

WHITE SKIN, WHITE MASKS: THE CREOLE WOMAN AND THE NARRATIVE OF
RACIAL PASSING IN MARTINIQUE AND LOUISIANA

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Curriculum of
Comparative Literature

Chapel Hill
2006

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ABSTRACT

MICHAEL JAMES RULON: *White Skin, White Masks: The Creole Woman and the Narrative of Racial Passing in Martinique and Louisiana*
(Under the direction of Mae G. Henderson)

Through an examination of two Creole passing subject from literary passing narratives of the twentieth century, this thesis simultaneously treats two problems that have been largely overlooked by contemporary scholarship: the role of the Creole racial identity in the genre of the passing narrative, as well as the possibility of racial passing within the context of a Creole society. In Walter White's 1926 novel, Flight, and Mayotte Capécia's 1950 novel, La négresse blanche, the protagonists' difficulties in negotiating a stable racial identity reveal the inherent weakness of the racial binary that is essential to the very notion of racial passing, and they also show that Creoleness has failed to establish itself as a stable racial identity in the societies represented in both novels.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	<i>Pawòl Douvan</i> /Some Opening Words.....	1
2	<i>Nwè, Blan èk Kréyòl</i> /Black, White, and Creole.....	10
3	<i>Mimi èk Isaure</i> /Mimi and Isaure.....	19
4	<i>Pasé pou Blan, Pasé pou Nwè</i> /Passing for White, Passing for Black.....	32
5	<i>Ovwè tè kréyòl</i> /Goodbye, Creole Land.....	55
6	Conclusion: <i>Èk alòs ...</i> /And so	74
WORKS CITED.....		77

Chapter 1

Pawòl Douvan/Some Opening Words

Since entering the English language in the 11th century, the word “pass” has taken on numerous meanings. The online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary devotes no less than thirty-four pages to the verb form of the word, not including adjective or participle forms, such as “passing.” Even when the word is taken in the context of racial passing, there is no single catchall definition that truly captures the essence of the act. Gayle Wald configures the act of passing as one of “crossing a line” in her book, aptly entitled Crossing the Line (2000). Specifically, she looks at passing as an appropriation of the racial majority’s power by the racial Other. In her introduction, she tells the reader, “I highlight the enterprise of ‘crossing the line’ as a strategic appropriation of race’s power, emphasizing the stakes of such appropriation for racially defined subjects” (ix). For Wald, passing is not a passive act, but a conscious act of subversion. Furthermore, the act of passing does not simply undermine the power of the dominant race; it undermines the power of race itself. Wald elaborates: “The interest of narratives of racial passing lies precisely in their ability to demonstrate the failure of race to impose stable definitions of identity, or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner” (ix). Nonetheless, Wald recognizes the power of race as a means of defining. She therefore constructs the act of passing not as a rejection of racial definition, but as an act of self-definition. Racial passing is, in Wald’s words, “a practice that emerges from subjects’ desires to control the terms of their racial definition, rather than be subject to the definitions of white supremacy” (6). It would seem, then, that

the passing subject not only crosses the line separating white from black, but also the line separating object from subject.

For Mae Street Kidd, the subject of Wade Hall's biography, Passing for Black (1997), passing is the act of crossing not an imaginary racial line, but rather a real geographical line, a line separating "white" places from "black" places. Speaking of her experiences under the Jim Crow laws in Saint Louis, Kidd tells Hall:

Of course, Louisville was a Southern city, and we had some Jim Crow laws, but most of us blacks knew what the boundaries were and more or less observed them. What were those boundaries? I couldn't use the main public library. I couldn't go to the first-run movie shows on Fourth Street. I had to attend the "colored" theaters like the Lyric and the Grand. I couldn't stay or eat in the Brown Hotel. As long as we kept within those boundaries, we never had any problems. (41)

In the days of Jim Crow, to pass meant to have free reign to enter "white" places such as the ones Kidd mentions. It should be noted, though, that each of Kidd's "white" places consists not only of a racialized space, but also of a racialized behavior. Black people are not simply barred from entering the main public library; they are forbidden to read the books to which white people have free access. Black people are allowed to watch movies, but they are not allowed to watch first-run movies because they are barred from entering the theaters where first-run movies are shown. To pass, then, is not simply to go where white people go, but also to do what white people are free to do. However, Like Wald, Kidd does not see passing as a rejection of blackness. She tells Hall:

. . . I would have been able to pass for white if I'd wanted to. I never tried. I never wanted to put myself into what could have been an embarrassing situation. But I am an American citizen... That gives me certain rights, regardless of customs and laws. If I went into a clothing store and wanted to try on a dress or a hat, then I had the right to do it... [I]t was never a matter of whether or not I was "passing" for white—or for any other color. I would have been simply expressing myself as a free American. (39-40)

Kidd, Like Wald, sees the passing subject not as a person who rejects the race that has been assigned to her by society, but rather as a person who refuses to be defined by race, that is, a person who refuses to allow the dominant race to mark her as Other and thus deny her the freedoms available to members of the dominant race. The passing subject refuses to be seen as a black American or as a female American, but simply as a free American, with no qualifiers to undermine that freedom.

