

**The Prisms of Passing:  
Reading beyond the Racial Binary in Twentieth-Century U.S. Passing Narratives**

**Amanda M. Page**

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Approved by:

Linda Wagner-Martin

William Andrews

María DeGuzmán

Mae Henderson

Jennifer Ho

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## ABSTRACT

AMANDA M. PAGE: *The Prisms of Passing: Reading beyond the Racial Binary in Twentieth-Century U.S. Passing Narratives*  
(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

In “The Prisms of Passing: Reading beyond the Racial Binary in Twentieth-Century U.S. Passing Narratives,” I examine a subset of racial passing narratives written between 1890 and 1930 by African American activist-authors, some directly affiliated with the NAACP, who use the form to challenge racial hierarchies through the figure of the mulatta/o and his or her interactions with other racial and ethnic groups. I position texts by Frances E.W. Harper, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White in dialogue with racial classification laws of the period—including Supreme Court decisions, such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), and immigration law, such as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924—to show how these rulings and laws were designed to consolidate white identity while preventing coalition-building among African Americans and other subordinate groups.

In contrast to white-authored passing narratives of the time, I argue that these early African American passing narratives frequently gesture toward interracial solidarity with Native American, European immigrant, Latina/o, or Asian American characters as a means of challenging white supremacy. Yet, these authors often sacrifice the potential for antiracist coalitions because of the limitations inherent in working within the dominant racial and nativist discourses. For example, in *Iola Leroy* (1892), Harper, despite her racially progressive intentions, strategically deploys white nativist discourse against Native Americans to demonstrate the “Americanness” of her mulatta heroine and demand recognition of African American assimilation. Though later African American passing narratives, such as Johnson’s *The*

*Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and White's *Flight* (1926), began to reflect a collaborative global approach to civil rights as the century progressed, these strategies of domestic antagonism and/or international solidarity with groups outside of the black-white binary ultimately worked in service to a specifically African American civil rights agenda.

This study concludes with an examination of a contemporary passing narrative by an Asian American author. Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son* (2001) revises the form to challenge the continued marginalization of Latina/os and Asian Americans and thus suggests the need for a reconsideration of how we approach civil rights activism to accommodate new racial dynamics in the post-civil rights era.

for Troy

I never could have come this far without you.

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Linda Wagner-Martin has not only guided me through the sometimes treacherous path of getting a doctorate, but she also provided a model for how to be an exceptional scholar and person. In a profession that often privileges scholarship over teaching, Linda has mastered both. Her straight-forward honesty and pragmatism are the result of a genuine interest in her students. Linda's generosity as a teacher is matched only by her sense of humor and her vast knowledge of the last decades of departmental dirt. Linda Wagner-Martin has shaped generations of UNC graduate students, and I am so grateful to be one of them.

During my first semester at UNC in the fall of 2003, I took a class on the passing narrative that set me on the path to writing this dissertation. Professor Mae Henderson introduced me to texts and concepts that have kept me fascinated throughout graduate school, and I will be always indebted to her for sparking this interest with her own passion for and vast knowledge of the subject. Her insights and suggestions have improved my writing throughout this process.

When my interest in the passing narrative became more focused, I sought to better understand African American literature by taking a seminar with William Andrews. In addition to introducing me to the genre of slave narratives and the history of African American literature in North Carolina, Dr. Andrews provided his class with a collaborative publishing opportunity that gave us the invaluable experience of seeing ourselves as active scholars, not simply passive students. Our conversations about little known works of African American literature will remain some of my fondest memories of graduate school.

I began to realize the need to move beyond the African American literary tradition to better understand the larger racial dynamics at play in passing narratives, so I took María DeGuzmán's seminar on the Latina/o presence in U.S. literature and unexpectedly found a new critical framework for approaching my studies in African American literature. Dr. DeGuzmán's exciting scholarship has helped me imagine goals for my own work, and I am especially grateful for her insightful comments on my work.

Hoping to further expand my horizons, I met regularly with Jennifer Ho to read and discuss multiethnic criticism and theory. Jennifer has spent innumerable hours mentoring me; from informally directing my reading of Asian American critical theory to advising my forays into scholarly publication to providing me new opportunities for teaching, she has given her time and knowledge with enthusiasm. Her dedication to mentoring graduate students is unparalleled, and many of us have been lucky enough to consider Jennifer both a colleague and a friend.

The arduous and often absurd process of getting a doctorate would not have been half so fun without my comrades-in-arms Sarah Ficke, Leslie Davison, Cheryl Thayer, Sarah Lindsay, Marc Cohen, Jennifer Larson, and Hannah Bryant. Special thanks to Leslie Davison for her editorial prowess, her genuine concern for those around her, and her sense of humor. You are a wonderful combination of fierce compassion and equally fierce wit; I am happy to have been on the receiving end of both. To Sarah Ficke: thank you for the numerous revisions of my work and the countless entertaining conversations about obscure texts and frivolous blogs. I am so glad we have been on this path together from the beginning. And to Cheryl Thayer: thank you for letting me unleash my inner octogenarian without judgment. Procrastination would never have been so much fun without you.

Love and thanks to my sisters, Samantha and Katelynn, and my nieces, Haven, Soma, and Mayan, for being such loving, interesting people. Our family is many things, but boring is not one of them. Thanks to my grandparents, Robert and Mary Page and Warren and Claudette Davis, for your love and encouragement over the years. Special thanks to the Taylor family, especially Ed and Betty, for welcoming me into your family and supporting me during difficult times.

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## Introduction

### “More than just a foreigner”<sup>1</sup>: The Spectrums of Race and Ethnicity in the U.S. Passing Narrative

Passing narratives investigate the ways the boundaries of race can be re-imagined: in these texts, the dominant binary construction is automatically under scrutiny for its failure to accommodate the identifications of people who do not fit comfortably in either category. As critic Elaine Ginsberg writes, “passing is about identities: Their creation and imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularly: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen” (2). Despite great shifts in the way passing has been deployed over time, these underlying preoccupations have remained questions at the heart of U.S. cultural identity. While versions of the passing plot have appeared throughout the world in international literature,<sup>2</sup> U.S. literature has sustained a tradition of passing narratives throughout its history because questions of national belonging and identity have remained contested since the creation of the country.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I take my chapter title from William Faulkner’s 1932 novel, *Light in August*, in which the racially ambiguous Joe Christmas declares he is “more than just a foreigner” (184).

<sup>2</sup>The characteristics of passing narratives around the world differ greatly and are shaped by the racial and ethnic dynamics specific to the culture producing the narrative. For example, Shimazaki Toson’s novel, *The Broken Commandment* (1906), is about a young teacher who disguises that he is a member of Japan’s outcast class the eta until he decides to fight discrimination. In a more recent example, the narrator of Vedrana Rudan’s *Night* (2002) conceals her Serbian heritage and passes for Croat in the aftermath of the Croatian War of Independence.

The persistence of the passing story is due in part to the role it plays in the foundational works of the African American literary tradition: the slave narrative. Critic Mae G. Henderson writes:

The passing narratives contest and constitute part of the critique of race and racial difference that is first formally articulated in the slave narratives. Like the slave narrative, it is a genre that is both political and moral in its appeal to the reader. If the slave narrative functions as a critique of slavery (and to some extent northern racism), the passing narrative functions as a critique of post-bellum social structures based on racial segregation, white privilege, and black subordination. And if the slave narrative articulates the fundamental humanity of blacks, the passing novel advances its claim to the civil equality of African Americans. Finally, the passing narrative, like the slave narrative, is a form that both explicitly and implicitly challenges hierarchical and discriminatory social, political, and economic practices. (xxxii-iii)

As Henderson suggests, passing narratives continued the protest function of earlier slave narratives by decrying racial inequality after legal emancipation. As the passing narrative became an established literary genre in its own right, these works of fiction and nonfiction diversified, varying in tone, style, and degree of political engagement.

Within this genre, I identify a subset of racial passing narratives written between 1890 and 1930 by African American activist-authors, some directly affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who use the form to challenge racial hierarchies through the figure of the mulatta/o and his or her interactions with other racial and ethnic groups. African American authors such as Frances E.W. Harper (who was also an abolitionist and co-founder of the National Association of Colored Women), James Weldon Johnson (who was the first African American Executive Secretary of the NAACP), and Walter White (who became Johnson's NAACP successor) combined their artistic works of fiction with elements of didactic social criticism to critique the codification of racial segregation. Unlike

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<sup>3</sup>Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) explores the role race has played in forming "American" identity and literature; Morrison's book is discussed further later in this introduction.

well-known passing narratives like Nella Larsen's *Passing* or William Faulkner's *Light in August* which examine the psychology of passing through modernist techniques, these works of realist fiction use the genre to overtly condemn the same racial injustices their authors fought against in their activist work. While each of these writers produced novels of compelling aesthetic merit, I read these literary endeavors as part of their larger political agendas and as artistic extensions of their activism in the NAACP and other organizations.

To show how these works of social protest are part of a specifically African American subset of the passing narrative, I place these texts in comparison to passing narratives by white authors. As will be seen in chapter three's treatment of the 1927 Hollywood film *Old San Francisco*, passing narratives are not automatically works of anti-racism. Though Anglo-American authors like William Dean Howells (whose novel *An Imperative Duty* is discussed in chapter one) attempt to illustrate racially progressive agendas, I concur with Henderson's assessment that African American passing narratives "promot[e] the value of blackness" while condemning racial inequality (xxxii).<sup>4</sup> Despite the different approaches to the passing plot Harper, Johnson, and White each take, they share a fundamental commitment to African American social, political, and cultural equality.

Yet, this commitment to civil rights activism is not to suggest that the resulting texts are not also implicated in U.S. systems of racism and even sometimes replicate the structures they try to resist. Because the passing narrative developed primarily as a trope about the failures of racial categorization for the mulatta/o "passing" subject who must decide to live as either black or white, these texts are historically invested in exploring the "color line" from a binary perspective. Although the form was ostensibly designed by African American authors

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<sup>4</sup>Henderson cites Sterling Brown, whose 1937 book, *The Negro in American Fiction*, argues for a pointed difference in black and white authored passing narratives (xxvii).

to protest racism, I argue that the strategic positioning of Native American, European immigrant, Latina/o, or Asian American characters becomes an index for determining the extent to which the author is willing to reject, revise, or simply reify the racial structures of the larger culture.<sup>5</sup>

Because passing narratives reveal that neither black nor white identities are adequate for their mulatta/o subjects, these marginalized groups could provide the passing subject with models for living outside of the binary. Early passing narratives frequently gesture toward interracial solidarity with Native American, European immigrant, Latina/o, or Asian American characters as a means of challenging white supremacy. Yet, these narratives often sacrifice the potential for anti-racist coalitions because of the limitations inherent in working within the dominant racial and nativist discourses. Though later African American passing narratives began to reflect a more collaborative global approach to civil rights as the century progressed, these strategies of domestic antagonism and/or international solidarity with

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<sup>5</sup>While these labels are currently the dominant categories of racial and ethnic identification, they are undeniably inconsistent and problematic. Some of these labels (like “Asian American”) are recent creations, a way of creating a political voice built around a shared history of oppression in the United States. “Native American” has for some (but not all) supplanted “Indian” as identity marker. Of course, both of these terms elide important differences and even cultural specificity; the Inuit culture is no more similar to the Abenaki culture than the Japanese culture is to the Tibetan. “Latina/o” is not a racial category at all. Even so, categorizing people according to the geographical origins of their ancestors appears to be a way to distance ourselves from the idea of race itself. “European American,” then, would seem the analogous category to “African American,” “Asian American,” “Native American.” Yet, “white” remains the primary label applied to people of European ancestry. “European American” as a collective identity would only really work as an effective label after the consolidation of whiteness in the early twentieth-century; immigrant groups like the Irish and Italian were not granted automatic “whiteness” upon arrival in the United States. “Anglo-American” seems the best fit for describing the dominant early American culture. It is really an agreed upon definition of “whiteness” that would allow “European American” to function now in the U.S. The current inclination for marking identity along ancestral origins seems to me a way to distance ourselves from our history of color-coding race even as we acknowledge a need to talk about race. Each of these labels has historical connection to one of the races of the color line. Race may be a social construction, but it has continuing significance. For expediency, I will not be using quotation marks to indicate the artifice of racial and ethnic labels. The exact definition of racial labels varies by text, with each author constructing his or her own categories and types. My interest lies in how these constructions relate to each other in the fictional world created by an author grappling with the definitions of race in the real world.

groups outside of the black-white binary ultimately worked in service to a specifically African American civil rights agenda.

Just as the genre was historically preoccupied with the struggle between black and white, criticism of this form rarely moves beyond a discussion of race in these binary terms, a reading practice which denies the full spectrum of racial and ethnic dynamics at play in these texts. Though I discuss early novels by black and white authors in relation to the work of influential critics on the passing narrative like Hazel Carby, Werner Sollors, and Gayle Wald, I highlight the unacknowledged presence of marginalized groups in both the criticism and the texts themselves by extending recent theories of comparative racialization to the genre. I adapt Claire Jean Kim's concept of "racial triangulation," which displaces the usual binary emphasis in studying interracial relationships by adding a "third" point of comparison, to include all racial or ethnic groups represented in a text without limiting the racial dynamics at work by a predetermined number. This critical strategy helps overcome what Lisa Lowe has identified as the artificial separation of racial and ethnic histories by examining relationships among Anglo Americans, African Americans, and other groups who are constructed as non-white. Because racial formations have changed over time, my examination of passing narratives requires careful consideration of the historical context of each narrative in order to understand each work on its own terms. The interconnections between domestic racial laws and burgeoning U.S. imperial policies abroad also complicate how we read the racial dynamics of turn-of-the-century passing narratives, so work by scholars such as Ian Haney López, Mae M. Ngai, and Amy Kaplan provides additional historical background for my research.



Building from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992)<sup>6</sup> and the premise that the dominant racial binary of "black" and "white" as constructed in the U.S. racial imagination provides an inadequate framework for showing the complex, intricate web of identifications at work in the national literature, this study examines the ways race is often strategically deployed in order to reimagine or reify the racial order. Coining a term that echoes Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism," Morrison defines "Africanism" as a "term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (6-7). Alongside the "Africanist" presence in U.S. literature, there are many other racialized presences that also function rhetorically in "American" texts. Here, I examine the ways that authors of passing narratives work to uphold, redefine, or reject the dominant binary construction of race in accordance with (or in opposition to) the larger cultural discourse of race through their representation of those groups *outside* the binary.

The legal construction of racial categories influenced cultural representations of what race in the United States means—and which people these labels described or omitted. This failure of categorization has similarly carried over into critical examinations of the literature of passing;<sup>7</sup> even the racially-conscious criticism about the passing narrative in recent years

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<sup>6</sup>The American binary construction of race functions in a way similar to what Said identifies as "Orientalism" in his now classic 1978 text of the same name. Influenced by the work of earlier anti-imperialist critic Franz Fanon (whose foundational *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) itself shows the influence of W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" by applying it to a colonial context), Said explores the ways in which the (white) West has conceived of the East as "Other" in order both to define itself and secure cultural primacy as a way of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority" over the non-western Other (3). In a parallel fashion, white America constructed a racial binary of black and white in order to cast the African American as the Other. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison explores how the African American has figured as the Other through which white American writers could define themselves and their culture, often revealing more about constructions of white identity than black. Contemporary studies of American literature, through the lens of Africanism, have allowed Morrison and others to pursue new interpretations of old texts.

<sup>7</sup>Passing narratives have provided useful models for critics interested in critiquing constructions of gender and sexuality as well. Though I will limit my examination to narratives of racial passing, there are many studies

often reinscribes a black-white focus on race.<sup>8</sup> One way to address the invisibility of Asian American, Latina/o, Native American, and European immigrant groups in criticism about passing narratives is to approach the genre as part of a larger racial project; each narrative, more than simply offering a representation of racial dynamics, attempts to argue rhetorically for a new order.<sup>9</sup> Placing the passing narrative in the context of the racial classification laws of the period—including Supreme Court decisions, such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), and immigration law, such as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924—shows how these rulings and laws were designed to consolidate white identity while preventing coalition-building among African Americans and other subordinate groups. The figure of the mulatta/o embodies the contradictions of laws meant to rigidly define racial identity; the act of passing further subverts the confines of legislated racial categorization by resisting the racial barriers meant to deny the full rights of citizenship to non-white peoples. I examine how these passing narratives attempt to challenge the

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which bring race, gender, and sexuality together. See *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*. Eds. María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (New York: New York UP, 2001).

<sup>8</sup>One exception is Adam Meyer's article in the Fall 2004 edition of *African American Review* entitled "Not Entirely Strange, but Not Entirely Friendly Either: Images of Jews in African American Passing Novels through the Harlem Renaissance." From Mr. Cohen in Harper's *Iola Leroy* to Rachel Salting in Fauset's *Plum Bun*, Meyers reveals the astounding frequency of depictions of Jewish characters in passing narratives. Despite the similarly liminal positions of both African Americans and Jewish Americans in the early twentieth century, the passing narrative often reflects a conflicted and tense power dynamic between these communities.

<sup>9</sup> One powerful tool these authors deployed for reimagining race is the transvaluation of the dominant cultural discourse. In "Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism," Nancy Leys Stephan and Sander L. Gilman note how scientific racism at the turn of the twentieth century could be transformed into a new discursive logic:

[One] response to racial science was to accept the terms set by the dominant discourse, but to change the valuation attached to them. The significance of biological race differences was accepted, but the "inferior" element in the hierarchy revalued and renamed. This strategy entailed a transvaluation of the terms of the dominant discourse. For example, blackness became an oppositional structure to whiteness, and negativity was thereby transformed into positivity. (92, emphasis added)

Transvaluation of the language of biology and racial hierarchy plays a pivotal role in the U.S. "race" novel in challenging the status quo of American race relations. By deploying the very language that was intended to keep non-white groups oppressed, novelists could, thus, accept the racial differences posited by the dominant discourse; importantly, they could also change the meanings of those differences so as to privilege oppressed groups and challenge the treatment of non-white characters in American literature.

legitimacy of race itself and, in doing so, allow for new opportunities for solidarity across racial and ethnic boundaries.

At the turn into the twentieth century, American racial identities were principally determined by the “one-drop” rule that the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* codified into law. According to this ruling, a single drop of black blood prevented a person from claiming the racial privilege of whiteness, thereby legalizing hypodescent in which the multiracial person is classified according to the subordinate race of his or her parentage. Not only did *Plessy v. Ferguson* determine the boundaries of black and white identity, it also laid the groundwork for the passage of Jim Crow legislation through many parts of the South. By illustrating the ways in which the belief in the “one-drop” rule defined rigid racial categories, Gayle Wald argues that passing narratives have consistently exposed the relative visibility (or invisibility) of all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. by showing the limitations of the binary construction of race:

By representing “whiteness” as the absence of the racial sign, [one-drop] has perpetuated the myth of white purity (a chimera that colors contemporary liberal language of the “mixed-race” offspring of “interracial” marriages). In a complementary fashion it has rendered the political and cultural presence of Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans invisible (or merely selectively and marginally visible), thereby enabling the hyper-visibility of African Americans as that national “minority” group most often seen as “having” race. (13-14)

The construction of race in terms of an indisputable black-white racial binary locates whole groups of people within constrictively defined positions that allow for little social mobility. By constructing whiteness as “race-less,” whites are able to secure their dominant social positions, as they shift the burden of a racialized identity to African Americans. The expected “hyper-visibility” of the African Americans is undercut by the existence of the passing subject, who subverts the cultural assumption that racial identity is a visible fact. After the codification of “one-drop” in *Plessy*, there was a renewed interest in the passing narrative as

a way to protest Jim Crow. As scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant observe in their seminal 1986 work, *Racial Formation in the United States*: “Challenges to the dominant racial theory emerge when it fails adequately to explain the changing nature of race relations, or when the racial policies it prescribes are challenged by political movements seeking a different arrangement” (11). By depicting “black” characters who are visibly white (and thereby “raceless”), the passing narrative undermines the binary division of black and white to reveal the constructed nature of racial categories while presenting alternative formations.

Any new racial order imagined in these texts, however, can remain as vexed as the original in its implications for those outside the historically privileged groups. The passing narrative is predicated upon a contradiction: while these narratives expose the constructed nature of “race” by undermining the fiction of racial purity by depicting subjects whose physical appearance masks their purported “essence,” the subversive act of passing usually ends with the passer’s having to choose to be either black or white, which acknowledges the material reality of race and racism. Though authors of passing narratives often position characters from other groups similarly outside of the racial binary to illustrate the limited and exclusionary cultural insistence on identifying as either black or white, most passing narratives resolve with the passer making just such a choice. Rarely is there a third option for characters that pass, highlighting the lack of a multiracial alternative. Though many groups did exist outside the binary—and most passing narratives acknowledge as much—passers rarely resist the pull of committing to one identity.

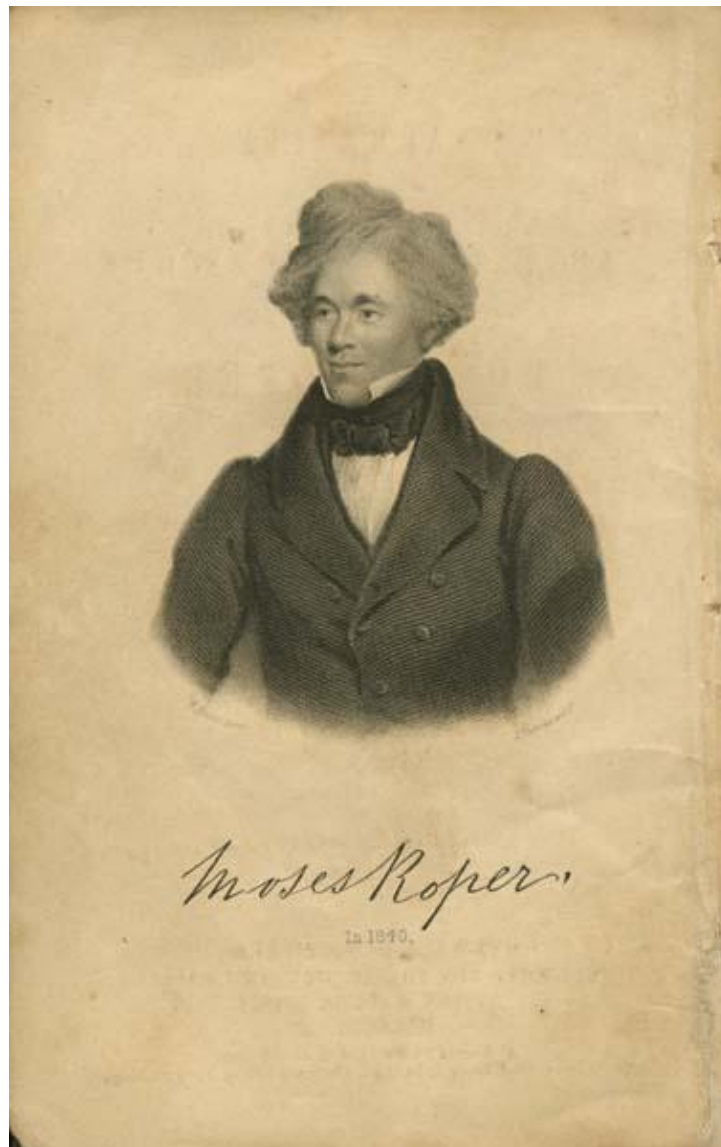
## The Origins of U.S. Passing Narratives

African American authors have capitalized upon the inconsistencies of American racial dynamics since the earliest works in the tradition. Slave narratives often include scenes of racial disguise as a means of escape from slavery. Laura Browder notes the tension in the slave narrator's need to seem honest with accounts of the deceptions required for escape:

The indeterminacy of race was highlighted [...] in slave autobiographies that challenged notions of racial essentialism. While insisting on the authenticity of the narrative, the storyteller emphasized his or her ability to disguise his or her identity, to pass as a member of another race or gender. Because escape almost inevitably required disguise, the authors of slave narratives also stressed the mutability of their identity. They told stories of how their many possible white captors were unable to recognize them as who they were, or who their status made them. (23)

One of the best examples of racial passing as the key to escape appears in *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1837). Moses Roper, the son of his white master and a “half-white” slave, repeatedly uses his white complexion to aid his repeated escapes from slavery (48). The problems of a “white” slave in the South are immediately addressed in the narrative, as Roper begins by describing his near-murder in infancy by his father's wife upon her realization that the baby was white-skinned. By framing his subsequent story of escape from slavery by boldly exposing the violence both of his birth and the unspoken violence of his conception, Roper lays the groundwork for excusing his subsequent racial deceptions. The ambiguity of Roper's identity causes great anxiety for those who encounter him outside of the plantation, and he uses this ambiguity to his advantage. Having implied to a man he meets on one of his escapes that he was “bound” (i.e., an indentured servant), Roper then carefully explains his justifications to his readers: “This statement may appear to some to be a direct lie, but as I understood the word bound, I considered it to apply to my case, having been sold to him, and thereby bound to serve him;

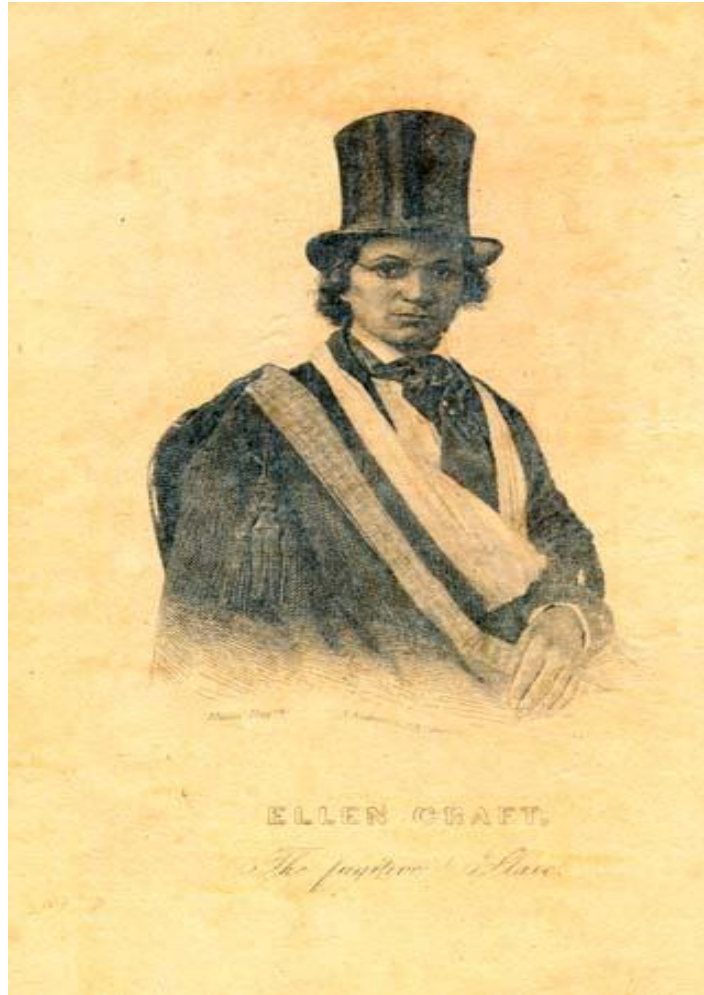
though still, I rather hope that he would understand it, that I was bound, when a boy, till twenty-one years of age” (49). Though the man suspects Roper is a runaway slave, the man’s wife asserts that “she had seen white men still darker than me,” so Roper remains on the run.



*Figure 1: Moses Roper*

Roper artfully uses his ambiguous racial identity to his advantage, but, in addition to simply “passing for white,” Roper also uses his Native American ancestry as part of his cover. When asked questions by a stranger, Roper volunteers information: “I also told him I was partly Indian and partly white, but I am also partly African; but this I omitted to tell him, knowing that if I did I should be apprehended” (65). Partial truths serve Roper well. Informing strangers about his Native American ancestry circumvents questions about his ambiguous racial identity; Roper gives this information as a way of providing strangers with a racial categorization that would prevent their guessing his slave status.

This racial maneuver also underscores that it is *African* blood of the mother that makes a slave in the U.S. If he were just a man of white and Indian heritage, Roper would be free to roam; the detection of his African ancestry, however, results in his capture and torture. In Roper’s text, the difference in status between Indian and African is great, and he later details his specific ancestry again: “I am part African, as well as Indian and white, my father being a white man, Henry Roper, Esq., Caswell county, North Carolina, U.S., a very wealthy slave-holder, who sold me when quite a child, for the strong resemblance I bore to him. My mother is part Indian, part African; but I dared not disclose that, or I should have been taken up” (67). Though at the beginning of the narrative Roper had initially described his mother as simply “half white,” he later changes how he categorizes her ancestry. Whether his mother was of white, African, and Indian ancestry or only African and Indian ancestry is unclear. What seems significant is the way Roper can take on and discard different identities as needed to suit his situation. Proclaiming Indian heritage while a runaway slave was a calculated identification maneuver that aided Roper’s escapes.



*Figure 2: Ellen Craft*

Another famous slave narrative that relied on passing as a means of escape was William Craft's account of his and his wife Ellen's escape from slavery in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860). Ellen Craft, passing as a white man, travelled out of the South with her personal slave (her husband, William) as a companion. The Crafts' exciting story, with its transgressions of the boundaries of both race and gender,<sup>10</sup> was fictionalized by

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<sup>10</sup>While Ellen Craft's double act of passing appears tantalizingly transgressive, Ellen M. Weinauer argues that William Craft also carefully reinscribes gender roles throughout the narrative:

Craft's verbal and visual insistence on the distinct separation between his "real" wife and her "fictional" male persona serves, clearly, as a form of narrative control. This is, after all, Ellen as



novelists before William Craft published his narrative, showing the continuity between slave narratives and African American fiction,<sup>11</sup> as well as the cultural appeal of the passing plot. Leonard Cassuto notes that while both Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Wells Brown use the Crafts' story in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Clotel* before the publication of the Crafts' narrative, "Brown's account resembles Craft's especially closely, raising the possibility that in writing his autobiography Craft may have drawn on a fictional version of himself" (245). From the beginning of the African American literary tradition, the trope of passing passed from slave narrative to fiction and back again.

*Clotel, or, The President's Daughter* (1853), the first novel by an African American, weaves together a variety of texts (from poetry and sermons to newspaper advertisements and political tracts) to argue against slavery. The slave status of Brown's heroine Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, embodies the hypocrisy of American slavery. As Cassuto argues, *Clotel* does indeed borrow the Crafts' story, with Clotel dressing as a white, male invalid travelling North with a slave named, of course, William. Once free, however, Clotel returns to the South in order to find her daughter. This time Clotel passes as "an Italian or Spanish gentleman" by adding a dark false beard to her disguise (109). Clotel finds herself an object of interest while disguised as a "fine Italian" because "American ladies are rather partial to foreigners" (117). Just as Roper indicates his Indian heritage as a subterfuge, Brown has Clotel take on the identity of another "not-quite white" group, evoking what critic

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William Craft presents her: it is he who grants access to Ellen, he who designates how she is to be understood, how she is to be read. While Craft may want to indict the restricting cultural "laws," both categorical and juridical, that deny him and Ellen various "inalienable rights," the narrative itself reveals his concurrent attempts to bring Ellen within the confines of another set of laws—the laws of gender and of marriage. (50-1)

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of the interconnection of African American slave narratives with the emergence of the African American novel, see William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*.

María DeGuzmán has termed “off-whiteness.”<sup>12</sup> In *Spain’s Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire*, DeGuzmán argues that throughout U.S. literary history, “Anglo-Americans created a fantasy of racial purity through the representation of Spaniards as figures of morally blackened alien whiteness or *off-whiteness* and doomed hybridity” (xxiv). By having Clotel take on this suspect ethnicity, Brown gestures toward the inconsistencies of U.S. racial divisions.

While this strategy would seem expedient for passing, Clotel, we know from her earlier success at passing, is “much fairer than many women of the South” (91). Yet, Brown has Clotel specifically choose to pass as foreign. The reason for this transitional identity is perhaps illuminated by the way Brown describes Clotel’s death. Clotel, an early prototype for the “tragic mulatta” that would later become a ubiquitous trope in U.S. fiction,<sup>13</sup> commits suicide after having been captured as a runaway slave and then pursued when she escapes from prison. Brown writes:

Had Clotel escaped from oppression in any other land, in the disguise in which she fled from the Mississippi to Richmond, and reached the United States, no honour within the gift of the American people would have been too good to have been heaped upon the heroic woman. But she was a slave, and therefore out of the pale of their sympathy. They have tears to shed over Greece and Poland; they have an abundance of sympathy for “poor Ireland;” they can furnish a ship of war to convey the Hungarian refugees from a Turkish prison to the “land of the free and home of the brave.” They boast that America is the “cradle of liberty;” if it is, I fear they have rocked the child to death. (129-130)

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<sup>12</sup>The emergence of the field of Whiteness Studies has increased the study of white racial construction and the unsteady development of “white” identity in recent years. Such scholars as Noel Ignatiev, David Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Ian Haney-Lopez and others have traced various European immigration histories to tell the story of white racial formations that are integral to this study of passing.

<sup>13</sup>The role of the “tragic mulatta/o” has received extensive critical attention. For discussion of this trope see Judith Berzon’s *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (1978), Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), and Werner Sollors’s *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997).

In a rhetorical move that would become a central comparative strategy in African American literature, Brown shows the contrast between American sympathy for “foreigners” as compared with attitudes toward their slaves at home.

Though these early examples of the passing plot in slave narratives and fiction worked in service with the abolitionist agenda of ending slavery, the passing narrative did not disappear after Emancipation. In his encyclopedic *Neither Black nor White yet Both*, Werner Sollors explains that passing continued to be relevant after Emancipation because “a situation of sharp inequality between groups” persisted after the abolition of slavery (247-48). After the upheavals of civil war and the boom of industrialization in the U.S., racism nonetheless remained as urban anonymity increased, explaining in part why passing narratives were so abundant in the U.S. during the period of Reconstruction and Jim Crow segregation.

Sollors cites another reason for the persistence of the passing plot: the uniquely American appeal of the story of the *parvenu*, the social upstart.<sup>14</sup> In a nation that defines itself as the land of opportunity, people looking to recreate themselves are theoretically welcome: during Reconstruction, the possibility of reinvention had special appeal. Sollors notes, however, that “black-white racial passing constitutes an exception in that it is condemned or even *punished* in societies that otherwise idealize, applaud, condone, or at least express amused ambivalence toward, mobility” (259). Racial passing, unlike class passing by white characters, becomes something to be condemned, and, in many ways, passing narratives can serve to reinforce racial boundaries even as they seem to transgress them. Wald notes:

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<sup>14</sup>Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894) deviates from the standard parvenu component in the passing narrative when the slave master’s son, Tom Driscoll, is swapped for the infant slave Chambers. In this instance, the master’s son unknowingly passes for a slave.

Neither wholly subversive nor wholly complicit, they mediate desires that disrupt the crude opposition of racial power and racial resistance. In so doing, moreover, they encourage us to draw a line in our own critical and theoretical practice between the celebration of individualized acts of racial transgression and the discovery of a “way out” of white supremacy. Indeed, they illuminate the precise manner in which the color line operates as a collectivizing discourse that also encourages subjects’ investment in national narratives of individual social and class mobility. (8)

As Wald illustrates, the passing subject is a figure that both reinforces and challenges the boundaries of race and class. Celebrating a passing subject’s individual economic success can serve to reify national myths of the “self-made man” while ignoring the reality of racism for those too dark to pass. Likewise, condemning passers for abandoning their “true” race in the quest for individual economic security can reify the one-drop rule (or hypodescent) and ignore the complexities of self-identification. The paradoxes of passing are often irresolvable in the texts, leaving these novels ambiguous and often contradictory in their racial messages.

Two popular passing narratives appearing after Reconstruction, Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894) and Charles Chesnutt’s *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), treat mulatto characters who attempt to pass for white with mixed results. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby notes the significance of the figure of the mulatto: “After the failure of Reconstruction, social conventions dictated an increasing and more absolute distance between black and white as institutionalized in the Jim Crow laws. In response, the mulatto figure in literature became a more frequently used literary convention for an exploration and expression of what was increasingly socially proscribed” (89). Like *Clotel*, the mulatto/a characters that pass in Twain’s and Chesnutt’s novels meet tragic ends, but it is Chesnutt’s heroine Rena Walden who best fits the “tragic mulatta” mold (reader sympathy is greater for the virtuous Rena than for Twain’s villainous Tom Driscoll). Despite these differences, however, both novels engage the paradox of being mulatto/a in an increasingly

inflexible binary world. In Twain's treatment of the theme, the chasm between the races cannot be bridged. His mulatto is so vilified that the reader almost applauds his fate of being "sold down the river"; the real tragedy of the novel is Chambers, who—though restored at the conclusion of the novel to his place as white heir—is so degraded by a life in slavery that he is irreparably disconnected from his "white" life. Though Chesnutt's mulatta heroine also meets a tragic fate when confronted with the chasm between black and white, her brother John does successfully pass into the white world, though Chesnutt leaves this fact quietly in the subtext. Gender and class privilege combine in Chesnutt's novel to allow a well-bred, light-caste man to have a successful crossover and find economic security in the white world. John Walden is uniquely deserving of the rights of full citizenship in a way that even his sister Rena is not permitted to realize. Like Chesnutt, Twain condemns race as a "fiction of law and custom," yet the power of this fiction is undeniable in both texts (13).

These representative post-Reconstruction passing narratives fell out of favor during the early decades of the twentieth century when the New Negro movement actively tried to reimagine the parameters of African American literature and depictions of black life. Critic M. Giulia Fabi argues that while the passing narrative tradition remained, the "continuities are indirect and mostly to be found in the New Negro novelist's parody of Old Negro fictions" (5). The perceived shortcomings of the previous generation's limited goals for black uplift became a target for rewriting the passing story as satire.<sup>15</sup> Fabi also cites a significant

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Bone's classic *The Negro Novel in America* (1958) likewise notes a shift in the nature of passing narratives in the 1920s, as African American writers began to reject passing as a sign of racial pride. Recently, Steven J. Belluscio credits black Harlem Renaissance writers with moving beyond earlier naturalist renderings of passing into modernist treatments that critique race as a concept and even seem proto-postmodern in their awareness of performativity (See *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2006).

break with older passing narrative conventions when the emphasis of passing narratives moves from a discourse of “biology to culture” during the Harlem Renaissance:

In the nineteenth century the emphasis was on redressing stereotypes and arguing the existence of African American culture and the agency of African Americans as subjects. In the 1920s, this order of priorities was reversed and the focus shifted on analyzing blackness not only in its differences from mainstream culture but also in light of intraracial variations of gender, geographic provenance, class background, sexual preference, shade of color and education. [...] passing became an extreme example of how deep such divisions could run but also remained a tool to focus on the ideological and cultural components of blackness. (100-101)

The passing narrative was again transformed to meet the needs of a new generation of artists and activists.

James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), while very different novels in both structure and tone, exemplify the new focus on the *multiplicities* within identities in early twentieth-century passing narratives. As I will examine in depth in chapter two, Johnson’s narrator is a cultural chameleon, as ambiguously classed and gendered as he is raced. Johnson’s 1912 novel regained life in the Harlem Renaissance and inspired a new generation of passing narratives. Nella Larsen’s *Passing* probes, with cutting psychological insight, the heterogeneity within and among gender, class, sexual, religious and racial identities through the character of Clare Kendry, a passing figure who likes to slip in and out of her various identities at will.<sup>16</sup> As Henderson notes, “Clare’s complexly reconstructed identity is fundamentally inconsistent and incompatible with the essentializing assumptions of her culture. Larsen has created a character, a mulatta, who affirms a complex, contingent, and multiplicitous postmodernist notion of identity in a modernist world that would nullify her very existence” (lxxiii).

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<sup>16</sup>While *Passing* is perhaps the most widely recognized passing narrative, Larsen’s novel is unlike the majority of passing narratives of its time. Unlike texts like *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* which uses literary realism to present political allegories through the story of passing, Larsen uses the narrative techniques of modernism to create a nuanced psychological portrait of Clare Kendry and her friend, Irene Redfield.

Though Clare, like many mulattas before her, dies a tragic death, the boundaries imposed on her come as much from the keepers of black identity as from their white counterparts. While the political agendas and aesthetic goals in passing narratives shifted dramatically over the decades, the form adapted to new uses and persisted as a useful tool for interrogating both race and interracial relationships.

