁰ In *A Study of Some Negro-White Families in the United States*, anthropologist Caroline Bond Day describes George White, who is "supposedly a quadroon," as follows: "The skin color of the father is white, and he has brown (?) eyes and straight, dark brown hair, a rather broad nose, rather thick lips, and slight alveolar prognathism" (32).

meanest circumstances an implacable color line had decreed for all Negroes, whatever their character or circumstance might be" (138).

Although both of White's parents were light complected, Madeline White is described as "having not only light hair and eyes, but sharp, New-England-like features" (Ovington 104). According to White, his mother was possessed of "almost severely aquiline features, with light blue eyes and the most golden hair" he admits to ever having seen (White, *A Man* 21). As a consequence of their light coloring, the Whites often came face to face with the perils of passing, despite a concerted effort to avoid such duplicity. White illustrates the kind of hostilities his family encountered as a result of unwittingly crossing the line:

The streetcars of Atlanta were places where interracial conflict most often occurred. Whites were supposed to sit from the front of the car toward the rear and Negroes were required to sit from the rear toward the front. If Mother and my sisters boarded a car and sat in the "Negro" section they were often objects at best of embarrassing stares and remarks and not infrequently of insults and other indignities from white male passengers. If they had sat in the "white" section they would have been accused by some Negroes of "passing." (21)

The Whites are placed in a double bind as a result of the collective anxiety of both the white and black communities stemming from the Jim Crow system of segregation. As the family's experience epitomizes, confusion or ambiguity about the identity of certain individuals challenges the efficacy of segregating people along racial lines. The very nature of passing suggests that the color line that separates black from white is as arbitrary as the imaginary line that divides the front of the streetcar from the rear.

Unlike the multitudes of “white-skinned Negroes” who traverse the “color line” every year, however, White is not persuaded that he will be “happier and more successful” as a member of the “white race” (3-4). Although he neither condones nor condemns the practice, his own passing accounts reflect the potential hazards rather than the advantages of such a journey. Tracing his first encounter with the color line back to his early teens, White recalls taking a job as a page boy in one of Atlanta’s most luxurious hotels. Not long after he begins working at the hotel, White discovers that he has been inadvertently passing, as the position had till then only been filled by whites. Agonizing over whether or not he should keep the job, White approaches the captain of the hotel bellboys: ““Mr. Dutton did not ask you if you were white or colored. It’s a good job and you’re doing it well. All he can do to you is to fire you. You are making good money, so go ahead and earn it until you are fired,’ was his advice” (24). Despite his misgivings, White decides to accept his supervisor’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” advice. When he is offered a promotion the following year, however, White’s sense of propriety will not permit him to accept the new post: “I found that I couldn’t sail under false colors any longer. To cleanse my conscience I blurted that I could not accept the job of key clerk, as I did not want to get [Mr. Dutton] into difficulty” (24). White’s initial ignorance of his “transgression” attests to the fact that passing is not necessarily predicated on a conscious decision to do so. Ironically, neither White nor his employer is initially aware that White has been “sailing under false colors.” As there had been nothing to suggest that the page boy was not white, it is only as a result of White’s confession that the hotel manager becomes cognizant of White’s racial identity. In the end, White resigns his position and

determines to find “a job as colored in another hotel” (24) so as avoid future embarrassment.

Although he vows never to pass again, White reconsiders his decision when he is offered a job with the NAACP a few years later. Within two weeks of accepting the position, the twenty-five-year-old White requests permission to investigate first-hand the lynching of a Negro sharecropper in Tennessee. Strongly opposed to the idea at first, “because he feared injury or death for [White] if [his] purpose or racial identity were discovered” (40), White’s supervisor reluctantly consents. Recalling the trepidation he felt as he embarked on his “first planned attempt to pass,” White states:

I had learned ... enough of the cruelty of which Southern mobs were capable, and their fear and hatred of “outside interference in the affairs of the South,” to know I would be given short shrift if McIlherron’s murderers found out why I was there. As I remember the experience, however, I believed that I would be subjected to even greater fury for the sin of “passing” as a white man, which I had to do to induce the lynchers to talk freely. (40)

White’s anxiety is intensified by his knowledge of the severity of the penalty for such a trespass should he be caught. More than the relative success or failure of the investigation, his very life hinges upon his credibility as a white man. By feigning first ignorance of and then a lack of interest in the lynching, White successfully entrusts himself to the guilty parties. He even goes so far as to boast of “much more exciting lynchings” (41) in an attempt to goad the participants into revealing the exact details of the murder. “It was difficult,” White admits, “to suppress evidence of my anger and nausea at the gruesome recital” (41). His tactics, however, prove fruitful. White returns to New York to publish the facts he has unearthed about the lynching, and to begin “a phase of work for the

Association which neither it nor [he] had contemplated" (40) when he first joined the NAACP.

The increasingly perilous nature of White's undercover work for the NAACP is revealed in his account of an investigation in which he comes remarkably close to being lynched himself. Approached in the dark by a stranger – who recognizes White as an ally, not a fellow Negro – White is warned of the impending danger: "I don't know what you are down here for, but I just heard them talking about you – I mean the white folks – and they say they are going to get you. The way I figured it out is that if the white folks are so against you, you must be a friend of ours" (50). Realizing that his cover has been blown, White heeds the man's warning and flees for his life. On the train back to Memphis, the conductor unwittingly informs White of the peril he has so narrowly avoided:

"But you're leaving, mister, just when the fun is going to start," he told me. In answer to my question as to the nature of the "fun," he replied, "There's a damned yellow nigger down here passing for white and the boys are going to get him."

"What'll they do with him?" I asked.

Shifting his cud of tobacco, he shook his head grimly and assured me, "When they get through with him he won't pass for white no more!" (51)

Despite the harrowing nature of this experience, White continues to pass for white in an attempt to expose the magnitude and severity of the lynching epidemic in the South. He even steps up his efforts and attempts to infiltrate the nation's most notorious white supremacist organization, the Ku Klux Klan.

White's application for membership in the Klan, an organization full of hatemongers bent on his destruction, is at a minimum ironic. Even more ironic is the ease with which he ingratiates himself to one of the organization's leaders, who not only

“express[es] pleasure” at White’s interest in joining but is “convinced that [White] could be useful to the Klan” (54). Although his deception is eventually discovered and his life threatened, White is nonetheless successful in obtaining incriminating evidence against the Klan. With the assistance of an ex-Klansman, White is able to confirm the Klan’s involvement in a triple lynching in South Carolina. Ironically, when it is revealed how he obtained the pertinent information, it is White who is threatened with prosecution:

The revelation of these findings after I returned to New York did not add to my popularity in the lynching region. Public sentiment in the state itself, stirred up by several courageous newspapers, began to make it uncomfortable for the lynchers. When the sheriff found things getting a bit too unpleasant, he announced that he was going to ask the grand jury to indict me for “bribery and passing for white.” (59)

Clearly, White’s “crimes” of “bribery and passing” are nowhere near as egregious as the transgressions of those he is investigating. Fortunately, the court recognizes this fact, and White escapes indictment.

It is only through his manipulation of the color line that White is able to expose the atrocities committed against members of his race and to sway public opinion against the perpetrators of such crimes. White “waged a long and ultimately successful campaign against the lynching of blacks by white mobs in the United States” (“White, Walter” n. pag.). Although he did not attain his ultimate goal – the enactment of a federal anti-lynching law – “the climate of public opinion was markedly changed by [White’s] investigations, exposés, and impassioned propaganda. In 1918, when he joined the NAACP staff, 67 persons, all but 4 of them blacks, were lynched. In the year of his death, 1955, there were only three recorded lynchings, and for the five previous years there had

been none. Lynchings had become a rarity and were soon to disappear from the American scene" ("White, Walter" n. pag.).

Despite all that White had accomplished for his people, there were still those who questioned his loyalties. When White married a white woman, for example, the black community was scandalized. Black leaders vehemently opposed the union, expressing indignation at what they considered to be White's blatant disregard for his heritage. According to F. James Davis, "the black press was outraged by this marriage, as it had been decades earlier by the marriage of Frederick Douglass to a white and by the second marriage of Lena Horne" (7).⁸¹ Davis continues, "Although the genetic crossing in

⁸¹ Like White, Lena Horne suffered the hostility of both the white and black press when she married Lennie Hayton, a white musician. Early in her career, the fair-skinned Horne came under fire for not conforming to people's perceptions of a black entertainer. "Noting her brunette-white beauty," claims Davis, "one agent tried to get her to take a Spanish name, learn some Spanish songs, and pass as a Latin white, but she had learned to have a horror of passing and never considered it, although Hollywood blacks accused her of trying to pass after she played her first bit part in a film" (3). Another actress, whose "light skin and other caucasoid features" impeded her entry into show business, was Jane White, Walter White's daughter (Davis 4). Discussing his daughter's struggles as an actress, White reveals that Jane

wanted above everything to devote her life to the theater. But for her the disadvantage of skin color was greater even than that faced by dark-skinned Negroes. If her skin had been darker, she could have secured (assuming that her ability was great enough) so-called Negro roles in the increasing number of Broadway plays in which there were Negro characters. But her delicate ivory color and regular features caused her to appear un-Negro behind the footlights even with the use of dark makeup. And the stage was not yet ready to permit a Negro actor or actress to portray any except Negro roles. (White, *A Man* 338)

A determined Jane White finally made her debut playing the role of Nonnie, an educated mulatto maid, in the stage production of Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit* (1944).

White's marriage was minute at most, he had married across the social group barrier, outside the black community" (Davis 7), which to many was inexcusable.⁸²

Although White straddles the abyss that separates white from black, he accepts both identities. His affinity with the black community does not preclude him from appreciating his white heritage. In the passage that concludes his autobiography, White poignantly reveals his hopes for the future of the two races of which he is an amalgam:

I am one of the two in the color of my skin; I am the other in my spirit and my heart. It is only a love of both which binds the two together in me, and it is only love for each other which will join them in common aims of civilization that lie before us. I love one for the sins she has committed and the fight she has made to conquer them – and conquer them, in great degree, she has. I love the other for her patience and her sorrows, for the soft sound of her singing, and for the great dawn which is coming upon her, in which her vigor and her faith will serve the world. (White, *A Man* 366).

As his vision implies, White's conscious decision to align himself with the race that fills his spirit and his heart rather than the one that occupies his countenance does not prevent him from embracing both.

In the closing chapter of his autobiography, entitled "All Shadows Are Dark," Walter White touches on the emerging trend in science towards the repudiation of racial differences spurred on by anthropologist Franz Boas in the 1930s and 40s. The scientific community's rejection of the "belief that racial markings are apparent in a Negro, no

⁸² Interestingly enough, individuals who were not privy to White's true racial identity assumed that his marrying outside his race meant that he had taken a "colored" bride. In a biography of her husband, White's second wife, Poppy Cannon, "a brunette white," claims that "when they toured the world with an American goodwill mission and were referred to as an interracial couple, puzzled people often asked White how he happened to marry a colored woman" (Davis 7).

matter how light he is" (364) is of particular interest to White, whose personal experience is proof enough. Recounting his introduction to the president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, White recalls the man's intense scrutiny of him. Finally addressing White, he remarks, "The only way I can tell you have Negro blood is by the shape of your eyes" (364). When a startled White asks, "What is there in them which reveals my ancestry?" (364), the man, upon further consideration, recants his earlier position: "No – I'm wrong. If you had not told me in one of your letters that you have Negro ancestry, I would have seen nothing. But because you did tell me, I *thought* I saw some indication. That's unscientific. Sit down, won't you – and let's talk" (364). The fact that the president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science was able to admit his bias is encouraging. It is only through the scientific community's recognition of racial differences as "unscientific," and their willingness to acknowledge the unreliability of the categories they helped to invent that society can move beyond such matters.

4.2 “As Bright as the Noonday Sun”: Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*

There was never any consciousness of race and there still isn’t; for race today in my mature years is no longer a question of pigmentation but a philosophy of life, a *modus vivendi*.

– Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam* (1971)⁸³

The individual who comes closest to Walter White in terms of physical appearance, and experiences stemming from the same, is United States Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. In a description of Powell, one of his biographers, Charles V. Hamilton, states that “the first thing one always noticed about this black preacher-politician from Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem was that in physical appearance he looked like a white man” (18). Born into an upper-class family, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was shielded to a large extent from the sorrows and hardships experienced by the majority of black Americans at that time. “To the extent that Negroes could carve out a relatively luxurious life within a segregated society and develop a social class system behind the racial barrier,” says Hamilton, “the Powells enjoyed Negro upper-class status. This was facilitated by the family skin color. They *looked white*” (44). In fact, the family’s black heritage is so imperceptible that, unless otherwise acquainted, people automatically assume they are white.

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. was born in 1865 to “a slaveowner named Powell, from whose loins had sprung the seed, the seed we know not how received, whether in joy or in

⁸³ (New York: The Dial Press, 1971), 14.

abject submission, by a Cherokee Indian squaw" (Powell 2). Adam Sr. was raised by his mother, "a tall, rather fierce Negro-Indian woman named Sally" (2), and an ex-slave named Dunn, who took in Sally and her unborn child. Resembling his mother, "little Adam Clayton Powell was a mulatto, extremely light-skinned because of miscegenation," writes another of Powell's biographers, Will Haygood (59). When he was thirteen, Powell Sr. met a girl named Mattie Fletcher Schaefer, whom he would marry many years later. The daughter of Col. Jacob Schaefer and his mistress, Mattie was "also extremely light-skinned" and "blessed with high cheekbones and flowing black hair" (62). In 1898, Mattie gave birth to the couple's first child, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter, whom they named Blanche. Ten years later, on November 29, 1908, Adam, Jr. was born.

Like his parents and sister, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. could not readily be identified as having an African heritage: "Reflecting the mixture of blood in his parents – more white than black – the baby had brown eyes but blond hair, Caucasian rather than Negroid features" (65). As a boy, Powell's "light complexion threw playmates off. Many wondered whether he was white, black or Italian" (1). Reflecting back on these early years, Powell intimates that, as a child, he was unaware of racial differences: "No child knows anything about race, whether he is as black as sable breast of darkness or as bright as the noonday sun" (Powell 13). Had he been cognizant of race, claims Powell, he "would have looked around and thought [he] was in a white world" (14).

Growing up in Harlem in the early 1900s, Powell would not be sheltered from the world of racial tension for long. Rather than protect him from discrimination, Powell's racial ambiguity causes him to be victimized from all sides:

The first night that my father sent me out to buy the evening paper in our new neighborhood, on 136th Street, a gang of Negro boys grabbed me and asked, "What are you, white or colored?" I had never thought of color. I looked at my skin and said, "White!" Whereupon I was promptly and thoroughly beaten. The very next night I had to go to Eighth Avenue to get something from the store for Mother, and a gang of white boys grabbed me and demanded, "What are you?" Remembering my answer, and my beating, of the preceding night, I answered, "Colored!" Whereupon I again was bloodied. On the third night, another group of colored boys grabbed me on Seventh Avenue and asked the same question, "What are you?" Remembering once more my previous experiences, I said, "Mixed!" One of the boys yelled out, "Oh, he's a Mick!" And I was sent home crying for a third time. (Powell 24)

Powell's "first real brush with racism" (24) teaches him that prejudice knows no bounds: "It sowed the seeds of my belief that it's not the color of your skin but the way you think that makes you what you are" (24). But, as Powell well knows, the color of one's skin *does* determine one's position in society. If others perceive him to be white, he will be afforded certain privileges. If they think him to be black, he will be denied these same advantages.

With their extremely light complexions, the Powell family could easily have passed for white had they so chosen. Rather than reject his African-American heritage, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. chooses instead to minister to his black brethren from the pulpit of the largest African-American church in the United States, the Abyssinian Baptist Church. While the Reverend and Mrs. Powell Sr. make no conscious effort to pass, it is likely, claims Hamilton, that "they may not have seen it necessary to make known their race if the circumstance did not call for it – as on vacations or in daily transactions in stores, downtown, the countless times in casual contact when instant identification can mean the difference between cordial or hostile treatment" (46).