Elaine Ginsberg also constructs passing in terms of boundaries. In her introduction to Passing and the Fictions of Identity (1996), she tells the reader, “Passing is... about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing” (2). For Ginsberg, the passing subject moves “from a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege, a movement that interrogate[s] and thus threaten[s] the system of racial categories and hierarchies established by social custom and legitimated by the law” (1-2). The boundaries breached by the passing subject, then, are boundaries separating different categories of people, and the categories into which the subject passes carry with them legal status and privilege that the subject cannot attain prior to passing. Ginsberg describes the act of passing as a form of “trespass,” in which the passing subject enters a forbidden realm of freedom and privilege. Ginsberg explains:

The genealogy of the term *passing* in American history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent “white” identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as “Negro” or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry. As the term metaphorically implies, such an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary—indeed *trespassed*—to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other. (2-3)

Passing, for Ginsberg, is not only a crossing of boundaries; it is also an act of theft. By crossing into the world of white privilege, the passing subject illicitly appropriates that privilege, which law or custom denies her, and uses it for social or monetary advancement.

Biographer Brooke Kroger has perhaps the broadest and most complicated definition of passing. In the subtitle of her collection of contemporary real-life passing narratives, Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are (2003), she defines passing as an inability to express one's "true" identity. In the introduction, Kroger notes that she focuses on people who pass "in order to bypass being excluded unjustly in their attempts to achieve ordinary, honorable aims and ambitions. [This book] is about *people who pass to be more truly themselves*" [my emphasis] (2). Kroger's formulation of passing, then, suggests that essentialist constructions of identity suppress people's "true" identities (which, in and of itself, suggests another, different, essentialist construction of identity), thus forcing them to take on a new identity in order to express themselves fully. At the same time, though, passing, for Kroger, is an unnatural act, one that goes against the passing subject's true identity. "In the most general way," she tells the reader, "it is passing when people effectively present themselves as something other than what they understand themselves to be. *Effectively* is key because an ineffectual effort to pass is just that, a failed attempt" (7). She adds later that "[p]assing never feels natural. It is a second skin that never adheres" (8). It should be noted that Kroger's book focuses not only on black subjects who pass for white, but also white subjects who pass for black, homosexual subjects who pass for heterosexual, male subjects who pass for female, and other forms of passing not usually acknowledged in scholarly works on passing.

For the purposes of this thesis, I wish to define passing as assimilation into a society whose laws and/or customs define the passing subject as an outsider. This definition is consistent with the definition constructed by Kroeger in her book Passing. She describes passing as “disclosure management,” or a selective disclosure of personal information, the goal of which is invisibility, or to reach a point at which one is not marked as Other by mainstream society. By assimilation, then, I mean that the passing subject achieves a state in which she is not marked as Other by the group into which she passes—in this case, white society.

This thesis will focus on racial passing, but, like Kroeger’s work, it will focus on a form of racial passing that has been almost entirely overlooked by modern scholars. Passing, according to the discourse of the binary opposition of races, is to cross a line that separates white from black; by adhering to this notion, many critics have neglected the possibility that race is a continuum, rather than a binary. Wald notes in her introduction that “to pass... is to capitalize on the binarism of the dominant racial discourse” (6). That is, the passing subject supplants one binary construction of race—the “one drop” theory that states that an individual with even one proverbial drop of “black blood” is black—with another binary construction, one based on skin color, in which people who “look white” are white, and all others are black. The introduction of the Creole passing subject brings this black/white binary into question. The Creole subject, defined by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant in their manifesto, Éloge de la Créolité (1989), as “l’agrégat interactionnel ou transactionnel, des éléments culturels caraïbes, européens, africains, asiatiques, et

levantins, que le joug de l'Histoire a réunis sur le meme sol"¹ (26), disrupts the black-white binary and introduces a new identity that is, to quote Werner Sollors, "neither black nor white, yet both." Vincent W. Byas defines the Creole in his article, "Ethnologic aspects of the Martinique Creole" (1943), as the result of "[t]hree stubborn centuries of isolated, intensive . . . hybridization in Martinique" (261). He later elaborates, noting that "[i]t is quickly evident that Martinique's present racial amalgam arises from the three . . . vaguely outlined but universally recognized ethnic sub-species: Mongoloid, Caucasian, Negroid, all of which were, at the outset, not merely strangers to each other's character and temperament, but quite foreign to this island climate as well" (262). Byas later analyzes each of the three ethnic "sub-species" in detail, focusing on the different nations whose natives have converged in Martinique to create the Martinican Creole, including India, China, France, the Netherlands, and various African countries. Byas also describes the construction of the Creole identity in the United States: "The 'Creole' has been variously defined in the United States so as to avoid connotations of Negroid ancestry. In its more universal application, however, as American descendants of the colonial Latin-Europeans, or . . . any native of the European colonies in the Americas, the term is applicable to all similarly indigenous groups" (261f). The American reluctance to associate Creoleness with African ancestry differs from the Martinican construction of Creoleness, which Byas describes as "extraneous blood influences [operating] upon a basic, native-born, African stock" (261f). Nonetheless, Bernabé et al. note that "aux U.S.A., la Louisiane et le Mississippi sont en grande partie

¹ "the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history" M. B. Taleb-Khyar's translation, (87). All translations of the *Éloge* come from Taleb-Khyar.

Créoles”² (31-32), thus placing the Southern U.S. Creole, including the Louisiana Creole, in roughly the same racial category as the Martinican Creole. The Creole “race,” then, comprises a diverse set of points both on and off of the black-white continuum, and the Creole subject cannot be truly said to “pass” for either black or white, as she does not truly exist on the plane of the black/white binary. Moreover, Creoleness encompasses such a diverse range of racial and ethnic combinations—and, therefore, a vast array of experiences and histories—that it is very difficult to examine the problem of passing from a universal Creole perspective. Each individual Creole passing narrative centers on a different construction of Creoleness, and each Creole passing subject relates differently to blackness and whiteness. It is, therefore, very difficult to draw conclusions about the Creole passing subject in general; the best that one can hope to do is draw conclusions about each Creole passing subject and attempt to discern patterns in the constructions and deconstructions of race that take place in these subjects’ narratives.