Despite the passing narrative's adaptability, these texts remain deeply ambiguous. Wald concludes that, as critics, we must "abandon [...] the notion that these texts are consistently or even necessarily critical of dominant discourses":

Indeed, given the contradiction of the one-drop rule, which simultaneously constructs the possibility of "crossing the line" yet stabilizes the racial binary through the notion of "black" blood, we should expect that the complicity of identity with race will persist in some form in these narratives, whether or not their protagonists "choose" to pass. (35)

Though the passing narrative's "complicity" in racial construction operates on many levels, this complicity is exemplified in the way characters outside of the American racial binary are depicted in service to an author's particular racial goals for his or her narrative. Whether or not the authors of passing narratives transvalue the dominant racial structures, they do not always overcome racism itself. Each text discussed in subsequent chapters repositions different racial and ethnic groups to reimagine dominant hierarchies, and each in its own way reconstructs a racial division and devalues certain groups.

This study begins in the 1890s when legal segregation was codified in the landmark Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This situates the passing narrative in the context of the legal and cultural constructions of race that defined who was eligible for the full rights of equal citizenship. The first chapter, "Foreigners From Within and Without: Nativism and the 'Scale of Civilization' in William Dean Howells and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,"

examines the ways in which these two authors favorably position African Americans against an inferior “third” group to argue for better treatment for African Americans after the failure of Reconstruction. Howells’s *An Imperative Duty* (1891) and Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) depict Irish immigrants and American Indians, respectively, as “foreign” Others in order to demonstrate the inherent “Americanness” of their mulatta heroines. Despite this similarity, the two authors define who counts as American in vastly different ways. Though Howells begins his novel by praising the African American in contrast to the lowly Irish, he ultimately expands his definition of whiteness to include the mulatta heroine while sidestepping questions of black equality. Harper, on the other hand, pointedly refuses to allow her heroine to pass for white; instead, she disparages Native Americans to make African Americans appear as the superior minority group and therefore more deserving of equal citizenship.

Like Harper before him, James Weldon Johnson positions Indians as culturally inferior to African Americans in his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). Unlike his predecessor, however, Johnson indicates a willingness to embrace interethnic solidarity, as illustrated in his admiration for Latina/o culture. The second chapter, “From Local Competition to Global Solidarity: James Weldon Johnson, Citizenship, and the Rhetoric of the Color Line,” explores the ways in which the novel celebrates Cuban immigrants living in Florida for providing an idealized model of interracial cooperation in the fight for Cuban independence. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, cultural and racial anxiety about America’s relationship to Cuba and other newly acquired territories became something black writers and activists had to grapple with as they continuously re-shaped their arguments for greater African American civil rights at home. While predominantly defined by his domestic civil rights agenda as the Secretary of the NAACP,



Johnson's writings consistently reflect a cosmopolitan engagement with Latin American concerns that lead to his eventual embrace of a collaborative global approach to civil rights as best exemplified in his later support of Haitian sovereignty.

Johnson's progressive gesture towards internationalism in his passing narrative does not indicate a broader trend towards greater inclusiveness: the genre continued to serve contradictory ends. In my third chapter, "Consolidated Colors: Figurations of the Chinese in Walter White's *Flight* and Darryl Zanuck's *Old San Francisco*," I argue that even as passing narratives reveal and challenge the myth of racial purity by focusing on subjects who can pick and choose their racial affiliations, the genre often reasserts boundaries between racial groups. Walter White, Johnson's successor at the NAACP and a fellow novelist, directly advocates global solidarity in his novel *Flight* (1926) by creating a Chinese character who argues that people of color should be powerful allies in the collective fight against white racism. While *Flight* represents the Chinese immigrant as a positive force for international unity against white racism, white unity based on nativist fear of the Other is established at the expense of the Chinese in the 1927 film *Old San Francisco*. Released only a year after White's novel, *Old San Francisco* uses the passing narrative to depict the Asian American as a dangerous alien threat to (white) American identity, reflecting the larger cultural hysteria around the "Yellow Peril." The film demonizes the Chinese to consolidate European ethnic groups into one unified white race, foreclosing multiracial collectivism in favor of monolithic American identity. The contrasting aims of these two texts reveal a tension at the heart of the form and illustrate how the passing narrative could be used either as a progressive call for racial solidarity or as a way to reinforce racial difference.

These African American activist passing narratives, to use Henry Louis Gates's term, signify on each other in compelling ways.<sup>17</sup> Just as Harper revises Howells's narrative, so, too, does James Weldon Johnson signify on Harper's work in his 1912 novel. The influence of Johnson and his novel on his successor at the NAACP, Walter White, becomes clear in White's novel *Flight* (1926). These authors take a variety of different attitudes toward passing and the passing subjects of their own creation, but there remains a clear lineage of influence among them. For all these debts of influence, however, each author presents a very different vision of interracial relations. As the earlier texts of Howells and Harper position non-binary characters in opposition to African Americans, Johnson selectively positions other racial and ethnic groups in opposition to or in alliance with black characters. Later still, White positions the foreign third as a power ally in the fight against white racism. Yet, this seeming evolution of interracial solidarity does not in any way reflect a progression. Alluding to Mark Twain's famous phrase, Dana Nelson argues, "fictions of 'race'" are "neither continuous nor progressive"(x). Thus, the "peak" period of the passing narrative concludes without any resolution to the racial strife inherent to the form.<sup>18</sup>

Acknowledging the presence of non-binary characters in our reading of the racial dynamics at work in these early twentieth-century passing narratives reveals the continuity from traditional black-to-white passing stories to contemporary novels in which the multiracial passer has replaced the mulatta/o subject. My study concludes with an examination of *American Son* (2001) by Asian American author Brian Ascalon Roley. Like the earlier

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<sup>17</sup>See Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

<sup>18</sup>In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Werner Sollors calls passing a "phenomenon of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century" (247). F. James Davis, citing estimates based on census records, asserts that "passing as white probably reached an all-time peak between 1880 and 1925" (56). See *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*. 1991. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2001.

passing narratives I have identified, this novel uses the form to investigate the contemporary possibilities for solidarity across racial and ethnic lines. While exploring similarities among Asian American and Latina/o subject positions in Los Angeles, the novel engages the virulent anti-immigration rhetoric of the 1990s that recodes racism as nativism to show how this rhetoric works to pit immigrant groups against each other, creating real barriers to lasting political solidarity. By revising a form that h

Acknowledging the presence of non-binary characters in our reading of the racial dynamics at work in these early twentieth-century passing narratives reveals the continuity from traditional black-to-white passing stories to contemporary novels in which the multiracial passer has replaced the mulatta/o subject. as historically depended upon the hyper-visibility of blackness, Roley challenges the continued marginalization of Latina/os and Asian Americans and thus suggests the need for a reconsideration of how we approach civil rights activism to accommodate new racial dynamics in the post-civil rights era. The passing narrative, like U.S. literature and culture, remains a site of racial contestation.

### **In/Visibility in Asian American and Latina/o Critical Race Theory: New Critical Lenses for Reconsidering the Passing Narrative**

The historical dominance of the black and white binary in the U.S. racial imaginary has caused those groups outside of this dichotomy to be marginalized and, in many cases, made *legally* invisible as well. Omi and Winant describe how Asian and Latino Americans were arbitrarily assigned racial designations in the U.S. legal system in order to fit a dominant racial construction:

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many state and federal legal arrangements recognized only three racial categories: “white,” “Negro,” and “Indian.” In California, the influx of Chinese and the debates surrounding the legal status of Mexicans provoked a brief juridical crisis of racial definition. California attempts to resolve this dilemma by assigning Mexicans and Chinese to categories within the already existing framework of “legally defined” racial

groups. In the wake of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), Mexicans were defined as a “white” population and accorded the political-legal status of “free white persons.” By contrast, the California Supreme Court ruled in *People v. Hall* (1854) that Chinese should be considered “Indian” [!] and denied the political rights accorded to the whites. (82, emphasis in original)

Though Latino and Asian Americans were categorized differently in this historical construction, both groups were placed in similarly liminal positions by relying on U.S. racial categorizations that simply mapped preexisting labels onto these distinctive ethnic groups. The act of legal categorization continues to be problematic today, as evidenced in the confused label of “Hispanic” on the U.S. census form. Because Latino and Asian Americans are not comfortably categorized as black, white, or “Indian,” they were left to negotiate their position in the United States without allegiance to the dominant terms of historical racial discourse.

While the burden of a racialized identity (like the hyper-visibility of African Americans that Wald describes) can be detrimental, the absence of a collective identity can leave groups of people politically invisible. Critic Antonia Darder explains the continuing significance of racism in the formation of identity: “[W]e must also understand notions of ‘race identity and difference’ as *politically* formed rather than embedded in the color of the skin or a given nature (Hall, 1990a, 1990b). In other words, to identify as Black or Chicano is not so much a question of color as it is a question of cultural, historical, and political difference” (137, emphasis added). Darder stresses the need for a political presence (rather than a belief in essentialized race) as the underlying cause of group identity; political action requires a strategic deployment of essentialism that can inspire marginalized groups to mobilize around a collective identity for social justice. Choosing to identify racially can be a

powerful way to gain visibility by providing a label that can be recognized and acknowledged in collective struggles against racism.

Yet, as theorist Lisa Lowe notes, many groups in the United States were intentionally constructed in opposition to each other as a way of preventing challenges to white power: “The repeated injunctions that different groups must be divided and boundaries kept distinct indicate that colonial administrators imagined as dangerous the sexual, laboring, and intellectual contacts among slaves and indentured nonwhite peoples. The racial classifications in the archive arose, thus, in this context of the colonial need to prevent these unspoken intimacies among the colonized” (203). The result of the process of racialization Lowe describes was the legal naturalization of white privilege and the construction of whiteness as “raceless” in opposition to other raced bodies that could be kept subservient. As Cheryl Harris argues, understanding “white” as a racial construction is key to undermining white privilege: “The law [affirming white privilege] masks as natural what is chosen; it obscures the consequences of social selection as inevitable. The result is that the distortions in social relations are immunized from truly effective intervention, because the existing inequities are obscured and rendered nearly invisible” (85).<sup>19</sup> The “invisibility” of whiteness as a privileged racial identity leads to the invisibility of continuing racial injustice. Attention to whiteness as a racial construct, alongside special attention to historically marginalized groups, can bring visibility to the various racial formations at work in jointly upholding white supremacy and preventing interracial collaboration.

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<sup>19</sup>In her seminal work “Whiteness as Property,” Harris precedes this argument by describing the “naturaliz[ation]” of white privilege: “The legal affirmation of whiteness and white privilege allowed expectations that originated in injustice to be naturalized and legitimated. The relative economical, political, and social advantages dispensed to whites under systematic white supremacy in the United States were reinforced through patterns of oppression of blacks and Native Americans. Materially, these advantages became institutionalized privileges; ideologically, they became part of the unalterable original bargain” (85).

Minority groups often try to move beyond these historic injustices to create political alliances based on common resistance to oppression, alliances that work to combat the continuation of hidden white supremacy. Darder writes: “These coalitions and movement organizations have generally been primarily founded upon bicultural affinities of struggle rooted in the shared historical opposition of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans to cultural, class, and gender subordination” (137). The strategic division of minority groups that Lowe describes in the colonial period ironically becomes the very foundation of bicultural collaboration that Darder describes; common histories of oppression later provide the common ground needed for collaborative activism. Furthermore, Darder argues that these interracial alliances have the potential to bridge barriers among racial groups without eliding significant differences of those groups’ history and culture: “Such alliances can serve as vehicles by which to more effectively identify and challenge actual relations of power at work and to select more effective modes of intervention that are directed toward actualizing an alternative vision of both institutional and community life” (137). By engaging multiple group experiences, coalitions are able to more effectively dismantle the artificial separation of racial oppression.

Passing narratives, however, include few illustrations of interracial alliances. Despite sharing a similarly marginalized subject position, the multi-racial passing subject rarely shows affinity for other subjects outside of the dominant binary; most authors of passing narratives usually limit their vision of racial uplift to only one group (usually African American). Walter White’s 1926 novel, *Flight* (examined in chapter three of this study), is one of a few passing narratives that attempts to align racial groups. Instead, most passing narratives (like those of William Dean Howells and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper discussed

in chapter one) use third party characters to argue for better status for a select group, rather than for an idealized, unified whole of humanity. Even in fiction, the “affinities of struggle” that Darder describes are difficult to achieve.

This imaginative absence of solidarity in passing narratives is similar to what Lowe has identified as an academic tendency to refuse to see U.S. history as integrated: “Work in ethnic studies on comparative U.S. racial formation is still at odds with American history that disconnects the study of slavery from immigration studies of Asians and Latinos or that separates the history of gender, sexuality, and women from these studies of ‘race.’” (205). Immigration law is, in many ways, as significant to my project as overt racial laws stemming from the aftermath of slavery. Nativism and immigration go hand in hand, and oftentimes, the deviations from a strict sense of racial binary in these texts are in reaction to the imagined threat of immigrants overrunning America. As early as Howells’s *Imperative Duty* (1892), the Irish are presented as less “American” than are native-born African Americans. As late as Roley’s *American Son* (2001), a Filipino American boy ironically commiserates with a white racist about Mexican immigrants “infiltrating” California. While Howells strategically deploys nativist feelings against the Irish to argue for better treatment of African Americans, more than a hundred years later Roley satirizes such problematic maneuvers. Ethnic and racial division remains a central focus in contemporary passing narratives, but these contemporary texts reflect a greater awareness of the ironic limitations of ethnic competition as a narrative strategy for arguing for a particular group’s advancement.

Recent work in comparative race theory has attempted to address the persistent boundaries along fragmented ethnic or racial lines in intellectual inquiry. Claire Jean Kim’s theoretical method of “racial triangulation” attempts to remedy what Lowe identifies as the

separation of ethnic histories; through the examination of the intersection of three racial identities, the racial binary can be disrupted. Kim identifies two codependent formations: “relative valorization” when the dominant (usually white) group privileges one subordinate group over another as a means of domination, and “civic ostracism” in which the dominant group carefully constructs the “privileged” subordinate group as “foreign and unassimilable” in order to disenfranchise that group as well (107). Though Kim is careful to indicate that subordinate groups do have agency within these dynamics, her examination of the triangulation of racial dynamics requires an acknowledgement of the white supremacy that underlies all of these interactions: “White racial power may not tell the whole story, but it does generate a distinct structure of opportunities, constraints, and possibilities—parameters of resistance—with which groups of color must contend” (129). When applied to the seemingly binary dynamics of the passing narrative, racial triangulation offers a relational model that reveals a pattern of more complex racial dynamics at work. Though black and white are usually central to the passing narrative as representations of the standard top and bottom of the racial ladder, they make up only two points of the triangle.<sup>20</sup>

While Kim’s theory of racial triangulation helps to structure inquiries into racial dynamics that exceed the smaller scope of the racial binary, critic Shu-Mei Shih cautions that racial triangulation can at times, like its binary predecessor, lead to inadvertent omissions:

The ethical question, however, pivots on the choice of what three terms to place under pressure, on the selective valorization of these three terms over others, and on the consequence of diminishing returns for interracial solidarities. The calls to go beyond the black-white binary in American race studies are more likely to result in new

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<sup>20</sup>For this project, the number of racial types in a text need not be limited to three. While Howells may triangulate the Irish with black and white characters, Johnson shows relationships among black, white, Native American, Cuban immigrants, and other characters. All of these dynamics contribute to the picture of race in the U.S. that each author constructs. The disruption of the binary, rather than the number of points of comparison, is what interests me about Kim’s theory.



insights on Asian Americans and Latinas/os (Alcoff) than on other people of color, especially Native Americans. (1351)

Shih underscores the limitations of the triangulation model by reiterating the need for extra effort at inclusivity even in midst of comparative racial studies. Careful critical attention to the chosen groups that the authors of passing narratives chose to make visible (as well as to those authors chose *not* to engage) reveals the ways the author uses other racial or ethnic groups to make arguments about how race should be imagined in the U.S.

### **Changing Contexts, Changing Form: Contemporary Transformations of the Passing Narrative**

Legal scholar Ian F. Haney López explains how passing, though an act of choice, can also simultaneously be an act of internalized racism:

Passing demonstrates not only the power of racial choice, however, but the contingency of the choices people make, thereby reinforcing the point that choices are made in specific contexts. Choices about racial identity do not occur on neutral ground, but instead occur in the violently racist context of American society. (14)

Lopez argues that the material effects of racism make passing possible—and even, at times, necessary. The racism that makes passing possible shapes how passing functions as a trope in texts. To “pass” at all implies both an authentic identity and a reason to deny it. These prerequisites need to be met for a story of passing to be possible and limit the possible outcomes of such a story; passing narratives must be about racism which overdetermines how a passing subject must identify and how readers judge that identification. The central paradox of the passing narrative is that it reasserts racial boundaries even as it tries to dismantle them. It is a reflection on the limitations of the form itself that non-binary characters are often depicted negatively; if racial boundaries must be reaffirmed at the end of

a passing narrative, then jockeying for racial position remains a viable alternative strategy for arguing for racial uplift for the text's chosen group. The parameters of socially-condoned racism shift but they do not necessarily reflect a utopian racial climate; for example, while the post-civil rights era has seen real signs of racial progress, racism and nativism reemerge in new forms.

Ginsberg notes, "Had emancipation brought full social and legal equality, the story of race passing might have ended in the 1860s" (7), but the popularity of the passing narrative from Reconstruction through the mid-twentieth century demonstrates that emancipation did not end the use of the trope. Likewise, the success of the Civil Rights movement, culminating in the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the legal dismantling of segregation, might have signaled the end of the passing narrative. Instead, this narrative form has persisted and even thrived. As Sollors argues in *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), the 1960s and 1970s marked a reclamation of ethnic identification, as African Americans and other marginalized groups began to resist the assimilationist agenda that had previously characterized struggles for civil rights (20): "the very emergence of the stress on ethnicity and the unmeltable ethnic was directly influenced by the black civil rights movement and strengthened by its radicalization in the 1960s" (36). African Americans, as the "hyper-visible" minority, became the political model for those "invisible" groups looking to gain recognition, inspiring a generation of ethnic power movements and their subsequent literatures.

Wald likewise notes how passing narratives reflect the significance of politicized collective identification for marginalized groups during this time:

Cultural representations of racial passing demonstrate that the stakes of struggles for the cultural ownership of identities is particularly high for those groups who

historically have been least able to exploit the discourses of identity to express their own political will or social interest. For racially defined subjects, a strategic embrace of identities that are also sources of oppression may be a necessary precursor to the establishment of “lines” of safety and community. (24)

During the period after the Civil rights movement, passing, frequently depicted as racial betrayal in the earlier literature, was sometimes presented as antithetical to the values of the various identity movements that were trying to create strong ethnic identities as ways of overcoming oppression that Wald describes. Thus, the passing theme hit a low point in popularity as it appeared to work against the political messages of the period.

Yet, Wald also identifies a trend in the period of the 1950s that foreshadowed the demise of the passing narrative: the “postpassing” narrative in which authors “address themselves to the concerns of racially defined readers, articulating collective values of pride in ‘Negro’ identity and challenging the social and economic pressures that promote passing” (119). Passing narratives, so useful in showing the unjust limitations placed on a minority identity as a means of arguing for civil rights in the early part of the century, became much less common, but, at the same time, passing could be used as an illustration of lack of racial pride.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, the passing narrative’s activist goals seemed moot as the legal struggles for racial equality reached fruition. The Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* legalized interracial marriage in 1967, undermining the legal trespass of miscegenation at the heart of so many passing narratives. Yet, multiracial people were not automatically embraced either; if the political and social climate caused minority groups to reject passing, the multiracial person could also represent an uncomfortable blurring of racial boundaries:

The mixed-race character represented a testing of boundaries and a quest for the knowledge of origins. Conversely, dismissing or laughing off the boundary-challenging Mulatto characters—a tradition that reached the point in the wake of the 1960s when Mulatto characters became stock figures for comic relief—could help stabilize a belief in separate races. Since the Mulatto character may deflect from the assumption that race is a matter of “either/or,” denouncing the figure may have become a new consensus stereotype that helps to stabilize racial boundaries and may be functional in sustaining racial dualism. (Sollors, *Neither* 241)

The mulatto could be rejected as an anathema to pure identity or accepted so long as “one drop” was now embraced as a positive. The reification of racial boundaries, once a tool of white supremacy, paradoxically becomes a way for racial and ethnic groups to assert their difference as a means of power and visibility through racial separatism.<sup>21</sup>

Because of these politicized ethnic movements during the 1960s and 1970s, the demand for academic inclusion and a diversified literary canon resulted in the propagation of multicultural literature and a reevaluation of what the national literature looks like. The struggles for visibility in academia led not only to the reevaluation of the canon, but also to a revolution in theory. The predominance of postmodern theory helped reveal race as a social construction and underscored the performativity central to identity construction which gave the seemingly obsolete passing plot a newfound purpose.<sup>22</sup> Since the 1990s, with the rise of multiculturalism and identity theory, the passing narrative has experienced a renaissance: the trope of passing appeared in numerous novels, memoirs, and films even as essentialized race was academically discredited. As theories of biological racism were rejected, the academic consensus became that racial categorization is a social construction or a cultural illusion that

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<sup>21</sup>The critical use of the term “mulatto” in anti-racist scholarship is a continuing sign of our dependence upon racial language even in as we work to interrogate racial categorization.

<sup>22</sup>The predominance of Judith Butler’s writing in the 1990s with such works as *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) helped make the concept of performativity central to literary analysis. The popularity of postmodern theories of identity went beyond literary application during analysis, but also, as will be argued in chapter four, influenced contemporary novelists in their depictions of identity politics. The significance of Butler’s idea of performativity may also explain the critical attention given to gender and sexuality passing in recent years.

nonetheless has a real-world impact. The passing figure best illustrates the unreliability of race as a concept: how can one *look* “white” yet *be* “black”? The arbitrary rules of race are exposed in the passing subject’s dilemma.

The confounding paradoxes of passing have proven to be a useful metaphor for exploring contemporary postmodern identity politics. The popularity of the narrative of racial passing is reflected in its cross-genre appeal. James McBride, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Gregory Howard Williams and others wrote popular memoirs in the 1990s, and film versions of Walter Moseley and Philip Roth’s respective novels, *Devil in a Blue Dress* and *The Human Stain*, were both widely released. Recent years have continued to produce passing narratives in the form of novels (Kevin Baker’s *Striver’s Row*) and memoirs (David Matthews’s *Ace of Spades*, Paisley Rekdal’s *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee*, and Stephanie Elizondo Griest’s *Mexican Enough*). Gender or sexuality passing narratives (*M. Butterfly*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*) have also multiplied.

The resurgence of U.S. nativism in the last decade in the wake of recent immigration debates in the state and national legislatures (and the inflammatory media coverage of the issue), viewed in tandem with postmodern theories of identity construction and performativity, provide the context for understanding why the passing narrative continues to thrive despite expectations. By examining why passing precedents provide appealing frameworks for the development of marginalized literary traditions, I show how the passing narrative is a reaction to and a continuation of the contradictions of race. Deployed with a self-conscious awareness of the fictions of race, passing continues to offer a vital way to illustrate the absence of stable, fixed identities, a situation that gives the trope continuing

social relevance as the realization that, despite the victories of the civil rights movement and the election of a multiracial president, race and racism continue to have a crucial hold on the national imagination.

## Chapter One

### Foreigners From Within and Without: Nativism and the “Scale of Civilization” in William Dean Howells and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

The 1890s in the United States were marked by what historian David W. Southern has called the “triumph of racism,” as the Reconstruction promise of racial justice gave way to legalized Jim Crow politics (24).<sup>23</sup> This failure to reinvent U.S. race relations after the Civil War led to a cultural preoccupation with “the deconstruction of Reconstruction,” with civil rights activists and authors struggling to find new tactics and rhetorical strategies to counter the racism that was becoming increasingly legalized (Foster 38). One such author was William Dean Howells, who published his first extended treatment of the race question in an 1891 novel serialized in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. *An Imperative Duty* tells the story of Rhoda Aldgate, a young woman who discovers that she has black ancestry and must decide whether or not she will continue to live as a white woman. A year after *An Imperative Duty* appeared, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper published *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Harper’s novel is frequently read as a response to Howells’, with critics usually finding Harper’s revision more progressive than the earlier novel.<sup>24</sup> Though *Iola* also finds

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<sup>23</sup>Southern further notes that even under “Radical Reconstruction” racial equality was never fully sought: “The belated Civil Rights Act of 1875, which outlawed segregation in transportation and public places such as theaters and restaurants, but tellingly not in schools and cemeteries, was never seriously enforced, and the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 1883” (17).

<sup>24</sup>Michele Birnbaum, Debra J. Rosenthal, and Julie Cary Nerad all compare *An Imperative Duty* with *Iola Leroy*, and despite their differing perspectives on the novels, they conclude that *Iola*, by aligning with a black identity, is more subversive than Rhoda Aldgate. Birnbaum implies that *Iola*, in refusing the white Dr.

out she has enough black ancestry to be legally classified as black, she, unlike Rhoda, ultimately refuses to pass and instead dedicates herself to further the cause of African American civil rights. Despite these differences, Howells and Harper create mulatta characters faced with the dilemma of whether or not to pass as white as a means of illustrating both the unfulfilled promise of African American citizenship and the arbitrary boundaries that determine race.

This chapter will examine how Howells and Harper transvalue the dominant racial discourse of the 1890s through strategic use of a “third” category to disrupt a racial hierarchy that places African Americans at the bottom of the racial ladder in the U.S. By juxtaposing their mulatta heroines’ dilemma of racial identification with other racial and ethnic groups who do not fit easily into the rigid racial categories of black and white, these authors draw attention to the inadequacy of the binary system at work. At the same time, however, they remain so committed to advancing black uplift in these narratives that the Irish in Howells’s novel and the Indian in Harper’s are disparaged as a way of countering negative stereotypes of the African American. Both of their narratives question the scientifically supported racial hierarchies of their times to propose that the race system in America is flawed and illogical. Yet, each author, in turn, establishes a new racial framework that in some ways redraws the color line, redefining the parameters of race to exclude others who—like Rhoda Aldgate and Iola Leroy—do not fit easily into the system.

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Gresham’s marriage proposal, rejects the protection of whiteness that Olney’s offer to Rhoda provides. Likewise, Rosenthal sees Iola as ultimately more American than expatriated Rhoda precisely because she chooses to identify as black and remain in the U.S.—something Howells does not imagine as possible for Rhoda (516). Nerad argues that Iola decides to pass as black, reversing the bias towards blackness that appears in *An Imperative Duty* (832).



Legal discourse defining the boundaries of race and citizenship in many ways mirrors the strategies of racial Othering that Howells and Harper employ in their novels. Most notably, in the same year that Harper published *Iola Leroy*, Homer Plessy attempted to undermine segregation on trains in New Orleans by refusing to leave the coach designated for white passengers. The resulting 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* established the doctrine of “separate but equal” as the legal precedent underlying Jim Crow law that was not overturned until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Noting that Plessy was “of mixed descent, in the proportion of seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood; that the mixture of colored blood was not discernable in him,” the court also upheld the common belief that “one-drop” of black blood in a person’s ancestry makes that person black; *Plessy v. Ferguson* codified hypodescent into law (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 538 (1896)).



*Figure 3: Homer Plessy*

The only dissent for *Plessy* was written by Justice John Marshall Harlan in which he famously asserted that “Our constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens” (*Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 559). Though Harlan’s dissent arguing for a biracial understanding of citizenship was progressive for his time, as Sanda Mayzaw Lwin notes, this argument hinges on the existence of a “third racial category, one that represents neither black nor white”: the alien Chinese (19). Harlan writes:

There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race. But, by the statute in questions, a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States, while citizens of the black race in Louisiana [...] are yet declared to be criminals, liable to imprisonment, if they ride in a public coach occupied by citizens of the white race. (*Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 561)

Gesturing to this passage, Lwin writes, “Rather than seizing this opening to dislodge the black/white binary, he attempts to resolve the problem of the color line by redrawing it as one between citizens and noncitizens of the United States” (20). By alluding to the Chinese Exclusion Acts which prevented the Chinese from becoming U.S. citizens, Harlan positions the Chinese as the ultimate Other in counterpoint to the black American. Legally “alien,” the Chinese are part of an alien civilization, too “different from our own” to be assimilated into American life. Thus, in Harlan’s view, Homer Plessy was entitled to equal treatment before the law not because he (and his confounding mulatto body) revealed the inherent contradictions of dominant racial constructions but because he was an American citizen, whether black or white. The specter of the foreign Chinese becomes a useful way to unite the “two” American races.

This rhetorical move in Harlan’s dissent reflects a common contemporary tactic for those, like Howells and Harper, arguing against Jim Crow in the 1890s. As in Harlan’s

dissent, both authors ultimately argue for greater black civil rights by appealing to a sense of common citizenship that emphasizes African American assimilation in contrast to the “alien” Irish immigrant in Howells’s novel and the unassimilated Native American in Harper’s. In contrast to these third parties, African Americans are undeniably part of the American civilization. By deploying a discourse of conflicting civilizations that originally was intended to keep African Americans oppressed, these novelists could accept the racial differences posited by the dominant discourse but, importantly, they could also change the *meanings* of those differences in such a way as to privilege blackness and challenge the treatment of blacks in America.

Despite these similarities, the ultimate vision of race relations at the end of the novels differs greatly. While Howells ultimately allows Rhoda to pass for white in service to a theory of an eventual amalgamated “American” race where even the maligned Irish and African American are absorbed into the national body, he is unable to overcome a sense of Anglo superiority, so his revision of racial injustice is left incomplete. Harper, on the other hand, does not advocate racial amalgamation; instead, her heroine pointedly rejects passing as a way of asserting racial pride. In contrast to the failings of the hypocritical Anglo-Saxon and the uncivilized Indian, the black race is the hope of American civilization. Despite the seeming similarity between the mulatta heroines (who are neither black nor white) and these third figures (who are also outside the dominant categories), neither author of these early passing narratives uses this comparison to find solidarity; rather, these third figures serve only as a way to highlight African American assimilation. Though the passing dilemma shows the injustice of the racial binary, only the mulatta, not the immigrant or the Indian, is to be pitied or celebrated for disrupting it. While trying to revise racist discourses that

perpetuate African American oppression, Howells and Harper deploy frameworks that continue to create a tension between “us” and “them.”

### **“By an Odd Logic”: The Irish and (African) American Civilization in *An Imperative Duty***

In 1891, William Dean Howells took up the popular theme of miscegenation in his serialized novel *An Imperative Duty*. As in many miscegenation stories of this period, Howells’s heroine, Rhoda Aldgate, discovers her African heritage only after growing up white. In Howells’s story, however, his heroine escapes the “tragic” fate of so many mulattas in U.S. literature. Instead of meeting a tragic end, Rhoda is allowed to pass as white and marry her white lover, Dr. Olney. As Debra J. Rosenthal argues, Howells, the staunch realist, chose to revise the overwrought tragic mulatta plot in part as a way to parody the popular romantic tradition.<sup>25</sup> The novel offers a series of arguments, articulated through the novel’s hero, Dr. Olney, meant to show that Rhoda’s racial affiliation is rightly with the white race despite the social norm (and soon to be legal construct) of “one-drop.”<sup>26</sup> At the climax of the novel, when Rhoda confesses her secret to Olney, he responds with comic understatement.

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<sup>25</sup>In “The White Blackbird: Miscegenation, Genre, and the Tragic Mulatta in Howells, Harper, and the ‘Babes of Romance,’” Rosenthal argues that Howells fails in his attempt at parody because the trope of the tragic mulatta is a “sentimental figure resistant to scientific discourse” (497). Despite his realist convictions which prohibit stock characterizations, she argues, Howells cannot overcome the cultural power of the tragic mulatta. Rosenthal cites the suspicious drug overdose of Rhoda’s aunt as a displaced but still potent requirement of the tragic mulatta plot. Yet Rosenthal understates the irony of Mrs. Meredith’s death which Howells casts as the result of white racial hysteria. While ultimately Howells is unable to overcome the underlying discourse of white supremacy in the novel, he does subvert the expected death of the mulatta heroine.

<sup>26</sup>In “Slippery Language and False Dilemmas: The Passing Novels of Child, Howells, and Harper,” Julie Cary Nerad argues that, because Rhoda is raised as white, she is white and cannot be considered to be “passing” at all (814). Only after Rhoda feels ashamed of her black ancestry and in continuing to live as white does Nerad argue that Rhoda is passing—and even then only because this is how Rhoda views it, not because she is “really” black. Nerad persuasively argues that contemporary critics often reinscribe hypodescent in assuming that characters who believe themselves white only to later discover some African ancestry can be considered passing subjects.

Howells uses the language of the theatre (choosing words such as “rehearsed,” “melodrama,” and “dramatized”) to describe Rhoda’s romantic expectations of immediate rejection. Then he contrasts this language with the blunt logic of Olney’s radical response that “fifteen-sixteenths or so of you ...belong to my race by heredity” (229). The high drama of the racial revelation in passing narratives is ironically undercut.

Despite Howells’s seemingly progressive treatment of the popular trope, there is a tension between his racially conciliatory goals and the apparent racism in the novel’s execution. This tension is most evident in the novel’s depictions of both African American and Irish servants who, while drawn differently, are both caricatured throughout *An Imperative Duty*. Rude, coarse, and resentful of their status, Howells’s Irish characters are in stark contrast to the happily servile black figures that Olney finds so pleasant. Howells strategically positions the Irish in opposition to the African American as a way of arguing for greater acceptance of black Americans as Americans—but at the expense of the racially unstable Irish immigrant.<sup>27</sup> This maneuver helps illustrate why Howells’s advocacy for the African American fails. He does not challenge “race” as a concept; he simply reverses the rungs of a racial hierarchy. Ultimately, these depictions of the Irish immigrant and the African American serve to reify white identity: Dr. Olney argues that these groups are not yet

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<sup>27</sup>There are an abundance of narratives before *An Imperative Duty* that illustrate the dynamics of black-Irish relations in nineteenth century America. Decades earlier, for example, Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), one of the first novels written by an African American, dealt with the theme of racial passing while illustrating the tension between Irish immigrants and free blacks in Philadelphia. While the Irish are depicted as violent, coarse, and racist in their own right, Webb shows how Irish racism is manipulated by white supremacists into acts of violence against the black community, acts that benefit the dominant class. The villain of the novel, Mr. Stevens, blackmails the Irish McClosky into organizing attacks against middle-class blacks, targeting in particular Mr. Garie, Stevens’s white cousin who has married his former slave. When Mr. Garie is murdered, Stevens steps in to legally disinherit his children and claim Mr. Garie’s wealth for his own. Through the antagonistic relationship between the black and Irish in the novel, Webb clearly demonstrates how Irish racism becomes a tool for increasing Anglo-Saxon power.

ready to be full members of “American” civilization but that future generations will one day be absorbed by the larger, stronger Anglo type.



*Figure 4: William Dean Howells*

Despite the historic tensions between Irish and African Americans, Anglo-American depictions of the Irish in America often conflated them with blacks, using the same sort of characterization to describe both groups, as historian David Roediger notes: “Low-browed and savage, groveling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual—such were the adjectives used by many native-born Americans to describe the Catholic Irish ‘race’ in the years before the Civil War” (133). Such popular cultural representations of both the Irish and the African American were undeniably similar. Because of the precarious economic position of the newly arrived Irish and their lack of opportunity for following generations, they

worked the same jobs and lived in the same places as marginalized free blacks. That the black and the Irish are most often depicted as waiters and servants in *An Imperative Duty* reflects this similarity of class position for the two groups.

Ironically, Howells applies the derogatory stereotypes so often employed against blacks exclusively to the Irish. The black figures in the novel are instead depicted in positive—yet still stereotypical—terms. Howells sets up a direct comparison between the two “races” as Olney critiques his Irish waiters with his idealized vision of black waiters:

[Their clothes] did not support one’s love of gentility like the conventional dress-coat of the world-wide waiter, or cheer one’s heart like the white linen jacket and apron of the negro waiter. But Olney found them, upon what might be called personal acquaintance, neither uncivil nor unkind, though they were awkward and rather stupid. They could not hide their eagerness for fees, and they took an interest in his well-being so openly mercenary, that he could scarcely enjoy his meals. (139)

Though Olney mitigates his complaints about the Irish waiters with luke-warm concessions, his disgust comes from his idea of the general failings of their “race.” Olney’s disgust for the Irish is offset by his pleasure with the black waiters. Though these two groups share similar social positions, Olney finds the Irish lacking the charm of the Negro. Olney later suggests that the black waiters might have “been just as greedy of money; but he would have clothed his greed in such a smiling courtesy and such a simple-heartedness that it would have been graceful and winning” (139). Olney places the Irish and the African Americans on the same social plane, but he finds black waiters infinitely more pleasing to his Anglo-American sensibilities of racial and social position than his crass Irish waiter with the “hairy paw.” Regardless of the differences in depiction, what is significant to Olney about these men (and

their respective races) is how well they feign satisfaction with their positions and play their designated social role.<sup>28</sup>

The full extent of Howells's anti-Irish rhetoric is best seen in the original serialized version of *An Imperative Duty* which appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* beginning in July 1891. There was immediate protest from the Irish population, and Howells wrote to his sister Aurelia as early as July 17 that "The *Imperative Duty* has waked an Irish howl against me, and is likely to make noise enough. They can't see that it is not I who felt and said what Olney did" (316).<sup>29</sup> Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson write in their 2005 biography of Howells that "Readers of the serial installments attributed to the author Olney's negative comments about the Irish, which, by an odd logic, Howells had intended to bolster

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<sup>28</sup>This depiction of the African American in the novel caused a critical uproar. In her scathing 1892 essay "The Negro as Presented in American Literature," Anna Julia Cooper dwells at length on *An Imperative Duty* which had been published the year before. Coming a century before Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, Cooper examines the figure of the Negro in shaping American literature and argues that other authors who write of "life and customs among the darker race" have failed in their literary missionary work because "the art of 'thinking one's self imaginatively into the experience of others' is not given to all" (139). The results, she explains in her discussion of Howells, are "an insult to humanity and a sin against God to publish any such sweeping generalizations of a race on such meager and superficial information" (147):

Mr. Howells's point of view is precisely that of a white man who sees colored people at long range or only in certain capacities. His conclusions about the colored man are identical with the impressions that will be received and carried abroad by foreigners [...] who, through the impartiality and generosity of our white countrymen, will see colored persons as only bootblacks and hotel waiters, grinning from ear to ear and bowing and curtsying for the extra tips. (149)

Howells's novel becomes Cooper's most incisive example in illustrating her larger points about the more subtle forms of racism present even in "progressive" American literature.

<sup>29</sup>Given the outcry against the stereotypes present in the novel at the time of its first release, it is initially surprising that in 1912 W.E.B. Du Bois singles out *An Imperative Duty* for its progressiveness in a column praising Howells in the *Boston Evening Standard*. Though Du Bois praises the novel and borrows the phrase "double consciousness" from a line in *An Imperative Duty*, Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness" differed greatly from that of Howells, as critic Henry B. Wonham explains:

The novel gave [Du Bois] what he needed most: a psychological explanation of African-American identity in terms of nervous disorder, a "two-ness" that causes the world to "waver" and impedes "true self-consciousness." Howells, of course, had something entirely different in mind when he conceived of a love story between Olney, the nerve specialist, and a mulatta beauty. His story is about the therapeutic appropriation of blackness as a counter-force to white "over-civilization" and anxiety (129).

The mixed responses to Howells help to reveal the internal contradictions evident in the novel.



the standing of African Americans” (311-312).<sup>30</sup> In response to the “Irish howl,” Howells cut several derogatory phrases and added a few mitigating explanations for Olney’s displeasure with the Irish in the book version of the novel published the following year. While these changes are seemingly minor, they highlight the offensiveness of Howells’s original depiction. For example, one passage from the serialized novel reads:

By far the greater part of those listening to the brass band which was then beginning to vex the ghost of our poor old Puritan Sabbath there, were given away by their accent for those primary and secondary Irish who abound with us. The old women were strong, ugly old peasant women, often with the simian cast of features which affords the caricaturist such an unmistakable Irish physiognomy; but the young women were thin and crooked, with pale, pasty complexions, and an effect of physical delicacy which might later be physical refinement. (191)

In his revision, Howells replaces “ugly old” with “sturdy, old-world” and deletes the clause referencing their “simian cast of features.” He also adds that the young women are physically delicate “from their hard work and hard conditions” (138). In the revision, the open race-baiting of “simian” is eliminated and difficult labor conditions are acknowledged, but the overall effect of the passage remains the same: the race, biology, and class comparisons between the Irish immigrants and the Anglo Americans Olney identifies within this passage remain intact.