Haygood reveals that while “travelling in the South, Adam Powell Senior had often passed himself off as white at opportune moments – when near a lynching party, for instance” (11). While Powell’s failure to “make known” his race under such ominous circumstances may have constituted passing, his actions can hardly be construed as duplicitous.

Although Mattie and Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. never opt to be anything other than African Americans, the same cannot be said of their children. In a description of his beloved Blanche, Adam Jr. writes, “She was about five foot ten and her blond hair never changed in color as mine did. She looked totally white, with blue eyes like Daddy’s, my mother’s skin, my father’s mouth, and my nose” (Powell 28). According to Powell, his sister’s physical appearance enables her to cross the color line while working on Wall Street: “Blanche was well educated and worked for a member of the Stock Exchange downtown, where she passed for white” (28). Powell’s matter-of-fact account of his sister’s passing intimates nothing about what he thought of Blanche’s “deception,” or passing as a whole for that matter. The experiences Powell recounts concerning his own brushes with the color line in college suggest that he had yet to decide what path he himself would take.

When Powell begins his freshman year at Colgate University in 1926, there are only four other black students enrolled at the time, all of them athletes. Although the president of Colgate, George Barton Cutter, is acquainted with Powell’s father, he “had no intention of making Powell’s race known to other members of the college, faculty or students” (Hamilton 49). As a result of Cutter’s silence, Powell is placed in Anderson

Hall, where he is assigned a white roommate, rather than being housed with one of the other black students. Tipped off that there is another black pupil on campus, the black athletes are quick to deduce that whoever the new student is he must be passing himself off as white, because “at Colgate blacks roomed with other blacks or alone” (Haygood 10). Although Powell suggests that he did not deliberately try to hide his racial identity, he is clearly aware of the fact that, rather than being alienated, he is being treated like any other student – any other *white* student that is.

Powell is indeed ostracized once his secret is revealed. When the other students discover that Powell’s father is a minister in Harlem, Powell is shunned by white and black students alike. Although most of the white students on campus – with the exception of Powell’s roommate, who demands that Powell be assigned to another room – are more bewildered than anything else by the whole incident, the black students are outraged. One student in particular “felt that such an act was unforgivable” (Haygood 11). To this student, who “was as light-skinned as Powell,” but “prideful of his heritage, it meant one thing and one thing only: an attempt to hide one’s background, in essence one’s self” (12). Fortunately for Powell, his apologies and pleas for forgiveness are heeded by the other black students, who agree to accept him as a friend and roommate.

Although Charles V. Hamilton claims that “as far as is known, from that point on, Powell did not attempt to cross the color line overtly or covertly” (50), Powell tells a different story. While employed as bellboy for a hotel in New England, Powell, like Walter White, passes as white. As with White, the other employees are aware of Powell’s duplicity, and are greatly amused when he dupes guests whose prejudices move them to

refuse the assistance of a black staff member. Recalling an incident involving Robert Todd Lincoln, the aging son of Abraham Lincoln, Powell writes:

He hated Negroes and whenever a Negro put his hand on the car door to open it, Mr. Lincoln took his cane and cracked him across the knuckles. The manager asked me if, at a special increase in salary, I would take care of Mr. Lincoln's car each night when it arrived. So promptly every day, when Robert Todd Lincoln's chauffeured car rolled up with the son of the former president of the United States, I ... would open his door. And Mr. Lincoln, looking at my white hand was satisfied. For this service I received \$1 a day from him and \$10 a week from the inn's management. (Powell 33)

Although Powell's fellow bellhops feel a sense of satisfaction at his having deceived the cantankerous old man, the impact on Powell himself is more profound; "the future Negro leader never forgot it," claims Ottley (*New World* 227). Commenting on the incident, Hamilton – contradicting his earlier assessment of Powell's aversion to passing – explains that "this sort of 'passing' was acceptable, in the nature of playing a trick on an unsuspecting prejudiced white America – and turning a profit in the process" (50).

Wil Haygood puts a different spin on Powell's relationship with passing following the Colgate incident:

Powell had overcome his first crisis in life, the brief notoriety he had received in his attempt to pass as white. ('Never let that happen again,' his father warned him.) He would not be the tragic mulatto, seesawing between racial identities. He would instead accept being black and give it a wonderful spin, demanding to be accepted in both worlds, black and white, while arriving at the door of each with rebellion in his eyes. (18)

As if in affirmation of Haygood's words, Powell's subsequent flirtations with the color line are motivated by the same desire and objective that spurred Walter White's passing in his work with the NAACP – to protect and uplift the African-American race.

Years later, at a gathering of New York's high society at the Waldorf-Astoria, Powell is introduced as "one of the most outstanding citizens of this state, member of city council, head of the largest church in the city of New York, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell" (Haygood 87). A hush falls over the audience as they crane their necks to catch a glimpse of the great man. Addressing the crowd, Powell announces, "I'm here tonight not as a member of the city council, not as minister of the church, but I come here tonight as a Negro!" (qtd. in Haygood 87). There is an audible intake of breath as the audience realizes that the white-looking man standing before them is, in fact, black. Powell uses this brash approach time and again, as he attempts to right the wrongs committed against his people. In protest of the Jim Crow laws, for example, Powell boldly enters restaurants that are barred to blacks and insists on being served:

He challenged waitresses and waiters, walking up on them with his imposing body, knowing he confused them with his light skin, primed for argument, then stalking to his seat, his boldness serving to dim curiosity about his racial background His assault on public restaurants gave him perfect grist for Sunday morning sermons. He told his congregation that he went in those places, right through the front door – not for himself, he wasn't eating for himself, but for them and their children and their grandchildren, for Georgia's blacks and Mississippi's blacks and Alabama's blacks, for blacks everywhere. (Haygood 116-117)

When his detractors complain that he is "a stranger in [their] midst," and that his white skin affords him a kind of protection and privilege denied his black brethren, Powell reassures them that "the unkind cuts reach him as deeply as they do black men" (Ottley, *New World* 232).

Walter White's and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s attempts to dispel misconceptions about their racial identity are hindered by people's hesitancy to relinquish their initial

perceptions of them. Unable to reconcile themselves with the revelation that the men standing before them are black, they assume that there must be some mistake. Since most people use visual cues to determine racial identity, it does not matter how often these men insist that they are not white. The appearance of whiteness encourages people to manufacture certain assumptions and stereotypes about them. Because there are no tangible traits, no easily recognized characteristics of their race upon them, people simply infer that they are white. The fact that they are phenotypically more white than black is of little consequence to Walter White and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. They are black by experience, by involvement and, more tellingly, by choice. "Black is the way you think," insists Powell, "not the way you look" (14).

Chapter Five

Stepping Over the Line: Passing Unbeknownst to Themselves

In March 1948, *Ebony* magazine astounded readers with the revelation that millions of individuals with “a determinable part” of African-American ancestry were currently passing for white in the United States. According to the cover essay by Roi Ottley, as many as “Five Million White Negroes” had reputedly crossed the color line. In his article, Ottley estimates that “between 40,000 and 50,000 Negroes ‘pass’ into the white community yearly and that between 5,000,000 and 8,000,000 persons in the United States,” who are purported to be white, “actually possess a determinable part of Negro blood” (23). As if to convince readers of the fidelity of its claims, Ottley’s article included a series of photographs with the caption, “Can you tell who on this page is Negro and who white?” Of the fourteen fair-skinned individuals depicted in the photo array, all but three – the three with the darkest complexions – are African Americans.

According to Joel Williamson, the estimates regarding passing vary significantly among those well-versed in the subject. “Some put the number at over 100,000 yearly,” writes Williams, “others estimated that from 10,000 to 25,000 a year passed” (103). F. James Davis claims that “the peak years for passing as white were probably from 1880 to 1925, with perhaps from 10,000 to 25,000 crossing the color line each year” (22). Werner Sollors offers the following quantitative analysis of passing:

Ray Stannard Baker wrote in 1909 that no one, "of course, can estimate the number of men and women with Negro blood who have thus 'gone over to white'; but the number must be large." Most other writers have offered estimates that are, however, dramatically heterogeneous and range from hundreds to millions. For example, in "The Vanishing Mulatto" (1925), Charles S. Johnson inferred from census data that 355,000 blacks must have faded "into the great white multitude" between 1900 and 1920. Based on similar data, E.W. Eckard assumed more modestly that there were 2600 cases per year nationally from 1920 to 1940. (281)

In addition to Johnson's and Eckard's estimates, Sollors also cites those of Walter White (12,000 p.a.), Carl Van Vechten (8000 p.a.), T.T. McKinney (10,000 p.a.), Burns Mantle (5000 to 20,000 p.a.), and Harold Asbury (30,000 p.a.) (281). Perhaps the best explanation for the quantitative discrepancy in the estimates concerning the passing rate in the United States is the secrecy associated with crossing the color line.

In *A Man Called White*, Walter White characterizes passing as "the magic word which means that some Negroes can get by as whites, men and women who have decided that they will be happier and more successful if they flee from the proscription and humiliation which the American color line imposes on them" (White, *A Man* 4). As Lawrence Otis Graham points out in *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (1999), for many, the only thing remotely "magical" about passing is the passer's ability to vanish from the lives of family and friends. Of the seventeen "tips" or "rules" for passing Graham has gathered from light-skinned African Americans, some of the more disturbing include:

5. Think of some way to "kill yourself off" in the minds of black people who know you and your family. If your parents or siblings are willing participants in assisting you, they can say that you now live outside the country, that you have entered a cult or religious order, or even that you have died.

6. Realize that blacks – and not whites – are the ones who can threaten your security as a black person living a lie. Avoid any meaningful interaction with black people. Affluent blacks who understand the “passing” phenomenon and may try to “out” you are particularly dangerous....
9. Enhance those physical features that can support your new identity. Lightening your hair color, narrowing your nose, thinning your lips, and adopting a more conservative style in clothing and speech are all simple steps that can aid in your transition.
10. Realize that no one in your life (including a spouse) should be trusted with your secret, except for your adult-aged child, who, presumably, will maintain secrecy because of his or her own self interest in living as a white person....
16. To avoid the risk of giving birth to a “throwback child” with black features, consider adopting a white child. (381-382)

Given the degree of the sacrifice involved in passing, it is not surprising that the act is viewed pejoratively by the African-American community.

The following chapter explores passing as a complex phenomenon, predicated as much on secrecy as it is on subterfuge. To this end, I examine the autobiographies of four individuals who were all oblivious to the fact that one or more of their parents (and, by extension, they themselves) were passing. In *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (2001), Maria Carla Sánchez and Linda Sclossberg contend that “passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation. It disrupts the logics and conceits around which identity categories are established and maintained” (1). I would argue that the individual who most disrupts ideological race categories is the unintentional passer. Because this individual is born into and raised in the white world, his or her sense of racial selfhood is unmistakably white. As such, the inadvertent passer – to an even greater extent than the intentional passer – destabilizes notions of race as a biological or natural category.

5.1 “Right on the Color Line”: Gregory Howard Williams’s *Life on the Color Line*

I guess there has never been a time in my life that I haven’t been right on the color line.

– Gregory Howard Williams, *Life on the Color Line* (1995)⁸⁴

Published in 1995, Gregory Howard Williams’s *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* opens with a description of the Open House Café, a small tavern located on the racial dividing line between Alexandria and Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Although it is against the law in the summer of 1950 “to serve whites and coloreds under the same roof” (4), the tavern’s proprietor, Tony Williams, does it anyway. Tony appeases officials at the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Commission by dividing the tavern into two distinct serving areas: whites are served in the “front end” of the bar and blacks are served in the “back end” (4). Although Tony freely crosses the invisible line that segregates the bar, his wife, Mary, only works in the front. Thinking back to those early days in Virginia when his parents ran the Open House Café, Gregory Howard Williams explains, “I didn’t really understand what it meant, let alone begin to appreciate the irony and symbolism of our life and location. Even though most of my playmates were black, I saw segregation of the races as part of the natural order of life” (4). Fortunately for Williams, his white skin places him at the top of the racial hierarchy, or so he thinks.

⁸⁴ (New York: Plume, 1995), 4.

In the summer of 1953, Williams experiences a crippling loss: his mother, tired of his father's vicious abuse, packs up the two youngest children and leaves. One year later, Williams experiences another devastating loss: the loss of his identity. Sitting aboard a Greyhound Bus with everything they own packed into a couple of suitcases, Tony Williams makes a shocking confession to his two young sons. Leaning closer to the boys, Tony lowers his voice as he asks them if they remember a woman named Miss Sallie who used to work at the Open House Café. "It's hard to tell you boys this," says their father, "But she's really my momma. That means she's your grandmother." "But that can't be, Dad! She's colored!" whispers Williams, so he will not be overheard by other passengers on the bus. "That's right, [Greg]," his father continues. "She's colored. That makes you part colored, too" (32-33). Trying desperately to process what his father has just confessed to them, Williams admits:

I didn't understand Dad. I knew I wasn't colored, and neither was he. My skin was white. All of us are white, I said to myself. But for the first time, I had to admit Dad didn't exactly look white. His deeply tanned skin puzzled me as I sat there trying to classify my own father. Goose bumps covered my arms as I realized that whatever he was, I was. I took a deep breath. I couldn't make any mistakes. I looked closer. His heavy lips and dark brown eyes didn't make him colored, I concluded. His black, wavy hair was different than Negroes' hair, but it was different from most white folks' hair, too. He was darker than most whites, but Mom said he was Italian. That was why my baby brother had such dark skin and curly hair. Mom told us to be proud of our Italian heritage! That's it, I decided. He was Italian. I leaned back against the seat, satisfied. Yet the unsettling image of Miss Sallie flashed before me like a neon sign.

Colored! Colored! Colored! (33)

Firmly convinced that race is biological, Williams scrutinizes Tony's physical appearance – the color of skin and eyes, the shape of his lips, and the texture of his hair – in his

efforts to racially classify his father. Williams's inspection of his father reflects the kind of scrutiny practised by antebellum judges and juries in their efforts to determine race. Not entirely persuaded by his findings, Williams then focusses his attention on Tony's reputed nationality, reassuring himself that his racially ambiguous father looks more Italian than African American. Satisfied that he has refuted his father's racial claims, Williams relaxes momentarily. This feeling of relief is fleeting, however, as thoughts of his paternal grandmother pervade his mind. Despite his young age, Williams understands race to be a matter of ancestry.

Rather than resign himself to the idea that his father, and by extension he, is black, Williams clings desperately to the thought that Tony must be lying: "I refused to believe Dad. I looked at Mike. His skin, like mine, was a light, almost pallid, white" (33). When Mike asks their father, "Daddy, we ain't really colored, are we?" Williams responds, "No! I answered, still refusing to believe. I'm not colored, I'm white! I look white! I've always been white! I go to 'whites only' schools, 'whites only' movie theatres, and 'whites only' swimming pools! I had never heard anything crazier in my life! How could Dad tell us such a mean lie?" (33-34). Glancing across the aisle, Williams sees his father as if for the first time: "The veil dropped from his face and features. Before my eyes he was transformed from a swarthy Italian to his true self — a high-yellow mulatto. My father was a Negro! We were colored!" (34). Having lived the first ten years of his life on the white side of the color line, Williams "knew what that meant" (34).