Some examples of American passing narratives with Creole subjects are William Dean Howell’s novella An Imperative Duty (1891), Kate Chopin’s short story “Désirée’s Baby” (1893), Walter White’s novel Flight (1926), and Fannie Flagg’s novel Welcome to the World, Baby Girl! (1998). Indeed, racial passing has been a popular subject in American literature and criticism for roughly one and a half centuries, from William and Ellen Craft’s 1860 slave narrative, Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, to such contemporary works as Phillip Roth’s novel, The Human Stain, published in 2000. In spite of social taboos and censorship laws prohibiting literary representations of miscegenation, the passing subject has appeared in literature since the time of the slave narratives, continuing up until the present day. Texts dealing with the issue of passing were often censored, but in recent years the

² “in the U.S.A., Louisiana and Mississippi are predominately Creole” (93)

passing narrative has enjoyed a surge in popularity. Nella Larsen's Passing has been reprinted three times in the past twenty years, Walter White's Flight was reprinted in the Voices of the South series in 1998, and numerous critical works on passing have emerged in the past decade. Most contemporary scholarship, however, does not address the complex construction of the Creole identity within the context of passing. In the U.S., there has been a great deal of recent scholarship on racial passing, but there is no concrete treatment of the Creole identity within this context. Likewise, while *créolité* is a popular theme in Martinican literature and criticism, appearing in such works as Patrick Chamoiseau's Une enfance créole, Mayotte Capécia's Je suis martiniquaise, Frantz Fanon's Peau noire, masques blancs, and Suzanne Césaire's essay "La malaise d'une civilisation," there is no concrete treatment of the problem of racial passing in Martinican society.

This thesis will provide a more complete picture of both racial passing and of *créolité* through a detailed analysis of two Creole passing narratives: Walter White's 1926 novel Flight and Mayotte Capécia's 1950 novella La négresse blanche. Although these two works are separated by a cultural divide, as well as a twenty-four-year temporal divide, both deal with very similar problems, including migration, female sexuality, miscegenation, and racially motivated violence. Both are set during periods of racial tension. Flight takes place in the years following the infamous 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which codified the "one drop" rule into law, and the 1906 Atlanta race riots figure prominently in the plot. It is also important to note that the novel is set shortly after the 1898 Spanish-American War and was published seven years after the end of World War I. Similarly, La négresse blanche is set during the 1943-1945 German occupation of France, a time period when Franco-German conflict mirrored black-white tension in Martinique, and was published a mere five years

after the end of World War II. Indeed, in both novels there is a *mise en abîme* in which a wartime context mirrors racial conflict within a particular region, which in turn mirrors the internal racial conflict that the Creole passing subject experiences, a conflict that Isaure, the protagonist of *La négresse blanche*, refers to as “this curse of being neither black nor white.” Through a comparison of Creoleness in two different contexts, this thesis will lead to a greater understanding of what it means to be Creole in a more global sense, painting a picture of Creoleness that transcends national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Also, by examining in detail the Creole identity within the context of the narrative of racial passing, this thesis will give greater credence to the anti-essentialist subtext of the genre of the passing narrative. By crossing a supposedly impermeable line separating black from white, the passing subject destabilizes that line. The Creole identity itself also destabilizes the notion of discrete races because the Creole subject herself straddles the line between blackness and whiteness.

In short, then, the purpose of this thesis is to broaden the scope of two fields of study, that of racial passing and of racial hybridity, by examining literary texts in which the problems of passing and hybridity are juxtaposed. By examining the act of passing within a Creole social context, this study will clarify the relationship between Creoleness, blackness, and whiteness in Creole societies of both the United States and Martinique. Furthermore, by isolating the Creole passing subject, this thesis will supplant the black-white binary that has long been the focus of criticism with a more complex picture of racial identity based on hybridity and Creolization.

Chapter 2

Nwè, Blan èk Kréyòl/Black, White, and Creole

In the legal discourse of race in both the United States and France, blackness and whiteness have been considered mutually exclusive polar opposites since at least the seventeenth century. In both law and custom, a person is either black or white, and there is no in-between. Indeed, as Werner Sollors notes in his book, Neither Black nor White yet Both (1997), in the modern era many attempts have been made, both in the United States and in the Caribbean, to segregate the races, even to the point of banning representations of fraternization between the races. He elaborates:

Black-white interracial love and family relations have been—especially in the modern period, from the French and Haitian revolutions to the aftermath of World War II—a subject likely to elicit censure and high emotions, or at least a certain nervousness . . . What is subjected to socially approved attempted or legalized bans in real life is often also censored, suppressed, denied, or rejected in symbolic representations. In 1930, the state of Mississippi, for example, enacted a criminal statute that made punishable the “publishing, printing, or circulating any literature in favor of or urging interracial marriage or social equality.” (4)

The interracial subject, then, as the result of miscegenation, is taboo—both in life and in print—in such segregated societies.