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<sup>30</sup>Though attributing Olney’s anti-Irish sentiment to Howells as author at first seems unjust, several critics have noted Howells’s own bias against the Irish. Martha Banta writes: “Howells [...] was aware of how closely his anti-Irish attitudes matched those of his generation. He was ashamed of his essentially illogical reactions, and he never forgot the rebuke James Russell Lowell gave him concerning the ‘grudge (a mean and cruel grudge, I now think it)’ that Howells held against the Irish” (ix). An early example of Howells’s anti-Irish bias is evident in “Mrs. Johnson,” a vignette first appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1868 about a black housekeeper who comes to work for the Howells family. In the story, there are early precursors to the comparative ethnic strategy that is expanded in *An Imperative Duty* as Howells compares a black neighborhood with Irish and “American” streets: “An air not so much of decay as of unthrift, and yet hardly of unthrift, seems to prevail in the neighborhood, which has none of the aggressive and impudent squalor of an Irish quarter, and none of the surly wickedness of a low American street” (100). As earlier in the story Mrs. Johnson is favorably compared to the previous Irish maid, so, too, is her race compared to the Irish one. More than twenty years later, Howells revisits this strategy and expands upon it, making the African American-Irish comparison central to his racial arguments in *An Imperative Duty*.

Yet for all their difference, Olney imagines a time when the Irish will be assimilated to their new country, an attitude which foreshadows the novel's endorsement of Rhoda's eventual passing:

Looking at them scientifically, Olney thought that if they survived to be mothers they might give us, with better conditions, a race as hale and handsome as the elder American race; but the transition from the Old World to the New, as represented in them, was painful. Their voices were at once coarse and weak; their walk was uncertain, now awkward and now graceful, an undeveloped gait; he found their bearing apt to be aggressive, as if from a wish to ascertain the full limits of their social freedom, rather than from ill-nature, or that bad-heartedness which most rudeness comes from. (138)

Again, Olney offers a sympathetically condescending analysis of the Irish in the U.S. Olney attributes Irish inferiority to their immigrant status, which would seemingly grant them the possibility of moving upwards. Yet Olney still couches this explanation in the biological terms of race. They need a few generations to adapt physically to their new location to rise above their present condition, because their inferiority is evident in their "gait" and their "bearing"—terms used in the "scientific" analysis of race. Although Olney does not argue that racial biology is fixed and unchanging, he relies on familiar nativist arguments about who "belongs" in America.

Olney's hope for the eventual breeding out of the negative attributes of the Irish resonates with many American theories of racial evolution. Noting the nineteenth-century emergence of racial "science," historian Thomas Bender writes, "Perceived differences needed explaining, and race was a clarifying option, establishing a literally visible hierarchy. The politics of this race theory carried the implied threat that the lower orders of humanity had either to adapt or become extinct" (208-209).<sup>31</sup> Critic Jeffery Clymer also notes how

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<sup>31</sup>Bender illustrates the variations of this theory through the examples of Thomas Hart Benton, and decades later, Josiah Strong:

racial theory became a convenient explanation for class difference. Citing Josiah Strong's influential work, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, revised and republished in 1891, Clymer notes: "For Strong, as for Olney, class becomes something that is in the blood and passed on from generation to generation. The working class, envisioned in Strong as almost a distinct race, is metamorphosed into an exterior threat to 'our country'" (35). Olney's theoretical matrix of race, class, and biology are contingent on contemporaneous concern about the status of the Anglo-Saxon in the U.S. under siege from an abundance of immigrants and newly freed African Americans. Henry B. Wonham echoes Clymer's point: "Olney's anxiety about his uncertain social position leads him to reflect at length about the encroaching lower classes. What bothers him most about the Irish is their tastelessly aggressive pursuit of an American dream of material success [...] Such vigor is threatening to Olney because it ignores precisely the intangible qualities of birth, manner, and education that constitute his tenuous claims to cultural authority" (130).

Olney's theory about the eventual assimilation of Irish immigrants helps to explain why a novel about black-white passing begins with a lengthy discussion of the Irish in America. When Olney arrives in Boston, he is taken aback by the abundance of the "proletarian type" he sees on the streets (137), which Clymer notes is "simply a synonym for 'Irish' in Olney's mind" (36). Olney has been abroad and is surprised to find his city changed, so he continues "his foreign travels in his native land." In addition to the abundance

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'The white race will take the ascendant, elevating what is susceptible of improvement—wearing out what is not,' declared Thomas Hart Benton, senator from Missouri, in 1846. Over the next generation, white racial pride became steadily less generous in its expectations of 'improvement' of dark-skinned people. In his widely read book *Our Country* (1885), Josiah Strong, a leading Protestant intellectual, observed that 'whether the extinction of inferior races before the advancing Anglo-Saxon' seems to be a matter for regret or not, 'it certainly appears probable.' He proudly noted that Anglo-Saxons represented only 'one-fifteenth part of mankind' but ruled 'more than one-third of the earth's surface, and more than one-third of its people.' (209).

Strong's racial calculus in service to white supremacy has disturbing resonance with the racial calculus Olney's acceptance of Rhoda depends upon.

of immigrants he finds in the city, Olney also finds many African Americans: “It seemed to him that they had increased since he was last in Boston beyond the ratio of nature; and the hotel clerk afterward told him there had been that summer an unusual influx of negroes from the South” (140). Black migrants mingle with Irish immigrants in a transformed Boston, but, unlike his reactions to the “rude” Irish, Olney is pleased to see so many dark faces: “Olney fancied that Boston did not characterize their manner, as it does that of almost every other sort of aliens. They all alike seemed shining with good-nature and good-will, and the desire for peace on earth” (140). “New” people, migrant and immigrant alike, flood Boston, yet Olney’s response to the Irish and “negro” races differs dramatically. If the Irish, whom Olney finds distasteful, will eventually assimilate into a more “American” mold, then this early linkage between Irish immigrant and black migrant helps frame the reader’s gradual introduction to the more controversial absorption of the black race into the American mold as well. The contrast of Irish with black in these early scenes serves to mitigate the later argument for Rhoda Aldgate’s passing and “mixed marriage” to Olney.

While Howells made revisions to lessen the offense to the Irish, the changes do not alter the clear contrast he draws between the Irish and the African American. Rather than rethink his comparative strategy in response to the protests, he seems to have only removed that language which he thought most inflammatory.<sup>32</sup> Howells’s attempt to transvalue the dominant racial hierarchy (one which, for all its particular variations, usually places the African American at the bottom of the racial ladder) is especially evident when Olney and

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<sup>32</sup>Perhaps the most inflammatory passage in the original was a discussion of miscegenation in Boston with Olney knowing of “two marriages here between white women and colored men, and in both cases the wives were Irish Catholics” (199). Though here Howells acknowledges the existence of black-Irish relationships in Boston, this aside also serves to lessen the impact of Rhoda’s marriage to a white man, as Olney’s patriarchal role in the marriage would dominate any innate limitations of his wife. With the direct reference to black-Irish miscegenation eliminated from the book version, Howells leaves the implication of miscegenation present by a seemingly out-of-context reference to black Catholics in Boston.

Rhoda both make explicit comparisons of the races. As Olney tells Rhoda and her aunt, Mrs. Meredith: “[T]he Irish are quicker-witted than we are. They’re sympathetic and poetic far beyond us. But they can’t understand the simplest thing from us [...] At any rate they seem more foreign to our intelligence, our ways of thinking, than the Jews—or the Negroes even” (152). In considering the Irish “foreign” for their different way of thinking, Olney sets the Irish apart from Americans, even black and Jewish Americans though Jews were commonly perceived as the quintessential foreign immigrant. This comparison creates another “Other” for the American imagination, one that allows black Americans closer connection to white Americans.

Many scholars have illustrated the slow transformation of Irish immigrants in the United States from caricatured foreign “Other” to celebrated “white” “American.” In *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev explains the uncertainty around the Irish racial identity:

Coming as immigrants rather than as captives or hostages undoubtedly affected the potential racial status of the Irish in America, but it did not settle the issue, since it was by no means obvious who was “white.” In the early years Irish were frequently referred to as “niggers turned inside out”; the Negroes, for their part, were sometimes called “smoked Irish,” an appellation they must have found no more flattering than it was intended to be. (41-2)

Because of the social, economic, and historical oppression of the Irish, their status as part of the privileged white race in the U.S. was not automatic, as their association with black stereotypes reveals. Depicting the Irish as caricatures in relationship to the African American suggests that Howells was not trying to argue that blacks deserve equal class status with “real” whites (as a favorable comparison to Anglo-Saxon characters might imply), but simply that they deserve better treatment since they are not, as a race, uniquely subservient and are more agreeable to Anglo sensibilities than Irish immigrants. Ironically, it was by using

similarly caricatured terms for African Americans and adopting white racism that the Irish were able to pull themselves up the racial ladder and become “white.”<sup>33</sup> Howells, on the other hand, attempts to reverse this technique on behalf of African Americans.

The results of this maneuver, however, are frequently inconsistent. Though Rhoda also asserts that “the Irish are twice as stupid as the colored people, and not half as sweet” (198), Howells makes a telling revision in this scene that complicates his use of the Irish as the foreign Other. In the serialized version, Rhoda prefaces her comparison of the black and Irish by explaining, “We were having a dispute this afternoon...about the Irish waiters here and the colored waiters at the Hotel Vendome” (198). In his revision, Howells simply replaces “Irish” with “white.” While the waiters discussed are still clearly Irish given that Rhoda and Olney are resuming a previous discussion, Howells reveals the extent of the slippage between “white” and “Irish” possible at this time. Though compelled by protests to make this change, Howells felt comfortable conflating Irish with white rather than simply reworking the scene. The contradiction of this revision with the novel’s insistence on “Othering” the Irish highlights the racial confusion present throughout the novel. Howells disorganizes the established racial hierarchy in which whites—even foreign whites—are valued above American blacks, disturbing the common notion of hierarchy by favoring black Americans over Irish foreigners who are (and yet not quite) white.

Both Olney and Rhoda see the “Negro” as something particularly unique and special to American culture. Olney, after years abroad, finds the presence of black Americans “altogether agreeable” (139); Rhoda, for her part, finds herself “homesick” for black waiters because “I was born in the South you know. Perhaps I got to have a sort of fellow-feeling with them from my old black nurse” (153). Later, she expresses regret that she cannot “own”

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<sup>33</sup>See Ignatiev and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

a Negro (172). Though Rhoda's aunt, Mrs. Meredith, thinks this evidence of her "race instinct," Olney wryly suggests that "it was the other-race instinct" asserting itself (173). Though seemingly sympathetic to the Negro, both Rhoda and Olney have feelings that are the result of a fixed idea of white racial superiority. The Negro is a source of pleasure, a uniquely American point of pride, but really no more to them than an abstract affection—that of a pet in Rhoda's case or a servant in Olney's.

After introducing a new sympathy for the Negro, Howells attacks certain aspects of biological racism in order to lay the ground for Rhoda's racial dilemma. Olney discusses the possibilities of atavism in mixed race children and decides that the chances are "so remote that they may be said to hardly exist at all" despite the idea's usual dramatic potential in passing narratives (161). Olney, given a position of authority as a doctor, effectively dismisses the racial hysteria that surrounds atavism. He goes further still to deny the validity of the one-drop rule once Rhoda has been told of her ancestry, claiming that she belongs to the white race by "heredity" (229). Howells, through Olney, dismisses some of the dominant ideas of scientific racism, but he leaves its framework in place. He reverses the logic behind hysterical fears of atavism to conclude that fifteen-sixteenths of someone should outweigh the "drop," but race is still very much a matter of biological determination. The outcome of Olney's seemingly "liberal" and radical theories of race are the "permanent effacement" of "inferior" races through miscegenation that will "absorb" and thereby "obliterate" the "colored race" (161). The discourse of civilization appears here as racially coded in keeping with the dominant discourse.<sup>34</sup> The white, civilized tendencies will dominate and overcome

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<sup>34</sup>Olney's theory of biological absorption of inferior races resonates with discourses around the issue of Indian assimilation when he argues,

[S]ooner or later our race must absorb the colored race; and I believe that it will obliterate not only its color, but its qualities. The tame man, the civilized man, is stronger than the wild man; and I believe

the black, uncivilized traits in the future amalgamated race. The endgame of Olney's racial calculus is as glaringly racist as the dominant belief in atavism.

Howells's new racial construction works to allow Rhoda to pass into white society after the revelation of her black ancestry. He breaks down an important barrier to Rhoda's assimilation by demonizing the Irish so that blacks could be idealized, making Rhoda's Negro ancestry more palatable to the reader, then introduces a biological theory of race that promises the absorption of blackness through intermixture. Michele Birnbaum notes that Olney's theory of absorption "make[s] clear that the conjugal bed simply offers a more intimate form of colonization" that "offer[s] as a political solution the mythic inviolability of interpersonal relations, of bonds which would precede and transcend culture" (14). She argues that Rhoda figures in the novel as the embodiment of "Howells's 'national fantasy' of Reconstruction; her marriage to Olney, reconstructed as a union between North and South, recapitulates her own corporeal embrace of black and white" (15).

Though the novel was written decades after the conclusion of the Civil War, Howells sets the novel during Reconstruction as a way to examine racial and national reconciliation. David W. Southern notes that "by the 1890s the white North seemed to crave reconciliation with the white South" which usually meant northern whites abandoned the agitation for black civil rights that fueled the abolitionist movement (35). Howells, however, uses northern nativism (particularly against the Irish in Boston) to seek both reconciliation and black civil rights. Rhoda's Southern-born black body becomes the biological key to racial and national reconciliation when joined in marriage with Olney's Northern Anglo-Saxon body. As a body

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that in those cases within any race where there are very strong ancestral proclivities on one side especially toward evil, they will die out before the good tendencies on the other side, for much the same reason, that is because vice is savage and virtue is civilized. (161)

As I will discuss in relationship to Harper's novel and in Chapter Two, assimilation policies in the late nineteenth century were often designed and implemented as part of a larger project of cultural genocide.



that has the potential to bring forth the new race Olney imagines, Rhoda's blackness is actually key to the biological nation-building Olney has in mind and reflects his earlier attraction to blackness as uniquely American.

William L. Andrews argues that Howells's underlying belief in benevolent white patronage results in an endorsement of black accommodationism:

Howells was basically a meliorist and accommodationist in his view of the turn-of-the-century race problem, and his concept of justice for the black man was shaped largely by his acceptance of the reconciliationist position of Booker T. Washington. [...] Howells's review of Washington's [*Up from Slavery*] summarized 'the great problem' facing black Americans in specific terms of 'reconciliation' of the black race 'with the white race.' To effect such reconciliation, blacks would have to learn 'at least provisional submission,' a 'manly fortitude in bearing the wrongs that cannot now be righted, and a patient faith in the final kindness and ultimate justice of the Anglo-Americans.'" (333-334)

Howells's own treatment of the race problem in *An Imperative Duty* prefigures the ideas that he later would find agreeable in Washington's writing. Early in the novel, Olney expresses a grandiose (but still patronizing) theory of an America where the African American has come into power: "[I]f the negroes ever have their turn—and if the meek are to inherit the earth they must come to it—we shall have a civilization of such sweetness and goodwill as the world has never known yet. Perhaps we shall have to wait their turn for any real Christian civilization" (155). Olney imagines the Negro as able to bring about a higher form of civilization despite his seemingly contradicting ideas about the Negro's subservient position. Though Olney is seemingly benevolent and progressive in this idealized vision of black civilization (an ideal that will become a cornerstone of Harper's novel), this sentiment lacks real force; the Negro may have a claim to moral superiority, but the idea that this will result in an utopian civilization that shows "sweetness and goodwill" appears naïve in the context of modern America.

Moreover, Olney's theory comes without an accompanying plan for praxis: "I'm critical, not constructive, in my humanity. It's easier" (155). For all his high-minded ideas, when Olney finally learns Rhoda's "secret" from her aunt, his initial reaction is nonetheless "disgust" and "repulsion" before he is able to "master" his "impulse" (165). Rhoda, for her part, is equally disgusted at the revelation of her black ancestry. Her reaction to the black people she encounters in a Boston church is perhaps the most offensive part of the novel for the contemporary reader. In fact, even the original *New York Times* review of the novel takes special note of this scene, concluding that Howells, because he does not have the first hand knowledge that a Southern writer possesses, shows "nothing short of repulsion" for the black race ("The Color Line"). The grotesque depictions of the black figures, once Rhoda's ancestry is revealed, are as offensive as the earlier depictions of the Irish, undermining Howells's attempt to reorder the racial hierarchy. The high-minded admiration for the African American that Olney professes throughout the novel is greatly diminished by a pervasive undercurrent of racial loathing.

Once Olney's repulsion impulse is "mastered," he actually becomes more enamored of Rhoda and uses her dilemma as a small way of living out his racial fantasy. His attraction to her is increased by his ability, as a white man, to validate Rhoda's race. Rosenthal notes that while Howells revises the standard rejection of the tragic mulatta by her white lover, he also "reinscribes it, as Rhoda's black maternal parentage makes her primitive and uncivilized, and therefore in need of protection" (508). Olney, insecure about his own position in a changing nation, finds purpose in bringing Rhoda out of the darkness of her newfound ancestry. Rhoda, similarly repulsed by her "tainted blood," is grateful to receive Olney's protection. The language of abjection used to describe the revelation also works as

the language of the power dynamics in Olney and Rhoda's relationship: Olney may have needed to "master" his repulsion, but he is rewarded for his efforts by becoming Rhoda's lord and master. The mulatta's dilemma, a result of slavery, is to be solved through marriage. The novel reinforces white supremacist ideology and white male privilege by rendering African American masculinity absent from Olney's vision of an amalgamated future in any viable or valuable way; a reversal of the race and gender roles of Olney and Rhoda's union is unthinkable.

Though the novel represents Olney's willingness to marry Rhoda as indicative of the future transformation of the Anglo-Saxon way of thinking, the promise of this new American civilization is cast strictly as a vision for the future; it is not realized despite Olney's marriage to Rhoda. Instead, Olney and Rhoda retreat from the U.S. and move to Italy, and Howells, in what is often deemed the critical failure of the novel, retreats from his vision of a racially reconciled America. Olney and Rhoda, contrary to the "tragic mulatta" plot, are allowed to marry, but the marriage is childless. Thus, Howells avoids the uncomfortable results of miscegenation but at the expense of undermining Olney's radical theory of one united American race. As Nerad suggests, the couple must go abroad, "given that Rhoda's blackness functions within the text as her true identity, any claim she has to whiteness becomes fraudulent. As a passer, Rhoda threatens the national racial hierarchy because she exposes the fraudulence of the whole system, not just her own putative whiteness" (828). By moving Rhoda to Italy, the author implicitly reasserts that Rhoda's true identity is black despite Olney's inversion of "one-drop," because Howells cannot confront the implications of Rhoda's remaining in the U.S. while living as a white woman. Ultimately, fears about the

definition of white identity override any hope for racial reconciliation; being mathematically white according to Olney's racial calculus turns out not to be white after all.

As the novel begins by framing the condition of the Irish as a contrast to the African American, so it ends with the comparison of Rhoda to another not-quite-white ethnic group:

She is thought to look so very Italian that you would really take her for an Italian, and he represents to her that it would not be the ancestral color, which is much the same in other races, but the ancestral condition which their American friends would despise if they knew of it; that this is a quality of the despise [sic] in which hard work is held all the world over, and has always followed the children of the man who earns his bread with his hands, especially if he earns other people's bread, too. (234)

Paradoxically, Howells bookends his story with images that suggest the spectrum of whiteness even as he continues to distance his heroine's passing from "real" Anglo American identity. The Irish, so crudely contrasted with the Negro in the early chapters of the novel, have been replaced by Italians, another group of "swarthy" Catholics who had also taken to immigrating in large numbers to the United States. Here, the comparison of Rhoda to Italians is meant to show her racial similarity to so-called white ethnics, as her color is so "much the same" that Rhoda could be passing for Italian. Howells concludes by making Rhoda neither black nor Anglo; instead, she becomes an "off-white" foreigner.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this contradictory impulse to relegate the mulatta to a white ethnic group analogous to the maligned Irish of the early chapters of the novel, Howells makes one last attempt to argue that the stigma of blackness is the result of the "condition" of slavery rather than of "color." Though he is not yet ready to break down the color line in America, Howells ends by suggesting that racism is the result of the underlying hypocrisy of white Americans over the legacy of slavery. Howells proposes that racism is really the result of classism from

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<sup>35</sup>I am borrowing the term "off-whiteness" from María DeGuzmán's *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (2005).

Americans who despise men who labor for their money, but “black” Rhoda is no more American than the Irish waiter Olney scorned upon his return to Boston. Despite its radical promise to undermine race and establish a more inclusive definition of “American,” the novel concludes by reaffirming the dominance of nativism and white supremacy.

**“The Scale of Character and Condition”: Native Americans and the Rhetoric of African American Uplift in *Iola Leroy*, or, *Shadows Uplifted***

Though similar in some respects to Howells’s novel from the year before, *Iola Leroy* is best read as an anti-passing novel. Raised to believe she is white, Iola chooses to identify as black after her mother reveals that she had once been her husband’s slave. Iola initially feels “horror and anguish” at the revelation, but she quickly condemns the legacy of slavery, not race, as the cause of her trouble—unlike Rhoda Aldgate whose revulsion is directed at black people themselves (Harper, *Iola* 105). Therefore, when Iola’s white lover, Dr. Gresham (Harper’s counterpart to Howells’s Dr. Olney), presents her with the opportunity to live as a white woman after their marriage, Iola rejects both him and the white identity that their marriage would require. Unlike Rhoda, who seeks racial validation from Olney because she believes her newly discovered heritage makes her inferior, Iola embraces her newfound identity and commits to work for racial justice. As Neraud provocatively argues, Iola, like Rhoda, was not previously passing for white and neither does she pass for black after her ancestry is revealed; instead, Iola “chooses to remake herself into an African American woman, a process that has everything to do with social circumstance (most specifically her family) and nothing to do with visually evident biological features. Iola does not return to the black race; she turns to it. Her choice does not make her blackness inauthentic” (835). The biological determinacy of race is replaced with a social choice of racial identity. Harper does

not construct Iola's "one-drop" of black blood as Iola's "true" identity; it is her dedication to her family and her desire to help the race that makes her switch her identification. Harper rejects the parvenu plot that is so dominant in American literature when Iola chooses racial uplift over the possibilities of individual success.



*Figure 5: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*

Throughout the novel, several other characters pointedly refuse to pass for white and argue instead that their skills are better used by identifying as black.<sup>36</sup> Robert Johnson, who

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<sup>36</sup>Critic Michael Borgstrom argues that in the novel passing is initially a strategy of survival and a subversive strategy for escape before Emancipation, but that the valence of passing changes: "After the war, whites routinely pathologized (black) cultural difference; in response, Harper's novel suggests that during Reconstruction blacks created community not by masking their political concerns but rather by publically asserting their loyalties to the race" (781). For Harper, unequivocal racial allegiance is necessary after the war.

is revealed later as Iola's uncle, refuses to pass when he joins the military to serve in the Civil War. As he explains to his white friend, Captain Sybil, when asked why he will not pass: "I think my place is where I am most needed" (43). For Robert, becoming a leader in the black company has more merit than gaining promotion. His nephew Harry, Iola's brother, makes a similar claim when he, too, refuses to pass for white after joining the army. He explains to Robert later that while he initially was hesitant to call himself black, "love for my mother overcame all repugnance on my part. Now that I have linked my fortunes to the race I intend to do all I can for its elevation" (203). In Iola's family, actively working for racial uplift becomes the alternative to passing for white. Robert goes so far as to claim "it would be treason, not only to the race, but to humanity, to have you ignoring your kindred and masquerading as a white man" (203). Through these characters, Harper equates passing with racial "treason," not only for its betrayal of the black family that would be left behind, but also for the lost opportunity to help the race as a whole.

Iola's refusal to pass is part of Harper's larger sustained argument against passing, and Harper exposes the limitations of the logic Olney applies in *An Imperative Duty* to justify Rhoda's passing. Like Olney before him, Dr. Gresham knows Iola's secret before he proposes marriage, and he, too, feels a similar sort of patronizing affection for her benighted race: "To him the negro was a picturesque being, over whose woes he had wept when a child, and whose wrongs he was ready to redress when a man [...] all the manhood and chivalry in his nature arose in her behalf, and he was ready to lay on the altar of her heart his first grand and overmastering love" (110). As Iola's husband, Gresham plans to protect her from the "woes" of blackness, sacrificing and enslaving himself in the process. Yet, as Birnbaum

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In fact, the only time Iola *does* pass after the realization of her ancestry is to gain employment when racial prejudice prevents her from finding work—and even this period of passing is short-lived.

argues, Gresham's desire to overcome racial boundaries through their marriage actually reinforces them:

Ironically, when Gresham argues that "no one has the right to interfere with our marriage if we do not infringe on the rights of others," he is invoking the legal prerogatives of personal contact (to be—or not to be—with whomever one chooses) undergirding the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling on separate-but-equal public accommodations. Both he and Olney believe that mutual silence—a "don't ask, don't tell" policy—ensures that miscegenation will "not infringe on the rights of others" potentially offended by interracial coupling. (14)

Both Olney and Gresham believe that they have the right to marry as they choose—so long as both women live as their white wives.

While Howells certainly endorses Olney's view of personal "prerogative" that Birnbaum describes, Harper satirizes this perspective. Like Rhoda, Iola feels "nervous depression" as a result of her secret—but without any of the accompanying temptation to succumb to Gresham's will (112). Whereas Rhoda resents blackness without ever having to suffer because of it, Iola is relegated to slavery (and the accompanying sexual vulnerability of that status) and suffers genuine effects of her new condition. Rather than drive her toward the safety of whiteness, however, the experience of slavery motivates Iola's dedication to black identity. Whiteness, from Iola's perspective, is morally inferior: "[I]n her lonely condition, with all its background of terrible sorrow and deep abasement, she had never for a moment thought of giving or receiving love from one of that race who had been so lately associated in her mind with horror, aversion, and disgust" (111). Dr. Gresham may be willing to overlook Iola's race, but she is unwilling to overlook his, rejecting him conclusively when she says, "I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment" (117).



As Frances Smith Foster notes, Harper was increasingly committed to civil rights work in her literature at the time of writing *Iola Leroy* (38). Despite its ostensible Reconstruction setting, *Iola Leroy* reflects Harper's contemporary radical civil rights agenda. The novel engages in what critic Gabrielle Foreman labels "histotextuality," or a strategy that "merg[es] past and present referents to effect change in an as yet not determined future [. . .] to direct social empathy and to model social intervention" (330). Harper, using contemporary and historical allusions, systematically condemns the racism of her era both in direct and indirect ways. Foreman notes in particular that though Iola is in some ways a typical sentimental heroine, her unusual name would resonate with her African American readers as the name of the popular newspaper column written by Ida B. Wells, the passionate anti-lynching activist (333). Attention to this allusion helps underscore Harper's heroine's underlying subversive potential; Iola Leroy has a political consciousness far beyond the helpless mulatta of Howells's novel.

Iola's underlying values are most evident in her relationship with Dr. Gresham. Rather than tearfully refuse her white suitor on grounds of her own inferiority, Iola frames her rejection of Dr. Gresham's proposal of marriage (and the passing it would entail) in terms of a competition of civilizations: "I believe the time will come when the civilization of the negro will assume a better phase than you Anglo-Saxons possess. You will prove unworthy of your high vantage ground if you only use your superior ability to victimize feebler races and minister to a selfish greed of gold and a love of domination" (116). Having fully accepted and identified with the black race, Iola condemns the Anglo-Saxon race in a way inconceivable in Howells's text and argues that her newfound race will advance beyond the moral hypocrisy of her former race. Harper, using the same terms of discourse that served

Howells in *An Imperative Duty* to argue for a generational evolution of racial development, transvalues the meanings of those terms by making the “scale of civilization” a question of ethics and justice in relationship to the (failed) national project of racial justice. When Iola’s mother Marie gives a lecture on the shame of American slavery, her theme is “American Civilization, its Lights and Shadows”—significantly echoing the subtitle of the novel: *Shadows Uplifted* (75). Though the “shadows” of American slavery should have lifted upon Emancipation, Iola and her family must continue to fight for racial uplift.

Despite the anti-racist goals of the novel, Harper’s reimagining of the racial hierarchy is no simple inversion of the racial binary. Like Howells, she uses a third racial group to argue for the impending rise of the black race. In addition to the moral rebuke of the Anglo-Saxon meant to undermine white supremacy, Harper also strategically emphasizes the relationship between the African American and the Native American in the American imaginary through direct comparison. By triangulating the black-white binary with the third presence of the Native American, Harper implies the comparative superiority of the African American on the scale of civilization because of the black race’s ability to assimilate and thrive in the U.S., even under the conditions of slavery.

Popular depictions of the Native American in the American imaginary at the turn of the twentieth century help explain why Harper chose to represent this group in a novel otherwise preoccupied with black-white relations after the Civil War. Despite very different historical trajectories, the “Indian Question” consisted of many of the same concerns about assimilation and separatism that Harper attempts to address for the future of her race. In *Removals: Nineteenth Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs*, Lucy Maddox argues that in the mid-nineteenth century Anglo Americans saw the fate of the

Native American as either assimilation to “white” civilization or outright racial extinction with few exceptions.<sup>37</sup> There was a belief that either of these options, extinction or absorption, would ultimately result in the death of Indian culture. Maddox summarizes the idea of the “vanishing Indian”:

The fated disappearance of the Indians, whether for good or for ill, became an increasingly popular subject in the literary magazines and in schoolbooks between 1830 and 1860. [...] literary magazines, similarly began to publish more and more sentimental eulogies for the vanishing Indian. (The dying Indian had already become established as a popular figure in sentimental poetry in both England and America by the late eighteenth century; however, these earlier representations tended to emphasize the Indians' stoical endurance of suffering, whereas the later efforts, significantly, more often presented the individual Indian's death as a synecdoche for the extinction of all North American Indians.) (31)

Even when romanticized as the “noble savage,” Maddox writes, “Indians had been safely sequestered in the historical past” (33). Images of Indians helped construct a sense of uniquely “American” identity, but these same images often served to exclude Native Americans from the contemporary nation and make the “stoical endurance of suffering” a convenient characteristic for Anglo domination. Critic Laura Doyle sees in this discourse an Indianism that is analogous in many ways to Morrison’s concept of Africanism, in which whiteness is produced by creating a racialized presence (6). Relegating the Native American to the “historic past,” white Americans gain mascots for American identity without needing to confront the ongoing issues of Native American rights.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>In contrast to the predominate ideas of assimilation and extinction as solutions to the Indian Question, Helen Hunt Jackson’s *A Century of Dishonor* (1881) and *Ramona* (1884) were books that attempted to reveal the extent of the injustice done to native peoples by the U.S. government. While *A Century of Dishonor* is an amateur history meant to document the outrages of Indian policy, *Ramona* is a novel that illustrated the injustice done to Native Americans as a result of Manifest Destiny. Ironically, the novel’s popularity helped garner support for the Dawes Act of 1887 that granted some Indians citizenship but ultimately undermined Indian land rights (Cashman 282-3).

<sup>38</sup>Popular images of the noble Indian masked the ongoing exploitation of the Native American population and theft of tribal lands. The 1880s saw a series of federal laws that chipped away at what remained of Indian sovereignty. The 1885 Supreme Court decision in *U.S. v. Kagama* ruled that Indians born on reservations were

Harper's novel challenges the romanticization of the Native American. Countering the common discourse that cast the Native American as proud and noble for resistance to Anglo domination in comparison to images of African Americans as weak and servile because of "submission" to slavery, Harper provides specific historical context to the differences of Native and African American experience. She recasts the comparison to stress the physical superiority of the African by citing the "stronger power of endurance" that led to African enslavement. When Robert, Iola's uncle and a former slave-turned Union soldier, discusses the history of the United States with Captain Sybil, he expresses surprise that the Native American was never enslaved. Captain Sybil replies in a monologue characteristic of the novel:

I have read that the Spaniards who visited the coasts of America kidnapped thousands of Indians, whom they sent to Europe and the West Indies as slaves. [...] The Indian had the lesser power of endurance, and Las Casas suggested the enslavement of the negro, because he seemed to possess greater breadth of physical organization and stronger power of endurance. Slavery was an old world's crime, which, I have heard, the Indians never practiced among themselves. Perhaps it would have been harder to reduce them to slavery and hold them in bondage when they had a vast continent before them, where they could hide in the fastnesses of its mountains or the seclusions of its forests [...] in dealing with the negro we wanted his labor; in dealing with the Indian we wanted his lands. (133-4)

While this didactic history lesson reaffirms Harper's argument about the exploitation of the African American at the hands of the Anglo-Saxon and extends this argument to acknowledge the oppression of the Native American, it also introduces a comparison of the

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not entitled to citizenship, yet certain crimes committed by Indians even if on reservations faced federal penalties according to the Major Crimes Act of 1885. The 1887 Dawes Act (also known as the General Allotment Act), designed to grant citizenship to Native Americans who agreed to renounce the reservation in exchange for a parcel of land, opened up tribal reservations for individual use which undermined Indian control of the land. Though the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 caused some public outcry, the policies of the 1880s had irrevocably undermined native rights by the time of Harper's novel. See John R. Wunder, *"Retained by the People": A History of American Indians and the Bill of Rights* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).

racism as if in answer to an implicit question behind the idea of unique black inferiority.<sup>39</sup>

Carefully contextualizing the material historical differences in circumstances to illustrate why Africans were enslaved as compared to the native populations, Harper transforms the idea of “endurance” into an African American strength rather than the “stoical” Indian strength Maddox describes.<sup>40</sup> Paradoxically, an underlying biological strength of the race led to black enslavement; it is this same strength, however, that Harper asserts will lead the emancipated race to greatness.

Careful to avoid framing the superiority of the African American in purely physical terms (a dangerous strategy during a period when scientific racism was in full force), Harper also includes a spiritual component to the potential for greatness in the black race. Robert bitterly reflects that Native Americans had not been “mixed up by our religion” as African Americans were because Native Americans were not “willing to give away all their lands on earth, and quietly wait for a home in heaven” (135). Yet, it is precisely this comparison that underlines the assimilation of African Americans into Christian society while highlighting Native American separation from the “American” religion. Though Robert frequently laments the hypocrisy of Anglo Christianity, Iola and other characters stress a uniquely African American version of Christianity as the hope of the race. Christianity, once removed

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<sup>39</sup>The Native American relationship to slavery is, of course, more complex than Harper describes. Since European contact (and before), Native Americans have been both slaves and slaveholders. The relationship between Indians and slavery varies based on time period, tribe, location, and circumstances. The history of relationships between Native Americans and African Americans is likewise complex. For an examination of some of the ways these groups have interacted in U.S. history, see *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America*, ed. James F. Brooks (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2002).

<sup>40</sup>Harper’s novel *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, published serially in the *Christian Recorder* in 1869, engages many of the ideas later developed again in *Iola Leroy*. *Minnie’s Sacrifice* likewise stresses the black power of “endurance,” but in the earlier novel, this characteristic is also linked to another formerly enslaved group, the Jews. One character argues that “[T]he Jews and Negroes have one thing in common, and that is their power of endurance. They, like the negro, have lived upon an idea, and that is the hope of deliverer yet to come; but I think this characteristic more strongly developed in the Jews than the Negroes” (30). Jews become a model of endurance and race pride for the newly freed slaves in Harper’s earlier novel.

from white supremacy, will be the salvation of the newly freed race. Despite the dominant privileging of the noble-but-doomed Native American, Harper stresses the physical and spiritual endurance of the African American and the race's ability to assimilate to the best of American civilization—without its shadows.

By the conclusion of the novel, Harper's initial contextualized treatment of African American and Native American trajectories succumbs to the "Vanishing Race" mythology as she tries to argue more forcefully for the rise and development of the African American. Despite his early appreciation for Native American resistance, Robert later says, "the Indian belongs to an old race and looks gloomily back to the past, and [...] the negro belongs to a young race and looks hopefully towards the future" (244). Bringing the discourse of the "Vanishing Indian" to the forefront in direct, explicit comparison to the African American, Harper posits through Robert and other characters that the African American will rise from the limitations of slavery and Reconstruction racism to contribute to "a far higher and better Christian civilization than our country has ever known" (255). The Indian, in comparison, is presented as culturally sterile and frozen in time. While both Howells and Harper propose a future in which African Americans contribute to the improvement of "American" civilization, Harper relegates another minority group—the Indian—to the past, whereas Howells was willing to envision a time when even the Irish would improve their stock.<sup>41</sup> These differences in projected racial trajectories of the Indian and the Irish are intimately tied to the ways each author imagines the future of the black race. Howells, despite his

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<sup>41</sup>Harper's rhetorical use of the Indian, though problematic, is not entirely dismissive throughout her writings. Her 1895 poem "The Present Age" presents the Indian as assimilating to American culture to join a future era where all racial injustice is remedied: "The Indian child from forests wild/Has learned to read and pray;/The tomahawk and scalping knife/ From him have passed away" (*Brighter* 341). Though her praise of Indian assimilation comes coded in the language of cultural death, Harper does include Native Americans in her vision of the future of the country.

condescension for the Irish, projects a time when they will be absorbed into a blanket American identity—an identity that he wants expanded to incorporate African Americans (even if he is unable to fulfill this ideal in his own narrative). Harper, on the other hand, tries to position the African American as much more inherently “American” than the Native American and thereby projects black advancement as the counterpoint to Indian stagnation and disappearance.

Harper’s deconstruction of the Indian-Negro comparison made by her white contemporaries was a familiar tactic in African American writing at the turn of the century. While the “positive” depictions of the noble savage may appear comparatively progressive, this discourse masked ongoing oppression and was often used to diminish African Americans. Anna Julia Cooper, in the same essay in which she rebukes Howells for his racist treatment of African Americans,<sup>42</sup> mocks the white construction of the Native American as superior to the African American:

The Indian, during the entire occupancy of this country by white men, has stood proudly aloof from all their efforts of development, and presented an unbroken front of hostility to the introduction and spread of civilization. The Negro, though, brought into the country by force and compelled under the lash to lend his brawn and sturdy sinews to promote its material growth and prosperity, nevertheless with perfect amiability of temper and adaptability of mental structure has quietly and unhesitatingly accepted its standards and fallen in line with its creeds. (143)

With characteristic bite, Cooper exposes the hypocrisy of privileging Indians for their perceived resistance to white domination while condemning the Negro for assimilating to white civilization, sarcastically concluding, “It *may* be nobler to perish redhanded, to kill as many as your battle axe holds out to hack and then fall with an exultant yell and savage grin of fiendish delight on the huge pile of bloody corpses” (143). She condemns the white worship of violence in this sympathy for “savage” Indians. Indian stereotypes are deployed

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<sup>42</sup>See Anna Julia Cooper, “The Negro as Presented in American Literature.”

as a tool in the argument against hypocritical white racism against blacks. The privileged position of the Native American in the white imaginary, Cooper argues, has material repercussions for African Americans as Anglo Americans focus on its “dishonorable and unkind treatment of *the Indian*” while the African American is “snubbed and chilled and made unwelcome” “when appropriations for education are talked of” (145). Though the Native American “privilege” of being the focus of white philanthropy is dubious, Cooper’s rhetorical strategy here, like Harper’s, nonetheless depends upon the triangulated comparison of black, white, and Indian relationships to illustrate the hypocrisy of white valorization of the Native American.

Unlike Cooper’s choice to strategically position Native Americans in negative contrast to African Americans, other African American authors of the period choose to express solidarity with the Indian in a way that could be viewed as a useful contribution to the nation by helping to solve the “Indian Question.” In *Up from Slavery* (1901), Booker T. Washington offers an account of the relationship between the Indian and the Negro as he highlights a common need to assimilate to white culture despite the cultural differences between the groups. Washington describes his fears of Indian prejudice against Negroes as he helps Native American students adapt to life at the Hampton Institute:

I knew that the average Indian felt himself above the white man, and, of course, he felt himself far above the Negro, largely on account of the fact of the Negro having submitted to slavery—a thing which the Indian would never do. [...] The things that they disliked most, I think, were to have their long hair cut, to give up wearing their blankets, and to cease smoking; but no white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language, and professes the white man’s religion. (97-8)

Though Washington expresses the concern that Indians scorn Negroes for their submission to slavery, it is ultimately the former slave who best can teach the Indian the ways of white



civilization as a racial intermediary. Publically committed to African American accommodationism, Washington sets about helping to “civilize the red men” from his position both inside and outside white society. Though Washington is seemingly expressing solidarity with American Indians, it is still in keeping with his assimilationist agenda. Like Howells, Washington ultimately hopes for an eventual merging of all races into a larger “American” culture, and his outreach to Native Americans serves to further that ideal.