Not bothering to give his sons any time to adjust to the idea that they are "colored," Tony Williams hits them with another shocking revelation: "Life is going to be

different from now on. In Virginia you were white boys. In Indiana you're going to be colored boys. I want you to remember that you're the same today that you were yesterday. But people in Indiana will treat you differently" (33). The fact that the boys can be white one minute and black the next attests to the artificiality of such narrow racial designations. Their father's hollow attempt to reassure them that nothing has changed is negated by his simultaneous disclosure that everything will change:

Again Dad spoke in a whisper. "You boys are going to have to learn to live with it, and living with it in Muncie won't be easy. But Indiana is only temporary. Once I settle up the business, we'll head to California and start over. We can still be white, but not in Muncie. The town is full of the Ku Klux Klan. Once they know who you are and what you are, they'll do everything possible to keep you 'in your place.'" (34)

Tony Williams's assertion that they "can still be white, but not in Muncie" stresses the mutability of the color line. His evocation of the Ku Klux Klan is meant to convince his sons that it is whites, in this case white supremacists, who fix the color line. The fact that their father makes the conscious decision to tell them they are black and then to move them to a place where they must live as black suggests that, where his family is concerned, he is the one who draws the line.

When they arrive in Muncie, Williams is disturbed by the abject feel of the neighbourhood. "This is the Projects, boys," his father exclaims, "Colored families live on this side of Madison, and crackers on the other. Stay outta there. If the crackers learn your colored, they beat the hell out of you. You gotta be careful here, too. Coloreds don't like half-breeds either" (38). Although the color of his skin enabled Williams to live on the white side of the line for the first ten years of his life, his newly discovered black

ancestry relegates him to the other side of the line. In the Projects, however, the color line is more real than notional. Unfortunately for Williams, like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. before him, neither side is safe.

Despite Tony's insistence that his sons live as black in Muncie, when he enrolls them at the local elementary school he writes on the registration form that they are white. "When he scrawled a 'W' in the space for race," recalls Williams, "I nudged him. He frowned sharply. Rebuked, I joined Mike who slouched at the door" (43). The capricious manner in which Tony Williams alters his children's race to suit his purposes speaks as much to the man's evasiveness as it does to the malleability of race. Having passed as white for most of his adult life, Tony knows the advantages associated with being accepted into the white world. He also recognizes the importance of not leaving a paper trail connecting him or his family to the black world should he decide to cross back over the color line.⁸⁵

Desperate to understand what precipitated his father's initial decision to pass as white, Williams begins searching for answers. Leafing through his father's old papers and photographs, he finds a letter from a judge's daughter telling Tony that, although she loved him, marriage was out of the question because she had discovered he was black. In another letter, "Dr. Alain Locke of Howard University expressed profound sorrow that [Tony] felt he must pass into the 'white world'" (54). Pouring over his father's

⁸⁵ In his article on "The Passing of Anatole Broyard," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reveals that one of the ways Broyard guarded the secret of his African ancestry was to destroy any records of the same.

mementoes, Williams asks himself, "What had gone wrong?" (54). Although he trusts only about half of what his father tells him, Williams, with the help of different family members, begins to piece together his father's history.

While working for a wealthy white family in Kentucky, Williams's grandmother, Miss Sallie, became pregnant by the young master of the house. Fired from her job, Miss Sallie was left to raise the baby on her own in a hostile environment. Williams explains:

After my father's birth, his light skin was a daily reminder in turn-of-the-century Bowling Green of the forbidden and unforgivable star-crossed union between black and white. Hostile stares on the streets and murmurs in the stores about her "white nigger" baby were followed by relentless demands from both whites and blacks to flee that racially torn town. Yet my illiterate grandmother managed to withstand the attacks. She drew strength from her ability to challenge the prized racial purity of the city, parading her "white" baby in a shabby, wooden cart she pulled while shopping downtown. (62)

Inheriting his mother's defiant nature, Tony Williams took full advantage of his fair complexion. Although his primary motivation for passing was to reap the benefits associated with assimilating into the white world, he also took great pleasure in duping prejudiced whites. On one occasion, describes Williams, "when passing for white in Virginia, [his father] became the first 'spook' president of the whites-only Forty-and-eighth American Legion Post" (63). Tony even managed to convince the legionnaires to purchase an old bus that had belonged to a black singing group. Unbeknownst to the bigoted whites who bought the vehicle, the members of the band had lived in the bus when they were denied rooms at white hotels. Although he always enjoyed relating these and similar such antics, remarks Williams, his father always grew sombre when he spoke about the time he "masqueraded as white" to gain access to the site of the last reported

hanging in the North. Williams describes how Tony “infiltrated the festive white crowd milling around the courthouse lawn where two black teenagers hung long after being beaten, kicked and drug from jail. Four thousand white citizens had stormed the jail and applauded as the youths were killed” (64). Like Walter White before him, Tony Williams recognized the importance of sharing the horror he had witnessed with the black community. “It was as if he had walked into hell and come out with a report on it” (64), exclaims Williams.

As he listens to his father recount his passing experiences, Williams wonders what possessed Tony to cross back over the color line. Tired of living in squalor, Williams begs his father to take them back to Virginia, but Tony refuses, saying there is nothing back there for them. Instead, his father suggests that the boys go live in an orphanage. “Life could turn out much better for you there,” Tony tells his sons. “Plus, if I can get you out of Muncie, you won’t have to be colored. I’m telling you boys, it ain’t easy being a nigger” (66). When they beg him to reconsider his decision to orphan them, Tony explains, “It’s not safe for you at Mom’s and you fight everyday on the playground ’cause you look white” (67). As the boys continue to protest, an agitated Tony Williams lashes out at them: “I’m doing the best I can, and if you don’t like it you can go live with your mother! If you can find the white bitch!” (67). Shocked by the harshness of his father’s words, Williams states, “I was angry at my mother for abandoning us, but not ready to bar her totally from our lives. Though we hadn’t heard from her in almost a year, labeling her a ‘white bitch’ pushed her over the line and banished her totally from our lives” (67). In Williams’s eyes, his father’s decision to cross back over the color line and bring them to

Muncie has cemented their fate. Their mother is white and they are now colored; they belong to two different worlds.

Rather than send the boys to an orphanage, their father arranges for them to move in with a kind-hearted widow, Miss Dora Terry. Trying to persuade Miss Dora to reconsider her decision to foster the boys, her sister-in-law, Nell, says to her:

“It ain’t your responsibility, Dora. I don’t care if you is religious. They got a daddy, a grandma, and a whole lotta white and colored folks that could be taking care of ’em if they had a mind to. Their white folks don’t even come by to see ’em. You should be tired of taking care of ungrateful crackers. You done it all your life. Soon as these boys get grown they gonna plumb forget you. They gonna run away and be white boys, and you’ll never hear from ’em again.” (77)

Nell’s reference to the boys as “crackers” and her intimation that they will pass as soon as the opportunity arises reflects the attitudes of the majority of blacks in Muncie. Greg and Mike Williams may be legally and socially defined as black, but they are not embraced as such.

Despite the black community’s indifference towards them, the Williams boys are informed that they are subject to the same rules as the rest of the community. After reading about the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, a black youth from Chicago who made the mistake of whistling at a white woman, Williams looks to his grandmother to reassure him that nothing like that could really happen in America. Instead, she tells him that the reason she worried so much about his father when they were living in Virginia was that “They might have found him out and lynched him” (115). When Williams assures her that no one would have bothered his father because he was a successful businessman, his grandmother retorts, “It don’t make no difference what he

owned. He was still a nigger, and if they found him out, he would'a been a dead nigger. You better watch out too, boy, and not mess around wit' no white girls. It was the ruination of your daddy" (115). As Miss Sallie contends, were it discovered that his father was passing, and, worse yet, had married a white woman, the consequences could have been fatal for Tony Williams.

The longer he is in Muncie, the more accepting Williams becomes of his new racial identity. His acceptance does not, however, prepare him for the kind of discriminatory treatment he experiences as a member of an oppressed race. In the summer of 1955, he and Mike coax Miss Dora into taking them to Louisville to visit their father. At the end of their two week visit, their father escorts them back to the bus station. While they await the arrival of the next bus to Muncie, they are approached by a bus station attendant who informs Tony and Miss Dora that they are supposed to be in the colored waiting room. "His words made no sense to me," explains Williams, "but as I turned to the benches and counters behind us, it was instantly clear. There were only white faces in the room, and all of them seemed to be glowering at us" (117). "'You can't stay here,' insisted the white man. 'The boys can if they wanta, but you two gotta go'" (117). The fact that the attendant assigns Tony Williams to one side of the color line and Tony's sons to the other reveals the variability of that line.

A few days after their return to Muncie, Williams gets into a scuffle at The Madison Street YMCA, or, as it was known throughout town, "the colored Y" (118). When another boy tries to skip ahead of him in the lineup for the Ping-Pong table, Williams protests by grabbing the paddle from the boy's hand. Shoving Williams against

the wall, the boy yells at him, "Gimme that, you white mothafucker, or I'll kick your ass!" (119). An outraged Williams strikes his assailant screaming, "I ain't white!" (119). Dropping the paddle, Williams charges headfirst at the boy, knocking him down. "I ain't white! I ain't white! I ain't white!" (119), Williams yells repeatedly at the boy as he pounds him over and over again in the chest. Williams's violent self-affirmation marks his assimilation into the black community.

The following year, on the way to his elementary school graduation, Williams and his father joke about their tumultuous first two years in Muncie. They laugh when Williams's father remarks, "They would've never known you were a spook if the principal hadn't taken Mike to Aunt Bess after he fell off the fire escape. But I guess it doesn't matter these days. Schools are changing" (125). But, as Williams learns at the graduation ceremony later that day, the schools have not progressed as much as his father likes to think. When the principal rises to announce the winner of the Academic Achievement Prize – which is awarded to the "student who through diligence, hard work, and dedication to learning has shown time and again the ability to overcome adversity and difficulty" (125-26) – Williams shifts nervously in his seat. Graduating at the top of his class, he is convinced he will win the prize. When they announce the name of another student, Williams turns to look at his father. "The smile had vanished" from Tony Williams's face; it was "replaced by a cold, knowing mask" (126). Williams explains, "The prize did not go to Negroes. Just like in Louisville, there were things and places for whites only" (126).

Offering his son some fatherly advice, Tony tells him that he cannot count on the teachers in Muncie to recognize his true potential, and that he must work ten times as hard as the average white boy if he hopes to succeed in life. Reaching into his shirt pocket, Tony pulls out a small Bible and hands it to his son. The inscription reads:

*To my son,
Gregory Howard Williams*

*May this Bible provide you some small
consolation for all your losses at
such an early age.*

*Dad
James Anthony Williams. (141)*

But, as Williams realizes later that same summer, his father's pride in his accomplishments is tainted by jealousy. One night at the local rib joint, a drunken Tony Williams announces to the crowd that his sons are going to entertain them: "Greg, my white boy, is going to quote Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and Mike, the nigger and small-time hustler — just like me — will exhibit the same athletic prowess I did during my Golden Glove days" (154). After a nervous and embarrassed Greg Williams finishes reciting the Gettysburg Address, the eleven-year-old Mike Williams impresses the crowd by doing push-ups and walking across the bar on his hands. Afraid he is losing the attention of the other patrons, Tony Williams says, "Okay! Boys, now square off! We're gonna see who is the best man. The nigger or the white boy" (154). When Greg refuses to defend himself against Mike's blows, his father slaps Greg across the back of his head. Furious at his father, Greg charges at his younger brother, pummeling him until the fight is broken up.

Incredibly, the resentment Williams feels towards his father following this incident has less to do with the abuse and humiliation Tony inflicts on him and Mike than it does with the labels he places on them. As they are leaving the rib joint a short time later, an angry Williams asks his father, "Why do you call me white? I'm not white. And Mike's not a nigger. Miss Dora said being a nigger ain't got nothing to do with color. It's a bad, low-down person" (156). Tony replies: "[Greg], you're supposed to be a smart boy, but you haven't learned a damn thing in Muncie. Don't you remember the only time I was somebody was when I was white? In Muncie, I'm just another nigger. You're smart enough to make it out of this hellhole. Your brother's not" (156). Furious with his father, Williams protests, "Mike ain't dumb and I ain't white" (156). Slapping his son across the face, Tony Williams hisses at him, "You're a white motherfucker whether you like it or not" (156). Dragging his sons back into the bar, Tony says to a patron named Bobby, "Greg doesn't think he's a white boy. He says he's just like me and Mike. Tell him he ain't a nigger, even if he wants to be one" (157). When Bobby agrees with Tony, saying, "You okay, Greg, but this ain't you, man. You belong with the smart white folks," Williams retorts, "But I don't want to be white" (157).

Two years earlier, his father had stripped him of his white racial identity, and now he is trying to force it back on him. Ruminating on the issue, Williams muses:

I hadn't wanted to be colored, but too much had happened to me in Muncie to be a part of the white world that had rejected me so completely. I believed that most of Dad's problems stemmed from his attempt to "pass for white" in Virginia. The charade created incredible turmoil for him. "Passing" hadn't worked. Why did he want it for me? I also know being black didn't mean I couldn't be successful. Just the week before, Dad told me about one of the most famous Negroes in America — Walter White.

White had been executive director of the NAACP for ten years until he died in 1955. He traveled throughout the country speaking against prejudice and discrimination. Negro communities around the nation greeted him with open arms. Yet he had blue eyes, blonde hair, and, most of all, white skin. He was only 5/32 Negro, but he was "black." If Walter White could choose to remain in the black community and make a difference, so could I. No matter what Bobby, Dad, or anyone else said or thought. I knew who I was and what I wanted to be. (157)

Williams's black racial identity had been thrust upon him at the age of ten by a self-serving father. An abusive alcoholic, Tony Williams had taken a successful business and run it into the ground. His vicious temper had cost him his wife and his two youngest children. Worse still, Tony's neglect of his boys had exposed them to the seedy underbelly of Virginian society. A drunken hustler with no money and no prospects, Tony had no choice but to return to the world he had fled, dragging his sons behind him.

Greg Williams's life had been turned upside down. In the span of a few years, he had lost his mother, his innocence, and his identity. And yet, he had survived. Rather than wallow in self-pity like his father, the young Williams is determined to make something of his life. Unlike his father, who saw passing as his ticket out of Muncie, Williams sees education as his salvation. Although he is rejected by his white relatives and mistreated by his black relatives, he finds refuge in the person of Miss Dora Terry. Miss Dora takes the Williams boys into her home when no one else will have them. She teaches them to love and respect themselves, and accepts them for who they are. Their struggles become her struggles. Under Miss Dora's tutelage, Williams learns not just to accept his new racial identity, but to embrace it.

Williams's conscious decision to live his life as black is complicated by the fact that he looks white. Because people perceive him to be white, they treat him accordingly. Their sense of betrayal when they discover he is black dramatically impacts their treatment of him. For example, when Williams's junior high football coach asks one of his teammates to "identify the colored boys" on the team roster, the coach acts like the boy "kicked him in the balls" when he points to Williams's name (160). That same day, Williams is alternated with a white quarterback. Rather than quit the team, however, Williams decides to make himself indispensable to it. He writes: "If I thought I had learned one thing in Muncie, it was that race didn't matter on the playing fields. Everywhere else it did, but in sports the only goal was winning" (160). Playing with a renewed sense of purpose and intensity, Williams proves his theory to be right when the coach reconsiders his decision to sack the quarterback.

A few weeks later, when one of his friends pesters him about finding a date for a party at the local youth centre, Williams learns that rules for football do not apply to dating. Well aware of the "cardinal rule" in his community – "Black boys do not talk to, flirt with, or date white girls" (163) – Williams asks a pretty colored girl named Mayme to be his date. On the way to party, Williams notices people gawking at them. At first, he is confused as to why: "Then I realized — they were shocked to see a 'white' boy on South Madison Street with a black girl" (166). As Williams and his date anxiously make their way toward the youth centre, a teenager leaning out of a car window hurls the phrase "Nigger lover!" at Williams (166). Walking home alone later that evening, Williams contemplates his dating dilemma: "I wrestled with the fact that Muncie would not permit

me to date white girls, and apparently couldn't tolerate seeing me with black girls either. Muncie's white community would only be satisfied with an inconspicuous and unobtrusive eunuch. My very existence made people uncomfortable and shattered too many racial taboos" (166). Rather than complicate his life anymore than it already is, Williams decides to focus all his energy and attention on his studies.