In order to erase the interracial subject from the public consciousness, both United States and French law codified an absolute racial binary into law. During colonial times, race in the Francophone Caribbean was defined by a set of laws known as the *Code noir*, issued in 1685 and amended several times over the following century. These laws were much more complex than the American “one-drop” rule, and were thus more subject to interpretation and

manipulation. Sollors observes that “[n]aming the right paragraph of the *Code noir* could make the difference of life and death, of a happy marriage or a sale into slavery” (187). Joan M. Martin, for example, observes in her article “*Plaçage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*,” that “under the French *Code noir*, children assumed the [slave] status of their mothers. Very often, though, the white father freed both his mixed-race children and his concubine . . . The parties were legally free following manumission, and were therefore different from African slaves, but they were not accorded legal or social equality with whites” (59-60). William Renwick Riddell elaborates on this point in his 1925 article, “*Le Code Noir*.” “If a free man [were to] have children by a slave concubine,” he explains,

he, as well as the master of the woman permitting it, is to be fined two thousand pounds of sugar. If the woman be his own slave, concubine and child are to be confiscated to the use of the Hospital and to be perpetual slaves. If however, the offender, being unmarried during the liaison, marries the woman with the rites of the Church, she and her offspring will become free and the children legitimate. (323)

In the French West Indies, there was a certain degree of flexibility for Black subjects. The law permitted miscegenation under certain circumstances, and the *Code noir* even contained provisions whereby mixing of the races could be used as a means of freeing slaves from bondage. Nonetheless, as Martin points out, under all versions of the *Code noir*, freed slaves did not have equal status with White citizens.

Riddell notes that a new *Code noir*, somewhat more restrictive than the first, was issued in March of 1724 to govern the colony of Louisiana. Unlike the laws of the Caribbean colonies, the *Code noir* of Louisiana dictated that “[w]hites of either sex were not to intermarry with blacks” (327), and Riddell further notes that “[w]hites or freeborn or freed blacks were not to live in concubinage with slaves. The white master, father of a child by his own slave, lost both slave and child. But a freeborn or freed black might marry the woman

and so make her and her child free and the child legitimate” (328). In Louisiana, female slaves could still attain freedom by marrying free black men, but marriage with white men was forbidden. It should also be noted that both in the French West Indies and in the colony of Louisiana, black men were forbidden to intermarry with white women. Miscegenation was a means of liberation only for women, and even for women, intermarriage resulted only in a limited degree of freedom.

After the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, Louisiana came under American law, which governed race even more strictly than the *Code noir*. Wald describes the American “one-drop” rule:

Codified in the late nineteenth century, particularly in the years following Reconstruction, this rule designated as “black” any person possessing even a “drop” of “black blood,” as determined by ancestry extending back (in theory, at least) an indeterminate number of generations. According to the one-drop rule, for example, [Charles] Chesnut, a writer of diverse African and European ancestry . . . and a man who was often taken for “white,” was thus grouped together with people of dissimilar ancestry under the badge of “Negro” or “colored” identity. Although Chesnut maintained that he belonged to a separate category of “mixed blood” citizens distinct from what he called “true Negroes,” the binary logic of the one-drop rule mandated that if he were not “white,” then he had to be “black.” (11)

Ginsberg adds that “[t]he Supreme Court of the United States, in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, confirmed that a person with one-eighth Negro ancestry could be legally defined as Negro under Louisiana law, even though, as in the case of *Plessy*, that ancestry was not physically visible” (7). The American government thus assured the separation of the races by legally suppressing hybrid racial identities. A white-skinned person of “mixed blood” could not truly be said to pass for black, as Kidd suggests in her interview with Hall, for she would be legally considered black under American law in spite of her white skin. If, on the other hand, a person of mixed blood were to present herself as white, she would be considered to be passing, and thus in violation of American law.

Nonetheless, in spite of the legal attempts to erase racial hybridity from the popular imaginary, a hybrid racial identity, Creoleness, emerged in both the French West Indies and Louisiana. Virginia R. Dominguez describes the rise of Creole societies:

European colonial expansion in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries gave rise to a number of Creole societies and Creole languages . . . Sectors of colonial societies, sometimes entire colonial populations, became known as Creole . . . Common to these societies were structured economic, and often political, contacts with Western Europe, a self-image as pioneering societies surviving or thriving in nearly unlivable surroundings, and a heterogeneity of physical appearance, language, and cultural heritage. (13)

It should be noted in particular that, unlike their white counterparts, the Creole populations of both Louisiana and the Francophone Caribbean acknowledged their heterogeneity. The absence of a notion of “pure” Creoleness led to an inclusiveness that contrasted sharply with the exclusivity of the white societies that coexisted with the Creoles in the French colonies.

The definition of Creoleness was not static, however. Dominguez observes that “as the Creole populations of [the] colonies (or former colonies) [of the Caribbean] established diverse social, political, and economic positions for themselves over the years, *Creole* acquired diverse meanings” (13). The *Academia Real Española* attributes the word’s origins to Spanish explorers in the West Indies who used the word *criollo* to describe “all locally born persons of nonnative origin. This included persons born of European parents in the islands as well as locally born children of African slaves” (Dominguez 14). The term “Creole” was originally a geographical distinction, not a racial one. All people—black, white, mixed, and otherwise—who were born in the New World were Creole. Dominguez notes that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the definition of the term “Creole” began to take on a racially differentiated meaning. While the 1869 edition of the *Dictionnaire Larousse* gives a race-neutral definition, the 1929 edition “unequivocally stated

that *Creole* was correctly used only in reference to the presumably white population of these colonial or formerly colonial societies” (14). The term “Creole” could not be applied to a person of African descent without the word “Negro” following it. Even in 2005, the Oxford English Dictionary is unclear as to whether Creoleness is associated with whiteness, blackness, neither, or both. It defines the term “Creole” as follows:

n. In the West Indies and other parts of America, Mauritius, etc.: *orig.* A person born and naturalized in the country, but of European (usually Spanish or French) or of African Negro race: the name having no connotation of colour, and in its reference to origin being distinguished on the one hand from born in Europe (or Africa), and on the other hand from aboriginal. *a.* But now, usually, = *creole white*, a descendant of European settlers, born and naturalized in those colonies or regions, and more or less modified in type by the climate and surroundings.