Though Harper, like Washington, acknowledges the need to assimilate to white culture in order to be deemed “civilized,” her vision of the future as presented in *Iola Leroy* does not include a desire to create one larger amalgamated American race with every group fully integrated. Before she offers an alternative to the amalgamation model of *An Imperative Duty*, however, she explores the subject of biological absorption through the character of Dr. Gresham. Gresham argues for the advancement of the African American in a conversation with colleagues—but in a vein more reminiscent of Dr. Olney’s theories than of Iola’s hopes for an independently developed African American community. Gresham offers an argument stressing the march of human progress:

The negro [...] is not the only branch of the human race which has been low down in the scale of civilization and freedom, and which has outgrown the measure of his chains. Slavery, polygamy, and human sacrifices have been practiced among Europeans in bygone days; and when Tyndall tells us that out of savages unable to count to the number of their fingers and speaking only a language of nouns and verbs, arise at length our Newtons and Shakespeares, I do not see that the negro could not have learned our language and received our religion without the intervention of ages of slavery. (225-6)

Filtering an evolutionary argument of racial development through Dr. Gresham serves to give it the weight of scientific authority. Simultaneously underscoring the primitive origins of the European, Gresham praises Negro assimilation to “our” language and religion; his confidence in Negro assimilation explains his willingness to marry Iola despite her ancestry.

Gresham's confidence in white superiority echoes Olney, rather than Iola who ultimately rejects Gresham's idea (the lynchpin of *An Imperative Duty*) by refusing to marry him.

Yet, this underlying assurance of white superiority in Gresham's attitude also provides a surprising counter-argument to Dr. Gresham's southern colleague, Dr. Latrobe, whose assertions are purely white supremacist. Gresham undercuts Latrobe's arguments of white domination by declaring: "I have too much faith in the inherent power of the white race to dread the competition of any other people under heaven" (223). By framing his views as a competition of races, Gresham implies that Latrobe is too afraid of black potential to allow equal opportunity to all races.

Though Gresham's arguments work to counter the racism of Latrobe, his ideas (unlike those of his counterpart Olney) are not endorsed in the novel. Dr. Latimer, Iola's eventual husband who could also pass for white, supplants Gresham in both Iola's affections and as the masculine ideal. Latimer counters Latrobe's claims of white supremacy by pointing to the existence of miscegenation and the injustice of condemning black mothers while giving "absolution" to white fathers (228). Like Dr. Olney before him, Gresham supports Latimer's idea and further argues that "the final solution of this question will be the absorption of the negro into our race" (228). Latrobe dismisses this idea as absurd since "the taint of blood is there and we always detect it"—the crucial irony being, of course, that Dr. Latimer's tainted blood goes undetected in this scene (229). As Birnbaum notes, Latimer's superior knowledge undermines "the medical guardianship of white male authority" that was so central to in *An Imperative Duty* (12). Latrobe's arguments are deflated in the face of his inability to read the biological signs of race he believes exist during this conversation with Latimer.

As the frequent invocation of passing suggests, the racial competition that Harper asserts throughout the novel does not mean that she constructs the races as “pure.” Iola and her brother, uncle, and husband are all able to pass as white, yet they all decide against doing so. Harper constructs black identity as inclusive of multiracial people in a way that white identity is not. What *does* matter in Harper’s construction is that the mulatto subject identifies as black. Iola, the fair skinned heroine, becomes a passionate defender of the race, and even privileges the accomplishments of people of pure African descent as “a living argument for the capability which is in the race” because, as her brother points out, “it is not the white blood which is on trial before the world” (198). Iola and her creator are ever conscious of the cultural scrutiny the black race undergoes after Reconstruction.

Yet, Harper and her heroine are fully confident that the race will rise to meet the challenge. As Carby notes:

By the final chapters of *Iola Leroy*, white characters had virtually disappeared; the group of black intellectuals had become self-sufficient, self-contained, and independent of the parameters of white intellectual debate. All were embedded within black communities and committed to uplifting the folk. Harper’s novel was as much a part of that political program of uplift as her lectures and activism. Its didacticism was aimed at a black, not a white community, though her moral condemnation was clearly designed to move, though not depend on, white sympathies. (93)

The novel ends with a vision of a united, competent black leadership ready to move forward in the world and contribute to American civilization.<sup>43</sup> Harper concludes her narrative with a direct address to the audience, proclaiming that as “a new era” comes to pass, the African American will “rise in the scale of character and condition, and to add their quota of good citizenship to the best welfare of the nation” (282). Assimilating only to the best of American civilization without being “absorbed” by whiteness, Harper presents the possibility that black

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<sup>43</sup>Carby notes in her introduction to the novel that Harper’s novel in many ways prefigures Du Bois’s later theory of the “talented tenth.” (xx).

racial uplift will create a better country, one that achieves a higher moral standard than the one currently in existence, for, as one character asserts, “compared with other races, the outlook was not hopeless” (254).

To argue for the full realization of black citizenship after Reconstruction, Howells and Harper position mulatta heroines within a triangulated racial landscape to challenge the dominant black-white binary opposition of race in the U.S. By allowing his heroine to live as a white woman at the end of his novel, thereby inverting “one-drop” and seemingly rejecting some forms of American bigotry, Howells nonetheless uses nativism against the Irish to counter bias against the African American. His nativism, however, does not extend to keeping the “American race” separate from immigrants because even so-called “white ethnics” like the Irish must one day be absorbed. Significantly, Harper’s vision of race is seemingly more separatist than Howells’s with each racial group in competition. Harper rejects Howells’s solution to the problem of racism because to be “absorbed” into the majority population would amount to a cultural death reminiscent of that of the “vanishing” race; she prefers a vision of a level playing field that would allow each racial group to evolve to its own capabilities. Yet, Harper’s construction is not purely essentialist: underlying her construction of race is a belief in a morally-motivated, voluntary unity against racial injustice. Pride and righteous indignation prevent Iola Leroy from returning to the white race after emancipation. Both authors triangulate race as a means of positioning African Americans as an integral part of the nation, yet, ironically, these reimaginings hinge on the denigration of other marginalized groups. Despite the contradictions and failings of each author’s strategies, Howells and Harper tried to forward the unfulfilled project of equal black

citizenship promised by emancipation even as this idealism was soon to be put on hold indefinitely with the codification of Jim Crow in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

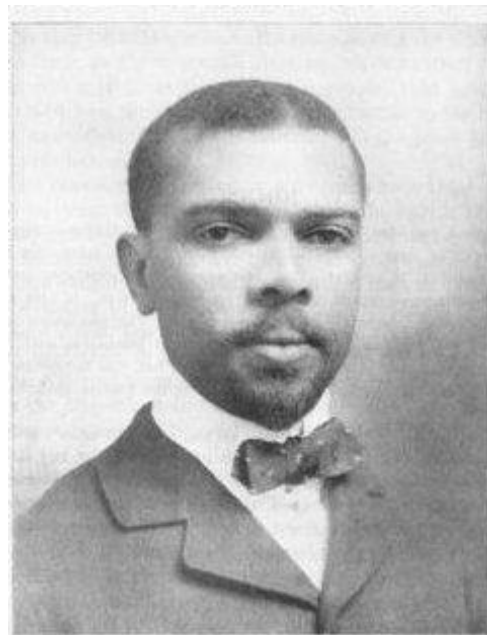
## **Chapter Two**

### **From Local Competition to Global Solidarity: James Weldon Johnson, Citizenship, and the Rhetoric of the Color Line**

As William Dean Howells and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper argued against encroachment on the rights of citizenship for African Americans, the United States was embarking on a new phase of imperial conquest beyond the continental borders of North America that would infinitely complicate the relationship between race and citizenship at home and abroad. After the brief war with Spain in 1898 (followed by a much more prolonged war with the Philippines), the Treaty of Paris granted the U.S. control of the former Spanish colonies, including Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and Cuba. Despite the seeming success of this imperial conquest, the relationship between the new territories and the rest of the continental nation was unclear. The uncertain status of these newly colonized people was a source of great cultural anxiety—just as African and Native American status continued to trouble the bounds of citizenship in the white imaginary.

In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, cultural and racial anxiety around these “new” Americans became something black writers and activists had to grapple with as they continuously re-shaped their arguments for greater African American civil rights. While predominately defined by his domestic civil rights advocacy, James Weldon Johnson and his writings continually and consistently reflect a cosmopolitan engagement with Latin American concerns. The influence of Latin America on Johnson, as an author, an activist, and as the leader of the NAACP, is often overlooked despite his seven year career as an

American consul in Central and South America. Indeed, Johnson begins his autobiography, *Along This Way*, by locating the origins of his family history not in the United States, as most African American writers do, but in the Caribbean.<sup>44</sup> As national racial policies began to be applied internationally, Johnson's work reflects an engagement with a wider sphere of civil rights concerns and begins to show a greater awareness of the interconnections between racial groups in the U.S. and abroad.



*Figure 6: James Weldon Johnson*

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<sup>44</sup>Johnson begins with a description of his maternal great-grandmother's flight from Haiti for Cuba after Haitian independence from France. Captured by the British, Johnson's grandmother ended up in the Bahamas where her son married a girl descended from another woman who had also been hijacked by the British on her way to slavery in Brazil. Though both of Johnson's maternal great-grandfathers were presumably white colonizers, any tensions about this fact are romanticized in family history, with Johnson lamenting that he did not know more about the "picturesque old sinner" that was his grandfather (4). By contrast to the boisterous Caribbean family history on his mother's side, Johnson knew little of his father's U.S. born family, noting only that his father was "born a freeman in Richmond, Virginia, August 26, 1830."

Nowhere are these parallel struggles for legal recognition seen more clearly than in the decisions of the United States Supreme Court at this time that sought to reify American identity as white. Just as *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1896) had codified the “one-drop” rule and affirmed Jim Crow, greatly undermining the advances toward black citizenship during Reconstruction, the 1901 case *Downes v. Bidwell* left newly colonized Puerto Ricans in a precarious legal position. While the case was ostensibly about the legal trade relationships between the U.S. and Puerto Rico,<sup>45</sup> the court ultimately ruled, in the words of Justice Edward D. White, “that while in an international sense Porto Rico was not a foreign country, since it was subject to the sovereignty of and was owned by the United States, it was foreign to the United States in a domestic sense, because the island had not been incorporated into the United States, but was merely appurtenant thereto as a possession” (182 U.S. 244, 341-342). The results of this ruling left Puerto Ricans in citizenship limbo that made them both part of the American empire yet also apart from the nation.<sup>46</sup> Problematically both inside and outside the nation in this construction, Puerto Ricans were unequivocally Other. Not until the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917 would Puerto Ricans be granted U.S. citizenship.

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<sup>45</sup>When Samuel Downes was required to pay foreign import duties on oranges brought from Puerto Rico to New York City, he sued George R. Bidwell, a customs inspector, on the grounds that Puerto Rico was part of the U.S. and therefore exempt from import duties according to the Constitution. The case was heard before the Supreme Court in January of 1901.

<sup>46</sup>As in *Plessey v. Ferguson*, Justice Harlan authored a dissent. On the grounds that denying Puerto Ricans full protection under the Constitution undermines the very authority of the Constitution itself, Harlan argued:

If Porto Rico, although a territory of the United States, may be treated as if it were not a part of the United States, then New Mexico and Arizona may be treated as not parts of the United States, and subject to such legislation as Congress may choose to enact without any reference to the restrictions imposed by the Constitution. The admission that no power can be exercised under and by authority of the United States except in accordance with the Constitution is of no practical value whatever to constitutional liberty, if, as soon as the admission is made,—as quickly as the words expressing the thought can be uttered,—the Constitution is so liberally interpreted as to produce the same results as those which flow from the theory that Congress may go outside of the Constitution in dealing with newly acquired territories, and give them the benefit of that instrument only when and as it shall direct. (182 U.S. 244, 389)



As Amy Kaplan argues, in *Downes v. Bidwell*, the justices were looking to provide continuity from the nation's romantic belief in its own anti-colonial past to justify its imperial present (94), and the Court found a convenient parallel in the legal status of Native Americans as domestic foreigners:

The justices insisted that, legally, the treatment of Indians in conquered territories did not provide a precedent for the status of Puerto Ricans, who were prior subjects of Spain. Yet the language of *Downes vs. Bidwell* resonates with the landmark decision of *Cherokee v. the State of Georgia* in 1831, which rendered Indians as members of "domestic dependent nations," foreign to the rights guaranteed by states and territories, but domestic for federal purposes. As "alien races," Puerto Ricans were rendered "foreign" in the "domestic sense" by their perceived resemblance to alien races deemed to be incapable of self-government at home. The threat of millions of aliens incorporated by the U.S. empire was both amplified and muted through the domestic analogies of Indian-white relations, slavery and immigration. (10)

Furthermore, the majority opinions in *Downes* also frequently cite *United States v. Kagama*, the 1886 decision which upheld the Major Crimes Act of 1885 that made certain crimes committed on Indian reservations subject to federal jurisdiction. Though Indians born on reservations were not entitled to U.S. citizenship, they nonetheless were subject to U.S. federal law (Danzinger 163). Race (or, in the case of Puerto Ricans, ethnicity conflated with racial difference) becomes the unspoken, yet undeniable, factor in determining who becomes a citizen as the U.S. expands its reach, and the legal oppression of one race becomes a model for the legal oppression of another.

As the intersecting citizenship claims of Native Americans and Puerto Ricans in *Downes* illustrates, no racial or ethnic group under Anglo American domination existed in a vacuum. Despite the persistent mythology that posits turn-of-the-century race relations as primarily a struggle between black and white, the very legal foundations of institutional racism in the U.S. present a more complicated matrix of race and ethnicity. Johnson, from the very beginning of his career as a writer and activist, acknowledges this varied racial

landscape. In his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Johnson questions the predominately binary discussion of race by making Native Americans and Latinos central to the development of his novel and his arguments for greater African American civil rights.

Though the novel has received much scholarly attention, critics almost exclusively focus on the black-white relationships in the text. This perspective ignores the complex representations of other positions outside the racial binary in the novel. Written while Johnson served as consul in Venezuela, the novel follows the unnamed narrator as he travels around the U.S. and Europe trying to find a place to belong. The son of a black mother and a white father, the ex-colored man is able to change his personality to blend into his surroundings, allowing Johnson to explore constructions of racial identity and to interrogate the inconsistencies of U.S. racial logic.

Like Harper before him, Johnson positions Indians as culturally inferior to African Americans. He lays out a theory of African American cultural potential through his narrator's artistic journey of racial discovery. Native Americans become a crucial counterpoint to Johnson's theory of cultural apotheosis by symbolizing cultural stagnation and death. Despite his strategic choice to negatively depict Indians in the text, Johnson positions Latino identification as an alternative to an exclusively black or white identity. When the unnamed narrator works for a time in a cigar factory in Florida with Cuban immigrants who support the Cuban fight for independence from Spain, he finds a temporary way out of his biracial dilemma. By identifying with a specific national group whose background is mestizo and largely racially ambiguous,<sup>47</sup> the narrator assimilates to a lifestyle beyond the confines of Jim

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<sup>47</sup>Because of the extent of the historic intermingling of African, European, and indigenous populations in Cuban, historian Ted Henken explains that racial definition in Cuba was often the inverse of the U.S. "one-

Crow that gives him a short-lived peace. Cuban immigrants provide Johnson's narrator with an alternative paradigm that is particularly well-suited for a racially-conflicted mulatto.

However, the irony of the ex-colored man's disdain for the Native American and affinity for another group with mestizo roots highlights the limitations of Johnson's attempts at interethnic and international solidarity in the novel.

Despite his early desires for a career as a diplomat, Johnson shows in his writings his interest in examining interethnic collaboration to reveal the connections between Jim Crow racism and U.S. imperialism in Latin American and the Caribbean. U.S. foreign policy, Johnson feared, merely transplanted American racism abroad. His anti-imperial critiques culminate in his essays and activism dedicated to the liberation of Haiti, a nation he viewed as an important symbol of black self-determination. Though his rhetorical strategies vary from a hesitant embrace to outright denunciation of imperialism, and his presentation of interethnic cooperation moves from hostile to collaborative, Johnson's underlying, unwavering commitment to black rights ultimately determined his willingness to promote an internationalist ethos at various points in his career.

### **“A Useful Tool”: The Domestic Competition of Cultures in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man***

In many respects, Johnson begins his lifelong fight against racism by adopting the techniques and strategies of his literary predecessors and merging them with new concepts.

As demonstrated in Howells's and Harper's novels, the power of scientific racism was best

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drop” rule: “Indeed, if there is a Cuban equivalent to the ‘one-drop rule,’ it is that ‘one-drop’ of European blood/ancestry defines a person as non-Black” (352). While the celebration of mestizo identity was embraced by early nationalists like José Martí, this inverse of “one-drop” has parallel racist implications: “Thus, while in the United States, “Black” has been categorized as distinct from (and inferior to) pure whiteness, in Cuba, the tradition has been to measure oneself in terms of degree of distance from (and superiority to) pure blackness” (352).

undermined by attacking the supposed biology behind race. Just as the ideas of the characters Dr. Olney and Dr. Gresham serve to counter the pseudo-science of African American atavism and racial inferiority, so, too, do the mulatta heroines, Rhoda Aldgate and Iola Leroy, counter notions of racial purity. When Johnson wrote his novel about a mulatto light enough to pass, he had a tradition of passing narratives to draw from, as well as new, powerful evidence with which to counter the “science” of race. In *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), anthropologist Franz Boas not only tried to challenge the “scientific” rationales for racism, he argued that race is based upon the illusion of purity. Racial purity, he contends, requires “conditions [that] are never realized in human types and impossible in large populations” because the history of racial interaction has prevented the complete isolation of races (227). By stressing the significance of human migration and intermingling, Boas deflates the notion of pure race, much as the figure of the mulatto often works to subvert the premise underlying the idea of racial hierarchies.

To diminish the importance of race as a category, Boas emphasizes instead the significance of civilization as a means by which to explain differences between human groups. Boas argues that different civilizations cannot be conflated with any one racial group because civilization itself is the result of the migration and intermingling of many peoples and many cultures by way of shared “ideas and inventions” (22). By stressing the contribution of multiple races to the development of modern civilization, Boas radically subverts the notion that the highest forms of civilization are attached exclusively to white Europeans, as his contemporaries Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard argued.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>While Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920) used anthropology to undergird scientific racism, David W. Southern notes that Boas’s study was “often hailed as the Magna Charta of the darker races” (55).

But even in this “race-less” concept of civilization, a new hierarchy (correlative to race) nevertheless emerges. Scholars have long noted what Vernon J. Williams, Jr., calls the “Boasian Paradox”—the seeming “contradiction between [Boas’s] egalitarian sentiments and his recontextualization of traditional European and American physical anthropology” (6).<sup>49</sup> Instead of a strictly racial hierarchy, then, Boas creates a hierarchy of civilizations in which the “primitives” represent the objects of implied inferiority and are characterized as “petrified at an early stage of development” (22). American Indians bear the brunt of inferiority in this new system of human organization in many of Boas’s illustrations.<sup>50</sup> While Boas thus attempts to reject the biological justification for racial discrimination (and even goes so far as to challenge the very notion of “progress” when evaluating cultures (187)), he creates a new hierarchy in which the racial implications remain concealed within the terms of “primitive” and “civilized,” effectively recoding race.

Despite these limitations, Boas’s work was a very powerful blow to racial “scientists” at the turn of the century. Like Boas, W.E.B. Du Bois had seized upon the concept of “civilization” as a tool for unsettling the prevailing racial hierarchies in the U.S. In his influential address, “The Conservation of the Races,” delivered before the American Negro Academy in 1897, Du Bois transformed the language and vocabulary of scientific racism into

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<sup>49</sup> Although Boas’s overall argument is constructed against racism, he cannot distance himself from his anthropological training:

[I]n comparison with the skull, the face of the Negro is larger than that of the American Indian, whose face is, in turn, larger than that of the White. The lower portion of the Negro face has larger dimensions [...] which reminds us of the higher apes. There is no denying that this feature is a most constant character of the black races, and that it represents a type slightly nearer the animal than the European type. (101)

He tries to lessen the racist implications of his cranial measurements with qualified language, but, by locating the Negro closer to the “higher apes” and Europeans farther from this category, Boas contradicts his desired goal of unsettling the discourse of racial hierarchy.

<sup>50</sup> In one instance, Boas compares the proud Indian of pre-European America to his “degenerate offspring” and, in another, claims that though “the Indians of California produce excellent technical and artistic work, [they] show no corresponding complexity in other aspects of their lives” (179; 180).

a theoretical construct that stressed the contributions of all races to the formation of civilization. Appropriating “race” as a scientific construction, Du Bois nevertheless revised its received definition by privileging culture over biology. Race, as Du Bois defined it, “is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (40). Significantly, although Du Bois includes “blood” as a basis for race, it functions as one of many factors.<sup>51</sup>

Instead of the bonds of blood, Du Bois stresses the bonds of common purpose. For Du Bois, each race has “its particular ideal” that, once realized, will constitute its gift to the world. Not only does this ideal become the goal of each race, but Du Bois argues further that “some of the great races of today—particularly the Negro race—have not as yet given to civilization the full spiritual message which they are capable of giving” (42). Du Bois calls for black Americans to unify in order to achieve their full potential and share their gift with the world. The radical implication here is that once Negroes have proven the value of their race, they will be able to claim equal status with those racial groups who have already achieved their cultural purpose. As in Boas and Harper, the figure of the Indian plays a vital rhetorical role in this discourse of racialized civilizations. Du Bois brushes aside American Indians in “The Conservation of the Races” by designating them as a “minor race” (41). The

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<sup>51</sup>Historian Tommy L. Lott comments that for Du Bois “group loyalty need not rely on a biological essentialism, given that most African Americans are of mixed blood. As a criterion of group identity, he proposed to give culture a greater weight than physical characteristics” (60). Du Bois takes race beyond biology and blood, and into the realm of the discourse of civilization, with its bonds of language, history, and traditions. Du Bois reconstructs a new definition that denies the ultimate significance of biology, and thereby allows race to exist without the ties of biological inferiority or superiority, changing the value of the racial hierarchy altogether.

implication of Du Bois's theory is that a "minor" race would have less to contribute than a "great" race like that of the Negro.

Du Bois's emphasis on the importance of black cultural contributions greatly influenced Johnson's novel, with the nameless narrator expressing ideas that would not seem out of place in Du Bois's famous address. While the reliability of the ex-colored man as narrator is often questionable,<sup>52</sup> he does reflect the ideas of both Du Bois and Johnson in his assessment of the Native American contribution to American civilization. Johnson expanded on this notion in an editorial entitled "The Imitative Negro" published in the *New York Age* on September 21, 1918:

It is the ability to imitate and assimilate that has made it possible for the Negro in the United States to outdistance the American Indian in the race. The Indian, in spite of his advantages and opportunities, remains an Indian. The Negro, in spite of his handicaps and obstacles has become an American. The Negro is American in language, customs, mode of thought and religion. The Indian is still just about as much of a savage as the law allows him to be. (Wilson 172)<sup>53</sup>

Locating Native Americans as inferior on the scale of civilization, Johnson also constructs this group as "less" American because of their resistance to assimilation into white American culture. Johnson represents the American Indian, in effect, as the "un-American Other."

Eugene Levy notes that Johnson, in order to emphasize black contributions to society,

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<sup>52</sup>From Robert E. Fleming's 1971 article "Irony as Key to Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" to Neil Brooks's 1995 postmodern reading "On Becoming an Ex-Man: Postmodern Irony and the Extinguishing of Certainties in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," critics of the novel have often taken up the issue of how to interpret the views of the anonymous narrator. Brooks concludes that the "complex intertextuality, which underscores the shifting identity of the narrator, does not keep the novel from expressing clear messages concerning race and passing, but insists that part of that message, and certainly the irony, in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, must remain suspenseful, irresolvable" (27).

<sup>53</sup>The focus of this 1918 essay echoes a passage from *The Autobiography* in which the ex-colored man reflects upon the adaptability of the Negro: "I have seen the black West Indian gentleman in London, and he is in speech and manners a perfect Englishman. I have seen natives of Haiti and Martinique in Paris, and they are more Frenchy than a Frenchman. I have no doubt that the Negro would make a good Chinaman, with exception of the pigtail" (112). Johnson's emphasis on the strength of black adaptability reflects a belief in the formative impact of culture on identity. Privileging cultural assimilation works to argue against the dominant belief in the biological determinism of race.

“thought of nativism as at least a useful tool to gain his ends” and would treat other ethnic groups negatively to make his points (157). In a similar way, Johnson treats Native Americans as foreigners from within and deploys the same nativist rhetorical strategy to create another “Other”—one in opposition to the dominant construct of the Indian as the icon of American identity. By casting the Indian as Other, Johnson establishes national identification and assimilation as ways that might transvalue the dominant racial hierarchy.

Johnson’s strategic use of Native Americans stems from two interconnected concerns. One source of tension between Native and African Americans was the discrepancy in treatment by white Americans. Though racial difference was cited as the basis for discrimination in the South, the color line was often predicated on more than color alone. In *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington recounts a scene on a steamboat: “The man in charge politely informed me that the Indian could be served, but that I could not. I never could understand how he knew just where to draw the colour line, since the Indian and I were of about the same complexion” (102). In this case, Native Americans, though the same physical color, benefit from *not* being African American. This seeming “privilege,” however, had a down side as well. Native Americans were, in many respects, less threatening to white identity. By the turn of the twentieth century the Indian population was both lower than the black population and in less contact with the white population because of nineteenth century policies of Indian removal. Johnson opposes African Americans with Native Americans to point to the moral inconsistency of Jim Crow applying exclusively to African Americans and to argue against segregation by stressing African American efforts of assimilation.

In his 1912 novel, published six years earlier, Johnson exploits this view of the Native American in order to elevate the status of African Americans. Johnson’s strategy is to first



disorganize and then reconstruct the order of the dominant racial hierarchy. While he is at first repulsed by the “loud talk and laughter” of Southern Negroes, the narrator learns to appreciate the American Negro dialect. Further, he considers the “ability to laugh heartily” as “the salvation of the American Negro” that “keep[s] him from *going the way of the Indian*” (emphasis added, 40). Johnson thus invokes the common stereotype of the stoic Indian in order to demonstrate the superiority of the stereotypically “happy” Negro. “Going the way of the Indian,” significantly, draws on the discourse of the “vanishing race.” If the Indian is doomed for want of spirit, the Negro’s endurance deserves recognition and respect.

The ex-colored man’s second reference to the Native American makes explicit the link between the scale of civilization and so-called Indian inferiority. Cataloging the four major contributions of African Americans to American culture—namely the Uncle Remus stories, the Jubilee songs, the cake-walk, and ragtime—the narrator concludes that “the [black] race has been a world influence; and *all of the Indians between Alaska and Patagonia haven’t done as much*” (emphasis added, 63-4). By setting the American Negro in opposition to this allegedly “minor” race, ex-colored man not only glorifies the accomplishments of his people, but also reverses the dominant racial hierarchy—locating the Native American on the lowest rung of the racial ladder. In thus devaluing the Native American for his alleged lack of contribution to the formation of American culture, the ex-colored man repositions blackness in the hierarchy of the dominant racial discourse.

In *Along This Way*, his 1933 autobiography, Johnson describes a “well received” speech he gave in 1917 to the Intercollegiate Socialist Society that echoes the earlier novel’s theme of the contributions of the Negro to American culture; he also acknowledges the seeming insult to other ethnic groups implicit in his earlier argument:

In making the original statement I certainly had no intention of disparaging the accomplishments of other groups, the aboriginal Indians and the white groups. The Indians have wrought finely, and what they have done sprang from the soil of America; but it must be admitted that their art-creations have in no appreciable degree permeated American life. In all the white groups have wrought, there is no artistic creation—with the exception noted above [i.e. skyscrapers]—born of the physical and spiritual forces at work peculiarly in America, none has made a universal appeal as something distinctively American. (327)

Despite this mitigating apology, even as late as 1933, Johnson persists in using epideictic rhetoric not simply to argue for equal appreciation of African Americans in U.S. culture but for cultural superiority. The moments of nuanced complexity of Harper's awareness of historical, material differences in her comparison of the Indian and Negro in *Iola Leroy* are absent from Johnson's theory of racialized contributions to American civilization. Johnson's vision of black uplift is tightly linked to a comparative "scale of civilization."

In a scene reminiscent of Harper's dialogue-heavy novel, the ex-colored man overhears a conversation among four men on a train: a Jewish cigar manufacturer, a Yankee professor, an old Union soldier, and a Texas cotton planter. While the Jewish businessman handles the question of race with "diplomacy" and the Yankee professor is an apologist for Jim Crow, the Union veteran argues for "equal rights and opportunity for all men" to the racist Texan. The old soldier expresses Johnson's adopted idea of a scale of civilization, when he asks the Texan:

Can you name a single one of the great fundamental and original intellectual achievements which have raised man in the scale of civilization that may be credited to the Anglo-Saxon? The art of letter, of poetry, of music, of sculpture, or painting, of the drama, of architecture; the science of mathematics, of astronomy, of philosophy, of logic, of physics, of chemistry, the use of the metals, and the principles of mechanics, were all invented or discovered by darker and what we now call inferior races and nations [...] We are a great race, the greatest in the world today, but we ought to remember that we are standing on a pile of past races, and enjoy our position with a little less show of arrogance. (118-119)

Though the ex-colored man disparages the Native American to place the Negro in a comparatively better light, Johnson, like Harper before him, deploys the “scale of civilization” rhetoric to counter the absolute assumption of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. While the narrator of the novel is unable to divorce himself from his internalized belief in white supremacy, Johnson systematically argues each side of the argument to diminish, and even deflate, the rhetoric of white racism.

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Johnson’s narrator finds one possible solution to the problem of the color line in the promotion of black culture on a global scale, an idea that again reflects the depth of influence Du Bois’s “The Conservation of the Races” had on Johnson’s thought. The narrator’s highest aspirations are to fulfill the cultural project proposed by Du Bois as a means of gaining full recognition for African Americans within U.S. culture. The narrator explicitly cites Du Bois’s “remarkable book” *The Souls of Black Folk* as the beginning of the realization of his dream of a new Negro art form. Envisioning ragtime as a way to promote respect for African American culture, the ex-colored man explains, “[T]here is not a corner of the civilized world in which it is not known” (73). The narrator seeks to elevate ragtime into a music that will “voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form” (108). In blending the black vernacular music with the “classic” music of the West, the ex-colored man strives to unsettle the boundaries between these traditions, thus disrupting the dominant Western aesthetic hierarchy. This new music would reconstruct a new aesthetic that blends the traditions of both African American and white cultures; the ex-colored man’s investment in the success of this project of merged musical aesthetics has a corollary in his own multiracial subjectivity. Bringing African American ragtime together with European classical music to

create a new contribution to world culture would seem to vindicate the ex-colored man's own existence. His project of musical unification is the creation of mulatto music, and he believes that this cultural creation could be greater than the sum of its parts. The ex-colored man's aesthetic project, then, counterpoints the larger political project of the narrative; and both function to reimagine the racial hierarchy and further the cause of black uplift.<sup>54</sup>

While gathering information for his new music project, however, the ex-colored man witnesses the lynching of a black man, an act which shakes his dedication to his race. In response, the narrator explicitly appropriates the discourse of civilization to condemn the violence he witnessed: "A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only *civilized*, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive" [emphasis added] (137). He disorganizes the dominant hierarchy by calling into question the status of white America on the "scale of civilization." The supposedly "civilized" white race is truly "primitive" in its bestial treatment of black Americans, suggesting that whites do not deserve their privileged position in the hierarchy. Here Johnson devaluates the Anglo-Saxon in order to give African Americans higher moral status (even as his narrator internalizes the racism he witnesses). Johnson performs a "double" revision of the dominant hierarchy by relocating first the Native American and then the Anglo-American; in so doing, he rejects the terms of the dominant discourse. Johnson's larger narrative strategy is to use transvaluation to secure a

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<sup>54</sup>While critic Harilaos Stecopoulos provocatively argues that Johnson equates his narrator with imperialists of color who "remake themselves at the expense of black people throughout the Americas," his argument hinges on the ex-colored man's racial musical project as a cynical act of cultural imperialism (38). Stecopoulos (2007: 50, 53), citing the ex-colored man's imperially-informed description of ragtime as a "world conquering influence," also highlights the ex-colored man's inauthentic claims to black music that would require he "gloatingly steal" the raw materials for his project. But to argue for the ex-colored man's project as an inauthentic form of cultural imperialism ignores that in many respects the South was already a site of colonization, and southern culture – like the ex-colored man himself – is its hybrid product.

higher status for the African American while still working within the dominant racial framework.

The limitations of Johnson's rhetorical strategy for black uplift in the text are revealed in the vulnerable position of the Native American in the U.S. imaginary at this time. As historian Thomas Bender argues, the precarious legal status of the Native American becomes a model for American imperialist adventures abroad during the Spanish-American War that would justify the spread of American racism:

There were, in fact, all too many precedents for the United States to become a colonial power. [...]The closest "domestic" analogy was the government's treatment of Native Americans, which provided a model for establishing the legal standing of colonial subjects. They were legally "nationals" owing allegiance to the United States but not as citizens. Harry Pratt Judson, future president of the University of Chicago, argued that Filipinos would hold the "same status precisely as our own Indians...They are in fact, 'Indians.'" The Harvard historian Albert Bushnell Hart (who served as W.E.B. Du Bois's dissertation advisor) agreed with these views. The United States was already a "great colonial power," he observed, for "our Indian agents have a situation very like that of British officials in the native states of India." (222)

The legal status of the Indian thus becomes a model for imperialist domination of other peoples of color around the world. The imperialist campaign of the United States positioned people of color against white domination both at home and abroad, adding fuel to a burgeoning internationalist movement. Though Johnson strategically positions the African American against the example of the Native American, his relationship to these new "family" members is much more ambiguous. Though in his novel he sets up barriers to black and Indian alliance, newly arrived Cubans offer Johnson an alternative perspective of interethnic alliance.

**The Ever-Expanding South:  
James Weldon Johnson and “Color-Conscious Internationalism”**

Though the ex-colored man frequently maligns the Native American in attempts to reposition African American status in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, his author's treatment of Latinos is much more conciliatory. Johnson's parallel interests in civil rights in the U.S. and in the politics of the larger hemisphere offer an opportunity to move beyond a strictly national perspective in examining race at the turn of the twentieth century. His body of work reveals how the international dynamics of racial oppression operate when placed in a hemispheric context. As Latino/a critics Edna Acosta-Belén and Carlos E. Santiago argue in “Merging Borders: The Remapping of America,” there is a need for greater efforts to “extend the cultural parameters of analysis beyond those already imposed by spurious geographic national frontiers or constructed boundaries” as a way to explore “the cultural and racial diversity of the Americas – North and South – two intricate multicultural and multiracial spheres where we find diverse populations bound by a shared legacy of colonialism, racism, displacement, and dispersion” (29). While choosing not to acknowledge a “shared legacy” of racist oppression with Native Americans, Johnson reaches across geographical borders to illustrate African American solidarity with Latinos because of the spread of Jim Crow racism abroad.

At the same time, though he was deeply committed to defeating racism, Johnson's relationship to U.S. imperialism was vexed. Despite concerns about actions abroad after the Spanish-American War, he actively engaged in furthering national military and economic interests in Latin America when he served in the U.S. consulates. In 1906, using his knowledge of Spanish to further his career ambitions and with the help of Booker T. Washington, Johnson became the U.S. consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. In 1909, the

consulate transferred him to Corinto, Nicaragua, where he played a role in protecting American interests during the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1912; the handover of Corinto to U.S. marines marked the beginning of three decades of occupation of the country. While Johnson himself served as an agent of American imperialism, his attitudes toward U.S. intervention were complicated and often contradictory.

Before joining the consulate, Johnson, with his brother Rosamond, wrote a comic opera called *Tolosa* about an American naval officer who romances a native girl on an island in the Pacific while attempting to annex it. Speculating on why the opera was never produced, Johnson wrote in his autobiography: “the managers were a bit afraid of it; the Spanish-American War had just closed, and they may have thought that audiences would consider a burlesque of American imperialism as unpatriotic” (151). Yet, despite an irreverent stance on U.S. imperialism in his art, Johnson nonetheless sought a political position in Latin America. He hoped to make a career in the diplomatic corps, eventually serving in Europe; but the nomination of Woodrow Wilson signaled the end of any future for Johnson in the consulate. As Wilson’s Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryant, made clear, only loyal Democrats would receive choice positions. Johnson bitterly notes in his autobiography, “I was up against politics plus race prejudice ... I came to the definite conclusion that life was too short for me to spend eight more years of it in Corinto” (293).

While Johnson’s experience of the international dimensions of American racial politics expanded during his time as a diplomat, his reputation as a “race-man,” committed to fighting the racial inequality of Jim Crow segregation, stemmed from his southern upbringing in Florida. During his childhood in Jacksonville, FL, with its large, active Cuban community centered on the cigar industry, exposure to Latinos disrupted the binary idea of

race in the South as either black or white. Jacksonville provided relative autonomy and opportunity for the African American and Cuban community at that time.<sup>55</sup> As a child, Johnson learned Spanish from his father who taught himself to speak the language in order “to increase his value as a hotel employee” (17). The Johnson children became fluent when a Cuban boy named Ricardo Rodriguez came to live with the family.<sup>56</sup> This important friendship and his multicultural southern childhood greatly impacted Johnson’s life and work.

Johnson’s childhood in Jacksonville and his adult experiences in Latin America influenced the racial logic of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. In contrast to the rigid segregation the ex-colored man finds elsewhere in his travels through the South, the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation become crossed in Jacksonville, which creates an Afro-Cuban community in multiple respects.<sup>57</sup> In Jacksonville, the ex-colored man finds a vibrant community with African Americans living – and marrying – Cuban immigrants. He goes to live in a boardinghouse owned by a Cuban man and his African American wife.

Though identified as Cuban, the landlord is “light-colored” with “a handsome black

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<sup>55</sup>Only later in his life did Johnson perceive a change in the racial climate of the city: “Jacksonville is today a one hundred per cent Cracker town, and each time I have been back there I have marked greater and greater changes” (45). Johnson’s happy childhood memories are overwhelmed by experiences of discrimination while a young man. When he is nearly lynched by an angry crowd for talking to a woman they perceive to be white, he decides to leave Jacksonville “as quickly as possible” (170).

<sup>56</sup>In *Along This Way*, Johnson recounts that an elegant Cuban gentleman named Ricardo Ponce “had come to Jacksonville to find a family with which a Cuban boy in whom he was very much interested in might live and learn English” (58-9). Ricardo Rodriguez, who later takes the name Ponce, lives with the Johnsons and even follows James to Atlanta University where the two are roommates. Ricardo later decides to drop out of college and instead travels with Rosamond Johnson to Boston. Though financially supported with money from Cuba, Ricardo remained close to the Johnson brothers even after reaching adulthood.

<sup>57</sup>The ex-colored man’s time in Jacksonville, Johnson’s hometown, is one of many scenes in the novel informed by Johnson’s own experiences. Many critics have noted how closely scenes from *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* mirror episodes from Johnson’s life as recounted in his actual autobiography, *Along This Way*. See Donald C. Goellnicht’s “Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*,” *African American Review* 30:1 (Spring 1996): 17-33.



mustache and typical Spanish eyes” as compared to his “brown-skin” wife (49). Despite this description of the couple’s skin colors, the racial identity of the husband remains ambiguous. Johnson does not assign a clear label to the man; his nationality supplants any label of “white” or “Negro” in binary terms. Though the husband could be of Spanish ancestry (an identity that was itself racially ambiguous in the American context), he aligns with the Afro-Cuban and African American community in Jacksonville, particularly through marriage.<sup>58</sup> In Johnson’s vision, Cubans and African Americans form a cohesive community despite the potential for cultural and language barriers.<sup>59</sup>

Written after the Spanish-American War, the novel’s short references to pre-Independence Cuba highlight Johnson’s representation of an alternative, more fluid construction of race. Immersing himself in Afro-Cuban life in Florida, the narrator learns about Cuban politics from his landlord, an exile who works to raise money to supply “arms and ammunition for the insurgents” in the fight for independence from Spain (52). The exile grows “positively eloquent” when speaking of “the Gomezes, both the white and the black one, of Maceo and Bandera” (52). By presenting heroes of black ancestry and emphasizing the interracial alliances of revolutionaries in the fight against Spanish imperialism, the exile reveals an entirely different concept of race outside of the U.S. context.<sup>60</sup> In Cuba, blacks and

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<sup>58</sup>See María DeGuzmán’s *Spain’s Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (2005) for a dissection of the racialization of Spaniards as “off-white” in the construction of Anglo-American identity as “white.”