Despite his efforts to avoid members of the opposite sex, Williams soon finds himself in breach of Muncie's "cardinal rule." When one of his friends informs Williams that a white girl named Janie is interested in him, he reluctantly agrees to meet her after his basketball game. Catching the couple together in the hall, Williams's English teacher, Mr. Bennett, severely reprimands them. Rumours of the incident spread quickly throughout the school. The following morning, Williams is called into the guidance counsellor's office. Chastising Williams for his deviant behaviour, the guidance counsellor, Miss White, says, "It is simply not acceptable for you or any other Negro boys to socialize with white girls. If you continue this, you are going to create a lot of problems for yourself" (183). Pausing for a moment to allow the impact of what she has just said sink in, Miss White continues: "I've been wanting to talk to you ever since I found out you were colored," she said. 'You're a special case. Everyone at Wilson knows about you and your problem. But next year you'll be at Central. When school starts I want you to speak to each and every one of your teachers and tell them you are colored. They will know what to do. I'll write them a note too'" (183). Perceiving that Williams poses a threat to innocent young white girls, Miss White wants to ensure that his "true colors" are revealed. Determined to keep him from passing for white at his new school, the guidance

counsellor goes so far as to warn him that she intends to notify the school of his “problem.” That the school must be apprised of the fact that Williams is colored underscores both the indeterminacy of race and the white community’s fear of invisible blackness.

When Williams arrives for his first day of high school, he is both optimistic and anxious. As he hurries from class to class, he cannot help but wonder whether or not Miss White had followed through on her threat to out him to his new teachers. When his science teacher asks him if he is related to Gene Williams, a white Delaware County prosecutor, a relieved Williams shakes his head no: “The simple question kindled the hope that my new teachers would be unbiased and more supportive of my desire to excel academically. I felt I would have a greater chance of succeeding if I could avoid the racism which had infected the junior high school” (190). The only way to “avoid the racism” to which he was subjected at Wilson Junior High, however, is to pass. Standing in the middle of the auditorium later that day, Williams realizes that he has to make “a fateful choice” (191). If he joins the white students, then the black students will think that he does not want to associate with them. “Yet,” he writes, “if I joined the black students, I would be an all-too-conspicuous ‘white’ face in a sea of multiple hues of brown” (191). As he stands there mulling the decision over in his mind, he becomes cognizant of the fact that there is no real decision to make. Joining the black students on the south side of the auditorium, Williams worries that, even though he has made his choice, they might not accept him. Relief washes over him when he spies his cousin Jemima among them. With her stamp of approval, Williams is welcomed into the fold. When one of the black

students asks him point-blank why he joined them instead of the white students, Williams is at a loss for words. "I don't want to" (191) is all he can muster. Williams writes: "A senior basketball star, perhaps understanding my choice better than I did, spoke up. 'Greg is making his life less complicated. If he sat over there the white kids would find him out in a minute, and he'd be another outcast. He's over here with us, telling them, 'Here I am, deal with me!' Don't bother Greg. He's where he belongs'" (192). Buoyed by the basketball player's words of explanation and acceptance, Williams knows that he has made the right choice.

Later that year, when Williams makes the school football team, his life gets more complicated. As an official Bearcat, Williams draws a lot of attention to himself, especially from female students. Although he is careful to avoid any kind of intimacy with white girls based on the incident at Wilson, Williams sees nothing wrong with befriending them. But, as he finds out the hard way, even casual conversation between a colored boy and a white girl is frowned upon in Muncie. Walking back to school after lunch one afternoon, Williams is confronted by one of his white teammates. "What the fuck are you doing talking to my sister?" (219) the boy snarls at him. Feeling particularly bold, Williams tells the burly football player that he can talk to whomever he wants. "I'll tell you what, nigger," warns the boy, "if you say one more word to her I'm gonna kick your black ass" (219). Refusing to be intimidated, Williams approaches the boy's sister at her locker that same afternoon. When he attempts to engage her in conversation, however, the girl grabs her books and bolts down the hallway. Later that night, Williams awakens to the sound of breaking glass. Racing downstairs, he finds Miss Dora standing in the

living room with a brick in her hand and broken glass all around her. Waving the brick at him, she says, "White girls mean trouble!" (219). Williams had to agree.

Despite his promise to avoid white girls, Williams soon after becomes involved with a white girl named Sara Whitney. A year behind Williams in school, Sara is an attractive girl, with blonde hair, blue-green eyes, and a creamy white complexion. Sara is, of course, dissuaded from socializing with Williams by her friends and fellow students, one of whom calls her a "nigger lover" (259). Despite people's efforts to keep them apart, the couple begin to spend more and more time together. When Sara's parents receive an anonymous phone call in the middle of the night telling them that their daughter is dating a "nigger" (268), they demand an explanation. In an effort to appease her parents, Sara shows them Williams's yearbook photo. Satisfied that the boy Sara is seeing is white, her parents do not pursue the issue. When an acquaintance apprises them of Williams's racial heritage a short time later, however, Sara's family threatens to disown her if she does not end the relationship. Despite her misgivings, Sara obliges them in their request.

Devastated by the loss of Sara, Williams once again focuses all his energy and attention on his studies. With only three credits left to graduate, Williams makes an appointment with the assistant principal to discuss a scheduling conflict. While waiting in the empty office, he notices his school file on the desk in front of him. Unable to resist the temptation, Williams opens the file: "On the first page under 'Color,' a *W* for 'white' had initially been entered. I remembered Dad put the *W* there the day we registered at Garfield Elementary School. However, parentheses were place around the *W*, and a *C* had been written above it, obviously for 'colored'" (256). Directly underneath was a

handwritten note: "Father is colored — mother is white — neither of his parents lives here — He lives with Mrs. Dora Terry whom he says is no relation to him. There is a brother also — From outward appearance they both look to be white. Parents are divorced" (257). Williams is convinced that the only reason for the entry is to ensure that teachers are not deceived by him or his physical appearance. He is even more upset, however, by the suggestion that he is in fact related to Miss Dora, but unwilling to acknowledge the same. An infuriated Williams writes: "At no time during junior high or high school had I tried to convince anyone I was white or deny my debt to Miss Dora. Ever since the fourth grade I had shared too many experiences with her, and my black friends and relatives, to consider myself any different from them" (257). Although he desperately wants to confront the assistant principal about his file, he has lived in Muncie long enough to know that such a confrontation will serve no purpose.

After graduation, Williams begins taking courses towards an undergraduate degree at Ball State University. To help finance his education, he applies for a position as a deputy with the Sheriff's Department. When a local black minister hears through the grapevine that the Sheriff's Department is considering hiring Williams, he opposes the appointment: "He accused the sheriff of planning to pay off the black community by hiring me, while preserving the outward appearance of a 'lily-white' department" (272). Reflecting on the dispute, Williams states, "The controversy forced me to move beyond my own feelings and consider more carefully the minister's view. There *was* a need for a visible black presence in the department. It *was* important for Muncie and Delaware County to see black people in positions of authority. I considered withdrawing my name

from consideration" (272). When Williams shares his dilemma with a cousin who works as a parole officer in Pittsburgh, his cousin offers him the following advice:

"If you get the job, just do the best you can. Let the politicians worry about who's black and who isn't. Nobody in Muncie ever gave you any breaks just because you look white. You've had to take just as much crap as anybody I know, black or white. You deserve that job as much as anyone. If you're in a position to arrest some brothers, you are gonna be fair — not like some of the hillbillies they got on the department. You always gonna have people crackin' about you bein' black or sayin' you ain't black enough, Damn, cousin, you paid your dues!" (272)

Heeding his cousin's advice, Williams accepts the position with the Sheriff's Department when it is offered to him the following week. Soon after he begins working at the county jail, he witnesses two white police officers abusing a colored prisoner in their custody. When he intercedes on the prisoner's behalf, one officer says to the other as they walk away, "You'd think he was a nigger himself, the way he sprang out of the office to protect that coon" (276). When Williams informs the sheriff about the incident, the sheriff warns him about the political implications of accusing the two officers of police brutality. But, the sheriff adds, he will not tolerate prisoners being mistreated in his jail, and leaves the decision up to Williams. Although Williams decides not to press charges against the officers, he is consoled by the fact that he will soon be on the streets "calling the shots and making the arrests" (276).

A few months later, when he is working late one night at the jail, Williams receives a phone call from his mother's brother, Walter, telling him that his mother wants to see him and his brother, Mike. "I had waited ten long, lonely years for this call," confesses Williams. Reunited with his mother a few days later, Williams is overwhelmed

with emotions. Both he and Mike confront her about her reasons for failing to contact them over the years. Their mother claims she tried to send them letters and money through their grandmother, but the boys never received anything. She then tells them that whenever she visited her family near Muncie, she would drive to Miss Dora's and watch them from afar. When they ask her why she never got out of the car, she replies that they were in a colored area and she was afraid. Showing them pictures of their younger brother and sister, she tells them of the purpose of her visit. Their mother had married a white man named Bob. He had adopted the other two children, and was willing to adopt them too. When Williams tries to tell her that it was not easy for them in Muncie, she tells him that is why she is there, "to take you away from all this" (281). For Williams, the offer is too little too late:

The conditions for becoming part of her life became very clear to me. We could reenter her world if we rejected the one in which we had lived for the past ten years. She knew little about our life in Muncie, nor did she want to know. Gaining acceptance to her world required that we deny our black heritage and pretend that the people and circumstances of our life in Muncie did not exist. We were to forget we were "colored" boys. She expected us to move back into her life without a past, without roots, without feelings for the people who sheltered and cared for us when our need was greatest. I knew that was something we could never do. (281)

Ten years earlier, their mother had abandoned her family, and now she expected her sons to do the same. The fact that their mother expects them to simply forget they are "colored" reveals just how dissociated she is from the life they have lived. As Gayle Wald argues in "Along the Color Line: Memory, Community, Identity," "Whatever [his mother's] reasons for leaving town with only two of her children, for Williams her refusal to acknowledge her sons is ineradicably linked to race, a notion which is reinforced by

Williams's white grandparents' failure to visit or to offer material support, despite the fact that they live in nearby 'white' Muncie" (n. pag.). Standing on the porch listening to his mother make plans for his future, Williams says, "I felt farther away from my mother than I had at any time in my life" (282). For Williams, the gulf between the two worlds is too vast.

Williams spends another three years in Muncie, working as a deputy sheriff while he finishes his degree. After graduation, he moves to Washington, D.C. to pursue his dream of becoming a lawyer. He works as a high school history teacher, while he pursues a master's degree, then a law degree, and finally a doctorate degree. During that time, he is reunited with Sara Whitney, and they are married in 1969. They have two children of their own, Natalia Dora and Zachary. Then, in 1991, inspired by Miss Dora's selfless act so many years before, the couple adopt Carlos and Anthony, seven-year-old twin boys from Honduras. Thinking back to his childhood in Muncie, Williams writes: "In spite of all the pain and grief of my early years, I am grateful to have been able to view the world from a place few men or women have stood. I realize now that I am bound to live out my life in the middle of our society and hope that I can be a bridge between races, shouldering the heavy burden that almost destroyed my youth" (284).

In her essay entitled "The Problem With Gregory Howard Williams *Poster Child for the One-Drop Myth of White Racial Purity*," political activist A.D. Powell criticizes Williams for what she perceives to be his blatant disregard for the plight of hundreds of

thousands of multiracial Americans.⁸⁶ "By promoting the 'one drop' myth of 'no choice,'" writes Powell, "Williams has done far more than any self-described racist to oppress people of mixed racial ancestry who have the 'misfortune' to have some traceable black ancestry" (48). According to Powell, Williams has a "moral obligation" to stop using his own life experiences "to terrify others into the black fold" (49).⁸⁷ While Powell does not begrudge Williams the opportunity to tell his story, she wishes that it could be told alongside the stories of individuals whose exploration of the multiracial experience explodes the very myths of racial purity that Powell feels Williams upholds. Regardless of what Williams might maintain in his autobiography, reminds Powell, multiracial individuals are no longer under any legal or social obligation to label themselves as black. While Powell's concluding remarks about Gregory Howard Williams as "a simple black and white mind advocating a simple black and white world" (49) are harsh, her indignation is motivated by a desire to make rigid racial categories a thing of the past.

⁸⁶ In "*Passing*" *For Who You Really Are: Essays in Support of Multiracial Whiteness*, Powell launches an assault on the one-drop rule and the myth of racial purity. All but one of the essays in this collection were originally published in *Interracial Voice*, an online magazine serving the mixed-race/interracial community <<http://www.interracialvoice.com/powell4.html>>.

⁸⁷ What Powell finds most discouraging is the media attention devoted to Williams, who has appeared on "Dateline NBC," ABC's "Nightline," the "Larry King Live" show, and "The Oprah Winfrey Show." *Life on the Color Line* was even released as a made-for-television movie, which aired on the Fox network.

5.2 “An Irreversible Decision”: Jillian Sim’s “Fading to White”

And there was the real secret. This was why my grandmother would not, could not, speak of her family. Grandma’s mother had been born black, and she had left her black family behind to become white. An irreversible decision. A decision that would affect all the future generations of her family.

– Jillian Sim, “Fading to White” (1999)⁸⁸

In its February/March 1999 issue, *American Heritage* magazine ran a story about the search of a woman named Jillian Sim for answers regarding her racial ancestry.

“Fading to White” opens with a description of Camp Quanset, a summer camp in Cape Cod that Sim’s paternal grandmother had attended as a girl. “It was a fine camp,” her grandmother had told Sim, “a place where – for the stiff tariff of \$350 – well-heeled young ladies from as far south as Virginia and as far north as Canada learned to sail, and swim, and ride horses – their own horses, which they boarded for the two summer months” (n. pag.). It was a place that promised parents “the right companions and environment for their daughters,” a place which would become for Sim “an emblem of [her] family’s fading to white” (n. pag.).

Originally from Boston, Sim’s grandmother, Ellen, grew up in New York, on the Upper West Side. She graduated from Vassar College in 1927, and then took to the stage. After a thirty year career on Broadway, Ellen retired from show business. She lived out the rest of her days in a midtown hotel near the theater district she loved so dearly. A

⁸⁸ *American Heritage* 50.1 (Feb./Mar. 1999), n. pag.

frequent visitor to her grandmother's hotel room, Sim recalls how they would talk for hours about everything from the theater and music to food and fashion. Whenever Sim tried to broach the subject of Ellen's family, however, her grandmother's replies were always curt and matter-of-fact. It was as if she were reciting the information by rote, recalls Sim:

My grandmother told me her mother was born Anita Hemmings. She had attended Vassar College a generation before her daughter did, and was a strong student there. Anita married a Dr. Andrew Love, whom she met while working at the Boston Public Library not long after she had graduated. She could speak seven languages and did not know how to cook when she married. She came from French and English stock. (n. pag.)

Although Sim often tries to coax her grandmother into revealing more about her great grandparents, who they were and where they were from, the story always remains the same.

When her grandmother dies at the age of eighty-nine, Sim laments the fact that Ellen has taken her family secrets with her to her grave. Shortly following her grandmother's death, however, Sim receives a phone call from one of Ellen's closest friends offering her condolences. The woman apologizes profusely for what she believes to be her role in the untimely demise Sim's grandmother. The family friend proceeds to tell Sim that she had unearthed some unsettling information about Sim's family while conducting genealogical research for her grandmother. Although she had promised Sim's grandmother that she would not tell Ellen's family of the findings, the woman feels that if she confides her discovery to Ellen's daughter-in-law (Sim's mother) then she will not technically be betraying her friend. Two weeks later, Sim's mother calls her to say that

she has found out what Ellen's secret was. "Grandma's grandfather was a black man," Sim's mother exclaims excitedly. "Oh," replies Sim, somewhat surprised by her own lack of surprise (n. pag.).