The local use varies: in the European colonies of the W. Indies it is usually applied to the descendants of any Europeans there naturalized; in Mauritius to the naturalized French population. It is not now used of the people of Spanish race in the independent South American states, though sometimes of the corresponding natives of Mexico, and in the U.S. it is applied only to the French-speaking descendants of the early French settlers in Louisiana, etc.

b. Now less usually = *creole negro*: A Black person born in the West Indies or America, as distinguished from one freshly imported from Africa . . .

B. attrib. or adj.

1. a. Of persons: Born and naturalized in the West Indies, etc., but of European (or Black) descent; see *A.* Now chiefly applied to the native whites in the West Indies, the native French population in Louisiana, Mauritius, etc.

As Dominguez points out, one of the few consistent elements in the definition of Creoleness is the element of local, rather than European or African, birth.

Perhaps the most famous definition of Creoleness is the one given by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant in their 1989 manifesto, Éloge de la créolité. “Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Asiatiques,” the trio declare, “nous nous proclamons Créoles. Cela sera pour nous une attitude intérieure, mieux : une vigilance, ou mieux encore, une sorte d’enveloppe mentale au mitan de laquelle se bâtira notre monde en pleine conscience du

monde”³ (13). Creoleness for Bernabé et al. is not simply a racial identity; it is a philosophy, a way of life, a means of looking at the world. More importantly, it is a self-identification, “an interior attitude,” not an identity imposed upon a people by outside entities.

Furthermore, it is an identity separate from a pure European, African, or Asian identity. A Creole is “neither European, nor African, nor Asian.” Rather, it is a hybrid identity that is intimately linked to place. The Éloge elaborates:

La Créolité est l’agrégat *interactionnel ou transactionnel*, des éléments culturels caraïbes, européens, africains, asiatiques, et levantins, que le joug de l’histoire a réunis sur le même sol. Pendant trois siècles, les îles et les pans de continent que ce phénomène a affectés, ont été des véritables forgeries d’une humanité nouvelle, celles où langues, races, religions, coutumes, manières d’être de toutes les faces du monde, se trouvèrent brutalement déterritorialisées, transplantées dans un environnement où elles durent réinventer la vie . . . Notre histoire est une tresse d’histoires. Nous avons goûté à toutes les langues, à toutes les parlures.⁴ (26)

More than the sum of its parts, Creoleness is the result of a process of innovation. It is not simply a mixture; rather, the Creole is a mixture of histories as well as races—the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of cultural elements, as the authors of the Éloge call it. The Creole cannot be formed in a vacuum; Creoleness is the result of a complex process of negotiation and renegotiation within a context of cultural exchange and conflict. The definition of Creoleness put forth in the Éloge is similar to Homi Bhabha’s concept of *interstices*. In his book, The Location of Culture (1994), Bhabha delineates a set of “‘in-between’ spaces” that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood...that initiate

³ “Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles. This will be for us an interior attitude— better, a vigilance, or even better, a sort of mental envelope in the middle of which our world will be built in full consciousness of the outer world” (75). All translations of the Éloge come from Taleb-Khyar.

⁴ “Creoleness is the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history. For three centuries the islands and parts of continents affected by this phenomenon proved to be the real forges of a new humanity, where languages, races, religions, customs, ways of being from all over the world were brutally uprooted and transplanted in an environment where they had to reinvent life . . . Our history is a braid of histories. We had a taste of all kinds of languages, all kinds of idioms.” *ibid.*, 87-88.

new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation...” (1-2).

Creoleness is the offspring of numerous cultures engaged in violent conflict in a land that is foreign to many of them. It is a reinvention of the self that is necessary for peoples who are “brutally uprooted and transplanted.” Creoleness is the identity that emerges as displaced peoples develop new roots in a strange land. The botanical language of the Éloge is no accident. Like the vegetation of the New World, the Creole is intimately linked to the land. Suzanne Césaire offers her explanation in her 1942 article, “La malaise d’une civilisation:”

Qu’est-ce que le Martiniquais ?

—L’homme plante.

Comme elle, abandon au rythme de la vie universelle. Point d’effort pour dominer la nature. Médiocre agriculteur. Peut-être. Je ne dis pas qu’il fait pousser la plante ; je dis qu’il pousse, qu’il vit en plante. Son indolence ? Celle du végétal. Ne dites pas : « il est paresseux » dites : « Il végète », et vous serez doublement dans la vérité.⁵ (45)

The Creole grows out of the soil of Martinique, Louisiana, Guadeloupe, or any of the other lands that have come to be known as Creole. She cannot, as the authors of the Éloge point out, grow out of just any land. They compare Creoleness to Americanness, which is “l’adaptation progressive de populations du monde occidental aux réalités naturelles du monde qu’elles baptisèrent nouveau. Et cela, sans interaction avec d’autres cultures”⁶ (30).

The authors recognize a variety of zones of Creolization in the so-called New World:

Il existe donc une créolité antillaise, une créolité guyanaise, une créolité brésilienne, une créolité africaine, une créolité asiatique et une créolité polynésienne, assez dissemblables entre elles mais issues de la matrice du même maelström

⁵ “What is the Martinican?