<sup>59</sup>Evelio Grillo’s 2000 memoir, *Black Cuban, Black American*, offers an alternative perspective on Afro-Cuban identity. In this memoir, Grillo recounts his childhood in Ybor City in Tampa, Florida and the racial divisions among Cubans there. Though there had been no legal separation of the races in Cuba, class divisions made for segregation by race nonetheless. This racial division among Cubans only grew greater once in the U.S. Grillo writes: “Black Cubans worked in the factories alongside white Cubans. While my mother formed interracial friendships at work, few, if any, such friendships extended to visits in the home. Nor did whites and blacks attend church together. Black Cubans had their own mutual benefit society and social center, La Union Marti-Maceo” (7). The racial interactions of Johnson’s factory are left optimistically ambiguous.

<sup>60</sup>Like Johnson, Harper seizes upon a hero of the Cuban fight for independence to lament the need for struggles for freedom. Her ca. 1895 poem, “Maceo,” is an elegy for the fallen revolutionary. Despite this sympathy for

whites work together making it possible for a black man to become a revolutionary leader of political importance. The novel, sidestepping questions of American imperialism and oversimplifying the racial dynamics of the revolution, presents Cuba and its people as an alternative to the Jim Crow politics of the United States' South.

Johnson's presentation of a racially united, independent Cuba echoes the words of the Cuban poet and freedom fighter, José Martí. As in Johnson's novel, Martí's famous essay, "Our America" (1891), oversimplifies Latin American racial dynamics with its utopian claims that "[t]here is no racial hatred, because there are no races ... The soul, equal and eternal, emanates from bodies that are diverse in form and color" (297-8). The rhetoric of a race-less America appears throughout Martí's work as a central component of a unified region. In another essay entitled "My Race" (1893), Martí links racial unity directly to the struggle for national independence: "In Cuba there is no fear whatsoever of a race war. 'Man' means more than white, more than mulatto, more than Negro. 'Cuban' means more than white, more than mulatto, more than Negro. On the battlefields, the souls of whites and blacks who die for Cuba have risen together through the air" (319). In his construction, the divergent histories of black and white in Cuba come together through the ritual of interracial bloodshed for independence; this merging of bloods calls the nation into being. Rather than forcing the mulatto into a single racial category as mandated by the U.S. policy of "one-drop," Martí privileges the mulatto subject as the very embodiment of the united nation. His

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the Cuban struggle, in a poem entitled "Proclaim a Fast" from 1898, Harper derides American sympathy for Cuba while so many African Americans were being lynched at home:

Shall suffering Cuba find relief

From tender hearts and outstretched hands,

While hapless men and women slain,

With blood bedew our fairest lands? (380)

Johnson's rhetorical back and forth in solidarity and opposition to Latin American struggles echoes Harper's seemingly inconsistent use of Latin American solidarity as a rhetorical device. Both authors shaped their rhetoric concerning the southern hemisphere to the best interests of African Americans.

vision of a race-less Latin America provides Johnson with a new model for race construction, theorizing a democratic equality that the United States had yet to realize.

In his vision, Martí also sees a connection between Spanish imperialism and the looming threat of the United States to emerging Latin American republics. “Our America” presents an ideal of a race-less Pan-Americanism that will command the respect of “the formidable neighbor” to the North. Martí exposes the racism behind U.S. justifications for regional dominance by pointedly refusing to engage in reverse race baiting:

We must not, out of a villager’s antipathy, impute some lethal congenital wickedness to the continent’s light-skinned nation simply because it does not speak our language or share our view of what home life should be or resemble us in its political failings, which are different from ours, or because it does not think highly of quick-tempered, swarthy men or look with charity, from its still uncertain eminence, upon those less favored by history, who, in heroic stages, are climbing the road that republics travel. But neither should we seek to conceal the obvious facts of the problem, which can, for the peace of the centuries, be resolved by timely study and the urgent, wordless union of the continental soul. (298)

By taking the moral high road, Martí shows the hubris of the U.S.’s “still uncertain eminence” while advocating Latin American unity that could overcome racist imperialism in the region.

For his part, Johnson uses the rhetoric of the Cuban war of independence as a way to present an interracial alternative to the Jim Crow South. However, he does this without Martí’s underlying investment in a unified Latin America as a means of defense against imperialism. The United States serves only as a staging ground for exiles to work for the overthrow of Spanish rule in Cuba. Rather than highlight U.S. imperialism after the defeat of the Spanish, Johnson constructs the U.S. as a cradle for Cuban liberty.

By the time of the novel’s publication, however, the United States had a well established presence in Cuba and Latin America. Just as the status of new colonized subjects

was modeled on the status of the American Indian, Kaplan argues that this imperial presence was similarly the result of applying the logic of Jim Crow to the rest of the hemisphere:

[Theodore] Roosevelt implicitly linked the political fate of African Americans in the United States to that of Cuban nationalists. [...] The Platt Amendment, forced on the Cuban constitution in 1901, gave the United States unlimited right to intervene in the new nation, militarily and economically. As the military commander Leonard Wood wrote to his friend Roosevelt, “There is, of course, little or no independence left in Cuba under the Platt Amendment.” The Cubans’ perceived racial identity as Negro was used as an argument about their incapacity for self-government and their need for supervision. Recognizing this link between racism at home and abroad, the African American press protested Wood’s imposition of Jim Crow segregation on Cuba. (136)

Despite widespread recognition of the interconnection of Jim Crow at home and abroad in places like Cuba by the African American community, Johnson nonetheless engaged only with the potential racial liberation offered in the early days of the revolution rather than the less idealized colonial aftermath. The inspiration symbolized by Maceo and Bandera are embraced; the unfulfilled promise of independence in the years after the war is omitted.

This marked lacuna in Johnson’s presentation of the aftereffects of the Cuban revolution illustrates the contradictions in his feelings about U.S. imperialism in the region.<sup>61</sup> Though he wants to celebrate what he viewed as Cuba’s superior race relations, Johnson remained invested in the idea of the United States as a powerful, continental nation. On the one hand, he recognized the Cubans’ admirable fight for racial equality and freedom. Yet, on the other, his later condemnation of the instability of Latin-American nations boasts of U.S. power. Despite the narrator’s appreciation for Cuba’s struggle for independence from colonial Spain, another character in *The Autobiography* argues that had the South won the

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<sup>61</sup>The seeming incongruence of Johnson’s support for Cuban independence from Spain while evading questions of U.S. imperialism in the country is representative of attitudes toward the burgeoning empire. Bender notes that the arguments for and against imperialism frequently existed simultaneously about the role of the U.S. abroad (185). He cites Theodore Roosevelt’s justifications for U.S. intervention in Cuba in particular as illustrating “an anticolonial logic of empire” representative of the time. By arguing for a necessary but “disinterested” claim in protecting Cuban freedom, Roosevelt and other imperialists could serve U.S. interests while presenting these actions as neighborly defenses of liberty.

Civil War, the U.S. would have been reduced to “a score of petty republics, as in Central and South America, wasting their energies in war with each other or in revolutions” (117).<sup>62</sup> In the novel, the United States’ power is the result of the Civil War, casting the nation’s political and social dominance as an effect of the abolition of slavery and the affirmation of a united democracy. And, by applying logic similar to Martí’s, the novel equates national strength with racial justice that results in a nation capable of international domination.

Though *The Autobiography* reflects only Johnson’s burgeoning distrust of American imperialism abroad, the influence of W.E.B. Du Bois’s explicitly anti-imperialist *The Souls of Black Folk* on the novel is profound.<sup>63</sup> While the narrator’s struggle for an identity embodies the theory of “double consciousness,” the novel does not likewise sustain the imperialist critique that appears throughout Du Bois’s earlier work. Within *Souls*, Du Bois made repeated references to peoples and nations oppressed by American activities overseas. In his essay “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” Du Bois noted that while some African Americans advocated the colonization of Africa as an alternative to remaining in the U.S., this idea was shortsighted because of “the recent course of the United States toward weaker and darker peoples in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines – for where in the

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<sup>62</sup>Much later in his career, while advocating the end of U.S. occupation of Haiti, Johnson reverses his rhetoric of squabbling republics, arguing:

The seriousness of the frequent Latin-American revolutions has been greatly overemphasized. The writer has been in the midst of three of these revolutions and must confess that the treatment given them on our comic opera stage is very little farther removed from the truth than the treatment which is given in the daily newspapers. Not nearly so bloody as reported, their interference with people not in politics is almost negligible. Nor should it be forgotten that in almost every instance the revolution is due to the plotting of foreigners backed up by their Governments. (Wilson 227)

Hyperbolically dismissing the political unrest in the region as a means to argue for self-determination in Haiti, Johnson does highlight the role of “foreign” governments (U.S. included) in fomenting revolution. Though his ideas about U.S. foreign policy show frequent vacillation, his critiques grow more pointed over the years.

<sup>63</sup>Despite being aligned with Booker T. Washington at the time, Johnson was “deeply moved and influenced” by Du Bois’s book (*Along This Way* 203), and his novel reflects a dramatic shift toward a Du Boisian strategy of racial uplift.

world may we go and be safe from lying and brute force?” (38). Du Bois strategically linked the oppression of the Negro within the U.S. with the nation’s acts of racist imperialism abroad.<sup>64</sup> He later connected the poverty of the Negro with other national sins abroad: “The Negro farmer started behind, – started in debt. This was not his choosing, but the crime of this happy-go-lucky nation which goes blundering along with its Reconstruction tragedies, its Spanish war interludes and Philippine matinees, just as though God really were dead” (104). Du Bois showed that the exploitation and oppression of black people during Reconstruction and U.S. imperialism during the Spanish-American war were two sides of the same coin.<sup>65</sup> He took the race questions out of national bounds to reveal that colonization of “weaker and darker peoples” is a global problem.<sup>66</sup>

As Werner Sollors contends, the ex-colored man looks to create a miscegenated music, and, as a man caught between black and white, he occupies a privileged position from

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<sup>64</sup>Like Du Bois, William Dean Howells feared U.S. imperialism would compound racial strife. In response to what he perceived as bitterness in Charles Chesnut’s 1902 novelistic account of the Wilmington race riots, *The Marrow of Tradition*, Howells wrote to Henry B. Fuller, “How such a Negro must hate us. And to think of the Filipinos and the Cubans and Puerto Ricans whom we have added to our happy family. But I am talking treason” (qtd. in Andrews, 336-7).

<sup>65</sup>Characteristic of the ideological divide between Booker T. Washington and Du Bois, Washington takes a different position on the relationship between the plight of African Americans and the implications of the Spanish-American War. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington cites a speech he gave at the close of the war which highlights the significance of African American military service: “When you have gotten the full story of the heroic conduct of the Negro in the Spanish-American war, [...] then decide within yourselves whether a race that is thus willing to die for its country should not be given the highest opportunity to live for its country” (255). Washington, unlike Du Bois, viewed the Spanish American War not as an extension of white supremacy but as a means of unifying the races through the common cause. Ironically, Washington’s praise of interracial military service as a means to claiming national identity echoes Martí’s celebration of black and white unity in the Cuban fight for independence but with a decidedly different global perspective.

<sup>66</sup>The most influential black leader to advocate an internationalist perspective, Du Bois was not alone in linking the oppression of African Americans with international imperialism. Historian Jonathan Rosenberg identifies a movement that he calls “color-conscious internationalism” among African American leaders such as William Monroe Trotter and Mary Church Terrell in the twentieth century for whom “the domestic campaign was inseparable from the worldwide struggle against racial oppression, and it was in this way that the internationalist belief in the unity of humanity and in transnational cooperation achieved meaning” (6). This strategy of international uplift gained momentum in the years after World War I, with race leaders spurred by the possibility of international cooperation that could lead to worldwide racial uplift.

which to bridge the binary gap (269). The ex-colored man's project, then, is an expression of hope for an integrated "American" culture that transcends binary racial division.

Johnson's narrator, however, does not achieve Du Bois's vision of solidarity. By the time the ex-colored man conceives of his idea to create an integrated music, he has already failed to live outside the racial binary because of his own internalized racism and class preoccupation. Even in Jacksonville, the initial site of his burgeoning racial awakening, the ex-colored man continues to judge his surroundings by white standards. When he attends a public ball filled with a variety of people from Jacksonville, he concludes that "between people in *like stations of life* there is very little difference the world over" (63, emphasis added). Despite his seemingly cosmopolitan perspective, he continues to categorize the people he meets as types. Basing his conclusions on his observations of Jacksonville, the ex-colored man comments that "the colored people may be said to be roughly divided into three classes, not so much in respect to themselves as in respect to their relations with white people" (55-56). These classes (the "desperate," the "servants," and the "independent workman") are all defined by their relationship to "white people" (56-57). The novel, again showing the influence of Du Bois's "double consciousness," presents the ex-colored man's internalized ideas of white supremacy as fundamental to his sense of self, anticipating by decades Frantz Fanon's study of the psychology of the colonized black man in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Moving beyond racial distinctions alone to create hierarchies of class, the ex-colored man seeks class status as a way to alleviate his racialized inferiority complex.

As these undercurrents of classism appear even at the cigar factory, the narrator reifies class boundaries as he pushes against racial ones in a manner that mimics how Cuban culture in many ways replaces overt racial distinctions with racialized class markers instead.

After learning to speak Spanish “like a native,” the ex-colored man brags that “it was my pride that I spoke better Spanish than many of the Cuban workmen at the factory” (53). Not merely content to assimilate, the narrator also surpasses his peers. This distinction has the effect of giving the narrator the privileged position as the “reader”:

The “reader” is quite an institution in all cigar factories which employ Spanish-speaking workmen. He sits in the center of the large room in which the cigar makers work and reads to them for a certain number of hours each day all the important news from the papers [...] He must, of course, have a good voice, but he must also have a reputation among the men for intelligence, for being well-posted and having in his head a stock of varied information. He is generally the final authority on all arguments which arise, and in a cigar factory these arguments are many and frequent. (53)

The narrator’s remarkable acquisition of Spanish puts him in a position of “authority” in the factory over the native speakers. Being a reader also frees him from the tedious repetitiveness of the physical labor and increases his wages enough so that he gives up his second job as a piano teacher. While in some respects this promotion shows the narrator’s ability to assimilate and to prosper, it also sets the ex-colored man apart. He becomes superior to the lower workmen not only through his individual gifts, but also, though it goes unremarked, through the benefit of his light skin.<sup>67</sup> The racialized classism at work in the factory and the larger community benefits the ex-colored man and affirms the cultured, light-skinned narrator’s sense of innate superiority.

Critic Salim Washington argues that the ex-colored man’s position as the “reader” in the factory “prefigures the ending of the novel when the narrator’s linguistic/literary pursuits triumph over his musical endeavors. In the end, he is a failed musician, but he succeeds as the ‘author’ of the narrative. As a ‘reader’ he discovered that he ‘had a talent for languages as

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<sup>67</sup>Grillo notes in his memoir: “Black Cubans and white Cubans worked side by side in the cigar-making industry. But I know of only one black Cuban who won a status above that of worker: Facundo Accion, who achieved the highly honored position of *lector*, the reader” (7). The ex-colored man’s achievement is due in part to his color.



well as for music' at a time in his life when he did not perform as a musician" (244). The ex-colored man comes to privilege language over music during this time at the factory because it is more economically advantageous. In doing so, he also privileges his own class status at the expense of maintaining an equitable relationship with his Cuban coworkers. The ex-colored man's desire for personal recognition and economic gain foreshadows, as Washington suggests, the narrator's later abandonment of his Du Boisian music project. Ambition overwhelms his more idealistic desire to find a way to transcend racial divisions whether through music or by living outside the binary. Though the narrator hopes to settle down in Jacksonville, the factory is shut down, and he is "seized" with a desire for the North and resumes his travels (64). The idealism represented by the Afro-Cuban community is overcome by both the external economic forces that close the cigar factory and the internal psychological forces that drive the ex-colored man to continue searching for new opportunities for individual advancement.

Just as the narrator fails to become a permanent part of the Cuban community in Jacksonville, so, too, does he fail to fulfill his musical ambitions when confronted with the reality of white racism. After witnessing the burning of a man, the ex-colored man's belief in the possibility of black equality collapses, and he abandons his racial project of musical synthesis. By accepting the status quo of the dominant hierarchy, the ex-colored man also abandons the only hope for racial equality within the text, and the novel stops short of fully exploring a viable alternative life outside of the binary. By passing for white, the ex-colored man theoretically rises to the apex of the U.S. racial hierarchy, achieving success as defined by the dominant culture. The narrator's underlying desire for full recognition as an

American—and its accompanying potential for financial security—overrides his racial utopianism.

Despite these failures, the text does not validate the narrator's decision, creating a tension within the novel.<sup>68</sup> The narrator himself constructs whiteness as mercenary and money-grubbing, yet he self-consciously embraces whiteness to gain social status: "I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man's success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means 'money'" (91). Indeed, the text further condemns passing, as the concluding lines of the novel demonstrate:

My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am, and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a *vanished dream*, a *dead ambition*, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. (100, emphasis added)

By choosing to live as white, the ex-colored man absorbs the values of whiteness and "sells" his heritage. The results are "dead ambition" and "vanished dreams." In giving up his mission to help his race, the ex-colored man has let his beliefs "go the way of the Indian" (26), resulting in a sort of cultural death. If light-skinned African Americans chose the path

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<sup>68</sup>Critic Kathleen Pfeiffer takes issue with the standard reading of the ex-colored man's passing as a betrayal of blackness because it privileges blackness as "authentic" with whiteness reduced to an "opportunistic" identity (417). It is through ex-colored man's "racial vacillation," argues Pfeiffer, that he "locates his self-invention in an identity which is both sympathetic to many races and independent of any single racial affiliation." While Pfeiffer rightly points to many characteristics of the ex-colored man that are ordinarily subsumed by the overemphasis of the ex-colored man's denial of his black heritage, the ex-colored man's passing is cast as a tragedy in the final lines of the novel. While Johnson advocates a belief in American individualism, his larger vision as the Executive Secretary of the NAACP and an artist demonstrates a desire to be both American and black.

of the ex-colored man, Johnson suggests, the race would be as doomed as the Indians are perceived to be in his construction.<sup>69</sup>

Though the narrator cannot find a way to live outside the binary, his experiences in Jacksonville provide him with an advantage while passing in the white world:

In fact, I began then to contract the money fever, which later took strong possession of me. I kept my eyes open, watching for a chance to better my condition. It finally came in the form of a position with a house which was at the time establishing a South American department. My knowledge of Spanish was, of course, the principal cause of my good luck; and it did more for me: it placed me where other clerks were practically put out of competition with me. I was not slow in taking advantage of the opportunity to make myself indispensable to the firm. (142)

The narrator's knowledge of Spanish, which earlier in the novel was a potential way out of the trap of the racial binary, becomes an avenue for the narrator to make money and advance in the white business world.<sup>70</sup> The warmth of the Cuban and African American episode has been replaced by "money fever" to be gratified by economic conquest of South America. Ironically, the knowledge he gained through becoming part of the Afro-Cuban community in a search for solidarity is now a commodity to be exploited as an ex-colored man.

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<sup>69</sup>While the narrator's decision to pass is a reaction to witnessing a lynching, Martí, in his essay "A Town Sets a Black Man on Fire," links the expansion of "invidious" white settlement into Indian land with the brutal acts of white violence against black men (310). Though Martí characteristically foregrounds Native American oppression, the significant difference between these two authors is the treatment of the relationship between Indians and African Americans. In Martí's construction, white supremacy, whether in acts of colonization or in lynching, is an underlying point of affinity between the two groups, which highlights the limitations of Johnson's strategy of racial competition.

<sup>70</sup>The influence of Johnson's novel on the literature of the Harlem Renaissance can be seen in Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*. Johnson's positioning of South America as a signifier for his narrator's successful assimilation to whiteness via imperial exploitation foreshadows Larsen's similar figuration of South America as shorthand for white avarice. Mae Henderson notes:

Clearly, for the author, whiteness is attached not only to social privilege but to a materialist ethic: John Bellew [...] "turn[s] up from South America with untold gold." Thus, not only is the flagrantly racist Bellew attached to lucre, but suggestively to the imperialistic exploitation of a land and its natural resources in the pursuit of money and wealth. (lx)

Johnson and Larsen both suggest that the successful performance of whiteness—whether passing or not—is often predicated on one's ability to exploit foreign lands and people.

For Johnson, the desire for multi-ethnic affinity demonstrated in his novel became more foundational to his civil rights work in the years after his first hand experiences in Venezuela and Nicaragua. His subsequent writings reveal a more openly critical view of the connection between U.S. foreign policy and its accompanying racism. Following the publication of his novel, Johnson wrote essays for *New York Age* in which he used his experience in Latin America to reflect on America's reputation abroad and to argue more explicitly against the spread of Jim Crow racism. In "Why Latin-America Dislikes the United States," published September 1, 1913, Johnson concluded that the United States cannot achieve the "confidence and good will of Latin-American people so long as there is in this country a Negro problem"(Wilson 197). He wrote: "The Latin-American people, by an overwhelming majority, are not white people, and decidedly not in the American sense, and a number of them, people of wealth and refinement, who have come to the United States and been treated like 'niggers' will never be known"(Wilson 196).<sup>71</sup> Filtering his understanding of feelings abroad through the prism of his own experiences of Jim Crow, Johnson argued that Latin Americans fear the spread of American racism even more than they fear the effects of American imperialism.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Despite the argument he makes in his *New York Age* essays about the detrimental effects of Jim Crow on Latin American relations, Johnson, in his autobiography, points frequently to the treatment of black Americans under Jim Crow as compared to black foreigners. He recounts two separate instances when his speaking Spanish on a train made the conductor view him differently and allowed him to sit in the "whites-only" section of the train; Johnson is able to "pass" as Afro-Latino which somehow enables him to circumvent racial divisions. In both cases, Johnson concludes (word for word): "in such situations any kind of a Negro will do; provided he is not one who is an American citizen" (Wilson 65, 89). Though racial difference was the pretext for discrimination in the South, Johnson's anecdotes show that the color line operated on more than just phenotype, just as Washington's anecdote about travelling with Native Americans indicated in *Up from Slavery*. In this case, Afro-Latinos, though the same physical color as Johnson, benefit from *not* being African American. In his autobiography, Johnson chafes at the hypocrisy of Jim Crow law being applied exclusively to the descendants of American slaves, but, as his earlier reversal of this message shows, he could argue both sides so long as it made the case against U.S. racism.

Historian William E. Gibbs notes that Johnson revisited this “Ugly American” argument to illustrate how the world at large perceives American racism (347). In an essay called “As Others See Us,” published during the Red Summer of 1919, Johnson wrote:

Americans generally and most of the officials at Washington seem to be puzzled by the fact that in spite of the Monroe Doctrine which is supposed to be the great safeguard of the independence of the Latin-American republics, and in spite of other demonstrations of patronizing friendship on the part of the country, Latin-America fails to be moved to any display of genuine gratitude, and even shows the opposite feeling whenever it is not unsafe to do so.

This attitude of Latin-America is based almost entirely on the way in which the Negro is treated in the United States. Latin-Americans realize that they are not white people in the North American sense, and many of them who may not have realized it have had the realization forced upon them on a visit to this country. Thousands of wealthy and cultured Latin-Americans have visited the United States and have been treated like colored people. And not only this, but the American has carried his prejudices with him into Latin-America countries. (Wilson 234)

Johnson’s desire to expose the brutality of the race riots of 1919 led him to hyperbolic pronouncements on the causes of Latin American distrust for the growing U.S. presence in the region. While Gibbs concludes that Johnson’s “struggle against imperialism in Latin America constituted nothing less than a struggle against ‘Jim Crowism’ in the United States,” it is exactly his preoccupation with the race struggle at home that prevented him from fully acknowledging the range of reasons for resentment of U.S. domination in the hemisphere.<sup>73</sup> His tongue-in-cheek citation of the Monroe Doctrine as a “safeguard,” with its show of “patronizing friendship,” indicates his awareness of the reality behind U.S. pronouncements of neighborly benevolence. But, for Johnson, *racism*, not imperialism, is the root cause of

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<sup>72</sup>Whereas Anna Julia Cooper worries that Anglo Americans created racist images of the African American “that will be received and carried abroad by foreigners from all parts of the globe” (149), Johnson flips this argument to indict white racism itself as the slander to America’s reputation abroad.

<sup>73</sup>Like Gibbs before him (337), Lawrence J. Oliver praises Johnson’s *New York Age* essays for their cosmopolitanism, concluding that “Johnson was able to escape the nets of racial and nationalistic chauvinism to develop a transnational and intercultural perspective” (219). While Johnson certainly was engaged in a transnational critique of U.S. policy in these essays, I would argue that his arguments in these essays were, foremost, in service to his domestic racial agendas.

regional tension. The full potential for a deconstruction of U.S. imperialism is buried under Johnson's use of it as a rhetorical strategy to highlight his real cause: full civil rights for the African American.

Johnson's relationship to American imperialism remained complex and often contradictory throughout his career, but his protests against U.S. intervention in places like Haiti became a central part of his work at the NAACP. Johnson's attitudes toward U.S. intervention in Haiti reflect his larger early ambivalence towards U.S. foreign policy. When the U.S. occupied Haiti in 1915, Johnson initially supported the decision as one dictated by significant regional interest though he remained cautious about the effects of imported racism on the nation. Not until 1918, when a new constitution was created to bolster U.S. power in the country, did Johnson begin to actively oppose the occupation (Wilson 207). In 1920, Johnson spent two months in Haiti before returning to the U.S. to lobby for Haitian independence. In an extended essay that appeared serially in the *Nation* later that year, Johnson returned to arguments like those made in his earlier writings about Latin America that stressed the negative impact of U.S. racism on other countries in the hemisphere; this time, however, he also outlined the specifics of imperialism with a depth of knowledge lacking in his earlier anti-imperial essays.

While detailing the political and economic complications of American occupation in Haiti and denouncing the brutal treatment of Haitians by U.S. marines, Johnson described the Americans as "rough, uncouth, and uneducated," with "a great number from the South [who] are violently steeped in color prejudice"(216). Shortly thereafter, Johnson moved from the introduction of "southern" racism into a generalization that echoes his earlier critiques of all U.S. citizens in Latin America:

Perhaps the most serious aspect of American brutality in Haiti is not to be found in individual cases of cruelty, numerous and inexcusable though they are, but rather in the American attitude, well illustrated by the diagnosis of an American officer discussing the situation and its difficulty: "The trouble with this whole business is that some of these people with a little money and education think they are as good as we are," and this is the keynote of the attitude of every American to every Haitian. Americans have carried American hatred to Haiti. They have planted the feeling of caste and color prejudice where it never before existed. (217)

As in much of Johnson's work, "southern" racism often represents an overarching American racism that transcends regional boundaries. The rhetorical location of racism moves from the South to "America" to Haiti in this passage like a metaphorical virus that American carriers distribute around the world. Witnessing imperialism in Haiti pushed Johnson to develop his critique of U.S. intervention and his commitment to international justice as his domestic concerns came to overlap with the international crisis. The symbolic value of Haiti as a "Black Republic" dovetails with the familiar narrative of the oppression of black people by white Americans; Johnson used this convergence to simultaneously condemn U.S. imperialism abroad and shameful racial segregation at home (245). These shifts in Johnson's thinking prompted him to extend the focus of the NAACP to a broader platform of black internationalism.

Yet even within his most fervently anti-imperialist rhetoric, Johnson's focus remained primarily on *black* uplift. Published in *Crisis* magazine, "The Truth about Haiti" reiterated Johnson's "Ugly American" motif in order to combat the idea that Haiti was unfit for self-government. In this essay, Johnson made a case for Haiti as an exceptionally persecuted Caribbean nation, asserting that "[none] of the Latin-American republics had the difficulties in maintaining their independence that Haiti encountered" (245). While arguing that the U.S. had been particularly resistant to recognizing Haitian independence, Johnson went on to

claim that the nation was waiting for a moment to intervene in Haitian affairs as “there never have been grounds for intervention in Haiti that there have been in Mexico” (247). Whether or not the occupation of Haiti was premeditated (and whether or not his evaluation of Mexican politics is just), Johnson set up a comparison between Haiti and Mexico that highlights the seeming racism behind U.S. decisions abroad.

The motivations behind Johnson’s idealization of Haiti at the expense of Mexico have as much to do with U.S. history as with Mexican history. Johnson prefaced his condemnation of the Mexican system of peon labor (as compared to Haitian land ownership) by denouncing U.S. labor relations: “I learned that the war in Haiti by which black slaves liberated themselves worked a more complete social revolution than the war by which the slaves were freed in the United States. Our Civil War freed the slaves in name only” (346). Providing an idealized point of comparison to the U.S., Haiti serves as a powerful symbol of independent *black* rule for Johnson that inspired him to commit more fully to anti-imperialist internationalism.

Near the conclusion of his autobiography, the influence of Johnson’s experiences in Haiti is evident in his reflections on his own role as American consul during the Nicaraguan revolution of 1912: “I was fundamentally aware that the whole mess was, strictly, Nicaragua’s business; that it would be better if we were entirely out of it, or better still if we had never gotten into it. But I was also aware of the fact that we were in it” (283). Published decades after his time in Nicaragua, Johnson’s version of his own role in furthering imperialism was shaped by his changed perspective of the role the U.S. should be playing in international affairs. Though downplaying his own role in securing the city for military occupation by stressing the potential “massacre” that he averted, Johnson did acknowledge



the hubris of American imperialism, an admission made possible through his realization that imperialism is irrevocably linked to the color line.

Etsuko Taketani argues that Johnson, by choosing to confront his memories of Nicaragua in his autobiography, “painfully takes on his own implication in – and accountability for – the globe-carving imperialism he denounces” (103).<sup>74</sup> In fact, Johnson’s admission of interference in Nicaraguan politics in *Along This Way* frames his acts of imperialism in the context of an American racial hypocrisy that prevents black Americans from gaining full recognition of citizenship. While describing his role in preventing revolutionary takeover of Corinto, Johnson included his encounter with a white southern soldier who previously would not show him the respect his position deserved, but who later “appeared to be proud that we were both Americans” (286). The soldier’s changing attitude was the result of Johnson’s show of imperialistic U.S. dominance in Nicaragua. Johnson’s demonstration of “American” power superseded the white soldier’s racist belief in the inferiority of African Americans.

The encounter with the southern soldier reveals the double bind of Johnson’s position, emphasizing the limiting affect of white racism on Johnson’s authority while highlighting the ways acts of nationalistic domination work to counteract the racist’s suspicions of Johnson as a black man. While dealing with petty racists as consul, Johnson showed the limitations of U.S. democratic idealism; as an agent of imperialism in Corinto, he overcame domestic racism through the problematic act of furthering U.S. domination in the

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<sup>74</sup>Taketani further suggests that “African Americans of this era often positioned themselves squarely within the ideological flows of the colonialist and fascist discourse in the Pacific and beyond, and were not only influenced by these discourses but engaged in and reshaped them” (82). A black Pacific perspective helps to recontextualize Johnson’s recollection of his role in Nicaragua in his autobiography, Taketani argues, because the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua had become a symbolic precedent for Japan’s imperial invasion of Manchuria by 1933.

region. But even here Johnson was careful to indicate the inherent tensions by concluding that the soldier's approval "slipped back into the realm of unrealities, and his gesture and words seemed merely parts in a play" (286).

Writing his autobiography from a perspective decades after this time, Johnson exposed his contradictory and conflicted assessment of his diplomatic service in Nicaragua. The gain Johnson made by impressing the southern soldier becomes inauthentic by his evocation of a scripted racial drama that undercuts the soldier's agency – and, by extension, Johnson's. Both are merely playing out roles in which the racial divisions of the domestic front disappear in the international context when the black man proves himself a true "American" citizen by fighting for U.S. interests. The script of American racial conflict overwhelms Johnson's account of his role in furthering U.S. imperial power, so that, even as he likened this encounter to a performance (thereby acknowledging its limitations and ultimate artifice), he remained greatly invested in this narrative of racial understanding through a common national cause.

Perhaps Johnson's most explicit show of international racial solidarity with other people of color in *Along This Way* appears in his description of his experience at the Institute of Pacific Relations Conference in Kyoto, Japan in 1929:

Out of it all, the truth that came home mostly directly to me was the universality of the race and color problem. Negroes in the United States are prone, and naturally, to believe that their problem is the problem. The fact is, there is a race and color problem wherever the white man deals with the darker races. The thing unique about the Negro problem in the United States, a uniqueness that has its advantages and disadvantages, is that elsewhere the problem results from the presence of the white man in the midst of a darker civilization, and in the United States, from the presence of the Negro in the midst of a white civilization.(398)

Whereas his earlier attempts at an internationalist perspective appeared solely in service to his national racial agenda at home, Johnson took a different tact to acknowledge both the

similarity and difference between national and international problems of the color line. His assessment highlights the “universality” of these struggles and extends his earlier preoccupation with African American civil rights to gesture toward a worldwide struggle. While stressing the specificity of the African American subject position, it is white civilization that is the common problem facing “the darker races”; international unity stems from this “universality.”

Caught between the desire for worldwide colored solidarity and the need for full recognition of an American identity that remained contested, Johnson and other black leaders had to navigate their multiple identities to balance their utopian desires for racial fellowship abroad with their need to work within the pragmatic white frameworks to achieve civil rights at home. Johnson’s commitment to black civil rights in the United States ultimately trumped internationalist inclinations, but his internationalist writings, like his novel, present the sublimated dream of an alternative to the dominant structures of race and nation. As in his political writings, Johnson’s emphasis on Latin culture in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* complicates the idea of race as a straightforward black or white proposition. The more complex racial and ethnic matrices of Cuban culture serve to disrupt the rigid Jim Crow definition of race that the narrator deals with throughout the South. As in many passing narratives, however, the ex-colored man ultimately does choose to live on one side of the colorline, and, with that decision, he betrays his earlier solidarity with Latina/os. The depiction of Native Americans in the novel underscores the inevitable failure of true transcendence of the binary for both the narrator and the text itself; the narrative remains emotionally invested in promoting black cultural nationalism above any other strategy as a way to gain acceptance in white society. The contradictions within Johnson’s progressive

intentions in the novel are as muddled as the form in which he chose to illustrate them. The passing narrative's insistence on challenging and reifying racial boundaries shows the difficulties of dismantling race. Examining the influence of Latina/os and Latin Americans on the evolution of Johnson's attitude toward race and U.S. imperialism ultimately reveals the interconnectedness of domestic and international struggles for equal rights and the limitations of applying a binary framework (whether black/white or North/South) to a much more complex reality.

### Chapter Three

#### Consolidated Colors:

Figurations of the Chinese in Walter White's *Flight* and Darryl Zanuck's *Old San Francisco*

Before Walter White replaced James Weldon Johnson as the Executive Secretary of the NAACP in 1931, he already had a national reputation for his undercover investigations into lynching in the South. Arguably the most famous real life “passer,” White investigated and reported on forty-one lynchings by posing as a white man. In a chapter of his autobiography wryly titled “I Decline to Be Lynched,” White recounts an investigation during the “Red Summer” of 1919 in Phillips County Arkansas. His identity becomes known, and he narrowly escapes in time to save himself from lynching. Despite the seriousness of this story, White’s tone remains bitingly ironic when he recounts that the train conductor that sells him his escape ticket informs him that he is leaving before “the fun is going to start” as the man predicts White’s lynching (*A Man Called White* 51). White’s biographer, Kenneth Robert Janken, notes that White took pleasure in his ability to hide his identity in plain sight:

Walter White reveled in the disorientation caused by his apparent whiteness. He loved to tell of the time he was on a train and an ostensibly cultured southern man assured him that he could tell if a Negro was trying to pass simply by looking at his fingernails; examining White’s, the man told him that unlike his, blacks’ fingernails had pink crescents at the cuticles. He recounted with glee the bafflement on prominent whites’ faces when he unexpectedly revealed to them his racial identity. He derived great satisfaction from this masquerade, this putting one over on the whites. (2)

Acting as a racial spy in white supremacist territory, White was able to gather information by feigning insider status with white racists and report it with the added power and poignancy of

a black man's subject position. White's undercover work highlights how passing can be a subversion of racial essentialism: done on a short-term basis with full intentions of gaining an insider's perspective of the other side of racism, White's passing highlights passing as a performance of identity.<sup>75</sup> As critic Elaine K. Ginsberg writes, "[B]oth the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either threatening or liberating but in either instance discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent" (4).



*Figure 7: Walter White*

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<sup>75</sup>The appeal of White's story of passing continues to be strong today. The 2008 graphic novel *Incognegro*, written by Mat Johnson and illustrated by Warren Pleece, models the passing hero on Walter White's undercover lynching investigations as it explores contemporary racial politics.

Yet, White's passing also underscores the passing paradox: if race is strictly a performance of a socially-constructed identity, then is "passing" even possible? If Walter White can perform the part of a white man, what makes him not white? The white men he encounters in Arkansas have no way of detecting White's legally significant—but invisible—"one-drop" of black ancestry that would legally classify him as a black man.<sup>76</sup> Even as White's jubilant act of passing reveals the artificiality of "white" identity, so, too, does it reveal the artificiality of "black" identity. Over the course of a long and often contentious career at the NAACP, White's identity as a black man did not go unchallenged. He was frequently attacked for "passing for black" (Janken 2), as when W.E.B. Du Bois, disagreeing with White's attitudes toward segregation, questioned White's authenticity and dismissed his viewpoints by declaring "Walter White is white" (qtd. in Janken 191). In "Why I Remain a Negro" (1947), an essay published in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, White counters black criticism of his assertion of black identity by recounting a story of having to defend his childhood home against an angry white mob who resented the family's middle class success.<sup>77</sup> White-skinned or not, the White family experienced racism first hand, cementing Walter White's commitment to his "voluntary" race. White and his family chose to identify as black and were punished for it—a choice that Gayle Wald notes is not available to all people: "Whereas Passing represents race to be a fiction of identity, it also suggests that the status of this fiction cannot be disengaged from a critical recognition of the impossibility of

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<sup>76</sup>At the turn into the twentieth century, American racial identities were principally determined by the "one-drop" rule that the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* codified into law. According to this ruling, a single drop of black blood prevented a person from claiming the racial privilege of whiteness, thereby legalizing hypodescent in which the multiracial person is classified according to the subordinate race of his or her parentage. Not only did *Plessy v. Ferguson* determine the boundaries of black and white identity, it also laid the groundwork for the passage of Jim Crow legislation through many parts of the South.

<sup>77</sup>This scene from White's childhood echoes the violent conclusion of Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal*; Lewis modeled his novel on the life of his friend and was first introduced to the passing narrative by reading *Flight* (See Charles F. Cooney, "Walter White and Sinclair Lewis: The History of a Literary Friendship").

passing for the great majority of racially despised and degraded people” (8). In this way, White’s passing both challenges and confirms the reality of the color line.

White’s 1926 novel, *Flight*, uses the racial ambiguity of a passing subject to challenge the black-white binary. Furthermore, he also challenges the dominant construction of a racial binary by making a Chinese character a central part of his heroine’s decision to stop passing for white and return to living as a black woman. This Chinese intermediary, like the mulatta heroine herself, disrupts the dominant narrative of race as either black or white in the United States. These two strategies work together (and are in fact intertwined in the plot of the novel) as a double challenge to the dominant construction. White’s Chinese character becomes a mouthpiece for advocating an international unity of people of color against global white supremacy, leading to the heroine’s racial reawakening when he makes her realize the value of African American culture.

Yet, White’s progressive move towards internationalism in his passing narrative does not indicate a trend towards greater inclusiveness in the culture, as even the passing trope—so often a tool of progressive African American authors trying to undermine racism—continued to serve contradictory agendas. While *Flight* represents the Chinese immigrant as a positive force for international unity against white racism, white unity based on nativist fear of the Other is established at the expense of the Chinese in the 1927 film *Old San Francisco*. Released only a year after White’s novel, *Old San Francisco* takes a unique twist on the usual black-to-white passing narrative by depicting a Chinese American passing subject as a dangerous alien threat to (white) American identity, reflecting the larger cultural hysteria around the “Yellow Peril.”<sup>78</sup> Written and produced by Darryl Zanuck and directed by Alan

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<sup>78</sup>“Yellow Peril” was the term given to the perceived threat from Asian peoples posed to the West during the nineteenth and twentieth century. While Zanuck’s film presents the dominant cultural fear of the corrupting



Crosland, who would later that year make *The Jazz Singer*, in which Jewish assimilation is aided through the jazz singer's use of blackface, this permutation of passing is fully condemned in *Old San Francisco*. Rather than celebrate the passing subject's upward mobility and assimilation to the ideals of American enterprise, the film demonizes the Chinese as a means of consolidating European ethnic groups into one unified white race, foreclosing multiracial and multiethnic collectivism in favor of monolithic American identity.