When Sim tells her husband what her mother has said, he laughingly replies, "Your family is the whitest family I've ever met!" (n. pag.). Affirming her husband's statement, Sim writes: "I have reddish brown hair, and it is very fine. I have blue eyes, and you can easily see the blue veins under my yellow-pale skin. I was ignorant enough to think of blackness in the arbitrary way most of white society does: One must have a darker hue to one's skin to be black. I look about as black as Heidi" (n. pag.). If her grandmother's grandfather was black, speculates Sim, then he must have been the only black member of the family.

Determined to learn more about her newly discovered African-American ancestry, Sim emails Vassar College. The next day she receives a reply from the editor of the *Vassar Quarterly* giving her a brief biography of her great-grandmother. The woman informs Sim that "Vassar does claim Anita Hemmings as the first African-American graduate of the college, although apparently for most of her college career, she 'passed' as white" (n. pag.). Musing about her great-grandmother's decision, Sim wonders how her family felt as they watched "Anita leave them behind for better opportunities, for a better life, as a white woman" (n. pag.). Sim is devastated to think that Anita "had to pass as white to educate herself. She had to abandon the very core of who she was to educate herself" (n. pag.). Her great-grandmother had taken an incredible risk and sacrificed a great deal to improve her lot in life.

A few days after she receives the email from Vassar College, Sim is contacted by a professor who has been researching her great-grandmother's life for several years. Apparently, Anita Hemmings had spent almost four years at Vassar passing as white before the truth about her racial heritage was revealed. Her roommate, it seems, had become suspicious of Hemmings and persuaded her father to look into the matter. The girl's father returned to Vassar College just days before commencement and announced that "Anita Hemmings was indeed a Negress" (n. pag.). Embittered teachers and students protest that the deceitful young woman should not be allowed to graduate. The school board held a special session, and decided to allow Hemmings to receive her diploma with the rest of the Vassar class of 1897. Word of the Vassar scandal spread quickly. "Society and educational circles in this city," wrote the *New York World*, "are profoundly shocked by the announcement in the local papers today that one of the graduating class at Vassar College this year was a Negro girl, who concealing her race, entered the college, took the four year's course, and finally confessed the truth to a professor a few days before commencement" (qtd. in Sim n. pag.). In an to effort help its readers understand how Hemmings perpetrated the deception, the paper offered the following portraiture of her:

Her manners were those of a person of gentle birth, and her intelligence and ability were recognized alike by her classmates and professors. Her skin was dark but not swarthy. Her hair was black but straight as an Indian's, and she usually gathered it in a knot at the back of her head. Her eyes were coal black and of piercing brilliancy. Her appearance was such that in other environments she might have been taken for an Indian. Indeed, not a few of the students whispered that Indian blood flowed in her veins. (qtd. in Sim n. pag.)

Anita Hemmings was an attractive, intelligent, well-bred young woman who endeared herself to everyone she met during her four years at Vassar College. The fact that she was “a Negro” was nevertheless an affront to the Vassar community.

As she listens to the story of her great-grandmother, Sim is overcome with emotions. She cannot fathom what it must have been like for Hemmings to have lived a double life for so many years. Sim writes, “What white students and faculty might have seen as an insolent charade was in reality an agonizing and split existence. All through her college years Anita shuttled back and forth between elite white Vassar and migrant black Boston, between rich white strangers and her poor black family” (n. pag.). Sim deduces that the strength and courage that enabled her great-grandmother to achieve her goal must have helped her to weather the storm once her secret was revealed.

But Anita Hemmings did more than just weather the storm; she faced it head on. Three decades after the Vassar scandal, Hemmings encouraged her daughter, Ellen, to enrol at her alma mater. “My grandmother successfully passed as white at Vassar,” writes Sim, “graduating exactly thirty years after her mother” (n. pag.). Pondering her great-grandmother’s “lifelong deception that was courageous, desperate – and so effective that I might very well have gone to my grave without ever learning of it” (n. pag.) – Sim cannot help but think of the family Anita Hemmings left behind. For Sim, it is difficult to imagine a world so unjust that it would force someone to make such an impossible and irreversible decision.

5.3 "Trying to Get Back": Bliss Broyard's "The Unmasked Ball"

I wanted desperately to run away from home. My mother and father were too folksy for me, too colorful. Conformity is the first passion of small boys. Originality, if it comes at all, arrives much later. My love for these two misfits, these character actors, was too heavy to bear.

Eventually, I ran away to Greenwich Village, where no one had been born of a mother and father, where the people I met had sprung from their own brows, or from the pages of a bad novel. We buried our families in the common grave of the generation gap, silenced them with the so-called failure of communication. Parents became our shtik, a whetstone for our wit. Orphans of the avant-garde, we outdistanced our history and our humanity. ...

Now that I have a wife and family of my own, I've begun to feel what it is. When we go out together, I do my own share of strutting, and I wonder how my children feel about it. Am I an embarrassment to them, or an accepted part of human comedy? Have they joined my conspiracy, or are they just pretending? Do they understand that, after all those years of running away from home, I am still trying to get back?

– Anatole Broyard, "Growing Up Irrational"⁸⁹

In her autobiographical essay "The Unmasked Ball: Family Reunion" (2001), Bliss Broyard, daughter of renowned book critic Anatole Broyard, speaks candidly about her father's racial passing and its impact on her family. One month before his death, Bliss discovered that her father had been keeping a secret from her and her brother. Sitting outside the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, where Anatole lay dying inside, the Broyard children finally learn the "truth" about their father's racial identity. "Your father's part black," confesses their mother, Alexandra Broyard. Rather than being shocked at her mother's revelation, Bliss admits to feeling relieved that her mother had not confessed something more sinister about her beloved father. "In fact," Bliss confides,

⁸⁹ *The New York Times* Online (19 Apr. 1979), n. pag.

"I felt exhilarated to learn my history and identity were richer and more interesting than my white-bread upbringing had led me to believe" (n. pag.). Their mother goes on to explain that Anatole – whose "blue eyes and pale skin" belied his African-American heritage – was "of mixed French and black ancestry," and that the reason he was estranged from his family was that "they lived as black" (n. pag.). Their father's decision to pass as white, she continues, was prompted by his desire to establish himself as a writer: "he feared being marginalized as a black writer, limited to addressing only black experiences" (n. pag.). On a more personal level, their father had hoped to spare his children the anguish he felt growing up on the margins of the white and black worlds. It is not until after his death that Bliss Broyard begins to fully grasp the impact of what she has been told about her father's (and, consequently, her own) racial identity. The secret that her father had harbored all those years was "more than an interesting footnote to his life; it was a truth that had shaped his and [her] identity and destiny in ways [she] had only begun to imagine" (n. pag.).

Among the mourners at her father's memorial service were Anatole's younger sister, Shirley, and her son, Frank, neither of whom Bliss had ever met. Anatole's older sister, Lorraine, whom Bliss had not seen in seventeen years, was there as well. Although her father had maintained some semblance of a relationship with his sister, Lorraine, he had rarely spoken of his other sister, Shirley. Her father's justification for his estrangement from Shirley and her family, Bliss recalls, was that Shirley's husband was in politics, and Anatole never involved himself in politics. Later, Bliss learns that her aunt's husband is in fact a civil rights attorney, which she surmises made her father uneasy.

Bliss's own feelings of uneasiness begin to surface as she stands outside the church following her father's funeral service. Feeling excited yet anxious as she introduces her newly-discovered relatives, she hopes that in explaining the family connection she will somehow feel closer to them.

Mourning her father's loss, Broyard cannot help but think of the other losses she has suffered. As she thinks about the family, the history, and the culture she has been denied, she finds herself overwhelmed by feelings of regret. The realization that her father had only wanted to protect her and her brother is of little consequence in the wake of such loss. She begins to question everything she knows about her father and her relationship with him. In a way, recalls Broyard, it was like "losing him all over again" (n. pag.). For Broyard, "the only way [she] could think to get him back was to try to understand the world he had left behind" (n. pag.). With this in mind, she begins reading everything she can find on racial identity, race mixing, and the subject of passing. She then begins researching into Anatole's past, tracing his genealogy in an attempt to reconnect with the family that he had left behind. Broyard travels to Los Angeles, where she discovers that her father was not the only member of the Broyard family to cross over into the white world. "During the years of Jim Crow," writes Broyard, "many of my relatives who could pass for white did so – to get better jobs, to send their kids to a better school, to go to the nicer, 'whites only' beaches. Most of them came home at night and became black again, but some, like my dad, moved permanently to the other side of the color line" (n. pag.). Broyard knows that locating her lost relatives will prove difficult, but she is determined nonetheless.

A couple of years after she begins digging into her father's past, Broyard receives a phone call from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates explains to Broyard that he first became interested in her father's story back in the seventies when Gates had inadvertently outed Anatole to the senior editor at the *Times*. Apparently, Gates had commented to the man that he was "pleased to see a black critic on staff" (Broyard, *One Drop* 106). When the editor asked to whom Gates was referring, Gates replied, "Why, Anatole Broyard" (106). Startled by the insinuation, the editor reprimanded Gates, warning him, "That sort of scandalous talk will not be tolerated if you hope to keep writing for the *New York Times*" (106). Unwilling to risk his job, Gates quickly retracted his statement, he informs Bliss.

Anatole Broyard's secret life had intrigued Gates for many years. Although he had strongly encouraged Bliss to write about her father's racial identity, Gates decides to pen the story himself. When Gates informs Bliss a few months later that *The New Yorker* has commissioned him to write a piece on Anatole, she is furious. Bliss tries to impress upon Gates how important it is for her "to publicly identify her father as black for the first time" (108). Rather than respect her position, Gates accuses Bliss of being "worried about the stigma" (108). "That's it. Isn't it?" he tells her. "You're afraid of being identified as black" (108). Extremely insulted by the accusation, Broyard writes:

I told Gates that I felt I'd been done an injustice by having my father's ancestry kept from me, and that it was unfair for him to wrest away control over my identity once again. But of course my personal battle was not his concern. My dad was the most well known defector from the black race in the latter half of the twentieth century, and Gates was determined to tell his story. (108)

When Gates's article appeared in *The New Yorker* the following year, Broyard had to admit that the piece was not "unsympathetic." She was, however, offended by Gates's insistence that her father "wanted to be someone other than Anatole Broyard" (110). "The exact opposite was true," Bliss exclaimed to anyone who would listen. "He just wanted to be himself, without all the restrictions and stereotypes of being black" (110).

Although Bliss had cut off contact with Gates following their initial disagreement, Gates continued to converse with her mother, Alexandra Broyard. Despite Bliss's efforts to persuade him that she was not ashamed of her African-American heritage, Gates continued to assert that she needed to accept her new racial identity. He even went so far as to suggest to her mother that Bliss petition the court to change Anatole's racial identity from "white" to "black" on Bliss's birth certificate. Commenting on the incident, Bliss muses: "I wondered how a man whose lifework was dedicated to the notion that a person's race was the most signifying element about him could propose that switching sides was as easy as changing a word on a piece of paper" (111).⁹⁰ For Broyard, altering her father's race on her birth certificate will not change who she is or who her father was for that matter.

⁹⁰ Interestingly enough, Gates broaches that very subject in his article on Anatole Broyard:

The mistake is to assume that birth certificates and biographical sketches and all the other documents generated by the modern bureaucratic state reveal an anterior truth – that they are merely signs of an independently existing identity. But in fact they constitute it. The social meaning of race is established by these identity papers – by tracts, treatises and certificates and pamphlets and all the other verbal artifacts that proclaim race to be real and, by that proclamation, make it so. (207-8)

In September 2007, Broyard published the findings of her research into her father's past in a memoir, entitled *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life – A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. Five months later, Bliss appeared on the PBS series, *African American Lives 2*, which was hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In the voice-over that opens his interview with Broyard, Gates describes her as “one person who was in the matrix, but didn't know it” (n. pag.). Handing Broyard the results of an admixture test she had taken before the show, Gates exclaims, “You're a bit more Negroid than you thought. You are 17.2% African. You're almost 20% black.” Gates then asks Broyard, “Does this make you black?” For the first time since the controversy, Broyard is able to share with Gates just how she feels about her racial heritage. Broyard explains to him:

I sort of think of myself as like an ex-patriot in the black community, and I think that being black is not a result of my DNA test. It's not finding out that I have this ancestry. It's experience, and it's the way that you've lived. And so, I think of myself as someone who has mixed-race ancestry, and I feel like I'm kind of a cousin to blackness. But, I don't think that I've earned the right to call myself black. (n. pag.)

Unlike Gregory Howard Williams, whose black racial heritage is forced upon him, Bliss Broyard embraces her newfound ancestry on her own terms.

Following the publication of Gates's *New Yorker* article, Broyard felt even more pressed to reclaim her newfound heritage. With the assistance of her cousin, Gloria, who “had also recently discovered her African ancestry,” Broyard organizes a family reunion in New Orleans in an effort to mend the broken branches of her family tree (n. pag.). Although she is extremely excited at the prospect of meeting her new relatives, Broyard nevertheless worries about how they might react to her father and his decision to pass.

Much to Broyard's relief, "no one openly criticized [her father's] choice, and many were quick to say that they didn't judge him, citing the lack of opportunities facing blacks and '[her] father's understandable desire to better the lives of [her] and [her] family'" (n. pag.). One cousin confides to Broyard that she had been forbidden to contact Anatole or his family because they were "living on the other side," and wanted nothing to do with those they had left behind (n. pag.). Another cousin speaks of the struggles he and his family faced during the tumultuous time of integration in New Orleans. Rather than pass as white in order to obtain better employment, he tells Broyard, his parents devoted themselves to bettering their community. "They were proud to be colored," her cousin announces, just as he and his children are (n. pag.). Although his comments are not meant as an affront to her father, Broyard cannot help but feel saddened that she will never know first-hand the kind of intense ancestral pride that her cousin had expressed.

As she looks around the banquet hall, Broyard begins to realize just how much her father had sacrificed. She laments, "He would have loved New Orleans, more original and full of spectacle than any other American city. He would have loved the cousins gathered here, who shared his playful spirit, his physical beauty, his sensitivity and intelligence. They were his family after all" (n. pag.). Anatole's decision to live as white may have afforded him certain opportunities, but it had cost him dearly. Her father had once written, recalls Broyard, that it was not until his parents had passed away that he realized just how much he missed them and what they had meant to him. Thinking back on her father's words, Bliss Broyard feels comforted by the notion that although her father never managed to make it back, she did.

5.4 “c”: Carol Channing’s *Just Lucky I Guess: A Memoir of Sorts*

Well, I didn’t think it was coming this soon, but now I can’t continue this part of the saga of my childhood unless I tell you that when I was sixteen years old, packing for leaving home alone for the first time to go to Bennington College, my mother announced to me I was part Negro.

– Carol Channing, *Just Lucky I Guess: A Memoir of Sorts* (2002)⁹¹

In the opening chapter of *Just Lucky I Guess: A Memoir of Sorts*, theatrical legend Carol Channing reveals the details of her mother’s confession to her that her father was passing. “I’m only telling you this,” says Channing’s mother, “because the Darwinian law shows that you could easily have a black baby” (8). Her mother goes on to explain that when Channing’s father was born “his birth certificate had a small c, which stood for ‘colored,’ after his name, but that fortunately the city hall of Augusta, Georgia, burned down, leaving no evidence of this” (8). Following the death of Channing’s paternal grandfather, her grandmother was left to raise two children on her own. She moved from Augusta to Providence, Rhode Island, where she opened a small store and enrolled the children in public school. Because Channing’s father looked white, her grandmother knew that people “would never recognize [his] full features, his shining, evenly shaped teeth, or his magnificent, wide-ranged voice” as those of a Negro (Channing 8).