—A human plant.

Like a plant, abandoned to the rhythm of universal life. No effort expended to dominate nature. Mediocre at farming. Perhaps. I’m not saying he makes the plant grow; I’m saying that he grows, that he lives plantlike. His indolence? That of the vegetable kingdom. Don’t say: “he’s lazy,” say: “he vegetates,” and you will be doubly right.” T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s translation, Negritude Women (131).

⁶ “the progressive adaptation, and with no real interaction with other cultures, of Western populations in a world they baptized new” (91).

historique. La créolité englobe et parachève donc l'Américanité puisqu'elle implique le double processus:

—*d'adaptation des Européens, des Africains et des Asiatiques au Nouveau Monde* ;

—*de confrontation culturelle entre ces peuples au sein d'un même espace, aboutissant à la création d'une culture syncrétique dite créole.*

Il n'existe évidemment pas une frontière étanche entre les zones de créolité et celles d'américanité. Au sein d'un même pays, elles peuvent se juxtaposer ou s'interpénétrer : ainsi aux U.S.A., la Louisiane et le Mississippi sont en grande partie créoles, tandis que la Nouvelle-Angleterre, où ne vivent au départ que des Anglo-Saxons, n'est qu'américaine.⁷ (31-32)

Martinican poet and critic Édouard Glissant also speaks of the Creole in botanical terms. For him, creolization is the process by which heterogeneous cultures come into contact with one another, like a plant that spreads a network of roots to a wide area of land. He elaborates in his collection of essays and interviews, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1996): “le terme de creolization s'applique . . . à la situation où . . . les éléments culturels les plus éloignés et les plus hétérogènes s'il se trouve puissent être mis en relation”⁸ (22). Glissant puts identities that arise from creolization in opposition to identities that arise from a myth of a single common root. He explains: “Cette vue de l'identité [l'identité à racine unique] s'oppose à la notion d'aujourd'hui « réel », dans ces cultures composites, de l'identité . . . comme résultat d'une créolisation, c'est-à-dire de l'identité comme rhizome, de l'identité non

⁷ “There are a Caribbean Creoleness, a Guyanese Creoleness, a Brazilian Creoleness, an African Creoleness, an Asian Creoleness and a Polynesian Creoleness, which are all very different from one another but which all result from the matrix of the same historical maelstrom. Creoleness encompasses and perfects Americanness because it involves a double process:

—*the adaptation of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to the New World; and*

—*the cultural confrontation of these peoples within the same space, resulting in a mixed culture called Creole.*

There are obviously no strict frontiers separating zones of Creoleness from zones of Americanness. We might find them juxtaposed or interpenetrated within the same country: thus in the U.S.A., Louisiana and Mississippi are predominately Creole, whereas New England, which was initially inhabited by Anglo-Saxons only, is just American” (92-93).

⁸ “the term ‘creolization’ refers . . . to the situation in which . . . the most distant and heterogeneous cultural elements are able to come into contact with each other” (my translation).

plus comme racine unique mais comme racine allant à la rencontre d'autres racines"⁹ (23).

For Glissant, the Creole is a plant whose roots extend in all directions, nourishing him from a variety of different lands. Like the Creole islands of the Caribbean, the Creole body is the meeting-place of many cultures from every corner of the earth.¹⁰

⁹ "This view of identity [as arising from a single root] is opposed to the current "real" notion of identity in these composite cultures, as a result of creolization, that is to say, of identity as rhizome, of identity not as arising from a single root, but rather as a root going off in search of other roots" (my translation).

¹⁰ The issue of place and Creoleness will be treated in more depth in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3

Mimi èk Isaure/Mimi and Isaure

The mixed culture that results from “the cultural confrontation of . . . peoples within the same space” is evident in both the world of Mimi Daquin, the protagonist of Walter White’s novel, Flight, and in that of Isaure, the titular character in Mayotte Capécia’s novel, La négresse blanche. Flight is the story of Mimi Daquin, a Creole girl from New Orleans who moves to Atlanta with her father, Jean, and her stepmother, Mary Robertson, after Jean marries Mary. Mimi is introduced to the upper crust of Atlanta’s black society but quickly finds her reputation shattered after she becomes impregnated by Carl Hunter, the ne’er-do-well son of one of Mary’s high-society friends. Mimi flees to Philadelphia with her son, *Petit Jean*, where she finds work as a seamstress. Worried that she will not be able to provide for her son, she moves to Harlem to live with her Aunt Sophie, leaving *Petit Jean* in an orphanage. Mimi happily mingles with her aunt’s social acquaintances until a visitor from Atlanta reveals Mimi’s scandalous past. In order to escape shame and ridicule, Mimi moves to a white neighborhood and passes for white. She finds a job with Madame Francine, a celebrated dressmaker, and she quickly rises to a prominent position both within the dressmaker’s business and in New York society. She marries Jimmie Forrester, a friend of one of Madame Francine’s clients, but she longs for her son and for a place in black society. Finally, she leaves Jimmie to return to “her people.”

Isaure, the protagonist of Capécia's La négresse blanche, is a bar owner in Martinique. She has a son, François, by Daniel, a white man. After a *quimbois*, a magical spell, fails to reunite her with Daniel, she sets her sights on Lieutenant du Taillant, a French officer stationed in Martinique. Her pursuit of du Taillant is part of a larger pattern of idolization of whites and distaste for blacks. It gradually becomes evident that Isaure pursues white men because she believes that by marrying a white man, she can become white. Eventually she achieves her goal, marrying a wealthy *béké*, Pascal Guymet, but rather than finding contentment, she finds herself the object of scorn for both her white in-laws and the black population of Fort-de-France. After Pascal is murdered by the black workers on his plantation, Isaure decides that she must leave Martinique to escape her "curse" of hybridity. She makes one last attempt to integrate herself into *béké* society by lying to her mother-in-law, claiming to be carrying Pascal's baby, but she finally realizes that she truly must leave Martinique.