Despite the antithetical racial messages of the film and novel (one celebrates white supremacy while the other condemns it), both use the passing narrative to uplift select groups of people and deploy stereotypes (albeit contradicting ones) of Asians and Chinese Americans as a means of unifying select groups. Zanuck's depictions of the degenerate Chinese on the silver screen reflect the longstanding stereotypes of the American minstrel tradition. Critic Robert G. Lee writes:

The minstrel representation of the Chinese immigrant as a racial Other relied on a trope of insurmountable cultural difference. Unlike the minstrel characterization of free blacks, who were represented as fraudulent citizens because they were supposed to lack culture, the Chinese were seen as having an excess of culture. This excess had led them to degradation and cultural degeneration. Excess and degeneration, of course, carried with them connotations of disease, contagion, and pollution. (35-36)

*Old San Francisco* revels in the "excess" of Chinatown, creating a voyeuristic opportunity to witness the spectacle of opium dens, gambling halls, and white slavery blocks, all the while shifting the moral condemnation for such things onto the inherent degradation of the Chinese themselves. Walter White, on the other hand, deploys the stereotype of the wise Asian philosopher who is able to see the larger forces of the world at work and bring the heroine to enlightenment. In this depiction, White rejects the dominant white culture's claim to cultural

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power and influence of Chinese people, White's novel suggests the rise of Chinese power as having the *productive* potential for overturning white supremacy.

superiority (as illustrated by Lee) by transforming the “excess” of Chinese culture and the supposed absence of black culture through this superior Chinese figure.

While White’s stereotype is the more benevolent depiction of the two and serves as a seemingly more progressive call for solidarity against white supremacy, *Flight* strategically deploys figurations of the Chinese as a way to consolidate select groups while resolving the problem of the passing subject in a way that parallels *Old San Francisco*. Despite the challenge to racial essentialism that the very body of a passing subject suggests, most passing narratives resolve with the passing subject choosing one racial loyalty or, as in the case of *Old San Francisco*, having one chosen for them. In *Flight*, White has his heroine return to the black race after her encounter with the Chinese character with a newfound racial consciousness that privileges those oppressed by white racism which serves to recast the racial binary in terms of “white” versus “people of color.” The novel concludes without the racial ambivalence that drove the heroine to pass in the first place. The film, on the other hand, capitalizes on the element of the passing narrative that suggests the infiltration of white “purity” by a racial usurper to squash any sense of racial ambiguity in favor of purging the alien threat to “real” white folks. The very element of racial transgression that was so central to White’s own passing story is what *Old San Francisco* uses to galvanize the unification of marginalized European ethnic groups like the Spanish and the Irish into one inclusive white race against the dangerous threat of the Chinese in America. The overall racial messages of these two passing narratives seem to be polar opposites, yet the strategies both deploy to advocate different sorts of racial solidarity are startlingly similar.

Both passing narratives present visions of a new racial order using Chinese figures as the primary indicator of racial boundaries, reflecting the troublesome legal categorization of

the Asian as neither black nor white that was beginning to be challenged in the courts. The end of the First World War signaled a shift in U.S. ideas about race and reflected a cultural preoccupation with defining racial categories. Lawmakers and justices struggled to create legal definitions of race and ethnicity despite the growing scientific evidence that race was a social construction. In two Supreme Court cases from 1923, *Takao Ozawa v. United States* and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the Court attempted to define “whiteness” in opposition to “Asian” as a way to gauge who was eligible for U.S. citizenship. Legal scholar Ian Haney-Lopez notes:

In *Ozawa v. United States*, the Court wrote that the term “white persons” included “only persons of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race.” It thereby ran together the rationales of common knowledge, evident in the reference to what was “popularly known,” and scientific evidence, exemplified in the Court’s reliance on the term “Caucasian.” Within three months, however, the Court established a contrasting position in *United States v. Thind*, retreating from the term “Caucasian” and making the test of Whiteness solely one of common knowledge. (56)

By first deferring to the term “Caucasian” in *Ozawa* to deny the Japanese the protections of “whiteness” based on skin color, and then resorting to “common knowledge” in *Thind* to deny Asian Indians the protection of “Caucasian” identity, the Court both confirms and legitimates the social construction of race. The consequences of these haphazard definitions also determined who was eligible for immigration to the United States. As Mae Ngai argues, the decision in *Thind* “rendered a double meaning to assimilation. For Europeans, assimilation was a matter of socialization and citizenship its ultimate reward. Asians, no matter how committed to American ideals or practiced in American customs, remained racially inassimilable and, therefore, ineligible to citizenship” (46). The seeming inconsistency of the decisions in *Ozawa* and *Thind* reflects the Court’s underlying insistence on the Otherness of Asians.

The exclusion of Asians from citizenship was longstanding in U.S. immigration law. From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to its subsequent renewals in 1892 and 1902, the Chinese in particular were singled out for special limitations on the numbers of immigrants allowed to enter the country. The Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) in the year following the *Ozawa* and *Thind* decisions further restricted Chinese immigration and extended it to other Asian groups. Despite putting in place a system of quotas for European immigration based on “national origins” whose aim was to keep “undesirable” eastern and southern European immigration to a minimum, Matthew Frye Jacobson considers the Johnson-Reed Act “the beginning of the ascent of monolithic whiteness” (93). Ngai also stresses the ironic consolidation of “whiteness” that results from a law meant to limit those European ethnic groups considered undesirable:

In fact, the national origins quota system involved a complex and subtle process in which race and nationality disaggregated and realigned in new and uneven ways. At one level, the new immigration law differentiated Europeans according to nationality and ranked them in a hierarchy of desirability. At another level, the law constructed a white American race, in which persons of European descent shared a common whiteness distinct from those deemed to be not white. In the construction of that whiteness, the legal boundaries of both white and nonwhite acquired sharper definition. Thus, paradoxically, as scientific racism weakened as an explanation for Euro-American social development, hereditarianism hardened as a rationale for the backwardness and inassimilability of the nonwhite races. Moreover, the idea of racial “difference” began to supplant that of racial superiority as the basis for exclusionary policies. (24-25)

Despite legally instituting a hierarchy of European immigrants through the quota system (an act that reveals the prejudice against certain ethnic groups), the inclusion of these European groups as eligible for citizenship even in reduced numbers makes them “white,” especially when compared to Asians who are excluded from immigration altogether. While there remains a hierarchy within the law, “white ethnics” are now undeniably white and able to assimilate.

It is in such a climate that Walter White and Darryl Zanuck choose the passing narrative and the figure of the Chinese as a means to explore the construction of racial identity. Even as both texts reveal the myth of racial purity through the bodies of their multiracial passing subjects, the trope itself often works to reassert boundaries between racial groups. In *Flight*, White, though suspicious of racial purity, nonetheless concludes with the heroine reaffirming her commitment to black identity in the classic African American version of the trope. With this commitment comes a corresponding allegiance to the fight against white racism on behalf of the international community of color; White redraws the color line between white and non-white in a way that turns the dominant anti-Chinese script on its head. Zanuck, however, rewrites a trope that has been predominantly deployed as a progressive anti-racist tool for both black and white activist writers to correspond to the dominant xenophobic sentiment sweeping the country. Instead, the Chinese American passing subject is a usurper of white identity that only a unified body of European ethnic groups can overcome. The contrasting aims of these texts released only a year apart reveal a tension at the heart of the form and illustrate how the passing narrative could be used both as a progressive call for racial solidarity and as a way to reinforce racial difference.

**“The Oneness of these Variegated Colours”: Racial Unity and Collective Opposition in Walter White’s *Flight***

When Walter White became the Executive Secretary of the NAACP, he, like his predecessor, saw the value of black literature as a means to promote racial equality. White builds upon Johnson’s influential 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in his 1926 *Flight* by also choosing the fictional passing narrative to illustrate racial injustice in America. Perhaps because of his own experience with passing, White’s novel complicates the

dynamics of the African American passing narrative that often includes an element of “race betrayal” when the light-skinned African American chooses to live as a white person. White’s own famous acts of passing, motivated by the racial pride of being a “voluntary Negro,” deviate from the passing narrative’s usual presentation of self-loathing and/or economic advancement as the motivations for passing.<sup>79</sup> And though White’s fictional passing subject is not so self-consciously subversive as her creator when she decides to cross the color line, neither is Mimi Daquin condemned for her act of passing in the novel. In a twist on the standard passing plot, White creates a heroine who passes as much to avoid African American constructions of black femininity as to avoid white racism. Illustrating class and color discrimination among blacks in Atlanta, he also reveals the gender inequality at work in African American society: Mimi must pass for white when she finds herself shunned by her community for being unmarried and pregnant. White presents the black community as self-defeating for creating its own discriminatory restrictions:

Years before she had heard a story which Booker T. Washington had told in which he likened Negroes to a basket of crabs—when one of them had with great energy climbed almost to the top of the basket and freedom, the others less progressive than he would reach up with their claws and pull him back to their own level. (211)

The black community oppresses Mimi with its stringent proscriptions for female sexual behavior, so she moves North, leaving her young son behind. Thus Mimi considers her passing a result of the “intolerance of her own people” (212) when she is shunned for refusing to marry the father of her unborn child to save face in the community. Accordingly, unlike Johnson’s judgment of his own passing protagonist, White does not treat Mimi’s act of passing as a betrayal of the race; instead, the race has betrayed her.

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<sup>79</sup>Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) presents the nameless narrator’s decision to permanently pass for white at the conclusion of the novel as a response to both racial shame and a desire for monetary success that is denied him as a black man.

Like many African American authors before him, White uses the passing narrative to critique segregation and racism in the United States, but he is also using Mimi's story to denounce inequality within the African American community itself. In addition to the gendered discrimination Mimi receives when she finds herself unmarried and pregnant, White dwells at length on color discrimination and internalized racism within the black community, and this hypocrisy, too, drives Mimi toward passing. Because Mimi has reasons to pass rooted in shortcomings of her black community (rather than a desire to be a part of a white community), she does not battle the guilt of having "betrayed" her race by taking on a white identity. Instead, she evaluates the respective values of black and white culture to decide whether or not to continue living as one race or another. White's later introduction of a "third party" character who is neither black nor white becomes a way for the author to present a "neutral" outside perspective on the binary dynamics of race in America. The sudden introduction of a Chinese intermediary gives White an opportunity to present a case for the value of black culture in the face of white oppression that resonates with other African American passing narratives (like *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*) while advocating an internationalist sense of racial solidarity with other oppressed peoples. The use of the Chinese intermediary, however, gives White a way to affirm positive messages about black culture after allowing his protagonist to interrogate some of its shortcomings that seems new to this narrative.<sup>80</sup>

White's more generous approach to the passing subject also corresponds to a more inclusive vision of diversity within communities. When the novel begins, Mimi is a carefree

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<sup>80</sup>Nella Larsen's *Passing*, published three years after *Flight*, also critiques inequality within black society through the conflicted relationship between the conventional and bourgeois Irene Redfield and her boundary-transgressing friend Clare Kendry who passes for white.

Creole girl coming of age in New Orleans, a city which appears to offer a racial equality to be found nowhere else in the South.<sup>81</sup> Mimi is of mixed race, what her father calls “a little bit of everything,” which contributes to “the delightful colourfulness which is [the Creoles’] greatest charm” (40). Despite southern segregation, Mimi is permitted access to all the establishments of the city because the historic mixture of races in New Orleans has blurred easy racial distinctions, making one-drop difficult to enforce. For the youthful Mimi, New Orleans is a city in which mixed-raced people live together outside of the arbitrary biological definitions of race dominant in much southern culture. White first locates the action of the novel in New Orleans as a means of positioning the Creole experience as an alternative paradigm to the sharp divisions of Jim Crow.

Significantly, the perceived freedom of New Orleans is not without its own system of hierarchy and exclusion. The experiences of Mimi’s stepmother, Mary, illustrate that there is a hierarchy of *color* in New Orleans, if not of biological race. White writes of New Orleans: “[D]eadlines there were which they never permitted crossing. One of these was family. Another was colour. Mary offended in both. She was an outsider. And her skin was deep brown” (29). The categories of color and caste determine bias alongside the biological categories of race. While the standard racial hierarchy is not visible in New Orleans, White

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<sup>81</sup>The many definitions of the word “Creole” reflect the myriad of different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups that have claimed this identity. Linguist Connie Eble describes how the specific history of Louisiana contributed to the many different groups that describe themselves as “Creole” in the United States:

When movement of people and goods by water was the norm, Louisiana and the Gulf Coast states were oriented south and were culturally and economically linked to the Caribbean. In the Caribbean, the Spanish, French, Dutch, and English competed for colonies and developed large-scale agriculture for European markets made possible by the labor of slaves brought from Africa. Although it was never as prosperous as other Caribbean colonies, as a colony first of France then of Spain, Louisiana participated in the commerce and in the ethnic and cultural mixing of the region. (38)

See Virginia R. Dominguez’s *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986) for an extended study of Creole identity in the U.S.



reveals a hierarchy nonetheless—one that he condemns alongside the dominant racial hierarchy which permits racial segregation.

Of course, White is even more critical of the white society Mimi eventually enters. As in Johnson's novel, whiteness is constructed in terms of money and economic striving, yet who is eligible to strive for success is limited. White creates two other "passing" figures in the course of *Flight*: Sylvia Smith (whose real last name is Bernstein) and Madame Francine (whose name is really Margaret O'Donnell). Sylvia tells Mimi plainly that "you can't get by in some of these places if they think you're a Jew [...] I'm starting at the bottom just like you, to learn the tricks of the trade, but some day I'm going to have my own business" (218). Similarly, Margaret O'Donnell, who was once an "Irish immigrant girl," transforms herself into the "French" Madame Francine in order to establish herself as a clothing designer (230). White extends the notion of racial passing (from black to white in Mimi's case) to ethnic passing. Though ostensibly white, Sylvia and Francine are ethnically marked as other because they do not conform to traditional Anglo-Saxon or Gallic versions of whiteness. Sylvia, furthermore, must conceal her religious faith to conform to the prerequisite Christian identity that accompanies U.S. notions of whiteness (Francine's religious affiliation, whether Protestant or Catholic, could possibly remain unchanged during her passing). The "American Dream" is possible only by conforming to an Anglo majority. The definition of whiteness in this text is so narrow that even white-skinned Irish and Jewish characters choose to conceal their ethnicities to be accepted in the white world, thus White depicts European American passing subjects as a strategy to further unsettle and destabilize white identity.

Mimi's motivations for passing, however, are significantly different from those of her fellow "passers." Unlike Mimi, these women are motivated to pass for reasons that are

primarily economic. These ethnic women are coded as essentially white because they desire money, yet Mimi is motivated only by a maternal emotional desire to make enough money to be reunited with her young son.<sup>82</sup> Werner Sollors explains how this difference is one of White's larger points in the novel:

[T]he novel does not only insert parallel upstart stories into the lives of Mimi, it explicitly phrases a critique of the ideology of the self-made (wo)man as "bunk" (206). The criticism is part of a broader questioning of Western materialism and hypocrisy from the point of view of an existentially vital black culture and of black laughter. Passing is therefore a mistake, not because it constitutes an act of supposedly aberrant dishonesty in a country of authentic identities, but because it signals the surrender of a potentially critical position to the all too pervasive ethos of money-grubbing. (Sollors, *Neither* 274)

Mimi's passing is not wrong because she betrays whiteness (since the characters Sylvia and Madame Francine shatter the illusion of pure whiteness), but because she seems to abandon what could be the power of her black subject position for critiquing an American ethos of materialism by taking on a white identity for economic advancement.<sup>83</sup>

Though White constructs whiteness and blackness in direct opposition to each other, a tactic which seemingly functions to endorse the underlying structure of a racial binary, he also explicitly disorganizes the values attached to that binary. For example, Mimi's father criticizes the Atlanta blacks for "aping the white man—becoming a race of money-grubbers with ledgers and money tills for brains and Shylock hearts" (54). Despite the implicit anti-Semitism here (and the conflation of white and Jewish identity which contradicts Sylvia

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<sup>82</sup>Walter White did not dislike the phenomenon of black northward migration in and of itself. His 1920 essay, "The Success of Negro Migration," praises Southern blacks for their successful transition to work in northern industry, citing the efficiency of black migrant workers as "another blow to the exponents of the doctrine of race inferiority" (113). By contrast in *Flight*, the author warns of the dangers of assimilating to white culture and adopting such values as materialism and greed.

<sup>83</sup>White's critique of white materialism echoes the famous conclusion of Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in which the narrator laments his decision to pass: "I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (154).

Bernstein's passing), Jean's sentiment is reinforced throughout the novel. Mimi, too, is grateful that one of the great black "racial characteristic[s]" is the ability not to "surrender ... individuality to the machine" (94). White characters in *Flight* possess merchants' hearts, while Creoles, blacks, and other people of color have a strong sense of individualism and resistance to the mechanization of American culture. Reflecting a rhetorical strategy deployed by many African American intellectuals to transform the dominant hierarchy that insisted upon white superiority,<sup>84</sup> White repeatedly places blacks above whites, thereby advocating more than mere equality.<sup>85</sup> Critiquing white materialism becomes a method of also challenging the dominant discourse of competing civilizations which placed African Americans on the bottom.

Another illustration of White's construction of the gulf between black and white is evident in Mimi's response to World War I: "Oh, well, it's white people killing white people—the more they kill, the better the chance for coloured peoples" (222). Mimi's sentiments reflect one response of African Americans to the First World War. Her bitterness over World War I is reminiscent of Du Bois's take on the war in his essay "The Ways of White Folk."<sup>86</sup> Appearing in his 1920 collection *Darkwater*, the essay links the horrors of the

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<sup>84</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois's "Of Spiritual Striving" epitomizes this early twentieth century African American strategy of countering sociological dismissal of black civilization by condemning the prejudice which motivates it and promising to fulfill the "ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack" (8).

<sup>85</sup>Critic Blyden Jackson summarizes White's conclusions on white or black superiority in *Flight*:  
 T]he whole point of this novel, which its plot structure is organized, at least in theory, to make gleamingly apparent, is that Mimi's search for happiness, culminating as it does in her grateful return to Negro life, is proof of a unique quality which endows Negro existence in America with marked superiorities of humane values over the life of white Americans. (382-3)

<sup>86</sup>Despite the public struggle of wills between W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White (culminating in 1934 when Du Bois left his position as the editor of *The Crisis*), the influence of Du Bois's writing is undeniably evident in White's work (Janken 191).

world war, European colonial atrocities, and the condition of the African American: “In the awful cataclysm of World War, where from beating, slandering, and murdering us the white world turned temporarily aside to kill each other, we of the Darker Peoples looked on in mild amaze” (25). After systematically illustrating the connections between European colonization abroad and American oppression at home, Du Bois concludes with a rallying cry for the “dark world”:

The World War was primarily the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share in exploiting darker races. As such it is and must be but the prelude to the armed and indignant protest of these despised and raped peoples. Today Japan is hammering on the door of justice, China is raising her half-manacled hands to knock next, India is writhing for the freedom to knock, Egypt is sullenly muttering, the Negroes of South and West Africa, of the West Indies, and of the United States are just awakening to their shameful slavery. Is then, this war the end of wars? Can it be the end, so long as sits enthroned, even in the souls of those who cry peace, the despising and robbing of darker peoples? If Europe hugs this delusion, then this is not the end of world war,—it is but the beginning! (35)

Du Bois was at the forefront of the black internationalist movement and an early advocate for both Pan-Africanism and what historian Jonathan Rosenberg has identified as “color-conscious internationalism.”<sup>87</sup> As Du Bois’s statement illustrates, the First World War became an indicator of the end of European domination, and African American leaders seized upon it. In this respect, Mimi’s reaction to the war reflected a much larger international discourse of “dark” uplift.

When Mimi moves to New York, she finds herself drawn to the mixed cultures within the city—where there are “races representative of every nook of the world” (237). Significantly, White’s view on immigration was at odds with the largely negative reaction of most white Americans towards non-white immigrants. His positive constructions of a

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<sup>87</sup>See Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

multiplicity of races in this novel come only five years after the 1923 *Ozawa v. United States* and *United States v. Thind* Supreme Court decisions had determined the legal definition of whiteness in order to exclude non-white races from immigration eligibility. Even some black leaders such as Booker T. Washington were wary of unchecked immigration because of the economic threat it posed to African Americans who competed with immigrants for low wage jobs (Fuchs 295). Yet White's figuration of ethnic immigrants is positive, which, according to historian David J. Hellwig, reflects the representative African American perspective of the 1910s and 1920s:

Like the Afro-American, most immigrants were poor and encountered hostility in the United States. As victims of religious or ethnic bigotry, they often were relegated to a position which in some ways approached that of blacks. As fellow victims of intolerance, blacks empathized with the despised immigrant and hesitated to join their enemies. If Afro-Americans opposed welcoming other minorities, they might strengthen doctrines used against them. (111)

Thus White constructs the colored races as allied against white oppression. As Hellwig observes, to be anti-immigrant would only reaffirm racial discrimination.

In White's construction, other colored races share the essential qualities of blackness: "Black and brown and yellow faces flitted by, some carefree, some careworn. Mimi sensed again the *essential* rhythm, the oneness of these variegated colours and moods. It was all vivid, colourful, of a pattern distinctive and apart, and she *warmed* to the friendliness of it all [emphasis added]" (186). Similarly, White constructs mingled colored life as united by its own essential "rhythm:" "Black and brown and yellow faces replaced the white, the laughs became more frequent, more rich, more spontaneous" (10). In *Flight*, colored life is vibrant life. By contrast, whiteness is figured as lacking essential "warmth." While passing, Mimi has a constant "yearning for contact with her own people:"

She was lonely, for despite her success she had no intimates, none she could call friend, though she might have had them had she chosen. She missed the warm colourfulness of life among her own, she had never been able to shake off the chill she felt even when her present-day associates sought to be cordial. (241)

Whiteness is constructed as so “chilly” that Mimi finds herself incapable of choosing a white friend. Denied the essential warmth of black life, Mimi has only the monetary “success” of whiteness to comfort her.

Cut off from black society and adrift in the white world, Mimi needs an intermediary to reveal to her the true value of her people. Significantly, this intermediary comes in the form of a Chinese character, Wu Hseh-Chuan, who is introduced to Mimi and her white husband Jimmie through a professor of Chinese culture recently returned from a trip to China. The professor argues against the “perfectness” of American culture before Hseh-Chuan is even introduced, thereby laying the groundwork for White’s final challenge to the white hierarchy: the presentation of a viable alternative to the Western (i.e., white) way of life. A seeming mouthpiece for the author’s ideas, the professor argues that there is greater value in non-white civilization because western civilization has “made it possible to spread faster and more easily bigotry and hatred and intolerance” (271). White appropriates the terms of the discourse of civilization from his predecessors, but he undermines the usual value attached to white civilization. White’s construction is a redefined binary of colored/white that does not ignore those outside of the categories of black and white, and privileges colored unity.

Through the character of Wu Hseh-Chuan, White disrupts any remaining illusions about the superiority of Western culture. Mimi, expecting to meet a “slant-eyed Oriental shuffling across a laundry floor or a bestial, treacherous villain upon the stage of moving-

picture screen,” is startled by the superiority of Hseh-Chuan.<sup>88</sup> White’s depiction of this character runs contrary to the negative stereotype but affirms the stereotype of the mystic Chinese when Hseh-Chuan is described as having “the wisdom and dignity of a bronze Buddha” (280). His strategy for countering negative Asian stereotypes, much like his strategy for negative images of blacks, is to propagate the positive aspects of stereotypical depiction. While White is not propagating negative stereotypes of the Chinese in the U.S., he is none-the-less continuing a type of exoticization that renders this figure as foreign rather than native; Hseh-Chuan serves as an Asian aesthetic object rather than a fully enfranchised U.S. citizen to be fully incorporated into the American racial landscape.

White’s choice of an idealized Chinese intermediary reflects the growing African American interest in China as a model for resistance to western imperialism with the rise of Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>89</sup> As Hseh-Chuan tells Mimi:

There is a change taking place in China—all over the world, in fact [...] Gandhi in India, we in the Far East, in Africa, in Turkey, in the whole Near East—there is a stirring going on. But it isn’t against what you call your “Western civilization” nor is it primarily against white people as white people—it’s a healthy movement of people who for centuries have been asleep—it’s a rising, given form by the late war, of peoples who have been exploited. (281)

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<sup>88</sup>White, like many NAACP leaders, often wrote against racial stereotypes in literature and film. Racist representations of Asians in American film are as old as the form itself. Yellowface, like blackface, was common film practice at the time of White’s novel. Though White’s criticism of the film industry focused primarily on images of African Americans, his arguments against racist depictions can be applied to racist images of other groups as well. White’s condemnation of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* might equally apply to Griffith’s follow-up, *Broken Blossoms*, in which a white actor plays the Chinese lead in yellowface.

<sup>89</sup>For example, in 1927, the African American magazine, *The Messenger*, ran a series of articles heralding China as a harbinger of the defeat of Western imperialism that appealed to its black readership. Jonathan Rosenberg writes, “As the Chinese chased out western imperial influence in order to build a new society, the editors identified the dawn of a new historical epoch, ‘the beginning of the end of the unchallenged control and supremacy of the white race over the darker races.’” Though China represented the possibility of a new world order, even by the following year, disillusionment was creeping in. In Du Bois’s 1928 novel, *Dark Princess*, Princess Kautilya lectures the hero, Matthew Townes, on the potential leaders to be found in China, but she also warns of the dangers of “human weakness”: “There was Chiang Kai-Shek, so fine and young a warrior! I knew him well. I saw once his golden face alight with the highest ideals, his eyes a Heaven-in-Earth. Today, what is he? I do not know. Perhaps he does not” (291-2). Though the message of Du Bois’s novel is the potential for worldwide “dark” solidarity and resistance, he tempers his idealism with frequent reminders that the forces outside and within the “darker world” work against the dream (19).

Though Hseh-Chuan is not against “white people as white people,” he is opposed to the mechanization and disparity that white culture often brings to non-whites. Furthermore, though he implies here that the struggle for racial equality is not based upon essentialized race, Hseh-Chuan also claims that “only your Negroes have successfully resisted mechanization—they yet can laugh and they yet can enjoy the benefits of the machine without being crushed by it” (282). Negroes (as a race, not as individuals), argues Hseh-Chuan, have not denied their race to gain white success. Again, the author casts the opposition between colored and white in essentialist terms, turning a negative characteristic (black poverty) into a positive (resistance to capitalism).

Through Mimi’s interaction with an ethnic Other, White both reunites Mimi with her race and unites the colored races in their opposition to the values of white civilization (i.e., mechanization and materialism).<sup>90</sup> Influenced by Hseh-Chuan, Mimi’s racial reawakening is ensured when she sees a performance in a black cabaret. Listening to the music and watching the dancers, White writes: “it had taken an Oriental from half-way around the world to make her see things she had seen all her life and yet never seen” (293). Mimi needs an intermediary to show her the value of blackness before she decides to stop passing. By associating blackness with the potential for advancing colored empowerment on a global scale, Hseh-Chuan also gives Mimi a newfound political consciousness that becomes a part of her

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<sup>90</sup>While most critics (most notably Judith Berzon) contend that Mimi returns happily to the black race, Neil Brooks argues that Mimi’s sense of happiness is false because she “reclaims her birthright but at the expense of living in an idealized fictional world where she must deny a part of her identity and, moreover, willfully remain oblivious to that denial” (383). Here Brooks, challenges the way the author chose to align the mixed race character with only one racial identity. While Brooks is correct to point out the complications of such a choice, this emphasis denies the underlying construction of racial identities in the novel. With whiteness positioned against color in *Flight*, Mimi must choose to align herself with her black heritage because there is no middle position in this context. Because White offers no third alternative for Mimi’s identification, her reconnection to her blackness and her re-alignment with resistance to white oppression are the only choices Mimi can make without completely sacrificing herself to the emptiness of white identity.



“reborn” black identity. By revaluating the status attached to blackness in this scene, White disorganizes the dominant hierarchy, and then reconstructs a dichotomy of white versus colored. His reconstruction retains the binary structure of the dominant discourse, but he transforms it in such a way as to radically unite the colored races in the face of white oppression. White’s novel signals a dramatic shift in African American strategy for racial equality, taking the struggle from local to global (and back again).

White’s commitment to anti-imperialism and internationalism grew in the years following his novel. In an essay from 1932 entitled “The Negro on the American Stage,” White (taking a cue from his NAACP predecessor, Johnson) promotes black arts as well as civil rights. Even this treatise on black contributions to American culture returns to the internationalist theme, echoing his earlier novel:

Such organizations as the Interracial Commission in the southern colleges and universities and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People made rapid strides in causing at least the enlightened minority of the American mass mind to recognize the absolute necessity of intelligent and less biased appraisal of the Negro and the color question. This development was speeded by the emergence of Japan and the Far East, of India through the widely publicized Gandhi, of Africa and of other remote parts of the world whose exploitation had played so large a role in the jealousies and quarrels which led to the late World War. It became impossible to pick up a newspaper but that one encountered some item which directed the attention to some aspect of the problem of race. Try as one might, he had great difficulty in avoiding impingement upon his consciousness, either pleasantly or otherwise, that there are colored peoples on the earth whose lives and destinies were inextricably interwoven with the future of white peoples and of the world. (251)

Optimistically claiming the diminishment of negative black stereotypes in American culture, White links this change to both the work of domestic organizations like the NAACP and growing awareness of international justice.

If White’s internationalism grew during the post-World War I period, it peaked during the Second World War. In his 1948 autobiography, White writes of the statement

made in 1944 by representatives from twenty-five African American organizations concerning the election of that year. The collective statement, after detailing domestic concerns, concludes with a call to “end imperialism and colonial exploitation”; this could be assured if China were viewed as an equal power with the Allies and if the U.S. would include African Americans as “diplomatic, technical, and professional experts engaged in international post war reconstruction” (264). White and the other delegates argue that, along with the emergence of the Chinese superpower to disrupt “white superiority,” the placement of African Americans in reconstruction positions of power could help liberate the “two-thirds of the people of the earth who are brown, yellow, or black of skin.”

White’s hopes for a new world order were short lived. In *A Man Called White*, White recalls the disillusionment he felt when, during the 1945 founding meeting of the United Nations in San Francisco, it became clear that the U.S. would not pursue a human rights declaration as part of the founding charter. In a chapter aptly entitled “Cloudy Tomorrow,” White reflects:

I remembered the demolished Manila and the faith of the guerilla fighters of the Philippines who, having endured incredible hardship in fighting the Japanese invaders, believed implicitly when I had talked with them only a few days previously that the United States would do all it could to build a better and more just world. I remembered the Jews in Palestine, the impoverished Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa, and particularly the black natives of Africa who had told me of their dreams of a world after the war which would live up to at least some of the beautiful phrases of freedom in the Atlantic Charter. (296)

The revolutionary moment of change that White and other internationalists dreamed of never came, as the very organization that was to be the epitome of international cooperation was undermined from the beginning by U.S. unwillingness to assert a fundamental commitment to human rights across the color line.

White's disillusionment with the lost potential of the postwar period was compounded with the rise of Cold War politics. The rising force of African American solidarity with oppressed peoples around the world was quickly quashed under the new world order. Penny M. Von Eschen argues that the Truman administration, trying to present a positive image of U.S. race relations, enacted "the systematic repression of those anticolonial activists who opposed American foreign policy and who fought for the visibility of the oppression of all black peoples against a bipolar reading of politics that rendered the oppression of Africans and people of African descent a secondary issue" (3). African American activists like White, faced with the increasing hostility from the government, abandoned overt criticisms of foreign policy to focus instead on domestic civil rights (Von Eschen 109).<sup>91</sup> Instead of radically advocating internationalism, White argues that racism at home hurts the credibility of the U.S. as the agent of world democracy. Citing White's efforts to use arguments about "national interests" to fight housing segregation, Von Eschen writes, "White's counsel starkly underscores the impotence of moral appeals in the face of widespread changes in the political economy. And by acquiescing in a narrowed civil rights agenda, many civil rights leaders forfeited the means to address these structural changes" (149).

Though White's pragmatic ability to argue for a world-wide civil rights movement was stifled, he continued to imagine alternatives. On the last day of his life in 1955, White told his wife he planned to recuperate his fragile health in order to attend the Afro-Asian

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<sup>91</sup>Janken notes that White's pragmatic move away from anti-colonial rhetoric served his domestic Civil Rights agenda, but also "meant the isolation of African American radicals like Du Bois and Robeson, who denounced American racism as fundamental to American capitalism and demanded far-reaching changes in the country's polity and economy" (322). Though isolated from mainstream American activists, Du Bois's connection to China continued until the end of his life. His infamous 1959 visit with Mao Tse-tung was followed in 1962 with a final visit to China when Du Bois was ninety-four years old (Lewis 706). Living in exile, Du Bois remained staunchly dedicated to an ethos of global liberation.

Solidarity Conference in Bandung, Indonesia (Janken 359). Though unable to realize this political goal during his lifetime, White's vision of a more inclusive, international civil rights movement in *Flight* remains a powerful statement of racial solidarity.

### **Yellowface Heathens and Whitewashed History: *Old San Francisco* (1927) and the Consolidation of Whiteness**

The progressiveness of Walter White's vision of colored solidarity and his engagement with the black internationalist movement of the 1920s and 30s contrasts sharply with that of many white authors and filmmakers' depictions of race relations. Whatever the limitations of White's presentation of Wu Hseh-Chuan, most popular depictions of a Chinese character at the time did indeed confirm Mimi's film-induced expectations of a "slant-eyed Oriental shuffling across a laundry floor or a bestial, treacherous villain" (280). These stereotypes pervaded Hollywood. Consider *Old San Francisco*, the 1927 Vitaphone film appearing a year after White's antiracist novel.<sup>92</sup> Written and produced by Daryl F. Zanuck and directed by Alan Crosland, *Old San Francisco* tells the story of an old Spanish Californio family whose lives and property are threatened by a Chinese American man named Chris Buckwell, a man who passes for white so as to rule over San Francisco's Chinatown.

*Old San Francisco* begins with brief vignettes illustrating the history of the Vasquez family who settle in the Southwest as Spanish conquistadors. The film's main plot begins in 1906 when the Vasquez family has lost much of its wealth to encroaching Anglo settlement. Chris Buckwell, a crime lord who runs Chinatown and tries to keep the Chinese population

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<sup>92</sup>Used by Warner Brothers from 1920 until 1930, the Vitaphone process was an early method for providing sound to film by including the soundtrack on a record to be played while the film was screened. *Old San Francisco* is primarily a silent film with a musical soundtrack—until the conclusion of the film when the 1906 earthquake strikes and human cries are heard along with the sound of the collapsing city. Later that year, the *Jazz Singer* would take Vitaphone to new heights. See Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) for a discussion of the origins of Vitaphone.

confined to it, sets his sights on the struggling Vasquez ranch. Buckwell sends his Irish henchman, Michael Brandon, and Brandon's nephew, Terrence O'Shaughnessy, to the Vasquez ranch to strong arm the elderly patriarch into relinquishing his property. Terry, however, falls in love with the Vasquez granddaughter, Delores, and though the Vasquez patriarch considers the young Irish hero too inferior to court his granddaughter, Terry warns the family of the danger they are in. Vasquez's refusal to sell his land enrages Buckwell, who then arranges to take control of the Vasquez ranch. As the elderly Vasquez attempts to defend his property from Buckwell, he dies of a sudden heart attack. As bells ring and Delores prays to God for deliverance, a light from heaven shines down on Buckwell and his "true" identity is revealed to her. Buckwell, realizing that Delores knows his secret, kidnaps her and plans to sell her into white slavery in the underground labyrinths of Chinatown. Terry tries to recover Delores in Chinatown, but it is the Great Earthquake—a seeming response to Delores's prayer of deliverance—that frees her and kills Buckwell. Delores and Terry live happily ever after in a rebuilt San Francisco, "cleansed" of the degradation of old Chinatown. The depiction of the villainous Buckwell epitomizes what film critic Daniel Bernardi identifies as a central preoccupation of American film: "U.S. cinema has consistently constructed whiteness, the representational and narrative form of Eurocentrism, as the norm by which all "Others" fail by comparison. People of color are generally represented as either deviant threats to white rule, thereby requiring civilizing or brutal punishment, or fetishized objects of exotic beauty, icons for a racist scopophilia" (4). In *Old San Francisco*, Buckwell and the other denizens of Chinatown are both objects of white preoccupation and desire while they simultaneously threaten white power. Buckwell is played by Swedish actor Warner Oland who is best known for his portrayal of the Jewish cantor in the *Jazz Singer* and



*Figure 10: Oland as the Cantor*

his roles as two of the most iconic Chinese characters in U.S. culture: arch villain Fu Manchu and genial detective Charlie Chan. The only Asian American actor in the film with a credited role, Anna May Wong plays an “exotic” beauty whose primary purpose is to present a lascivious and dangerous counterpoint to the Spanish

American heroine of the film, played by Dolores Costello. These shady characters appear in the literal underworld of the “Mile of Hell”; complete with labyrinthine chambers, Chinatown as filmed is filled with opium dens, gambling halls, and white slavery auction blocks.

The decade of the 1920s was the peak period of stories about vilified Chinese and seedy Chinatowns.<sup>93</sup> Critic Gina Marchetti notes that the rise in narratives of the “yellow peril” had more to do with Western imperialism than with any genuine threat from Asian immigrants:

Rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe, the yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East. Given that knowledge about Asia and Asians has been limited in Europe and America, much of this formulation necessarily rests on a fantasy that projects Euroamerican desires and dreads onto the alien other. Thus, as Western nations began to carve up Asia into colonies, their own imperialist expansion was in part rationalized by the notion that a militarily powerful Asia posed a threat to “Christian civilization” (2).

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<sup>93</sup>In his study of “yellow peril” in fiction, William Wu writes: “The exploitation of Chinatown’s lurid reputation by American authors reaches its height in fiction by Hugh Wiley and Lemuel de Bra. Wiley has two short-story collections, *Jade and Other Stories* (1922) and *Manchu Blood* (1927). He is second only to Sax Rohmer, the English creator of Dr. Fu Manchu, in creating imaginary customs and behavior of a cruel and vicious nature in Chinese and Chinese American societies. Writing well after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and its fire that destroyed the Chinatown there, he ‘resurrected an exotic past that did not exist in order to satisfy our thirst for romance and adventure’ (137).

*Old San Francisco* embodies this popular yellow peril narrative and its corresponding concern with Christianity and imperialism. The film begins with an extended explication of the history of the Vasquez family who come to North America as conquistadors; that history is meant to represent the shaping of the Western United States. After a shot of Spanish conquerors on horseback raising Christian banners, an intertitle attributes the conquest of the West “to the glory of God and the crown of Castile.” European colonization is cast as a noble act of nation and Christian faith.



*Figure 9: Warner Oland as Charlie Chan*



*Figure 10: Oland as Fu Manchu*

The history of the Spanish settlement is then quickly compressed, jumping from 1769 to 1848 in a single shot. Though the Mexican-American War is alluded to through a reference to 1848, there is no explicit explanation of *how* the Spanish settlement became the U.S. city of San Francisco. Only upon the 1849 discovery of gold (a date shown superimposed over the image of a covered wagon giving a quick visual nod to the preeminent

symbol of Manifest Destiny) does the Vasquez family feel the threat of Anglo encroachment: the hacienda workers run away. One of the men shouts (through the title card, of course): “Your orders—and your Spanish glory—don’t mean a thing now. Stand clear!” before shooting the elder Vasquez son. The younger Vasquez avenges his brother’s death before the prologue concludes and the actors in the main story are introduced. This short history of the Vasquez family paints the story of the Spanish in the West as a glorious, yet defeated, chapter of history. Though Spanish conquest is romanticized, it is nonetheless relegated to the past.



*Figure 11: The Vasquez Hacienda under threat.*



The contrast of the past with the “present” of the film is made clear as the main story begins with shots of urban San Francisco in 1906: “But even as the city flourished and fulfilled its brilliant destiny, the glory of the ancient Spanish Californians grew dim.” This caption is followed by a shot of a ghostly party from days gone by. Delores Vasquez dances before her grandfather, trying to cheer him with hopes for the future, but he responds with, “The city surges up toward us. It will bury us and our traditions beneath an alien civilization.” This ominous response suggests that Anglo civilization will overcome Spanish tradition. Grandfather Vasquez’s fears are soon realized when Irish businessmen (the hero, Terrence O’Shaughnessy, and his uncle), working for the ostensibly white Chris Buckwell, threaten to steal the hacienda by refusing to honor Spanish land grants, an act that would complete the U.S. imperialist takeover of Spanish lands alluded to in the film’s prologue.