Unwilling to jeopardize her children’s opportunities for success, Channing’s grandmother distanced herself from them so that they could blend more easily into the white world. Channing’s father continued his education in his mother’s absence. He

⁹¹ (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 8.

graduated from Classical High School and went on to earn a degree from Brown University, Channing's mother informs her. In any event, her mother explains, the fact that Channing is "part Negro" is "why [Channing's] eyes were bigger than hers ... and why [Channing] danced with such elasticity and why [she] had so many of the qualities that made [her] [her]" (8). As for Channing's father, her mother adds, "the reason [he] was so fastidious and bathed so often and adored 4711 perfume was because 'all Negroes smell, you know'" (9). At this point in her recollection, Channing informs her reader that "[her] father never, ever smelled" (9). In fact, she adds, "No African American that I danced with ever smelled" (9). Then, having apparently exhausted the topic of her African-American heritage, Channing quickly changes the subject.

Given the casual tone and tangential style of Channing's memoir, it is hardly surprising that this exchange between her and her mother is sandwiched between descriptions of her father's talents as a singer and her mother's powder-fresh scent. What is surprising is that Channing's discussion of her black ancestry occupies just a single page in a memoir of 262 pages. It is obvious from Channing's remark concerning the hygiene of African Americans just how dissociated she is from that part of her heritage, which raises the question, "Why mention it at all?" Given the context of the revelation and the paucity of her comments concerning the same, one might argue that Channing's disclosure that she is "part Negro" is just another lurid detail in a memoir full of such tidbits.

Perhaps more than any other, the autobiographies discussed in this chapter highlight the amorphous nature of race and the variability of racial classifications. The

fact that Gregory Howard Williams, Jillian Sim, Bliss Broyard, and Carol Channing were completely oblivious to their African-American heritage and, thus, unwittingly passing speaks volumes. "Works like these," argues Gayle Wald in "Along the Color Line," "which illustrate the precise ways in which race is a fiction whose effects are nevertheless real, may thus take a place beside historical texts which detail the process by which races are invented, sociological critiques of racial formation, or studies of the cultural (re)production of—or resistance to—racial ideologies in the public sphere" (n. pag.). Straddling the color line, these autobiographers at once defy and destabilize the American racial system.

Conclusion

The Racial Divide



In his controversial comic strip, "The Boondocks," cartoonist Aaron McGruder takes a satirical poke at (among other things) interracial marriage and the politics associated with such unions. Taking liberty with the characters of Mr. and Mrs. DuBois, a black civil rights attorney and his white wife, McGruder cleverly stereotypes everything from the couple's dating preferences to their choice of Halloween costumes. Clearly,

McGruder's satirical depiction of the DuBoises is meant to be humorous, and yet it touches on some serious issues for mixed-race individuals.

Mrs. DuBois' insistence that her daughter be afforded the opportunity to "construct her own identity" echoes the sentiments of psychologist Maria Root. Frustrated by people's attempts to pigeonhole her and others like her, Root developed the following "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People":

I have the right

not to justify my existence in this world
not to keep the races separate within me
not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity
not to justify my ethnic legitimacy

I have the right

to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify
to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me
to identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters
to identify myself differently in different situations

I have the right

to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial
to change my identity over my lifetime – and more than once
to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people
to freely choose whom I befriend and love. (7)

As Root's "Bill of Rights" intimates, each successive generation of mixed-race individuals faces new stresses and uncertainties. Even those who feel the most equipped to deal with the pressures associated with living on the racial divide acknowledge the challenges inherent in such a feat.

The autobiographers discussed in the remainder of this dissertation use their liminal positions on the socially constructed color line to question the very idea of race. Kathleen Cross, Adrian Piper, Naomi Zack, Judy Scales-Trent, and Juanita Brooks refuse

to posit racial identity as essential and immutable. Using their racial ambiguity to challenge rigid classifications head on, these women insist that race is not a matter of biology but a matter of choice. But, as the experiences they share in their autobiographies reveal, to be mixed race “in a society that does not handle anomalies very well” (Scales-Trent 11) is an uphill battle.

In October 1990, *Ebony* magazine published an autobiographical essay by Kathleen Cross, entitled “Trapped in the Body of a White Woman: Oregon Teacher Reveals Pain of ‘Living Black and Looking White.’” The essay opens with a description of Cross as “the only White face” (n. pag.) at a crowded house party thrown by her and her siblings. As the fourteen-year-old Cross dances to the song “Play That Funky Music, White Boy,” she is assailed by a party crasher who screams “Play that funky music, WHITE GIRL” at her (n. pag.). Realizing that the young man’s anger is provoked by the color of her skin, Cross wonders how she can convince him that she is not white but black. Reflecting back on the incident, Cross writes: “It wasn’t the first time, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last, that I wanted to apologize, not so much for being White, but for not being Black enough” (n. pag.). Cross’s frustration stems from the fact that her white complexion is at odds with her black identity.

Cross admits that she has often been accused of being “socially and emotionally confused” and of being a “wanna-be” whenever she tries to assert her blackness to people who automatically assume she is white. Trying to explain her dilemma, Cross reveals, “My skin, my hair, my features are White, but my experience is Black” (n. pag.). She goes on to say that she has “had rich experiences and relationships which will forever commit

[her] to [her] African-American heritage" (n. pag.). Although she recognizes that the condition of living black and looking white seems hugely contradictory, Cross is nonetheless disturbed when people challenge her "right" to call herself African American. She confesses:

African-Americans have shaped my self-concept since my childhood, and I have loved and been loved in the Black community all my life. So when I am rejected by some of my African-American brothers and sisters, when my African-American husband is written off for "selling out" to marry me, and when my African-American children are referred to as "mixed," I find myself wanting to apologize again for not being Black enough. I am a Black woman "becoming" who can never really arrive, and there is pain and isolation in belonging to a family which often does not recognize my membership. (n. pag.)

While Cross admits that her white complexion keeps her from being a target of white racism, it does nothing to shield her from the animosity of the black community. Tired of being misunderstood, Cross looks forward to the day when she will finally be accepted by the community she has embraced.

In "Passing for White, Passing for Black," philosophy professor Adrian Piper echoes Cross's sentiments concerning the difficulties she experiences in today's society as a result of her decision to align herself with the African-American community. Growing up, Piper remembers being ridiculed as a result of her light complexion: "My family was one of the very last middle-class, light-skinned black families left in our Harlem neighborhood after most had fled to the suburbs; visibly black working-class kids my age yanked my braids and called me 'paleface.' Many of them thought I was white, and treated me accordingly" (235). While in university, Piper is continually accused of looking and acting white, and is even forced to prove her "blackness" by passing the

"Suffering Test." Such exchanges, in which she was expected to recount her experiences with racism, were "extremely alienating and demoralizing," recalls Piper (236). But, as her experiences in graduate school reveal, it is not just the black community that expects Piper to account for herself; the white community is equally sceptical of her black racial status.

Piper's situation is similar to Walter White's insofar as she "assumes" an identity that is perceived by the bulk of white society as undesirable. Although there are similarities in white people's reactions to both Piper and White, namely disbelief, these reactions are motivated by very different things. Whereas whites of Walter White's generation could not fathom why he would "choose" to be black, those of Piper's generation are convinced that she is motivated by self-gain. When Piper enters graduate school, one of the most renowned and respected faculty members insinuates that she has fraudulently represented herself. "Without introduction or preamble," recalls Piper, "he said to me with a triumphant smirk, 'Miss Piper, you're about as black as I am'" (234).

Piper experiences a similar reaction when she is applying for jobs following graduation. A junior professor calls Piper into her office and grills her as to her why she identifies herself as black. The woman goes so far as to question Piper as to the exact percentage of her African-American ancestry. Reflecting upon these incidents, Piper writes:

But the truth in my professors' accusations was that I had, in fact, resisted my parents' suggestion that, just this once, for admission to this most prestigious of graduate programs, I decline to identify my racial classification on the graduate admissions application, so that it could be said with certainty that I'd been admitted on the basis of merit alone. "But

that would be passing," I protested. Although both my parents had watched many of their relatives disappear permanently into the white community, passing for white was unthinkable within the branches of my father's and mother's families to which I belonged. That would have been a really, authentically shameful thing to do. (Piper 240)

Piper's guilt at having given herself an edge in terms of her education is mitigated somewhat by her recognition of the fact that identifying herself as white on the university application form would have been deceitful. The loss associated with the broken limbs of the family tree convinces Piper that any form of passing, however innocuous, is an "authentically shameful" act.

The dilemma Piper experiences as a result of having to list her racial designation on a graduate admissions form that cannot possibly accommodate her as a white black woman attests to the futility of such a prerequisite. "The fact is," insists Piper, "that the racial categories that purport to designate any of us are too rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately" (268). Not until "we have faced the full human and personal consequences of self-serving, historically entrenched social and legal conventions that in fact undermine the privileged interests they were designed to protect, will we be in a position to decide whether the very idea of racial classification is a viable one in the first place" (268). Rather than accept other people's attempts to categorize her, Piper uses her politically charged position on the color line to criticize narrow notions of race.

Unlike Piper, who clearly identifies as black, philosophy professor Naomi Zack insists, "I have always lived in racial ambiguity. I have resisted identification as black, Jewish (if Jews are a race), or white. My preference has been for people to accept me 'as I am'" (Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* xii). Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1944, Zack was

raised by her mother, a Russian Jewish immigrant, who supported them by working first as a custodian and later as a sketch artist. Growing up in Manhattan's Lower East Side, Zack was frequently mistaken for Hispanic. Knowing herself to be of Russian Jewish descent, she often wondered why people were so curious as to her nationality. When she was twelve, she moved with her mother and grandmother to a rural suburb in Westchester County. There, people did not question her nationality, but told Zack they thought she might be "coloured" (Zack, "My Racial Self" 22). Afraid to broach the subject of her paternity with her mother, Zack admits to being plagued by a "repulsive and scary feeling" (22) about herself.

When she is fifteen, Zack's mother confesses to her that Zack's father was black and that her paternal grandfather "had been born a Negro slave and was six years old at the end of the Civil War" (23). Her paternal grandmother was a Sioux Indian. "My mother," states Zack, "was ashamed of her relationship with my father and she encouraged me to deny my black ancestry" (Zack, "An Autobiographical View" 6-7). Although the truth about her paternity comes as a shock to Zack, it does not really change anything for her. Zack continues to excel in school and goes on to earn a doctoral degree in philosophy. During her student years, claims Zack, race was not an issue for her: "I did not have to identify myself racially on any forms, and I do not remember any official person in the New York City public school system, in college, or in graduate school asking me what race I was" (Zack *Race and Mixed Race* xi). Rather than take the teaching position she is offered, Zack decides to pursue other avenues.

It is not until she returns to academia after a twenty year hiatus that Zack begins to really think and write about race. Her philosophical approach to race helps Zack to better understand her position on the color line. She writes:

To have a foot planted on either side of this abyss is an emotional and conceptual impossibility. As far as I can tell about the present social reality, at least in academic culture, the chasm keeps getting wider. It's too late for me to hop to either side because I can't lie about the presence of black ancestry and pretend to be white, and I can't remake my past and become black. Either I sink or I rise. I have decided to rise. And I think that such *transcendence* is possible because I am defying the gravity of mere social reality. I have to function in social reality but I don't actually have to live there. (26)

Zack's need to transcend narrow notions of race moves her to embrace a more liberal approach to identity. She insists that individuals be afforded the freedom to choose or not to choose, to embrace or to reject, to stress or to ignore their racial identities as they see fit. Zack writes:

I refuse to be pressured into denying the existence of black forebears to please whites, and I refuse to be pressured into denying my white ethnicity and my white forebears, to please blacks. There is no biological foundation for the concept of race. The concept of race is an oppressive cultural invention and convention, and I refuse to have anything to do with it. I refuse to be reasonable in order to placate either blacks or whites who retain non-empirical and irrational categorizations. Therefore, I have no racial affiliation and will accept no racial designations. (Zack, "An Autobiographical View" 9)

Tired of living in a society that either forces you to choose sides or chooses for you, Zack – who has “moved from being Jewish; to being Jewish but not looking Jewish; to being Jewish and black, which is to say black; to being mixed race” (27) – chooses “none of the above.”

In *Notes of a White Black Woman: Race, Color, Community* (1995), Judy Scales-Trent also uses personal narrative to interrogate matters of race. As an African American who is often mistaken for white, Scales-Trent marvels at the sheer effort it takes to create and maintain a racial identity. For her, race is not a given or "something that just exists. It is a continuing act of imagination" (3). Drawing from her own experiences, Scales-Trent reveals just how imaginative one must be to survive in a society that views everything in terms of black and white. She insists: "Sometimes I feel like I'm black, passing for white. Sometimes I feel like I'm white, passing for black. On a good day, I just live my life" (14). The daughter of black parents with white skin, Scales-Trent grew up simultaneously "inside and outside of the black community and the white community" (8). At the age of thirty-eight, she turned to journal writing to try and make sense of the feelings of belonging and yet not belonging that she had been grappling with for some time. "I wish I had a name to make my home in, to hide inside of," Scales-Trent wrote in November 1978, "An identity. A group to belong to" (12-13). She momentarily ponders the notion of resurrecting the term "mulatto," but quickly dismisses the idea out of fear of being scorned by her "dark-skinned" brethren (13). Ironically, the kind of intraracism of which Scales-Trent speaks stems from the fact that members of the African-American community have themselves internalized the laws of racial purity that have plagued them since slavery.

The alienation Scales-Trent feels from the black community is clear as she repeats the phrases "cast out," "no home," and "no place" (13) again and again. Her demeanor is as much of an affront to them as her appearance: "'Who does she think she is? She think

she white, man.” “Hey, you think you better than me, huh?!” (13). And yet, she did not always feel this sense of isolation. As a child, she felt warm and safe, surrounded by a loving community of family and friends. Scales-Trent writes:

But I lost something more when I grew up and moved out of the segregated South, out of the safety of my childhood home, because the Jim Crow laws gave me an identity and a protection I couldn't give myself.

Suddenly, the world was opened to me: streets, movies, restaurants. I put one foot into the world of white-Jewish-liberal-intellectuals when I was in fifth grade, and I've been straddling two worlds ever since. (14)

The fact that she laments a time when she was subject to discriminatory laws and practices reveals just how demoralized Scales-Trent feels. In her mind, a racial identity concretized by prejudice is preferable to one marked by privilege.

Straddling the color line, she questions, “What do you do if you're rejected by one world, and are constantly rejecting the other?” (14). Feeling the push and pull of both worlds simultaneously, Scales-Trent realizes that she “must learn to live squarely, steadily, and surely in the middle of ambiguity” (16). Rather than be defined by others, she must define herself. The problem with living “in the middle of ambiguity,” admits Scales-Trent, is that she “is just as hungry for a place to belong as anyone else” and “just as willing to choose up sides” (64). If Scales-Trent is to be true to herself and to her family, then her choice is clear. “For I am,” she asserts, “after all, a black woman, deep down where it counts, and where it hurts” (16). And yet, she is protected from overt racism by virtue of her “white-skin disguise” (17). In an effort to explain her quandary, Scales-Trent explains:

How can I try to keep from passing when all I'm trying to do is catch a fucking cab? There is no way around it. I am passing all the time as I walk

through the world. I can only correct the perceptions of those persons I deal with on a more than casual basis. And I feel like a fraud. And I hate it. I hate myself for not being able to solve the dilemma. (17)

Scales-Trent is frustrated by the fact that she must not only alter people's perceptions of her, but also persuade them that she is who she claims to be. When she apprises someone of her race, she is often met with denial: "Sometimes it is said in shock, dismay: 'No! You can't be!' Sometimes, in confusion: 'But you don't *look* black'" (73). Because she does not appear to be different, then she must be the same.