The first words spoken by Jean Daquin, the Creole father of White's protagonist, Mimi, are "We're there, *petite* Mimi" (9). Jean's hybrid language foreshadows the issues of racial hybridity that he and his daughter will face over the course of the novel. Jean is both open about and proud of his mixed heritage. He tells Mimi, "The white Louisianian will tell you the Creole is white with ancestry of French or Spanish or West Indian extraction. There may be some of that kind—but I'm not sure—but most Creoles are a little bit of everything and from that very mixture comes the delightful colorfulness which is their greatest charm" (40). Indeed, one of the ancestors of whom he is most proud is his great-grandfather, "a Negro from San Domingo" (30). Nonetheless, he warns Mimi before their move to Atlanta that

Creoles are not held in high esteem in the rest of the United States as they are in New Orleans. Jean tells his daughter:

“Neither Margot nor I have ever consciously sought to keep from you the fact that the Negro blood in you set you aside, here in America, as one apart, though we have tried to shield you as much as we could from the embarrassments that blood can bring you.”

“Oh, is that all that was troubling you, Papa Jean?” laughed Mimi.

“You can afford to laugh here in Creole New Orleans,” Jean cautioned. “But away from here it’s a different matter . . .” (37-38)

In “Creole New Orleans,” hybridity is not cause for alienation or ostracism; on the contrary, it is the norm. For Mimi, who “had never been more than a few miles beyond the city limits” (37), and who had known only the Creole milieu of Louisiana, it was laughable to think that having black ancestry could be a liability. As Jean rightly points out, such an idea is laughable in a society where mixed blood is not only the norm, but a point of pride. In the former French colonies of the New World, black blood was not a life sentence, as it were. The *Code noir* provided means for black people to escape their station on the lowest rung of the social ladder. In post-*Plessy v. Ferguson* America, however, identifying oneself as Creole is not an option, and as soon as the Daquins leave Louisiana, they will also lose their privileged Creole status.

It should be noted, though, that Louisiana is hardly a racial Utopia. Although Jean and Mimi enjoy privileged status in New Orleans, Mary Robinson Daquin finds herself subject to much the same prejudices as in the rest of the United States. Indeed, by marrying her, Jean loses some of his privileges. One of Jean’s first indications that his marriage would be problematic was that

Mary’s darkness of skin prevented him from eating at the old restaurants . . . He and Margot and Mimi had gone there in the old days though the proprietors and waiters and the regular patrons knew of his Negro blood. He and Mary had gone once or twice until slight but unmistakable hints had been given him that he was

welcome but his wife—“We are most sorry but our American guests, on whose continued patronage we are largely dependent, object to *une femme de couleur*.” (32)

While Jean and Mimi’s mixed blood is not objectionable to the natives of New Orleans, Mary is barred from restaurants under the pretext that her visible blackness is objectionable to the American patrons. Although American miscegenation laws and social custom would suggest to any casual observer that Jean and Mimi were black as well, the anonymous restaurateur places the blame on Mary, the dark-skinned foreigner, rather than on the light-skinned Creoles. Also, it is strongly implied that the prejudice comes not from the Creole employees and patrons, but from the American guests. The restaurateur’s careful wording suggests that Creoles are able to look past skin color, but that the small-minded Americans require that Mary not darken the doors of New Orleans’ respectable restaurants in the interests of the economic well-being of the restaurants’ proprietors.

Indeed, the prejudice against Mary did not come only from strangers. Even Jean’s friends and family saw her as an outsider unworthy to move in Creole social circles. After her marriage to Jean:

Mary made few friends among the intimates of Jean and Mimi. They with gentle but unmistakable signs let her know that despite her marriage to Jean she yet was and would ever remain an outsider. Time and time again Jean and Mimi received invitations to dinner, to parties which did not include Mary. The mellow old families, militantly proud of their Creole and Negro ancestry, yielded not an inch to that which went on in the world outside. Deadlines 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, in sharp contrast to the ivory tint of Jean and Mimi. (29)

In fact, Mary crossed a third line, further compounding her offense: the line of place. Twice in the above passage she is referred to as an outsider. As an American, her black blood is not reason for pride, as it is for the “mellow old [Creole] families.” The people of New Orleans

refused to yield to the outside world, and this refusal included a refusal to open their doors to a person who was not of their world.

In addition, both Jean and Mary's families object to their marriage, but for different reasons. Jean is "alternately reviled and pitied for marrying an outsider, one who, though respectable and worthy, yet was not of Creole blood" (28). Once again, Mary is presented as an outsider, but this time, the discourse of blood arises. In spite of Jean's insistence that Creoles are hybrid by definition, his compatriots see their blood as superior to that of a black American. Indeed, it would seem that the Creoles, who were "militantly proud of their Creole and Negro ancestry" (29), consider mixed blood to be more desirable and prestigious than "pure" blood.