But as the plot unfolds and Buckwell is revealed to “really” be Chinese, the “alien civilization” that threatens the Vasquez hacienda is redefined. This narrative sleight-of-hand uses racist fears of passing to displace Anglo responsibility for imperialism in the western U.S. In *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, Michael Rogin explains that the revelation of Buckwell’s passing redefines the conflict from “Spanish versus Anglo” to “white versus Chinese”:

When the source of the threat shifts from white to Asian, the target shifts from property in land to property in women. Putting yellow faces on what it had earlier depicted as an Anglo menace, *Old San Francisco* endorses what it had first bemoaned: the passing (in both senses) of the California Spanish. Grandfather Vasquez’s prophecy that ‘the city will bury us and our traditions beneath an alien civilization’ is at once fulfilled and reversed: the movie transfers alienness from Anglos who endanger Spanish to Orientals who menace whites. (130)

This maneuver absolves Anglos of responsibility for Western conquest by redefining the “threat” to the Spanish settlers as Chinese. To do this, Buckwell, a single Chinese American with anomalous power that he uses as much to exploit the Chinese population as the Spanish, becomes a synecdoche for all Chinese people. Buckwell’s lone act of passing is so threatening to white womanhood (with its underlying promise of further miscegenation) that, by association, all the Chinese in Chinatown become the focus of white (and heavenly) retribution.

Furthermore, this narrative maneuver also helps begin the process of “whitening” the Spanish in an alliance with the Anglos against the truly “alien” Asian. In *Spain’s Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire*, María DeGuzmán argues that throughout U.S. literary history, “Anglo-Americans created a fantasy of racial purity through the representation of Spaniards as figures of morally blackened alien whiteness or *off-whiteness* and doomed hybridity” (xxiv). While the influence of the “Black Legend” on Zanuck’s treatment of the Spanish is evident in the early scenes (the entire Vasquez family is usually dressed in dark clothing), the film concludes by assimilating the Spanish heroine into the American fold while signs of her earlier identity (her dark clothing, property, and language) disappear. Variegated European ethnicity passes into a monolithic white race over the course of the film; Delores, too, passes into whiteness when under threat from Chinese Buckwell.

The assimilation of the Catholic Vasquez family into larger “white” identity was not, however, an easy move. Historian Justin Nordstrom argues that there was a strong national movement toward anti-Catholicism during the Progressive era that propagated that Catholics were unable to be truly American, “insisting that their adherence to priestly hierarchies made

Catholics unable to accept American values of egalitarianism, individualism, and tolerance” (8). Despite this cultural ambivalence toward Catholics, the film stresses that it is the commonality of *Christian* identity, an aspect that Rogin’s analysis largely ignores, that allows for the assimilation of the Spanish to occur. Notably, though the film promotes these Catholic characters as white and able to assimilate to “American” culture, Delores marries an Irish Catholic and avoids having to make a religious conversion.<sup>94</sup>

Appearing three years after the Johnson-Reed Act, *Old San Francisco* illustrates the larger cultural project of constructing “whiteness.” In the face of Chinese passing, yellow peril, like Asian exclusion, works to mark the “Spanish” heroine and the Irish hero as undeniably white. Marchetti notes that there are a disproportionate amount of “yellow peril” narratives despite a low Asian population in the U.S. in this period because Asians work “as signifiers of racial otherness to avoid the far more immediate racial tensions between blacks and whites or the ambivalent mixture of guilt and enduring hatred toward Native Americans and Hispanics” (6). What makes *Old San Francisco* so compelling is its use of the “yellow peril” theme in tandem with the passing narrative to both evade and engage with the problems of Latina/o assimilation and U.S. colonial guilt.

While Spanish experience in California is ennobled in the film, this history is evasive in its construction of Mexican-Americans as unproblematically white. The Mexican-American War of 1848 had determined Mexican racial status: the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo granted citizenship to Mexicans living in the territory annexed by the United States which, in turn, influenced the racial categorization of Mexicans:

When they conferred citizenship upon Mexicans en masse, Americans were aware

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<sup>94</sup>For a history of how Irish immigrants were received in the United States and their eventual assimilation into white American identity, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge: New York: 1995).

that the right to naturalize applied only to free white persons. The California constitutional convention of 1949 formally granted Mexicans the same citizenship rights as white persons. Delegates commented that “a small amount of Indian blood” was acceptable, as was suffrage for Mexicans, as long as Negroes and Indians were not admitted to the polity. (Ngai 51)

This racial classification of Mexicans as white is especially interesting given that declaration that “a small amount of Indian blood” did not invalidate Mexican whiteness as “one drop” of African blood certainly would have. Evading Mexican hybridity for the most part but granting some small wiggle room within the racial classification of the Mexican shows how the law defined whiteness, not the other way around. Mexicans are white because they have been granted citizenship; they are not granted citizenship because they are white.

While *Old San Francisco* treats the characters of Spanish descent as another variety of white ethnic, this construction had legal precedent. The Immigration Act of 1924 did not include immigration quotas for peoples within the hemisphere. Because Mexicans were legally classified as white, they were not excluded from citizenship based on race (Ngai 50). Suzanne Oboler has traced the construction of the many labels applied to the formerly Mexican population in California and concludes that upper class Mexicans defined themselves as biologically superior to lower class Mexicans, emphasizing a dubious claim to “pure” Spanish blood (24-5).<sup>95</sup>

*Old San Francisco* sidesteps the problem of indigenous populations in the history of the West, and this lacuna contributes to the construction of the Vasquez family as unproblematically white. Native Americans simply do not exist in the history presented by

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<sup>95</sup> *Californio* author María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s 1872 novel, *Who Would of Thought It?*, best demonstrates the conflict between how elite Mexicans constructed race before the Mexican-American War and how Anglo Americans reconstructed Mexican racial identities after annexation. Though Ruiz de Burton satirizes the hypocrisy of Anglo-American postures of superiority (one Anglo character, for example, is a rabidly racist abolitionist), her construction of Mexican identity is unequivocally white. Ruiz de Burton is invested in creating a clear boundary between indigenous peoples and Mexicans even as she condemns Anglo American resistance to accepting Mexicans as white.

the narrative. By ignoring the presence of Native Americans in the West, the film does not need to address any questions of *mestizo* heritage for its Mexican American characters. As Ngai explains, the myth of *Californio* purity became beneficial for Anglos looking to further Manifest Destiny through marriage and Mexican Americans looking to gain privileged racial status:

At the time of annexation Euro-Americans in the Southwest generally interacted with the native Californios, Tejanos, and Nuevo Mexicanos of the region more on the basis of class than race. Anglo settlers intermarried with the native upper-class elite, who owned most of the land and occupied the center of the seigniorial order. Many of them descended from the first Spanish settlements and missions in the northern borderlands during the seventeenth century. Yet, the white skin and Castilian blood of the native *ranchero* class may have been more apocryphal than real, a later invention by the Mexican American middle class striving to distance itself from the racial opprobrium associated with “Mexican” that emerged in the Southwest after World War I. (51)

*Old San Francisco* operates from the premise that its Mexican American family is Spanish, not *mestizo*. Throughout the film, the ghostly figurations of dead conquistadors serve as a visible link to the Vasquez family ancestry. The “purity” of Vasquez blood is so assured that when the Irish Terrence O’Shaughnessy comes to court Delores Vasquez, her grandfather dismisses him as inferior. Using the language of blood and breeding, Vasquez tells Delores not to “depend on him. He is one of their breed—and blood will tell.” The elder Vasquez reveals a sense of Spanish superiority reminiscent of Ruiz de Burton, and he views the Irish man as part of the larger Anglo conspiracy to take their property. His granddaughter disagrees, and her attraction to Terry indicates that the “purity” of the Spanish will, because it remains an European ethnicity, become part of a mongrelized whiteness in the next generation.

The romance between Terry and Delores plays out alongside the battle over property—with Delores’s purity as much an object to be gained as the ranch. Linda Williams

notes that melodrama is “the best example of American culture’s (often hypocritical) attempt to construct itself as the locus of innocence and virtue” (17). Delores’s physical virtue stands in for the innocence first of Spanish conquest (a remarkably bloodless narrative in the film) and then acts as a shield of innocence for subsequent Anglo conquest. Like the evasion of guilt over original conquest, Anglo American guilt is displaced onto the Chinese villains. Not only is the Chinese-passing-for-white Buckwell a threat to the Vasquez property and the purity of the Vasquez woman, but he is also to blame for the ghettoization of the Chinese. In two successive intertitles, Anglo responsibility for the creation of Chinatown is evaded. The first reads: “The Chinese question had long vexed San Francisco. To keep the Mongol within the limits of Chinatown—what graft and cruelty were invoked!” The second, following a shot of Warner Oland, seemingly blames an Anglo for the corruption of Chinatown: “Cruel, mysterious, crafty—Chris Buckwell had grafted his way from unknown origin to power. Czar of the Tenderloin-- -- chief persecutor of the Chinese.” Buckwell’s “unknown origin” has an ironic parallel in the legislation that deemed his Asian heritage unknowable. Ngai notes that the Johnson-Reed Act’s national origins quota system delineated European immigrants by their nation of origin while immigrants from the rest of world were described solely by race: “In this presentation, white Americans and immigrants from Europe have ‘national origin,’ that is, they may be identified by the country of their birth or their ancestors’ birth. But, the ‘colored races’ were imagined as having no country of origin. They lay outside the concept of nationality and, therefore, citizenship. They were not even bona fide immigrants” (27). Though ostensibly white at this point in the film, Buckwell’s “unknown origin” signifies his “tainted blood.”

The film feigns sympathy with the persecuted Chinese until, minutes later, Buckwell's identity is revealed when he takes a secret staircase to a room beneath the city. There he changes into traditional Chinese clothing and bows before an elaborate shrine. Orientalist music swells and near the shrine, a caged dwarf is seen. The earlier sympathy for the persecuted Chinese is evident again as an intertitle explains: "Dwarfed by nature—caged by man—Chang Loo's soul nevertheless dwelt with his God's." Sympathy for the dwarf, however, is tempered by the music score, which swells and becomes oddly upbeat as this title is presented. This underworld, complete with heathen idols, a caged dwarf, and elaborate costume, is far too exoticized to allow for complete sympathy for any of the Chinese characters. And though Chang Loo's faith is cited to elicit sympathy, his god is the same heathen god that Buckwell now prays to: Buckwell's religion serves as link to the Chinese people.

The depiction of Buckwell's religious faith in these scenes seems to fulfill a contradictory impulse on the part of the filmmakers. The complexities of various Chinese religious, philosophical, and spiritual practices are circumvented entirely; the film does not distinguish Buckwell's worship as Buddhist, Confucian, or any number of other Chinese religious or belief systems. Instead, the film transforms Buckwell's ambiguous beliefs into an exoticized, monolithic Chinese religion that clearly parallels Delores's Catholic faith. Like Buckwell, the Vasquez family has a chapel devoted to prayer, and it reflects Catholic iconography. And while the incense burning in Buckwell's shrine is meant to further exoticize his faith, incense is also a vital part of Catholic mass. But Delores's faith, for all its differences from Protestant worship, remains Christian, and, in comparison to Buckwell's elaborate shrine, is infinitely more subdued and assimilable to the Protestant majority.

It is the inassimilable (though pass-able) heathen Chinese enables the audience's embrace of the Catholic heroine and hero. Buckwell's alien heathen religion is ultimately his undoing. His faith, which he continues to practice even while passing, involves ancestor worship, and his passing is constructed as an "offence against his ancestors" that must be avenged by *his* community. Passing in *Old San Francisco* entails the betrayal of ancestors, blood, and religion because they are intertwined. Whereas Delores's faith, though also associated with ancestor worship in the film, grants her access to the protective mantle of whiteness that runs counter to her ancestors' perceptions of the Anglo Other, Buckwell's religion and his Chinese ancestors are the reasons he is denied a claim to whiteness. In this film, Asians simply cannot be assimilated, no matter how European they appear. With blood quantum trumping phenotype, "one-drop" is redefined to include Chinese Americans as well as African Americans. Europeans are constructed as having a common ancestry and therefore share similar religious and cultural values that people descended from other continents cannot have access to. In this way, *Old San Francisco* propagates the hierarchy of world civilizations that White's Chinese and African American characters reject in *Flight*.

Kneeling before the idol, Buckwell prays: "Oh, god of my ancestors—accept the sacrifices I offer for the sins I have committed against my own people." Buckwell's passing is now completely revealed to the audience; his religion reveals his ethnicity. As in many passing narratives, Buckwell passes as a way to make financial gains in white society. But unlike sympathetic portrayals of passing subjects, Buckwell is motivated by a desire for domination, not simply class mobility. Buckwell's passing is presented as an act of racial and cultural trespass, not as a representation of the paradoxes of American racial categorization. Unlike most passing narratives, which usually treat the passing subjects' claims to multiple



racial identities as part of the passer's struggle, Buckwell's racial makeup is not dealt with, or even explained, in the plot of the film. Here we find a mixed race passing subject with no discussion of miscegenation. Instead, Buckwell's ethnicity is made unproblematically Chinese, and it is this fact, not his evil actions, that proves to be his undoing.

Without the knowledge of Buckwell's "true" identity, the corruption of Chinatown and the encroachment on Californio land would go unpunished. The film, preoccupied with displacing blame for Anglo domination on a single act of Chinese passing, inadvertently shows the extent to which this narrative is deeply invested in the masking of white supremacy. In the tradition of passing narratives like *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in which the passing subject is condemned for succumbing to the ease of white identity, the film tries to condemn Buckwell for betraying his people. Unlike most African American authored passing narratives, however, the film does not attribute Buckwell's actions as a reaction against white racism, as the film insists that the degradation of Chinatown is due to the Chinese themselves, not ghettoization enforced by white Americans.

What is unique to this variation on the passing genre is the centrality of religion to the formulation of Buckwell's passing. In stories of African American passing, religion plays a less significant role, presumably because black-to-white passing would not necessarily require a religious as well as a racial conversion. Buckwell's religion, tied to ancestor worship, makes his passing a betrayal of his faith, family, history, and people. The religion that Buckwell betrays is what makes him a foreign Other in the film, creating a tautology of identity: because Buckwell is a heathen, he is Chinese; because he is Chinese, he is a heathen. In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors provides a history of the word "ethnic" that

grounds the word's origins in Greek. Originally meaning "gentile," the word over time changed to mean "non-Christian":

Thus the word retained its quality of defining other people contrastively, and often negatively. In the Christianized context the word "ethnic" (sometimes spelled "hethnic") recurred, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, in the sense of "heathen." Only in the mid-nineteenth century did the more familiar meaning of "ethnic" as "peculiar to race or nation" reemerge. However, the English language has retained the pagan memory of "ethnic," often secularized in the sense of ethnic as other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as not fully American. This connotation gives the opposition of ethnic and American the additional religious dimension of the contrast between heathens and chosen people. (25)

The interdependent terms of nation and religion are illustrated by the etymology of the word "ethnic." Buckwell embodies the interdependence of these terms, for he offends all of the criteria for national belonging. As a heathen Chinese, Buckwell can never be American, even if he exploits the Chinese population by assuming the pretense of white power.

Just as Buckwell's heathen religion is tied to ancestor-worship, so, too, is Hernando Vasquez's Catholic faith. The Vasquez family history is first related to the audience in the prologue as inextricably tied to the spread of Christianity in the West. Though Vasquez's variety of ancestor worship is treated with a dignity denied Buckwell's, his archaic insistence on the purity of his family line (as best seen in his rebuke of Terry's tainted, Irish blood) is likewise doomed. The threat Buckwell poses to the Vasquez family through his pursuit of Delores, the symbol of the family's purity, is more than Hernando Vasquez can bear. Significantly, Buckwell ingratiates himself with the Vasquez family by passing as Christian as well as white when he pretends to pray at the family chapel. Once Buckwell gains their trust, he attacks Delores, and her virtue is saved only by the arrival of Terry. When Vasquez later confronts Buckwell, he attempts to defend his granddaughter's purity—even without knowing Buckwell's true identity: "You tried to force shame upon an unsullied daughter of

my race—but a Vasquez avenges a Vasquez!” As he attacks Buckwell, Vasquez has a heart attack and dies, leaving Delores undefended. The Vasquez honor, which remained avenged in past scenes, is left without a male protector. All that remains of the family line is a lone female.



*Figure 13: Buckwell attacks Delores.*

Trying to defend herself, Delores takes up the family sword, and invokes God’s vengeance as retribution for her grandfather’s death in a series of intertitles: “You came to taunt a noble gentleman.—but he has escaped your evil hands—his soul is with his God—

who also is a God of Vengeance!” As Delores speaks, her servant rings the chapel bells, with Christian iconography prominently displayed as Delores’s ghostly ancestors rally around her. With the Christian God and dead Vasquez ancestors replacing male protection, Delores intimidates Buckwell, until he shouts: “Stop—Stop those accursed Christian bells!” and recoils from Delores who is framed in heavenly backlighting. Though Rogin points to this confession as the revelation of Buckwell’s passing, this moment shows only that Buckwell is not a Christian; there is no reason for Delores to automatically know that Buckwell is Chinese.

It is God who exposes Buckwell’s identity after Buckwell’s blasphemy: “In the awful light of an outraged, wrathful, Christian God, the heathen soul of the Mongol stood revealed.” In a twist unprecedented in passing narratives, the passer is exposed by God. As the light of God shines down, Oland changes his expression to one of cringing evil. Buckwell flees, and Delores kneels before a statue of Jesus and prays in thanks for her salvation. Buckwell, too, seeks comfort by praying at his shrine. An intertitle, superimposed over an image of a temple, reads: “When Chris Buckwell sought the solace of his ancestral gods, he knew the eyes of Delores had penetrated his disguise and guessed his secret-- --”. His heathen soul reveals his “real” racial identity. Delores later explains to Terry that “In a flash that hideous Buckwell revealed himself—and in his soul he knew that I knew—he is a Mongolian!” Despite the similarity in Delores and Buckwell’s relationships to faith and ancestors, the film clearly vindicates Delores’s religion as the true faith. Whiteness and Christianity are irrevocably intertwined.

Though Buckwell is outed by heavenly revelation, Terry suggests that Delores’s revenge will come as a pragmatic result of his passing: “You have your enemy in your hands-

--his own people will avenge you!” Buckwell’s passing, while offensive to Delores’s white purity, is nonetheless an assault on the Chinese community. Helpless to fight Buckwell when they thought he was an Anglo and thereby beyond legal reproach, the Chinese men can punish him for his exploitation of Chinatown once Buckwell is known to be Chinese, as Lu Fong confirms: “If he is guilty of this offence against his ancestors-- --nothing can save him from our vengeance!” Buckwell’s offense is to the Chinese community, and, without white power behind him, the Chinese are free to punish Buckwell themselves. His fate is left in their hands, but first, Delores must convince them of her story. With only her religious revelation as evidence, she struggles to prove her story until she brings the men to Buckwell’s underground lair. There she first points to Buckwell’s elaborate shrine and then to Buckwell’s brother in the cage. Physical evidence of Buckwell’s faith confirms Delores’s story and even has more force than the existence of a Chinese brother. In this scene, religion and biology define Buckwell’s identity in a way that implies they are the same.

In true melodramatic fashion, however, Delores is not safe upon the revelation of Buckwell’s identity. In a moment of confusion, Buckwell, aided by his Chinese girlfriend (Anna May Wong), whisks Delores away and sells her into white slavery. The only other female character in the film, Wong’s character is described as “A flower of the Orient, stifled and poisoned in Chinatown’s sunless cellars.” Serving as an exoticized, sexualized counterpoint to the virginity of Delores, Wong’s character is complicit in the degradation of the only other significant woman in the film.<sup>96</sup> To highlight the contrast between these

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<sup>96</sup>The stereotyped role of Anna May Wong in this film is indicative of the limitations placed on her career as an Asian American actress. As Cynthia Liu notes: “[L]inkage between anti-miscegenation laws common to the period prior to 1950 and a concomitant interest in ‘decency’ as regulated by the United States’ Hays Office Code came to determine the narrative outcomes of her films—and by extension, the bulk of Wong’s career” (32). Liu argues that the reason the only roles open to Wong were as a dangerously sexualized dragon woman or as the doomed heroine of the *Madame Butterfly* tradition was as much a result of law as of culture.

female characters and to emphasize Delores's purity (and its corresponding paradoxical sex appeal), she is dressed in a snow white sequined gown in preparation for the auction block. Then Delores, in Victorian fashion, faints. In an extended scene without title interruption, Delores runs from corner to corner of the room while trying to escape, only to be blocked by Chinese men at every exit. The sexual threat posed by Buckwell before the revelation of his identity seems mild compared to this extended threat of collective Chinese violation.<sup>97</sup> Any sympathy for the Chinese imagined early in the film is obliterated by the threat of white slavery in these last scenes.<sup>98</sup> The degradation of virginal white womanhood legitimates fears of the yellow peril as the threat of miscegenation, embodied by Buckwell, is again implied. The earlier dismay for the ghettoization of the Chinese in the film is overwhelmed by these scenes of moral degeneracy that demand the annihilation of Chinatown.

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<sup>97</sup> Marchetti notes the appeal of captivity narratives in reaffirming racial and sexual division:

Given the nature of the development of an American identity in contradistinction to Native American cultures here and European cultures left behind, it comes as no surprise that captivity stories achieved popularity well out of proportion to the numbers of people actually taken captive. Issues involving the assimilation or rejection (and subsequent annihilation) of people seen as different because of language, religion, ethnicity, or race, have always occupied an important place in American popular thought. Captivity narratives highlight these issues, expose and condemn differences, legitimize racial boundaries, and allow for the rationalization of the most heinous excesses to maintain a white, English-speaking, mainly Protestant identity as the sole representation of the American experience. (48)

<sup>98</sup> Though called "white slavery," the public outcry against it at the turn-of-the-twentieth century was to call for further immigration exclusion from China, as it was commonly Chinese women who were forced into prostitution once they arrived in the U.S. Rather than sympathize with the Chinese women victimized by the practice, Ruth Rosen argues, condemnation of human trafficking by foreigners allowed Americans to evade domestic instances (123). See Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982).



*Figure 13: Delores Vasquez Sold into White Slavery in Chinatown*

While the film does not insist upon a Protestant identity as described by Marchetti, *Old San Francisco* invokes Christianity as the antidote to the disease of the yellow peril. When Buckwell menacingly taunts Delores “You are the last of your line. Who will avenge a Vasquez now?,” her response is to recite the Lord’s Prayer, and God intervenes again to save her from a fate worse than death. In the midst of the prayer (as indicated by dashes in the title), San Francisco is wracked by the infamous earthquake of 1906. The film images are now tinted red and the soundtrack suddenly includes garbled human voices and the screams of people and sirens alike. The Vitaphone technology serves primarily as an illustration of

the destruction of Chinatown by the earthquake. To further reinforce the Christian message of the destruction of corrupt Chinatown, there is a flashback to an earlier scene in which a man called Old Testament Charley condemns revelers in a Chinatown bar, concluding “Father, forgive them—for they know not what they do.” This time Charley’s warning is intercut with images of the death of Buckwell: “And this underworld of which thou art king—it will perish with thee!” All of Chinatown is destroyed, apparently for the Chinese sin against white womanhood, and the white nation is safe from Chinese degradation.

The final title of the film reads: “The ashes of the disaster have blown away—the sea breeze sweeps through cleansed streets of the Oriental quarter—the City that was has become the San Francisco that is-- -- serene, sunlit and beautiful on its thrice seven hills-- --” The earthquake, an act of God, has “cleansed” Chinatown by destroying it. Susan Koshy writes that the idea of degeneration “gave a biological foundation to biblical ideas of the Fall of Man” and was later commandeered by race scientists (57). The “cleansing” of San Francisco operates on these two levels of degeneracy. The moral degeneration is eradicated by an angry God and the biological degeneration of the Chinese body is destroyed. The degeneration embodied in Chinatown in the film has biblical and biological antecedents that demand narrative redemption.

After the final title of the film come the final lingering shots. Terry and Delores embrace in a house high in the San Francisco hills, looking over at their daughter who rides a rocking horse while holding the ancestral Vasquez sword. The destruction of Chinatown (and the unspoken loss of the Vasquez ranch) has led to the creation of the white, nuclear, American family. The Asian threat to Delores’s purity worked to make both Delores and Terry white in contrast to the Asian Other, as illustrated in many of the details of the film.



Delores's early black Spanish costumes were lightened by the white dress of the slave block, and Terry's thick brogue in the initial titles gives way to standard English. European-American assimilation works to "whiten" their Catholicism, and their individualized ethnic identities give way to a consolidated, Christian whiteness. While the family sword in their daughter's hands reminds the audience of her ancestral past, in the final scene there are no Vasquez ghosts present. The family now lives in the city; the rural Spanish ranch life of the past has been replaced by the city of the future. Senorita Vasquez is now Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, and the Vasquez family name has died out, as the child is a O'Shaughnessy. The family's Spanish history is now part of a mythic past. Absent Indians, whitened Latinos, and erased Chinese in *Old San Francisco* enable the consolidation of American whiteness.

The stark differences in the treatment of Chinese figures in *Flight* and *Old San Francisco* shows how a form, primarily deployed in a progressive desire to argue for greater racial equality, could be reconfigured to argue for antithetical ends. The contradictions within the passing narrative trope itself allow for this discrepancy: even as the passer's existential dilemma calls racial categorization into question, the trope's usual insistence on loyalty to the disenfranchised group also works to affirm racial boundaries. Walter White's version of the trope is easier to praise because Mimi's rededication to the black race and a coalition of the oppressed is predicated on distaste for white racism. Yet, Zanuck takes this very construction and turns it on its head; Delores's newfound Christian solidarity with Terry and other "white ethnics" is predicated on their shared racism.<sup>99</sup> Both texts, despite these differences in

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<sup>99</sup>Zanuck continued to use the passing narrative throughout his long career. As *Old San Francisco*, *Jazz Singer*, and *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) demonstrate, Zanuck was greatly dedicated to unifying European ethnic groups whether Catholic or Jewish under the umbrella of whiteness. He returns to the passing narrative as a way to illustrate the folly of religious bigotry. Just as in *Old San Francisco*, however, the passing narrative in *Pinky* (1949) is more problematic. Like the Chinese Buckwell, African American Pinky's passing constitutes race betrayal, and she ultimately chooses to return to the South to live as a "race woman." Whereas Zanuck is

stereotype and overall racial message, use the passing narrative along with treatment of the Chinese as a means consolidate identities. Though Zanuck uses the Chinese passing subjects as a means of uniting European ethnics, *White* also uses a Chinese character, not as a passing subject, but as mediator to consolidate people of color against white oppression. Passing in both narratives serves to reveal how white supremacy operates. *White*, like many African American activist authors, uses the passing narrative as an antiracist tool to reveal racial injustice; Zanuck uses the same form to show passing as an act of betrayal against white identity and, counter intuitively, reaffirms the purity of whiteness. That the same form can be used to serve entirely different agendas illustrates the paradoxes of the passing narrative as well as race itself.

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comfortable with Catholic and Jewish assimilation, racial boundaries are not to be crossed in his passing films. See Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise* for an extended discussion of passing in Zanuck's work.

## Chapter Four

### Passing for Chicano, Passing for White: Negotiating Filipino American Identity in Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son*

The passing narrative remained a staple of American literature and film in the years following Darryl Zanuck's social problem films of the 1920s. Passing novels such as Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement*, Cid Ricketts Sumner's *Quality*, and Fanny Hurst's *Imitation of Life* were made into major motion pictures; similarly, literary memoirs such as W.L. White's *Lost Boundaries*, Reba Lee's *I Passed for White*, and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* were produced as films as the civil rights movement gained momentum. The passing narrative's dramatization of an individual's struggle with racism allowed white audiences to identify and sympathize with the light-skinned passing subject and to recognize the larger racism at work in society. The popularity of this trope in the early years of the civil rights movement reflected the growing public interest in the end of racial segregation. Perhaps as to be expected, there was a large decrease in the number of passing narratives written or filmed in the years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>100</sup> No longer struggling against legalized segregation, racial and ethnic

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<sup>100</sup>Gayle Wald describes the rise of "postpassing" narratives in the 1950s onward as reflecting the rejection of passing by upwardly mobile African Americans as necessary for social and economic advancement (118). This refusal of the "necessity" of passing would only grow more powerful after the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

groups were empowered by the victories of the movement, and the early civil rights movement that stressed racial assimilation gave way to movements stressing racial pride.<sup>101</sup>

Just as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 changed the focus of anti-racist activism, so, too, did the Immigration Act of 1965, which rewrote immigration policy to allow an equal number of immigrants to enter the U.S. from all countries of the globe, drastically changing more than a century of exclusionary policies that had previously admitted immigrants “according to a hierarchy of racial desirability” (Ngai 227).<sup>102</sup> The passage of this legislation led to an influx of immigration that greatly altered the racial make-up of the nation by the end of the twentieth century and changed the racial dynamics of the U.S. During the 1990s, Los Angeles saw more than 2.8 million new Asian and Latina/o immigrants, creating new racial tensions as low-wage jobs were being filled by immigrants (Kim 36). Critic Jinah Kim notes: “With the growth of these communities, Los Angeles became the first and largest U.S. city without a claim to a white majority population. This reality gave rise to a multiculturalist discourse of inclusion and anti-immigration nativist fervor” (36). As Kim suggests, the

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<sup>101</sup>The success of ending the legal segregation of black and white had ripple effects for other minority groups in the U.S. For example, inspired by African American political movements, Amy Uyematsu’s 1969 call-to-arms, “The Emergence of Yellow Power in America,” directly cites Black Power as a precedent for a collective Asian American movement: “A yellow movement has been set into motion by the black power movement. Addressing itself to the unique problems of Asian Americans, this ‘yellow power’ movement is relevant to the black power movement in that both are part of the Third World struggle to liberate all colored people” (769). For a comparative multicultural approach to the study of the Third World Left at this time, see Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2006).

<sup>102</sup>In *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Mae Ngai goes on to argue that even as this radical change of immigration policy opened doors to previously excluded groups, it created new immigration problems, particularly for immigrants from Mexico who were subject to the same numerical quota cap as other nationalities despite the obvious geographical proximity (227-8).

nativist “fervor” against largely Asian American and Latina/o immigrants has had lasting rhetorical and political staying power over the last two decades.<sup>103</sup>

Because of this dramatic shift in demographics, legal scholar Rachel F. Moran argues that the traditional approach to civil rights advocacy fails to adequately redress new forms of discrimination against groups like Latina/os,:

In attacking the evils of discrimination against Blacks in the South, this [traditional civil rights] framework has elevated race and ethnicity to a position of central importance in defining equality of opportunity. However, race and ethnicity have proven to be somewhat artificial organizing principles for Latinos because they have different racial origins and come from a range of countries. Consequently, issues related to racial and ethnic identity frequently have been barriers to overcome, rather than sources of mutual identification and support. (10)

By focusing on remedying historic injustice and predating activism on unified racial identification for mobilization, Moran suggests, this framework does not meet the needs of Latina/os and, by extension, other groups who fall outside of the black-white binary of historic U.S. race relations. Instead, Latina/o activists prefer class-based approaches to improving lives, as “many Latinos believe that the most significant impediment to upward mobility is neither race nor ethnicity, but poverty” (10). This fundamental difference of approach, along with the rivalries of a changing economy, prevents lasting interracial and interethnic coalitions among Latina/os, African Americans, and other groups (Moran 12).

Like the African American activist-authors discussed in earlier chapters, Brian Ascalon Roley’s 2001 passing narrative, *American Son*, examines barriers to political alliances among racial and ethnic groups but in the new racial context of contemporary Los Angeles. By revising a trope deeply embedded in the African American tradition of social

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<sup>103</sup>Though this essay focuses on the repercussions of anti-immigration rhetoric in California, the nation-wide controversy over the 2010 passage of Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 illustrates how deeply this nativist rhetoric permeates the entire country.

protest to place Asian American experience at the center of the story, Roley updates the form to accommodate new subjects in the post-civil rights era. The novel focuses on two brothers of Filipino and German-American heritage. Like earlier “tragic mulattoes,” narrator Gabe Sullivan and his older brother Tomas are left to negotiate their identities in a culture that has no framework to accommodate the complications of being both Filipino and “white.” Tomas chooses to pass for Chicano to gain visibility in Los Angeles gang culture, while younger brother Gabe passes for white in northern California as a way of escaping violence and poverty in Los Angeles. Roley presents each brother’s passing as the result of a desire simultaneously to gain visibility in a society that continues to define people using narrow categories of identity and to disassociate themselves from negative stereotypes about Asian American masculinity. While exploring similarities among Asian American and Latina/o subject positions in L.A., the novel reveals that racial and ethnic difference remain barriers to lasting solidarity as virulent anti-immigration rhetoric recodes racism as nativism and pits marginalized groups against each other. Thus, Roley suggests a new frontier for anti-racist activism and finds renewed purpose for the passing narrative.

*American Son* explores the strengths and limitations of collective identifications as a means of resistance to dominant paradigms of ethnicity, as identifying with a collective often becomes a way to be seen, to be made visible, and to gain collective bargaining power in U.S. political culture. In his emphasis on Filipino mestizo experience in the U.S., Roley explores the limitations of existing collective labels in addressing the needs of those who do not fit neatly into any single category or group, revealing that sometimes collective identification can be as much a reactionary choice in response to racism as a politically motivated desire for recognition. The liminal position of these brothers as Filipino Americans

allows Roley to extend the boundaries of traditional passing narratives to groups who remain outside the dominant (binary) racial discourse, yet the novel continues to challenge the white dominated hierarchy of race in the U.S. in the tradition of earlier black-white passing narratives.

Though passing subjects usually pass for white, Tomas's passing underscores the limited possibilities for potential identification in earlier passing narratives by reflecting postmodern preoccupation with the inadequacy of race as a category which offers new possibilities for multiracial subjects. Gayle Wald notes that the "hyper-visibility" of African Americans in the passing narrative highlights the absence of other groups who also have been marginalized by the exclusionary emphasis on the racial binary in the U.S. imaginary (14). The contradiction of the passing narrative is that while it exposes the constructed nature of "race" in subjects whose physical appearances mask their purported "essence," the subversive act of passing usually ends with the passer's having to choose to be either black or white. Rarely is there a third option for passing subjects. Critic Jennifer Ho argues that because "there is not a space or language for mixed-race people to claim a multiple, hybrid, or heterogeneous subjectivity, passing in a post-civil rights era could be seen as challenging a categorical system of thought" (143). Ho argues further that passing can now be seen as "a discontinuous process that can vary dependent on context and circumstance, for purposes of subversion as well as survival" (143). In Roley's novel, both brothers pass in and out of various identities as it suits them (or as others project upon them). With each performance of a new identity, Roley underscores the arbitrary nature of these identities. Contemporary narratives of identity need not be confined to forcing the multiracial subject to choose to claim one race or another. The potential for subversive rejection of the either/or proposition

of earlier narratives could be overcome: in *American Son*, Tomas's affinity for Chicano culture highlights this possibility.

Tomas's efforts to pass as Chicano, however, ultimately fail to produce a lasting connection with the Chicano community, as even this identity fails to satisfy Tomas's desire for the social and economic power that comes from an unambiguously white identity. While Roley uses the passing trope to make passing a way to assert multiplicity and the need for more fluid conceptions of multiracial subjectivity, the nature of the passing trope itself works to undermine the naturalization of multiracial identity: to believe one is "passing," there must also be an "authentic" identity that one conceals. Neither brother in Roley's novel can be praised for subverting racial categorization, because both are motivated by self-hatred and shame of their mother's Filipino origins. Tomas's claim to Chicano identity could be re-cast as a rejection of arbitrary boundaries through the common aspects of Chicano and Filipino experience; in which case, Tomas would not be passing at all. Instead, his decision to claim Chicano identity—like his brother's less ambiguous desire for whiteness—is a reaction against the larger culture's constructions of Asian masculinity as inferior.

Despite the loosening of the binary in recent decades with the emergence of new possibilities for Latino and Asian American identification, white racism continues to be the defining factor in many ethnic identity negotiations in *American Son*. Roley presents a portrait of the complicated dynamics of identity for Filipino Americans in a culture that marginalizes, conflates, or ignores the many ethnic and cultural identifications of the mestizo that are not easily incorporated into any of the dominant U.S. paradigms of identity. These characters navigate the many constructions of race and ethnicity in the U.S. today, but, in all varieties, these collectivities fail to accommodate the full experience of the Filipino



American, and the characters are left to grapple with a culture that insists on allegiance to a single racial identity—even as adhering to racial difference limits the potential for solidarity across boundaries. While interracial alliances fail in the face of persistent white supremacy, Roley’s choice of the passing narrative is itself a subversion of the racial hierarchy by reimagining the previously “invisible” presence in passing narratives as the central focus. In choosing a form that has historically depended upon the hyper-visibility of blackness, Roley challenges that very construction and, in doing so, suggests the need for a reexamination of how we approach civil rights activism to accommodate new racial dynamics.

### **“Both tyrant and slave”: The Inner Battles of the New Mestizo Passing Subject**

In *American Son*, Roley’s central characters are specifically positioned as Filipino Americans and their experiences as displaced, invisible others create a possibility for bridging gaps in subject positions, as their marginalized subject positions can be a source of strength. Lisa Lowe writes that “the specific history of Asian immigration in relation to U.S. citizenship is different from the histories of other migrant or racialized groups, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Chicanos/Latinos, yet the Asian American critique of citizenship generated by its specific history opens the space for such cross-race and cross national possibilities” (35-36). In the case of *American Son*, the often unexamined history of Filipino immigration creates an avenue for examining the ways that immigrants grapple with the multiplicity of racial and ethnic group dynamics they find in America. Though the boundaries between the labels “Latino” and “Asian American” are themselves not well-defined,<sup>104</sup> in the case of Filipino Americans, this intersection is further

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<sup>104</sup>Scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe how Asian and Latino Americans were arbitrarily assigned racial designations by the U.S. legal system in order to fit a dominant racial construction. Because

complicated. Filipinos share a history of Spanish colonization with Latinos, yet their homeland is in Asia rather than the Americas; sharing a common history of Spanish colonization, these groups are differentiated by geography. Negotiating the relationship between Filipinos and the larger body of Latinidad in the Americas becomes a maze of identification and disidentification, dependent on individual definitions of and identification with Latino and/or Asian identity. This already multi-faceted hybridity becomes especially difficult to negotiate in the United States where the complexity of Filipino American identification has been further complicated by the experience of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines.<sup>105</sup> The result of the meeting of Asian, Spanish, and Anglo American cultures, the Filipino American fits neatly into no single category or label of collective identity. Despite the possibility of creating alternative constructs that defy the dominant discourse, these Asian American characters fail to live up to the interracial collaboration of Lowe's vision. While the characters fail to create sustainable relationships across ethnic boundaries, Roley dangles the prospect of such interethnic alliances before the reader as an unrealized alternative.

Despite the differences in Chicana/o and Filipina/o cultures, Chicana writer/theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's work helps illuminate the parallel complications and contradictions of growing up Filipino in the United States. The sons of a German American father and a

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Latino and Asian Americans are not comfortably categorized as simply black, white, or "Indian," they were left to negotiate their position in the United States without allegiance to the dominant terms of the historical racial discourse; both groups were placed in similarly liminal positions that simply mapped preexisting labels onto these distinctive ethnic groups (82). The act of legal categorization continues to be problematic today, as evidenced in the confused label of "Hispanic" on the U.S. census form.

<sup>105</sup>After defeat in the Spanish-American War, Spain signed the Treaty of Paris which gave the United States control over the Philippines in 1898 despite the Declaration of Independence made months earlier by Filipino revolutionaries. Neither Spain nor the United States recognized the declaration, and in 1899, the Philippine-American War began. Not until 1946 did the Philippines achieve independence. The relationship between the United States and the Philippines began during the period of U.S. occupation and led to racialized colonial violence during the war and throughout the occupation. See Paul A. Kramer's *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (2006) for a history of the complex racial dynamics of the U.S. occupation of the Philippines.

Filipino mother, Tomas and Gabe Sullivan are true mestizos as defined in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of the flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (100)

Caught between many cultures and receiving contradictory values from each, the brothers' mestizo confusion makes the passing form a compelling strategy that highlights the continuities (and differences) between mulatta/o and mestizo/o experience. This shift from mulatto to mestizo passing subject should open up the boundaries of identification for the multiracial subject, transforming the either/or choice of the tragic mulatto into a more fluid and dynamic identification that allows for more than one racial or ethnic identity as imagined by Anzaldúa (100).