Baffled by these audacious efforts to assign her an identity, Scales-Trent muses about people's impetus to categorize. "In a society based on racial stratification," she asserts, "the state must keep track of who is who" (74). Races must be allocated, the boxes must be ticked. Scales-Trent recalls one of many instances when the wrong box was ticked:

I remember one time in particular, after the cab I was in crashed into the car in front, then backed into the one behind. A policeman stopped to help. He took down the story. As he was taking down my name and address, I noticed that he had checked the "white" box. "Officer," I said politely, "you made an error on your form. I am not white. I am black." He gave me a long, bored look, decided not to discuss it, and said, "Sure, lady. If you say so." If I say so? If *I* say so! As if it were my idea! I was enraged at his assumption that all of this – the categories, the racial impurity laws, the lives that are stomped, mangled, ruined because of those categories and those laws – was based on my say-so. If *I* said so, we would do away with all of it – the sickness and fear, the need to classify as a way to control, the need to make some appear smaller so that others can appear larger. (74)

Even though Scales-Trent recognizes the inefficacy of racial categories, she abides by the assumption that a box must be checked.

Like Naomi Zack, Judy Scales-Trent firmly believes that her position on the color line directly contributes to her insight into matters of race. "There is something about living on the margins of race," claims Scales-Trent, "that gives me a unique view of the categories 'black' and 'white,' that presents a different picture of white Americans and black Americans, of America itself. For my position does not allow me the luxury of thinking that the notion of race makes any sense" (7). As a white-skinned black woman, Scales-Trent defies classification. Her very existence complicates discrete categories of race and forces those who come in contact with her to reconsider what they have come to associate with race.

Born to an interracial couple in 1947, clinical psychologist Dr. Juanita Brooks has, like Judy Scales-Trent, spent most of her life searching for a place to call home. Although her parents made a concerted effort to connect with other interracial families, there were relatively few in the predominantly African-American community where they lived.⁹² Brooks remembers only one other biracial child in the neighbourhood who was close to her age, which meant that she had few friends growing up. Even though her family had been accepted by their community, Brooks still felt like an outsider. "I felt 'different,'" Brooks recalls, "I never felt like I fully fit into either the black or white communities" (n. pag.). To make matters worse, Brooks's father was an only child and her mother was estranged from her family, who had disowned her when she married Brooks's father. This lack of an extended family made Brooks feel even more isolated. Fortunately for Brooks,

⁹² This fact is not surprising considering that interracial marriages were not just taboo in the 1940s, they were still against the law in many states.

her parents advocated education as a means of self-discovery and improving one's lot in life.

Following the completion of her doctorate degree in clinical psychology, Brooks began to seek out other biracial individuals like herself. Capitalizing on her training and experience as a psychologist, she founded a web-based support group for multiracial individuals on November 1, 1996. Brooks envisioned "My Shoes" as a healthy "alternative to formal psychotherapy" (n. pag.), a place where multiracial youths and adults can commune with one another. As a clinical psychologist, Dr. Juanita Brooks is well-versed in the kinds of identity issues many multiracial individuals face. Although she does not provide psychological counselling to group members, they are nonetheless appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences with others like themselves. One need only peruse the "Personal Stories" of the site's members to recognize the necessity of such a forum. The feelings of alienation and isolation expressed by the majority of participants attests to the fragmented sense of identity felt by mixed-race individuals as a result of having to define and defend their racial selves.

Prior to establishing her website, Juanita Brooks had never (knowingly) met anyone with her particular racial complexion. Since then, she has become acquainted with a number of individuals who share not just her racial make-up, but who share "similar experiences, from civil rights marches in the mid-sixties to multiracial rallies and conferences in the late nineties" (n. pag.). When she is interviewed by her local newspaper in 2001 about the changes to the 2000 Census, Brooks claims she felt like she

was “coming out.” She is quick to add, “Not that I ever passed for white, but there were assumptions my acquaintances made” (qtd. in Crary, n. pag.). Although Brooks admits to “allowing people to believe whatever they wanted to believe, unless race came up in conversation” (qtd. in Crary, n. pag), she did not consider herself to be passing. Extremely satisfied with the changes made to the 2000 Census, Brooks reveals how she grew up convinced that she had to be black because there was no other nomenclature. “The word ‘multiracial’ was not in our vocabulary back then,” she insists. “You had to choose - society made you choose” (qtd. in Crary, n. pag.). She goes on to say that now that racial labels are less absolute, she feels liberated. What Brooks fails to realize is that she is still forced to choose.

The Census 2000 questionnaire allowed mixed-race Americans, for the first time in history, to select more than one race. Many of these same individuals applauded the Federal Government’s seemingly progressive attitude for having finally recognized the nation’s increasing diversity. What these same people neglect to see is that reformulating racial categories only reinforces the barriers between the races; it does nothing to break them down. It does not matter how many lines the American government draws, the effect is still the same. As Naomi Zack contends in *Race and Mixed Race* (1993), “the oppressiveness of some racial designations and the *immanence* of all of them, combined with the lack of empirical foundation for the concept of race, entail that no racial words are appropriate designations for human beings” (8). As testament to the fact that the Government’s collection of population data continues to buttress an archaic system, one

need only look at the hierarchical ordering of the races on the Census 2000 Summary File 1 Table P3 - Total Population by Race (See Appendix A) – “White alone” tops the list.

Historically, race afforded “just one of several ways of perceiving, interpreting, and dealing with human differences,” writes Audrey Smedley in *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (7). Today, however, race encompasses “a particular worldview, perpetuated as much by the continued use of the term in our daily lives and in the media as it is by the stereotypes to which so many of us have, often unconsciously, been conditioned” (7). Simplified perceptions of race and racial difference are so ingrained in American society that most people do not merely accept the existence of race, they are firmly convinced of it. Once deployed as a simple yardstick for classifying humanity, race is now a catchall that both enables and encourages individuals to fabricate certain stereotypes and presumptions. “When we meet another person one on one, and we know or recognize their race,” insists Toni Morrison, “we pull from that large suitcase of stereotypical information, of learned responses, of habitual reaction, which is the easiest and laziest way to evaluate other people” (“Toni Morrison” n. pag.). The fact that almost seven million Americans now identify themselves as mixed race suggests that race is not an inevitable and unalterable entity. Rather, it is a product of human invention, a culturally constructed edifice that must be dismantled if we hope to combat intolerance and eradicate racism.

Appendix A

Census 2000 Summary File 1 Table P3 - Total Population by Race⁹³

	United States
Total:	281,421,906
Population of one race:	274,595,678
White alone	211,460,626
Black or African American alone	34,658,190
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	2,475,956
Asian alone	10,242,998
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	398,835
Some other race alone	15,359,073
Population of two or more races:	6,826,228
Population of two races:	6,368,075
White; Black or African American	784,764
White; American Indian and Alaska Native	1,082,683
White; Asian	868,395
White; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	112,964
White; Some other race	2,206,251
Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native	182,494
Black or African American; Asian	106,782
Black or African American; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	29,876
Black or African American; Some other race	417,249
American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian	52,429
American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	7,328
American Indian and Alaska Native; Some other race	93,842
Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	138,802
Asian; Some other race	249,108
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	35,108
Population of three races:	410,285
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native	112,207
White; Black or African American; Asian	21,166
White; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	2,938
White; Black or African American; Some other race	43,172
White; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian	23,766
White; American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	4,843
White; American Indian and Alaska Native; Some other race	29,095
White; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	89,611

⁹³ From the U.S. Census Bureau <http://factfinder.census.gov>

White; Asian; Some other race	34,962
White; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	8364
Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian	5,798
Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	998
Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Some other race	7,023
Black or African American; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	5,309
Black or African American; Asian; Some other race	8,069
Black or African American; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	2,167
American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	3,063
American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Some other race	2,544
American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	586
Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	4,604
Population of four races:	38,408
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian	10,672
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	988
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Some other race	4,645
White; Black or African American; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	2,128
White; Black or African American; Asian; Some other race	1,376
White; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	325
White; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	6,450
White; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Some other race	1,099
White; American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	309
White; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	7,932

Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	750
Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Some other race	334
Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	111
Black or African American; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	1,082
American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	207
Population of five races:	8,637
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	6,611
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Some other race	724
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	68
White; Black or African American; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	379
White; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	639
Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	216
Population of six races:	823
White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some other race	823

U.S. Census Bureau
Census 2000

Appendix B

Runaway Slave Advertisements⁹⁴

New York, May 23, 1747 Made his escape from on board the Privateer Brig, Pollux, on the 20th inst, a Mulatto man named Storde, a Bermudian Born, aged about 23 years, pretty tall and pock broken, but not very much, but pretty large pits in his face, *pretty fair*, with his Head commonly shaved in order to make himself *pass for a white man....* Whoever takes up the said Mulatto slave and delivers him to Mr. Daniel Stiles at Captain John Waldron's at New York or to Mr. Philip Wilkinson, merchant at New-Port, Rhode Island, shall have ten pounds, as a reward and all reasonable charges paid by either. Daniel Stiles or Philip Wilkinson. – *New-York Weekly Post-Boy* 18 August 1746

THREE POUNDS Reward. RUN away from the subscriber, living near Canawingo Creek, Little-Britain Township, Lancaster County, on Friday, the 15th of January, a Mulattoe woman, about 18 or 19 years of age, she calls herself HANNAH CAMBEL, is a bold well tongued hussy, of a *whitish cast*, very much freckled in the face, has a brown spot on one of her little fingers, and commonly wears her hair tied.... Whoever takes up said wench, and brings her home to her master, or secures her in any of his Majesty's goals, so as he may get her again, shall have the above reward,

⁹⁴ These runaway slave advertisements, which originated in antebellum newspapers, were taken from collections of advertisements reprinted in the following sources: William Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery* 1853 (New York: Negro UP, 1968), 262; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1854), 349-363; William I. Bauditch, Esq., *White Slavery in the United States* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1855), 4-7; Lydia Maria Childs, *The Patriarchal Institution, as Described by Members of Its Own Family* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), 25-28; Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1790* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989), 131; and Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free: Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey"* (New York: Garland, 1994), 21-22, 282-83. Italics added for emphasis.

and reasonable charges paid by MOSES DAVISON. — *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 24 February 1773

IN MENS CLOTHES. RUN away the 30th of July last, from the Jerseys to Philadelphia or New-York, a MULATTOE Woman Slave, named *Maria*; had on a white or red and white jacket, white oken breeches, white stockings, old mens shoes, and an old beaver hat; she is *hardly discernable from a white woman*, is rather thinish visage middle size, thick legs, long black hair, and about 35 years old.... Whoever secures the said Mulattoe in goal, and will immediately advertise the same in this paper, shall have FOUR DOLLARS reward. — *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 7 August 1776

RUNAWAY, *From the Subscriber on the 10th instant*, A Mulatto, or Quadroon Girl, about 14 years of age, named Seth, but calls herself Sall, *sometimes says she is white* and often paints her face to cover that deception.... Two Dollars reward will be given to any person who will bring her home, or give information so that she may be found. All Masters of vessels, and others are forewarned not to harbour the said Mulatto Girl, as they shall answer at their peril. A.A. M'Kay. — *The Royal Gazette* (New York), 15 March 1783

\$100 Reward.—Will be given for the apprehension of my negro (!) Edmund Kenney. *He has straight hair, and complexion so nearly white that it is believed a stranger would suppose there was no African blood in him.* He was with my boy Dick a short time since in Norfolk, and offered him for sale, and was apprehended, but *escaped under the pretence of being a white man!* Anderson Bowles. — *Richmond Whig*, 6 January 1836

\$100 Reward.—Ran away from James Hyhart, Paris, Kentucky, on the 29th of June last, the mulatto boy Norton, about fifteen years old, a very bright mulatto, and *would be taken for a white boy*, if not closely examined. His hair is black and straight, &c. — *New Orleans True American*, 11 August 1836

\$10 reward for the apprehension of William Dubberly, a slave belonging to the estate of Sacker Dubberly, deceased. He is about nineteen years old, *quite white, and would not be readily taken for a slave.* John J. Lane. — *Newbern Spectator* (North Carolina), 13 March 1837

\$100 Reward.—Ran away from the subscriber, a bright mulatto man slave, named Sam. *Light sandy hair, blue eyes, ruddy complexion, is so white as very easily to pass for a free white man.* Edwin Peck, Mobile, Ala., April 22, 1837.

\$50 Reward.—I will give the above reward of fifty dollars for the apprehension and securing in any jail, so that I get him again, or delivering to me in Dandridge, E. Tenn., my mulatto boy, named Preston, about twenty years old. *It is supposed he will try to pass as a free white man.* John Roper, October 12, 1838.

Ranaway from me, a *negro* woman, named Fanny. *She is as white as most white women; with straight light hair, and blue eyes, and can pass herself for a white woman.* She is very intelligent; can read and write, and so forge passes for herself. She is very pious, prays a great deal, and was, as supposed, contented and happy. I will give \$500 for her delivery to me. John Balch, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, May 29, 1845.

\$25 REWARD. Ran away from the plantation of Madame Fergus Duplantier, on or about the 27th of June, 1846, a bright mulatto, named Ned, very stout built, about five feet eleven inches high, speaks English and French, about thirty-five years old, waddles in his walk. *He may try to pass himself for a white man, as he is of a very clear color, and has sandy hair...* — *New Orleans Picayune*, 2 September 1846

\$200 REWARD. Ran away from the subscriber, last November, a *white negro* man, about thirty-five years old, height about five feet eight or ten inches, *blue eyes, has a yellow woolly head, very fair skin*, (particularly under his clothes.).... He was lately known to be working on the railroad in Alabama, near Moore's Turnout, and *passed as a white man*, by the name of Jesse Teams. I will give the above reward for his delivery in any jail so that I can get him; and I will give five hundred dollars for sufficient proof to convict, in open court, any man who carried him away. J.D. Allen. — *New Orleans Picayune*, 2 September 1846

\$50 REWARD.—Ran away from the subscriber, about two months ago, a bright mulatto girl, named Mary, about twenty-five years of age, *almost white*, and reddish hair, front teeth out, a cut on her upper lip; about five feet five inches high; has a scar on her forehead; she passes for free; talks

French, Italian, Dutch, English, and Spanish. Andre Grasso. — *New Orleans Picayune*, 1848

\$200 REWARD.—Ran away from the subscriber, on the 23rd of June last, a bright mulatto woman, named Julia, about twenty-five years of age. She is of common size, *nearly white*, and very likely. She is a good seamstress, and can read a little. *She may attempt to pass for white*: dresses fine. She took with her Anna, her child, eight or nine years old, and considerably darker than her mother.... A.W. Johnson. — *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig*, 14 July 1849

\$500 REWARD.—Ran away from the subscriber, on the 25th of May, a very bright mulatto boy, about twenty-one or twenty-two years old, named Wash. *Said boy, without close observation, might pass himself for a white man, as he is very bright; has sandy hair, blue eyes, and a fine set of teeth.... Although he is like a white man in appearance, he has the disposition of a negro, and delights in comic songs and witty expressions. He is an excellent house servant; very handy about a hotel; tall, slender, and has rather a down look, especially when spoken to, and is sometimes inclined to be sulky....* George O. Ragland. — *Chattanooga Gazette* 5 October 1852

Ran Away from the subscriber, working on the plantation of Colonel H. Tinker, a bright mulatto boy named Alfred. Alfred is about eighteen years old, pretty well grown; *has blue eyes, light flaxen hair, skin disposed to freckle. He will try to pass as free born.* S.G. Stewart, Green County, Alabama.

\$100 *Reward*.—The above reward will be paid for the apprehension of my man William. He is a very bright mulatto — *straight, yellow hair*. I have no doubt he will change his name, and *try to pass himself for a white man*, which he may be able to do, unless to a close observer. T.S. Pichard.

Appendix C

“Astonishing Difference Between A White and Colored Skin!!!!” *The Liberator* 8.7 (February 16, 1838): 28.

Thrilling Incident. A Mr. Beasley, a few days since, offered to the Georgia Legislature, at Milledgeville, a memorial, stating that some years ago he had purchased of a slave trader a negro woman and her infant child, as he then believed the latter to be – and that he afterwards found an imposition had been practiced on him, as the child had been stolen from a white woman or abandoned by its mother. The object of the memorial was, to move the Legislature to change the name of the fondling from that of William (as known in the bill of sale of the slave-trader,) to that of William Brocket Beasley – and to restore to him the natural rights of which he had been unjustly deprived. A thrill of admiration passed through the House. Mr. Beasley was in the lobby, and held up the child in his arms – a fairer, prettier, more intelligent looking boy, had need never be desired. Many an old bachelor’s mouth watered! The House went into committee of the whole, had the child in their midst, and every one was satisfied of his whiteness and his title to freedom.

“A White Girl Kidnapped and Sold as a Slave” from *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 13.7 (October 3, 1857):1

One of the principal sensations in this vicinity [New Orleans] since my last has been the flight of a young and beautiful girl claiming to be white, from the domicile of a negro trader in Carrollion, and claiming protection from the authorities at the prison of our adjoining parish To all appearances, the girl is of pure Caucasian blood, which is what she asserts, and her story is, that she was left an orphan by the death of her parents in Kansas, and was placed in the charge of a guardian. She says that the latter has been for some time in California and that she was induced to leave Kansas by the representation of a man, that he had received instructions from her guardian to bring her to New Orleans and send her on to him. It is a matter of fact that the man who brought the girl from Kansas sold her as a slave, and that she was purchased by a trader who placed her in a house in Carrollion Taking all the circumstances into consideration, I am not

inclined to place implicit faith in the statements of the girl and yet they may be religiously true The youth and beauty of the girl enlists the sympathies of all who see her and hear her story, and if she has been wronged, every effort will be made to right her.

“Interesting Slave Case” from *The Anti-Slavery Standard* reprinted in *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 13.19 (December 26, 1857): 2

The fugitive was 24 years of age and bore the name of his white father, James Steid, a physician of Charleston, South Carolina. His more familiar *cognomen* was ‘Jeems.’ Tiring of the ‘happiness’ of a slave’s lot, and having carefully matured his plans, he started from Charleston and pursued his way, partly on foot, to Savannah without molestation. The whiteness of his skin doubtless enabled him to avoid suspicion. At Savannah he was concealed for a time by a friend, but on the 25th he went on board the steamer Florida and paid for a steerage passage, no one suspecting him of being a slave.” The boat was boarded by two special policemen who informed the Captain that he had a fugitive on board. “The Times thus relates what followed: ‘The officers produced a description of the property, and the Captain protested that no such person was on board, but to be certain about the matter, a search was instituted. Every passenger on board the boat was examined, but the officers were not able to designate their man. Determined to arrest somebody, however they finally selected a man very nearly answering the description furnished them, and seized hold of him. Fortunately, this man, who was white and had never been any man’s slave, had several responsible friends on board who testified to his being a free man. The officers reluctantly released the suspicious party and continued their search. Approaching ‘Jeems’ for the third or fourth time, with their instincts sharpened by numerous disappointments, they thought they discovered, after a close examination, that he answered the description.’ “The Times, in its account of this affair, thus describes the fugitive: “‘Jeems’ is of medium height, slim, of prepossessing appearance, regular features, and weighs perhaps 130 pounds. ... His complexion is so near white that, in the advertisement offering a large reward for his capture, it is stated that ‘he is so near white that he would readily pass for a white man, and is rascal enough to call himself so.’ The advertisement speaks the truth, as it will be seen that he succeeded in passing himself off as a white man on board the steamer, and that even the officers, who had a full description of his person hesitated some time before they dare charge him with owing labor and service to a master. ‘Jeems’ is even genteel. He is very good-looking, too. With his hat on, to conceal a few waves in his

hair, he might walk Broadway all day, and never once suggest the suspicion that any dark blood flowed in his veins.'

"A White Man Sold" from the "Miscellaneous Summary" section of *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 13.28 (February 27, 1858): 3

"The latest quotation of adult male negroes at New Orleans is \$1,000 & \$1,500, but it seems that an article of white man can be had at Peoria for \$417."

"A White Slave Manumitted" from the "Miscellaneous Summary" section of *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 13.31 (March 27, 1858): 3

The law report of the doings in the Supreme Court of Cincinnati, contained in the papers of that city yesterday, says that a young woman of rather delicate complexion, and having no affinity with the colored race, presented herself before Judge Storer, asking to have the necessary record made of her manumission. Her manner in responding to the interrogation of the Court, indicated the advantages of education and address. She stated that her age was twenty-eight years, and that she had been held as the slave of Mr. W.H. Talbot of New Orleans. When making the statement she burst into tears. The proper entry being made of her manumission, she then retired from the Court room.

"A White Slave Runs Away From the Church and Reaches Canada in Safety" from *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 13.39 (May 22, 1858): 2.

About the first of January there arrived at the depot of the U. G. R. K. in this city a woman, quite handsome, and perfectly white who was from Lexington, Ky Her father was her first master and resided in the interior of Kentucky. As we have said, the negro element in her was completely blanched out She was so Caucasian in appearance as to raise no suspicion and reached Cincinnati safely.

"A White Slave Reclaimed Owing to Mrs. Stowe's Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin" *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 13.51 (August 7, 1858): 3

In 1834, one German Goodloe sold to H.T.T. Miller, in Natchez, the Postmaster there, a yellow woman and her child. When Miller died, the slaves became the property of Owen by purchase. In 1839, Owen sold the woman, whose name was Atwell, and in 1847, he sold the boy to G.D. Ragland, of Alabama, by whom he was taught the trade of brick mason. In 1852, the boy ran off from Ragland and went to Pittsburgh, where he assumed the name of George Washington, passed himself off as a white man, and married a white woman, by whom he had a child.

A man named Shaw, also a mason, who had worked in Alabama, saw the boy in Pittsburgh, but could not place him until he read Bagland's advertisement in Mrs. Stowe's 'Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin,' when he at once recognized him as Ragland's property. Shaw immediately communicated with Ragland, and received instructions to watch the boy's movements, which he did for five years." [Upon further instruction from Ragland, Shaw finally arrests the boy and returns him to Alabama to his master. When Shaw returns to Pittsburgh, he is himself arrested by the boy's wife "for attempting to decoy off and carry into bondage her husband."]

This kidnapped white man was known in Pittsburgh by the name of Farris ... The Pittsburgh Gazette, commenting upon this article from the South, says:

Do not these soul hunters know that if they could prove Farris a slave a dozen times over, it would not relieve Shaw from the crime nor save him from the punishment of having stolen a man and carried him away into slavery, upon whose case not even a slave-catching commissioner had passed? If Farris had been surrendered under the infamous fugitive law, into the hands of Shaw, and Shaw had then taken him into slavery, he might have continued to be as contemptible as you please, but he would at the same time have been safe – infamous and contented.

From the "Miscellaneous Summary" of *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 14.3 (September 4, 1858): 3

The Richmond *South* is in great glee because it states: an advertisement of one Raglan at Mobile of a runaway slave, copied into Mrs. Stowe's Key to

Uncle Tom's Cabin, has been the means of the capture and return of the negro to slavery. The joke seems to be all the more keenly enjoyed by *The South* because the negro is so nearly white as to be mistaken for a white man, and has left a white wife in Pennsylvania. The satisfaction of enslaving a man, according to *The South*, is very much enhanced if white blood predominates in him, and we conclude the enslavement of free white men would give *The South* the most unalloyed gratification. — *Kentucky News*

"A White Slave Declared Free" from *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 11.3 (September 4, 1858): 2.

Madison County, KY - "About a year and a half since, a woman was arrested by order of a man named Dodson (acting as agent for one Mrs. Goddard), and brought to our town and lodged in jail for safe keeping until further disposition could be made of her person — the intention of the person or persons ordering her arrest undoubtedly being to sell her to go down South.

Seeing what appeared to every one a white woman held in bondage as a *slave*, and confined in a negro jail, enlisted the deepest feeling in her behalf. ... The truth of the matter was this: She had been held as a slave more than twenty years, and to make it appear more fully that she was a slave, her so-called owner had recognized her marriage with a negro man, which she, ignorant that she was not a slave, had consented to. ... When her alleged owners found out that she intended suing for her freedom, upon the ground that she was not a negro but a white woman, with not a particle of negro blood in her veins, they had her arrested and lodged in jail ...

Witnesses were called one after another, the substance of whose evidence showed clearly the villainy of the whole case: that the plotting and counter-plotting had been laid so deeply, that for more than twenty years, it had escaped the observation of inquisitive eyes; that the father of the woman was Mr. Goddard, whose widow claims her as a slave; that her mother was a respectable white woman, who has since been married and moved to a Western State with her husband; that when this woman was born, he (Goddard) placed her in the possession of one of his slaves, (a light mulatto woman) with the injunction that she should rear it as though it was her own child; that this mulatto was threatened if she divulged the secret of the child's true parentage or acknowledge that she was not its mother, even to the unfortunate child, that her life should be the immediate penalty. — Knowing as she did, the sternness of her master, it is not strange how well she kept the secret.

That Mrs. Goddard knew this woman's parentage is not doubted; for evidence presented proofs that on one occasion she introduced her as her daughter, and on another, to secure her property from attachment, she had secreted her slaves, retaining this woman in her house so that when the officers came and were about to take this woman, she told them that she was a white woman, and not her slave." The woman was freed by the jury's verdict.

"A White Woman Set Free." *The Liberator* 28.37 (September 10, 1858): 148.

One of the most remarkable and intensely interesting cases ever brought before a court of justice was tried and disposed of in our Circuit Court last week. The plaintiff, Ann Goddard, was a handsome young white woman, about twenty-one years of age, perfectly white, with long, luxuriant and straight hair, graceful and easy in manners, and having all the appearance of an accomplished and well-raised lady. Her features bore the highest marks of European perfection, and there was not the slightest indication of African blood in her veins. She brought suit here for her freedom, alleging that she had been forcibly arrested by the officers and lodged in the negro jail of the late James McMillan, under the claim of the defendant, Mary Goddard, that she was a slave, 'when in truth she was a free white woman.'

The suit was brought nearly two years ago by Hon. R. H. Stanton, and prosecuted by him, with the assistance of Hon. W.H. Wadsworth and Judge J.D. Taylor and defended by Hon. H. Taylor and T.C. Campbell, Esq. When the jury were sworn, the only testimony relied on by the plaintiff was the exhibition of her own person for their inspection, her counsel claiming that her appearance was *prima facie* evidence of her freedom, and the presumption thus being raised, of course the burden of proof rested upon the defendant to prove her a slave. An attempt was then made by the defendant to prove her the daughter of a mulatto named Matilda, by whom the plaintiff had been reared from infancy, but in this they did not succeed, as no witness was introduced who was present at the birth of the child.

The case was ably argued on both sides, and much feeling was manifested in the community on behalf of the plaintiff. When the jury brought in their verdict, to the effect that she was a 'free white woman,' the Judge was compelled to address the audience upon the impropriety of any demonstration of applause in a court of justice, in order to keep down a universal impulse to show the satisfaction given by the result. —

"Selling White People as Slaves" from *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 15.5 (September 17, 1859): 2.

The Abbeville (Ala.) Banner says that Patience Hicks, a young woman about 17 years of age, who was held as a slave by John Guilford, a citizen of Henry County, under a bill of sale made to him by John James C. Wilson, was brought before Judge Williams, under a writ of habeas corpus, sued out by Mrs. Cases Ann Hicks, the mother of the said girl, who arrived in the town of Abbeville on Tuesday, the 9th inst. On the trial of the case it was proved that Wilson went to the house of Mrs. Hicks, in Columbus, Georgia, about the first of last March, where he remained sick for several weeks. On his recovery, he desired to marry the young lady, and finding that her mother was opposed to their marriage, he stole her away and brought her to the house of Rev. John Guilford, to whom he sold her for a slave. On his return to Columbus, he procured her brother, about 15 years old, and sold him to a gentleman in Georgia. The girl has worked on the plantation, and is considerably sunburnt, which makes her appear rather dark. The girl Patience had an infant daughter. The case was tried before Judge Williams of the Probate Court, and the mother and child were released from the service of Guilford. The Banner states, however, that the counsel for Guilford have taken the case to the Supreme Court, not with the expectation of again enslaving the girl, but with the expectation of clearing Guilford of the costs imposed upon him by the Judge of Probate.

"A Man Selling His Own Daughter" *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* 14.23 (January 22, 1859): 2

Near Louisville, Ky., lives a planter of wealth and standing. He was the possessor of a hundred negroes, and he was noted for his thrifty, money-making disposition. He had never been married, and was an incorrigible bachelor of fifty. His house was managed by a young woman about twenty, his daughter by a quadroon, whose complexion was lighter by far than his own – and in whom the negro blood was hardly visible. The mother died ten years ago, leaving her daughter with the father's solemn promise that she should be educated, and should live as a free woman, rather than as a slave, and that she should pass as his daughter, as she was. The planter gave this promise because he had been really attached to the dying woman, and was greatly attached to her and his beautiful child. And so she grew up, radiantly beautiful -- receiving a reasonable education, all

that her father could give her, and in time took the management of his household. She never knew that there was any negro blood in her veins, and never dreamed that she was a slave.

Last fall, a series of misfortunes overtook the planter. [His house burned down, his crops failed, his speculations "resulted disastrously," and "he had lost heavily at play, the besetting sin of the Southern gentleman"]... He applied to his attorney for counsel in his extremity. The attorney, after examining the situation of his affairs, advised him to sell off a portion of his negroes. ... A list was made out and every head that could possible be spared was put down. ... 'I do not see Mary, your housekeeper's name in the list She, if offered to the right person, would make up the deficiency. I would give that for her myself.' And the eyes of the lecherous brute sparkled with unholy passion.

At any other time, the planter would have taken the suggestion as an insult, but necessity is a hard master, and he grasped at the idea, and before an hour the transaction was closed. It troubled him not a little to disclose the matter to her, but the fear of bankruptcy and ruin drove him to it. The poor girl's horror and distress may be imagined. She had known nothing but happiness, and now was to be plunged into the deepest and most hopeless misery. She had been sold, and was then the *property*, soul and body, of one who purchased her merely for the gratification of his beastly lusts. The idea was too horrible, and she swooned, remaining almost delirious for several days.

There was another upon whom the intelligence came with crushing weight. A junior partner in a produce house in Louisville had frequently visited the planter's house on business and struck with the beauty and intelligence of the supposed daughter, had become enamored — and after prosecuting his suit a proper time, had declared his passion, and unknown to the father, the two had betrothed themselves. As soon as possible after her father had told her her fate, she dispatched a messenger to him, stating the facts, and imploring him to save her from the doom that awaited her. Though thunderstruck at the intelligence that his affianced bride was a slave, and had just been sold to a fate worse than death, like a true man, he determined to rescue her. That night he saw her, and a plan was formed for flight.

The day she was transferred to the possession of her purchasers, they fled and in due time arrived at Cincinnati, where they were married. Our hero obtained an interview with one of the agents of the Underground Railroad located in that city, who immediately telegraphed instructions to the different agents along the line to keep strict watch, and if woman catchers were on the watch, at any point to telegraph back, and give the

fugitive timely notice, that they might leave the train." [Alerted to danger, the two are escorted off the train.] "A carriage was in waiting, and in two hours the fair fugitive and her husband were domiciled in the house of one of our whole-souled farmers, near Bueyrus, who had long taken pleasure in helping fugitives on their way to Canadian Canaan."

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