Furthermore, though the traditional black-to-white passing narrative hinges upon hypodescent as the indicator of a mulatto's "true" (i.e., black) identity, Ho argues that Asian identity is not so fixed:

While the "one-drop" rule guided definitions of African American subjectivity, this is not the litmus test to authenticate one's Asian identity, in so far as the evidence for "Asian-ness" is not based on a shared belief system and imaginary acceptance of "race" but is differently coded on the very body. For if one claims to have an Asian American grandparent but "looks" non-Asian (black or white or Latino), then the belief is that one is not Asian American but whatever one looks like (be it black, white, or Latino). (144)

That the Sullivan brothers do not "look" Asian and are therefore not defined as Asian by those evaluating their physical appearance should allow these subjects more leeway in claiming "authentic" identities than their earlier black counterparts.

Despite this difference of subject position, the trope remains viable because neither brother is able to feel comfortable in any single or even multiethnic political collective identity; in *American Son*, hypodescent is a state of mind rather than a legal reality, even when racism makes white identity unappealing. Tomas and Gabe are torn between a racist white father and an abused Filipino mother, as is shown when their father mocks Mrs. Sullivan by calling her “meek and obedient” (24).<sup>106</sup> His father’s racism causes Tomas’s hybrid identity to be made a source of tension rather than the source of power that Anzaldúa theorizes. Chicana critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba labels this unhealthy offshoot of hybridity “cultural schizophrenia”:

Because this hybridity, in the case of all “New World” peoples, is a product of conquest, we can deduce that cultural schizophrenia is a psychological effect of colonization. The colonized mentality is first and foremost a split identity, part conquered, part conqueror, “both tyrant and slave,” “the victor, and the vanquished,” as Corky Gonzalez (1972) says in his epic poem “I Am Joaquin.” (227)

Roley represents this history-induced cultural schizophrenia through the dysfunctional relationship between Tomas’s parents, illustrating why he must seek an alternative identity outside of the parameters of his parents’ experience. Tomas’s dilemma as the hybrid product of colonization echoes Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness” and the dilemma of the

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<sup>106</sup>Tomas assumes a macho Chicano gang member persona as a way of resisting the stereotype of submissive Asians that he thinks his mother, Ika, represents. In *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation* (2004), Susan Koshy examines the interlocking concepts of U.S. anti-miscegenation law, American colonial domination, and the construction of Asian American sexuality. She traces how perceptions of Asian American women as sexually dangerous (stemming from the desire to prevent Asian female immigration and the growth of the Asian American community) change after active U.S. colonial activity leads to U.S. servicemen bringing home Asian wives, “reconstructing images of Asian femininity from sexually licentious to domesticatedly feminine” (12). Koshy’s description of the stereotype fits Roley’s Ika, who is a passive, Filipina military wife who lives to serve her family. Roley deploys this stereotyped depiction as a way to interrogate the legacy of “invisible” U.S. colonialism and the impact of this socially approved form of miscegenation on the mixed-raced sons’ own sexuality.

mulatto in earlier passing narratives who struggles to identify fully with either parent.<sup>107</sup> His parents' relationship presents in microcosm the dilemmas of a "hybrid" son; he cannot comfortably align with either side of his heritage to form his identity, so Tomas appropriates a Chicano identity, one that resists the white racism of his father, yet has not the stigma of his mother's Filipina identity. The underlying irony of Tomas's appropriation of a Chicano identity is that he selects a politicized ethnic identity that has made its own hybridity a source of pride and power as a way to deny his own hybrid identity.

Internalizing white racism, Roley's characters cannot bring themselves to identify with either parent. Critic Antonia Darder explains the significance of racism in the formation of identity: "we must also understand notions of 'race identity and difference' as *politically* formed rather than embedded in the color of the skin or a given nature (Hall, 1990a, 1990b). In other words, to identify as Black or Chicano is not so much a question of color as it is a question of cultural, historical, and political difference" (137, emphasis added). While Darder stresses underlying political motivations (rather than a belief in essentialized race) as the basis of most racial collective identifications among groups which reveals the power dynamics inherent in choices of identification, Roley's novel demonstrates that even as identification can be motivated by political purposes, identification dynamics can also mask other forms of embedded racism because Tomas's identity conflict is based upon a sense of the feminization of the Filipino man which stems, in part, from the history of imperialism in the Philippines. Gary Y. Okihiro notes that Filipino men were historically "rendered feminine

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<sup>107</sup>From the earliest slave narratives in which passing becomes a means of escape as in Moses Roper's *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* (1848), to narratives in which the passing subject is torn between identifying with the oppressor or the oppressed as in William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*, passing narratives often treat characters who are the result of literal master-slave relationships. Jim Crow-era narratives, like Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, continued to examine the inequality of interracial relationships despite the abolition of slavery.

in their barbarism or condition of stunted intellectual development (as in children and women) and in the manliness of their women [...] the very visible racialization (and gendering and sexualizing) of Filipina/os underwrote the U.S. colonial project in the Philippines and its domestic agenda of white supremacy, patriarchy, and nationalism” (37). Unable to identify with his racist German American father (the symbolic American colonizer), Tomas’s perception of what it means to be Chicano is more appealing than his perception of what it means to be Filipino American, like his mother. Tomas constructs a violent Chicano persona for himself that he perceives as an empowering alternative to his “weak” Asian identity, yet Roley undermines this maneuver by exposing the racism underlying his mis/identifications. Tomas assumes a self-constructed version of Chicano identity merely to counter the self-hate he feels towards his Asian identity, unconsciously internalizing the racism of the larger U.S. culture in his misguided attempt to overcome it.

Though Roley’s novel is told from the perspective of Gabe, Tomas is Gabe’s point of reference, the mirror by which Gabe views himself. The novel opens with Gabe’s description of his older brother who has shamed the family by dressing and acting like a “Mexican” gang member:

He is the son who causes her embarrassment by showing up at family parties with his muscles covered in tattoos and his head shaved down to stubble and his eyes bloodshot from pot. He is really half white, half Filipino but dresses like a Mexican, and it troubles our mother that he does this. She cannot understand why if he wants to be something he is not he does not at least try to look white. (15)

Implicit in how Gabe defines Tomas is how Gabe defines himself. If Tomas is the “bad” son, then Gabe is the “good.” Gabe upholds the “Filipino values” that Tomas seemingly flouts by dressing as a “Mexican.” He stresses that Tomas is “really” white and Filipino, that Tomas is simply performing the part of a Chicano gang member with the tattoos and shaved head that

signal “Mexican” identity to this Filipino family. The family values white culture above Chicano culture, preferring Tomas to assimilate to white culture if he is going to assume an identity that is not his Filipino one.<sup>108</sup> That their mother sees the assumption of a white identity as also artificial reveals that despite the mestizo heritage of her sons, Mrs. Sullivan identifies her sons as Asian, not white or Latino. The rule of hypodescent, unquestioned in earlier passing narratives, continues to determine racial identification in the novel, reflecting how the larger culture continues to adhere to the logic of “one drop” despite new possibilities for a multiracial subject position.

The classification of the Sullivan boys as Asian is reiterated throughout the novel by their Filipino aunts and uncles. Mrs. Sullivan’s brother, Betino Laurel, writes letters from Manila to the family condemning Tomas’s behavior, explaining that he finds it “puzzling that a Filipino boy such as Tomas should choose to spend his time with poor Mexican children when there certainly must be nice American and Asian children of successful people in Los Angeles” (12). Class values play a significant role in the Laurel family’s preference for Asians and “Americans” (meaning “white” Americans) who are more “successful” than their “poor” Latino counterparts in L.A.<sup>109</sup> The Filipinos in this novel are personally invested in

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<sup>108</sup>In fact, Mrs. Sullivan herself is color-conscious, which Roley carefully frames in the context of Spanish colonization of the Philippines: “My mother’s brother Betino looks white—they both have Spanish blood—but my mother appears really dark—very Filipino—even though she avoids the sun” (113). The irony of her caste-consciousness lies in its similarity to themes of caste-consciousness evident in many Latino texts. Piri Thomas’s *Down These Means Streets*, for example, dwells at length on color-consciousness among Puerto Ricans, which is also a result of Spanish colonization and the privileged position of white “Spanish” skin.

<sup>109</sup>This version of “class” based hierarchy among minority groups is a familiar phenomenon (either as a strategy for uplift or a social critique) in the passing narrative, but class is often coded as if it were an inherent character attribute rather than one based on economic position. In Howells’s *An Imperative Duty* (1892), Dr. Olney convinces his beloved Rhoda Aldgate that she is truly white because she belongs “incomparably more to the oppressors than the oppressed” (231), presumably as much for her social position as for her color. Similarly, Charles Chesnutt’s Rena and John Walden in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) are justified in their decision to pass in part because their “superior blood and breeding” separates them from the rest of their poor, black community (21). These versions of variegated blackness based on class and caste parallel the positional hierarchies within and among minority groups in Roley’s novel.

the myth of the “model minority” that critic David Palumbo-Liu explains “reifies Asian American identity [as hardworking, successful people] and deploys this reification programmatically against other groups, mapping out specific positionings of minorities within the U.S. political economy” (174). Claire Jean Kim’s theoretical method of “racial triangulation” identifies two codependent formations that enable the “model minority” myth to operate: “relative valorization” when the dominant (usually white) group privileges one subordinate group over another as a means of domination, and “civic ostracism” in which the dominant group carefully constructs the “privileged” subordinate group as “foreign and unassimilable” in order to disenfranchise that group as well (107). Kim’s examination of the triangulation of racial dynamics requires an acknowledgement of the white supremacy that underlies all of these interactions. She writes, “White racial power may not tell the whole story, but it does generate a distinct structure of opportunities, constraints, and possibilities—parameters of resistance—with which groups of color must contend” (129). By perpetuating the myth of the model Asian minority, the Laurels are able to distinguish themselves from the “lesser” minority groups like Chicana/os and establish a superior position for themselves in the U.S. construction of ethnicity, regardless of the racism inherent in that construct—a construct that always values “white” Americans above Asian Americans, as Roley illustrates throughout the novel.

This depiction of a Filipino family’s distaste for Chicanos in L.A. gestures toward the family’s internalization of nativist rhetoric in California which positions the “model minority” against “undesirable” immigrants from Mexico. Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop note:

The history of media providing images of racial exceptionalism for Asian Pacific Americans, in contrast to images of African American and Chicana and Chicano



undeservedness, dates at least to the early 1960s civil rights era [...] The discourse pitted those nominated as exceptional Asian Pacific Americans against those constructed as troubled Mexicanas, Mexicanos, Chicanas, and Chicanos, rather than recognizing common and interrelated levels of experience and traditions of oppression. (163)

In the context of 1990s California, the model minority rhetoric often uses the figure of the idealized Asian immigrant to argue that Chicana/os are in fact receiving preferential treatment under U.S. immigration law to the detriment of law-abiding Asian immigrants who are positioned as victims (Johnson 62). By positioning one immigrant group against another, the nativist argument masks its own racism by arguing that immigration policy is itself racist against Asians. Yet, by presenting the Laurels acceptance of racist American rhetoric against Mexican immigrants, Roley critiques the ways in which Asian Americans are invested in their own “privileged” rhetorical status even as it prevents them from realizing potential solidarities with another community that shares migrant roots and labor concerns.

Tomas, by refusing to adhere to his family’s belief in assimilating to the dominant culture and by identifying with another liminal ethnic group, also seemingly rejects the racism that the rest of the family takes as the natural order of race relations in the U.S. His experience as a second-generation Filipino American reflects larger discontent among the children of immigrants. As Laura Pulido writes:

[W]ealthy immigrants, who have not necessarily embraced an antiracist politics, [...] have had a far different set of experiences. But their children, who grow up in this society and have had to confront the reality of prejudice as well as interethnic contact, regardless of their class position, often see things differently. This is one indication of where political possibilities may lie (233).

Just as Tomas is disappointed with the opportunities for American success, so too, are second generation Latina/os who likewise find the opportunities open to them wanting (Moran 11). Disillusioned by racism and limited economic possibilities, Tomas’s affinity with Chicanos

reveals the similarity between subsequent generations of Asian American and Latina/o immigrants that the larger nativist rhetoric of the anti-immigration movement works to undermine.

However, Tomas's alternative identification is complicated as his "Chicano" identity is based almost entirely on superficial markers. His tattoos are "mostly gang, Spanish, and old-lady Catholic. As he leans forward, the thin fabric of his shirt moves over his Virgin of Guadalupe tattoo that covers his back from his neck down to his pants" (17). When his family finds out about the tattoos, his uncle writes, "The Virgin Mary! I hardly think his motives were ones of reverence" (135). Though his family is Catholic, Tomas's motivations for tattooing this particular incarnation of the Virgin Mary have less to do with celebrating his own heritage than appropriating a powerful symbol of Chicano identity. Anzaldúa identifies the Virgin of Guadalupe as "the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/*mexicano*" (52). Tomas uses this tattoo as a way to literally mark his body with signs of Chicano identity, allowing him to masquerade as a member of an ethnic group to which he has no "authentic" biological claim. He also wears gang clothes and drives "a white Oldsmobile, the type Mexican gangsters prefer because they can pile so many people into the back seat" (40). Tomas has adopted so many outward signs of Chicano identity that Chicanos often try to speak to him in Spanish: "The wetback behind the pizza counter who spoke a few words of Spanish to my brother. Tomas did not understand the Spanish, though he nodded and tried to make it look as if he understood" (39). While Tomas's performance of Chicano identity highlights how superficial most outward signs of identity are, in actual practice, Tomas can only successfully pass outside of the group he is trying to appropriate as his own.

Tomas's decision to perform a Chicano identity also has economic motivations as he starts a business selling attack dogs to wealthy white clients who assume that Chicano identity means gang affiliation and an accompanying violent masculinity that would assure the attack dog was "authentic"—something Tomas's Asian identity would not establish. Allowed to accompany Tomas when he sells his attack dogs, Gabe takes much abuse for his "weak" (read Asian) appearance: "Sit down. If the client sees you standing there like that he's gonna think you're my houseboy" (18). Tomas views Gabe's "submissive" appearance as an economic detriment when selling attack dogs, but not without some justification, as one white client's hysteria around Tomas disappears around ostensibly "Asian" Gabe, who is not perceived as threatening when alone.

Furthermore, Tomas is aware of the racial dynamics in play in his dog business and even exploits his white clients' racism for his business's success:

He never tells his clients he is not Mexican. Sometimes he buys pit bulls in Venice or downtown where all the black people have them chained in their alleys and when you drive through the alleyways you can hear them barking for miles. The sound echoes between the buildings. He can buy them for forty dollars there and then place an ad in a West LA newspaper like the Evening Outlook and sell them for a couple hundred dollars. (20)

By buying the dogs on the cheap in black neighborhoods where wealthy white clients would never go, Tomas acts an intermediary and makes a large profit. Racially in-between black and white, Tomas literally becomes the go-between for white people looking to buy "tough" dogs. Implicit in this arrangement is the white clients' unspoken preference for doing business with seemingly "tough" Chicanos who are not as tough as the black people who are raising the dogs. Palumbo-Liu notes that white Americans have historically placed Asians in antagonistic opposition to black and Latino groups as a way to exploit labor (186). Tomas

sees an economic opportunity latent in this racism, and he successfully exploits it for his own gain. Roley uses Tomas's business to satirize the larger structures of racialized labor.

Previous passing narratives used representations of passing for economic opportunity as a means of critiquing inequitable labor and capital in the U.S., but here, Roley also redirects this plot to illustrate how minority groups also become invested in the dominant system. Tomas's passing echoes the economically-motivated version of the passing trope, yet his choice of Chicano over white identification (which is more obviously aligned with socio-economic power and for which he could potentially argue for "authenticity" based on his father's ancestry) makes his choice more complicated than the desire for simply greater economic opportunities. By highlighting Tomas's rejection of a "white" identity, Roley complicates both Tomas's motivations and the traditional focus on economically-motivated passing. Economic inequality is still in play for Roley's characters, but, by passing as Chicano, the web of identification and dis-identification at work in the text reveals how the "American Dream" mythos depends upon racialized identity and subsequent internalized abjection.

Tomas's attitude toward Spanish reveals a conflicted sense of identity that makes his assumption of a Chicano identity especially problematic. When Chicanos try to speak Spanish to Tomas, he answers with a few simple Spanish words mingled with English or just by nodding his head. Because of his inability to speak Spanish, Tomas is nervous around "real" Chicanos, as if he is afraid of being revealed as inauthentic. Though traditional passing subjects were often depicted as fearful of being exposed, Tomas's decision to pass for Chicano has the added anxiety of having no biological basis on which to claim his identification. Tomas's passing is more than a challenge to hypodescent; it is a challenge to

claims of “authentic” identity itself. Yet, the subversive potential of this challenge is undermined by who Tomas is performing his alternative identity for. When the brothers meet a Chicana at the house of a client, she studies Tomas closely “wondering if he is a real Mexican” after he speaks choppy Spanglish (45). Tomas wears a thin t-shirt to show off his tattoo so the “white client” can see it, but, with the Chicana, he “seems embarrassed, though, and he keeps it turned away” (45). Tomas’s most overt sign of Chicano identity is meant to be seen by a white audience and only causes him anxiety with “authentic” Chicanos who might detect flaws in his performance.

Gabe, however, does speak Spanish, and he relates to the Chicana in a way that Tomas cannot. He is more successful in this instance because he acts like himself and has genuine knowledge of Spanish—not simply the appearance of it like Tomas. Angry and humiliated, Tomas attacks Gabe, accusing him of upstaging Tomas with his “Flip, peasant Spanish” (54). Tomas’s accusation reveals just why Tomas has never learned Spanish, despite his desire to identify as a Chicano. He equates Spanish with being a “peasant,” a colonized person. Tomas’s assimilationist ideas (particularly his determined monolingualism) contradict his seeming desire to assume a Chicano identity. Rather than embrace the Spanish language as part of his Filipino heritage and make a seemingly “authentic” claim to an affinity with a Latino identity, he rejects the very characteristic which could form the basis of a genuine connection to Chicanos. Tomas’s relationship to Chicano identity has more to do with *white* perception of him than Chicano perception.

If Tomas is shamed by his Filipino ancestry, Gabe is no less guilty of this fact. When explaining how Tomas became involved with a Chicano gang, Gabe reveals how he and his brother negotiate their identities at school:

At my school—Saint Dominic’s—everyone thought I was white for a while. Tomas had gone there first and he had passed as a white surfer. There were no other surfers there, but he was known as one—he even bought a board and had our mother take him to the beach three times a week—and he put Sun-In in his hair, though instead of turning blond it went all red. Then he began hanging out with Mexicans, who are tougher. He stopped surfing and dyed his hair black again. If anyone tried calling him Asian he beat them up, and he started taunting these Korean kids who could barely speak English. [...] Finally, Tomas got kicked out of school for smashing a Japanese boy’s car window with a tire iron. By then people had figured out I am part Filipino. (30)

Sociologists Min Zhou and Yang Sao Xiong note that second-generation Asian Americans born in the U.S. are more attuned to racism than their foreign-born parents, and despite their supposed “model minority” status, they are “still keenly aware of their inferior racial status, internalizing the disadvantages associated with it” (1149). As Ian F. Haney López notes “Though the decision to pass may be made for many reasons, among these the power of prejudice and self-hate cannot be denied” (14). Tomas’s self-hate manifests itself in his attacks on Asian American students and his violent reaction to being identified as Asian. Caught in the trap of racism, Tomas uses racism against fellow Asians in an attempt to reposition himself. Tomas uses violence against Asians not only as a way to distance himself from the label of Asian American, but also as a way to claim Chicano identity. Passing as Chicano allows him to both claim another ethnic label and actively oppose the group he is denying. His choice of aligning with a Chicano identification is meant to obliterate any association with being a “submissive” Asian like his mother or brother.

Gabe’s passive passing is no less an act of abjection, as his eventual active passing reveals in the second part of the novel. He steals his brother’s car and runs away from L.A., out into “Another California”—the “white” California to the north which is filled with quiet, small towns (59). Once outside of L.A., he suddenly feels ashamed of his beat-up

Oldsmobile: “At home it seems like a normal car to have, but here I feel like throwing a damned blanket over it” (72). In this new, “foreign” context, Gabe feels inadequate and ashamed of himself because he wants to blend into the town as quietly as possible—which he thinks his poverty and ethnicity will deny him. Gabe crosses a cultural border without leaving his home state.

When the car breaks down, Gabe is befriended by a white tow truck driver. It soon becomes clear that the driver thinks Gabe is white, and he promptly begins a tirade about the “fucking Mexicans,” “Cambodians, Vietnamese, Laotians” and “all those mute Asians [who] won’t even learn to speak English” (84). Gabe does not react to this speech, and he certainly does not mention that his mother is Filipina and struggles with English. Gabe’s fear of white racism is well-founded in this “other” California. But Gabe does not merely “pass” as white to avoid a potentially dangerous situation in this instance. Seeking the approval of the driver, Gabe begins his own tirade against Mexicans and Cambodians:

We get all kinds [in L.A.]. The Mexicans come up and it’s like they’re still roaming all the barrios killing each other down in Mexico. They have their neighborhoods they mark up with graffiti. Like pissing dogs. The new ones have macho mustaches and slick their hair back like their some kind of Spanish Casanovas, but they’re like these short Indian-looking guys. The Cambodians are the worst. It’s like their war isn’t over yet. (86)

Gabe does not gain simple approval from the driver for his racist rant; he also gets “fatherly concern” that causes an “overwhelming warmth” inside him. Gabe desires approval from this white stranger as a substitute validation from his absent white, racist father.

The folly of this desire becomes evident later when the driver confuses the “Mexicans” of Gabe’s story with “Asians,” which conflates the two groups, and reveals the similarity of position between the two in the white, racist mind (92). Here, Roley’s novel mimics (and mocks) the rhetorical sleight-of-hand of the anti-immigration activists in

California in the 1990s, as epitomized in the struggle over Proposition 187 which sought to prevent undocumented immigrants from receiving public services. Ono and Sloop write:

[Proposition 187] recreated demeaning depictions of undocumented workers, primarily from Mexico, and attempted to rally the general public against them. For many, the policy conjured up memories of the racialized “alien” land law restrictions against Japanese Americans; legislation severely limiting Asian immigration; the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II; the 1930s repatriation campaigns to force Mexicans in the United States and their children to move back to Mexico; and the 1954 “Operation Wetback,” in which more than a million Mexican migrant workers were forcibly deported from the United States to Mexico. Proposition 187 was punitive, because the law already denied health and welfare benefits to undocumented workers. Proponents of Proposition 187 falsely suggested that workers were getting “benefits” they were already ineligible to receive; then, using a tortured logic, proponents called for a “new” policy to end such benefits. (3-4)

The anti-Mexican rhetoric of Proposition 187 supporters was successful with California voters.<sup>110</sup> Gabe’s ironic participation in nativist discourse fails to comprehend the implications of this racially-coded nativism for other immigrant communities and its echoes of past rhetoric deployed against Asian Americans. The underlying white supremacist logic of his statements escapes his notice, as the pleasure Gabe receives from this encounter makes him oblivious to the obvious shortcomings of a racist’s approval of his assumed “white” identity. Again echoing the racist discourse he so frequently hears in California, Gabe asks him how the town keeps “undesirables out” to which the driver excitedly exclaims: “Well there’s plenty of abductions, but it isn’t aliens that do it. [...] When undesirables come up, they tell them to get lost, and if they don’t, that’s their own peril” (88). Though Gabe feels vague “menace” in the air after these remarks, he still ponders the possibility of moving to this part of California, where there are “a million places you could buy a plot of land and build a small house and live for really cheap” (88). Drawn in by the wealth of “white”

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<sup>110</sup>Jacobson notes, “Whites supported the measure two to one, while over 70 percent of Latinos voted against it. Blacks and Asians marginally opposed the measure, with around 52 percent voting against it” (xix). Despite voter support, the measure was struck down as unconstitutional by federal court.



California, Gabe misses the meaning of the driver's implied threat against "undesirables," not realizing that his mother would be viewed as one such undesirable immigrant. Gabe's desire for a home outside of L.A., which would be the culmination of his family's "American Dream," is prevented by white racism, but he does not consciously realize it.

Gabe does, however, respond to this racism instinctively, growing suddenly anxious. He begins to feel that he "appears so obviously Asian" that others will tell the driver that Gabe is not white. Gabe's fear compounds when the driver calls his mother to have her pick him up at the diner: "I can't imagine Stone meeting her and mistaking her for being white" (113). His shame of his own ethnicity transfers into embarrassment of his mother's unambiguous identity. Rather than simply admit to the white driver that his mother is Filipina, he claims his white Aunt Jessica as his mother and reduces his mother to the status of "maid" (116). Feigning whiteness with this stranger is ultimately more important to Gabe than acknowledging his own mother—or claiming his own mestizo identity. He chooses the approval of a white racist over his Filipino mother, symbolically valuing his white father over his Asian mother. Gabe's passing as white rejects both his mother and his Filipino identity as much as Tomas's passing for Chicano does.

Gabe's rejection of his mother/Filipino identity leaves him with deep feelings of guilt as he becomes more aware of the daily abuse his mother suffers as a Filipina immigrant. Yet, as his guilt grows, so does his violent behavior as he begins spending more time with Tomas in "payment" for stealing his car. When the mother of a classmate extorts money from Mrs. Sullivan after she accidentally dents the woman's S.U.V., Gabe savagely beats his classmate with a tire iron, giving him a feeling of power that he mistakes for respect: "A couple times in the past I have been with a small group of people when someone said a few smart-aleck

things about me and Ben laughed even though I was older. But now he is respectful, his head bowed. And though my stomach wrenches, I feel a rush not of anxiety but of confidence. In a scary way I realize I like it” (215). Gabe, like Tomas before him, gains what critic Eleanor Ty calls a “hypermasculine identity” that counteracts the stereotype of Asian American men as “feminized” and weak (125) and allows Gabe to vent his frustration with the racism and exploitation he is otherwise helpless to protect his mother from.<sup>111</sup> Even as this behavior is a response to the racism his mother is subjected to, Roley casts that very violence as merely the perpetuation of the racial violence instilled in him by his abusive father—and American culture’s fetishization of violence.

By the time the Sullivan brothers attack Gabe’s classmate, Tomas has given up most of his outward affiliation to Chicano identity. He now drives a Ford Explorer, and Gabe notes that they have not been pulled over since Tomas “got his new car and started wearing straighter clothes (he says too many white kids dress like gangsters now)” (156). Ironically turned off Chicano gang-style clothing by the overabundance of white kids “passing” for gangsters, Tomas has “straightened” his appearance, but his violence persists. Though Tomas had been assuming Chicano identity as a way of asserting “macho” identity, the source of Tomas’s violence had no real basis in his pretensions towards a Chicano persona. Instead, Tomas’s shifting identities reveal his emotional progression toward acceptance of white supremacy. Though unable to accept an Asian identity, Tomas initially identifies as Chicano to circumvent Asian stereotypes while still refusing to embrace a white identity, but even his Chicano identity cannot surmount the appeal of white privilege. By “straightening” his appearance (i.e., blending into dominant white culture), he is free to continue his criminal

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<sup>111</sup>Eleanor Ty’s 2004 article, “Abjection, Masculinity, and Violence in Brian Roley’s *American Son* and Han Ong’s *Fixer Chao*,” applies Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection to novels by Roley and Han Ong to illuminate the racialized interplay of violence and masculinity in relationship to the effects of globalization.

behavior under the radar. Whiteness comes without scrutiny and his violent acts of theft go undetected. That Tomas must first steal in order to be able to adequately perform a white identity reveals how whiteness masks the economic injustice it is predicated upon. White identity, Roley suggests, depends upon racial exploitation.

In this way, Roley's critique of the intersection of racial and economic constructs in U.S. culture echoes the preoccupation with passing as a means of economic advancement in earlier passing narratives. Like Johnson's nameless narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Tomas sells his "birthright for a mess of pottage" (154). The struggle of negotiating his mestizo identity, like his desire for Chicano identity, is abandoned in exchanged for material gain. Tomas (and Gabe by extension) cannot fulfill the latent potential for connection to others also outside the American racial binary, so he reverts to American consumerism instead. Zhou and Xiong note that "[D]espite felt or experienced discrimination, Asian Americans were also less likely than other racial minority groups to take collective action against unequal treatment and instead more likely to buy into American individualism" (1143). Tomas's embrace of consumerism reflects his acceptance of the dominant American cultural values—the values his family wanted him to pursue when they protested his connections to "poor Mexican" teens (12). The difficulty of breaking down the dominant U.S. construction of race is too difficult for Roley's teenaged protagonists to achieve. Roley, having dangled alternative constructions of identity before the reader, concludes with that most pessimistic of the passing tropes: selling out. What Tomas betrays, however, is not an inherent racial essence, but, instead, a possibility for re-imagining interethnic affinity in the U.S.

Gabe Sullivan does not find peace with his mestizo identity as a Filipino American.<sup>112</sup> Instead, by using racism and violence to gain a fleeting illusion of supremacy, he becomes a true “American Son,” a title that signifies on Richard Wright’s classic *Native Son* (1940). Gabe’s acts of violence, through which he gains a fleeting sense of power, can only doom him like Wright’s Bigger Thomas. The tortured internalization of white supremacy that manifests itself in both novels leaves little hope for Gabe’s future. Roley, by alluding to Wright’s work in his title, forces a re-evaluation of contemporary race relations and the progress made in the last seventy years. As in his revision of the passing narrative, Roley strategically builds upon African American literary precedents to draw connections from the African American tradition of subversion of the dominant white discourse to create a new permutation of resistant literature, which stakes a literary claim of affinity in both form and content while addressing the new structures of racial inequality facing Asian American and Latina/os at the turn of the twenty-first century. And yet, this startling revision also confirms, as in earlier passing narratives, that white supremacy remains at the heart of U.S. racial constructions for all the purported progress of the age of multiculturalism, and that achieving transgressive interethnic alliances against the dominant confines of American racism remains a daunting task.

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<sup>112</sup>In his preface to “*American Son Epilogue*,” which appeared independently in a 2003 short story collection entitled *Growing Up Filipino*, Roley explains that the story appearing in the collection was the original conclusion to his novel. Though “*American Son Epilogue*” continues Gabe’s story where the novel left off, it ends with the same bleak ambiguity about Gabe’s future as the novel.

## Afterword

### The Passing Narrative in “Postracial” America

Contemporary passing narratives like *American Son* highlight the limitations of the traditional trope in imagining a truly subversive vision that overcomes racial hierarchies. To varying degrees, Howells’s *An Imperative Duty*, Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, and Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* all attempt to further a progressive agenda that advocates black uplift during a period that saw the legal codification of segregation after the failure of Reconstruction. Though each author redraws the dominant color lines to protest the unjust treatment of African Americans, these revisionary strategies work largely through the positioning of other oppressed groups as the alternative “inferior” groups. It often happens that while certain types of racism are challenged in these texts, other racisms take their place.

This inconsistency is mirrored in the conclusion of these narratives as well. Though racial divisions are themselves challenged through the existence of the passing subject’s mulatta/o body, each of these narratives concludes with racial divisions firmly in place. Howells’s Rhoda Aldgate abjectly rejects blackness to continue living as a white woman, while Harper’s Iola Leroy staunchly rejects the white identity she had grown up with to assume the fight for black equality. Johnson’s nameless narrator “sells out” his black identity for white monetary success but feels he has betrayed his race. For all of the critiques built into a story of racial passing about the failure of phenotype to reveal ancestry, racial divisions themselves are upheld at the conclusion of these narratives. There is no alternative

identification. The mulatta/o's dilemma in the passing narrative is so often associated with guilty feelings of racial betrayal that the challenge the passing subject's body poses to racial categorization is abandoned by a desire to assert loyalty to the oppressed group. For all the suggestiveness of passing, race remains an either/or proposition.

Even in the most progressive of early passing narratives, the subversive potential of passing is limited. A boldly performative act of passing may be subversive, as when Walter White takes on the mantle of white journalist to investigate lynching in the South. He passes to become a spy on the inner workings of white supremacists. White's undercover work is passing at its most subversive: done on a short-term basis with full intentions of gaining an insider's perspective of the other side of racism, White's passing highlights passing as a performance. Passing narratives can be subversive, if we are clear about what exactly they subvert. Most often, these texts try to subvert white supremacy, even though they often reproduce the same racist structures. In *Flight*, White, like Harper and Johnson before him, uses his passing subject's experiences of racism to argue persuasively against white supremacy. White's deviation from his predecessors, however, is that, rather than position other racial and ethnic groups in opposition to blackness, he promotes interracial solidarity among all people oppressed by white supremacy. Mimi Daquin finds allies, not enemies, in other people outside of the black-white binary. White's progressive alternative to reconstructing racial hierarchies, however, does come with a revision of the standard racial binary; in White's vision, it is not white or black but, instead, white or colored. Race itself is not deconstructed, and Mimi chooses to align herself with blackness. Even White, a committed integrationist, concludes his novel with an "us versus them" dichotomy, showing

an imaginative barrier that limits the extent to which racial alliances can be genuine. White supremacy remains the deciding factor.

Though seemingly antithetical to the internationalist solidarity of White's passing narrative, Darryl Zanuck's *Old San Francisco* shows the contradictions in the form itself by illustrating just how racist a passing narrative can be. Deploying a trope ordinarily used to illustrate progressive racial values, the film presents the passing subject as a dangerous racial traitor who is a threat to "real" white identity. Zanuck's film uses the transgression of racial passing not to show race to be an illusion but to reify boundaries between white and Other. That a trope so embedded in a tradition of social protest can be so easily commandeered by an antithetical agenda underscores some of the limitations activist-authors like White and Johnson encounter when trying to use passing to counter the dominant racial order.

Roley's twenty-first century novel ironizes this contradiction of resistance and reification in his revision of the classic trope. By applying the passing plot to characters outside of the black and white binary, Roley extends the parameters of the classic texts by making the presence of Asian American and Latina/o people central to the multiracial subject's identity crisis. By complicating the racial binary both through the use of a multiracial subject and by more fully representing the many different racial and ethnic groups living in the U.S., Roley takes what was a marginalized strategy in traditional narratives and makes it the lynchpin of his revision. While authors like Howells, Harper, and Johnson use binary-disrupting characters largely to show the comparative superiority of African Americans, Roley satirizes his Filipino-American characters for attempting to better themselves at the expense of other groups. When Gabe Sullivan gains the trust of a white truck driver by taking part in a racist rant against Mexicans and other ethnic groups in Los

Angeles, he is rewarded with the truck driver's condemnation of Asians as well. Though Gabe attempts to lay a claim to American identity by engaging in racist discourse (just as many the other passing subjects discussed do), Roley undercuts this technique, skewering the idea that an oppressed group can advance itself by taking on the racism of the dominant culture. Roley's young protagonists remain lost at the conclusion of the novel: unable to find solidarity across cultural lines, they succumb instead to abjection.

Like the classic narratives, contemporary passing narratives ask questions about the racial status quo, challenging the concept of race even if unable to totally reject it. Yet, passing narratives rarely present radically new ways to think about race. As we have seen throughout discussions of these texts, authors were imaginatively able to re-order existing hierarchies or flip the valence of the racial binary, but none was able to present a coherent multiracial alternative to choosing to live as either black or white (or Asian American or white in the final texts discussed). Living as a multiracial person remains an untenable position in narratives of passing. Because the form is so preoccupied with describing the realities of racism, it cannot move into a productive space that rejects the system altogether, a seeming requirement given the predominance of postmodern theories of identity that insist that race is a social construction.

When Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* was published in 1998, it received much critical attention in part because, as a contemporary revision of the passing narrative directly engaged with racial theory, it explores many of the tensions found in late twentieth century postmodern identity debates. While much theory of the time trumpeted the end of essentialized race, the novel addresses the gap between the concept of "racelessness" and the



conflicted reality of a mixed-race child in the United States. The abundance of theoretical allusions throughout the text creates a rich sense of intertextuality as Senna's young heroine, Birdie Lee, must navigate the philosophical landscape of competing racial theories in the political and social unrest of the 1970s. Through the character of Deck Lee, a race-obsessed professor of anthropology, Senna engages with a wide range of theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Harold Cruse, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others. Through this character, Senna interrogates the relationship of academic "Theory" to actual daily experience, using the novel as a window into the problems of praxis. While Deck's changing ideas illustrate the various waves of identity theory through the 1970s (and, of course, indirectly comment on the ideas of the 1990s), it is his multiracial daughter Birdie who must make sense of these competing theories to find the right way to live as a girl caught in-between. While the complex presentation of theory echoes and even affirms many ideas found in contemporary identity theories, it simultaneously critiques the limitations of theory in the face of lived experience—especially the ongoing reality of racism despite the recognition of race as a social construct.

Rejected by her father for her white appearance and separated from her sister, Birdie is left alone with her radical white mother, Sandy, who moves with her daughter to New Hampshire where they both take on new identities. While Sandy tests Birdie on Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and pronounces that Birdie will be "the first child raised and educated free of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism," she is also the one who "make[s] up a history" so Birdie can pass. She renames Birdie "Jesse" and insists on her taking a Jewish identity. She even tells Birdie that she is not really passing because "Jews weren't really white, more like an off-white" (140). With their "tragic

history, kinky hair, [and] good politics” Jews are as “close [...] to black as [Birdie could] get and still stay white.” Seeing Jews as an identity group in between black and white (though she herself blurs this distinction by concluding that Birdie will stay white), Sandy wants Birdie to pass but to still be “other” than normative white. Yet, this identity, too, is difficult for Birdie to maintain, and she abandons it.

As Birdie’s experiences of white racism in New Hampshire grow more stifling, she begins to search for a way to reunite with her sister. Locating her estranged aunt, Birdie finally speaks her story and explains she has been passing as “a white girl who wasn’t even Jewish at the end of the day” (311). This confession gives Birdie new strength: “Once spoken, the secrets seemed to lose some of their weight. The secrets that had owned me seemed to become my own all of a sudden—my history lesson to play with, to mold, to interpret and revise as I pleased” (312). Birdie’s new understanding of herself, still framed in the language of education, now exhibits agency and engagement that was not evident previously. Speaking her story gives her power; her narrative serves an important function—shaping her history lets her shape herself.

Senna’s corrective to the idea of race as primarily a social construction is reiterated when Birdie is reunited with her sister, Cole, in Berkeley, California. Birdie tells her sister that their father said “there’s no such thing as race” (408). Cole replies “He’s right, you know. About it all being constructed. But [...] that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.” Birdie, no longer simply looking to others for opinions and ideas, agrees with her sister, and adds “they say you don’t have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t.” Living in a postmodern state of unstable racial identity, Birdie found that regardless of the malleability of her racial identity, the reality of racism cannot be ignored. Viewing

race as an intellectual delusion is one thing, but racism itself cannot be so easily theorized. Cole's response to her sister's observations, however, makes it clear that identifying as one particular race also has consequences. While Birdie is eager to identify as black after years of passing, Cole, who never had the option to pass as white, knows that labeling oneself (or having that label put upon you) offers no perfect solution. The reality of Cole's experience has taught her different lessons.

By directly engaging with theory and making the thematic deployment of race theory a key component to understanding Birdie's journey to self-knowledge, Senna shows the ambiguity of postmodern identity even as she critiques its painful limitations. Senna's novel illustrates that positing a "colorblind" alternative ignores the reality of race: racial identification remains a necessary way to be visible in a racist society. She does not advocate a so-called "postracial" identity or abandoning racial markers altogether. In this way, this novel concludes like many passing narratives. Yet, unlike passing narratives from previous generations, Senna's narrative does not conclude with a rejection of passing as a betrayal of one's singular authentic identity. Instead, she concludes by positing a multiracial identity for her passing subject. Senna offers no dogmatic theoretical platform with which the sisters could proceed. Instead, the novel concludes with an image of a bus in motion, filled with kids "black and Mexican and Asian and white" (413). Birdie recognizes herself in the crowd of students. Choosing to identify as black, but understanding the multiplicity of her experience, Birdie embraces ambiguity even as she is able to move forward with her life. Significantly, Senna concludes the novel with an image of diversity, giving her multiracial heroine a home among other people who do not fit easily into the binary. Birdie has the task of living in the divide and, at the conclusion of the novel, she is better able to navigate her hybrid space. The

rigid boundaries that determined the conclusions of traditional passing narratives have given way to new constructs of identity with more fluid, shifting boundaries. The “tragic mulatta/o” trope no longer determines the outcome of a multiracial person’s story.

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