The reaction from Mary's family was much stronger but less focused. The narrator recounts:

From Mary's relatives, her father in particular, there came an outburst that overshadowed the protest of Jean's friends as a tornado outsweeps the gentle breeze of a woman's fan. Mr. Robertson rushed to New Orleans, stormed, denounced, ridiculed, pleaded, but in vain. Mary met his every mood in kind until, wise from his years of political training, he yielded, remained for the Protestant ceremony, refused to attend the Catholic one, and returned to Chicago, where he boasted to his friends of the "high Creole society" into which his Mary had married. (28-29)

Furious though Mr. Robertson may have been at his daughter for marrying a Catholic, he

nonetheless bragged to his friends that his daughter married into "high Creole society."

Much like a slave was able to raise her social standing under the *Code noir* by marrying a white man or a free black man, Mary attained through her marriage to Jean a social standing that, while not as privileged as that of a white person, was higher than the position that she held as a black woman in America.

Once in Atlanta, Jean and Mimi quickly discover that they are outsiders, just as Mary had been in New Orleans. A conversation between two of the Daquin's Atlanta neighbors reveals an aura of foreignness that precedes Jean and Mimi. Mrs. Plummer comments, "And say, Mis' King, did you know these new folks is Cath'lics? Well, they is—their name's 'Day-Quinn' or 'Day-kin' or something Frenchy like that . . ." to which Mrs. King replies, "Cath'lics, is they? Any time I hear tell of colored folks bein' anything 'cept Baptists or Methodists I know some white man's been tamperin' with their religion" (13). Before the Daquins even arrive in Atlanta, two things mark them as different from the local black community. Their name marks them as French, or non-American, and their supposedly "white" religion marks them as external to the black religious community. Nonetheless, Mrs. Plummer and Mrs. King acknowledge the Daquins as "colored folks," thus placing Jean and Mimi in a liminal space in which they are neither entirely accepted nor entirely rejected by Atlanta's black community.

Jean reacts violently to his outsider status. When Mary asks him to hide his religion from the black community in Atlanta so as to avoid alienation, he demands of his wife, "What if it does make us different? . . . Coloured people here, from what I've seen, are always talking about 'prejudice' and they're just about as full of prejudice against Catholics, Jews and black Negroes as white people themselves" (46). Jean observes that Atlanta's black population considers as Other not only people of different religions, but also people with darker skin than theirs. This prejudice is consistent with Mr. Robertson's behavior. While he refused to attend the Catholic wedding ceremony, he bragged to his friends that his daughter had married into high Creole society, which meant, among other things, that she had married a light-skinned man.

Jean and Mimi thus find themselves in a state of liminality outside of New Orleans. Under the one-drop rule, they are considered black—they cannot eat in white restaurants, attend white theaters, or worship in the white Catholic churches in Atlanta. On the other hand, they are among the lightest-skinned members of the black community, which places them in a privileged position. However, their Catholic religion sets them apart from the black community, which is almost exclusively Baptist and Methodist, and their French names only add to their foreignness. As Creoles in a society that recognizes only blackness and whiteness, then, they are condemned to be outsiders.

Isaure, the protagonist of Capécia's novel, *La négresse blanche*, finds herself in a similar state of inbetweenness. Indeed, the first description of her in the novel focuses on her mixed blood. The narrator describes her:

Elle avait une voix douce, un peu chantante; l'accent des filles des îles qui ressemble à l'accent anglais. Ce n'était pas tout à fait celui des filles noires qui mangent complètement les r. Les r, elle les articulait à peine, traînant sur les voyelles qui les précédaient, mais elle les prononçait lorsqu'elle parlait avec des békés. Afin de faire paraître plus lisses ses cheveux qui n'étaient crépus qu'à la base, elle les aplatissait soigneusement. C'était use de ces sang mêlé comme il y en a tant à la Martinique. La peau était de la banane, de l'orange, de la noix de coco, de café. Elle avait de grosses lèvres et des dents éclatantes, mais son visage relevé d'un peu de rose sur les pommettes avait l'aspect d'un visage blanc. Enfin, tout, chez elle, même son accent et ses gestes, était métissé.¹¹ (8-9)

Suzanne Césaire's concept of the Martinican as "l'homme-plante" appears in the description of Isaure. Her skin reflects the fruits of the island; she, like the banana and the coconut, grows out of Martinique's soil. However, Isaure attempts to erase the traces of her

¹¹ She had a gentle voice with a slight lilt, the accent of the island's young girls, resembling the English accent. It wasn't altogether like that of the black girls who completely swallow their "rs." She barely articulated hers, lingering on the preceding vowels, but she pronounced them when she talked to békés [locally-born whites]. So as to have her hair appear more sleek (which was frizzy only at the roots), she flattened it with care. She was one of those many mixed-bloods, so common in Martinique: her skin had a touch of banana, orange, coconut and coffee; her lips full, her teeth dazzling, but her face, highlighted with a bit of rose on the cheek bones, had the look of a white person. Lastly, everything about her, even her accent and her gestures, indicated that she was of mixed-blood. (160)

métissage. Much as Jean and Mimi speak a hybrid language, a cross between French and English, Isaure speaks a French that is neither that of the white Europeans nor that of the black islanders. Unlike Jean and Mimi, however, Isaure changes her speech patterns when speaking to whites. She also straightens her hair to further remove traces of her mixed blood.

Whereas Jean is proud of his mixed heritage, Isaure laments her “malédiction de n’être ni noire ni blanche”¹² (179). Indeed, by the end of the novel, she has alienated herself from everyone in her community, black and white alike. Much like the Creole restaurant owners in *Flight*, Isaure does not like to accommodate black patrons. The narrator recalls the story of Isaure’s mistreatment of a black customer:

Elle ne pouvait se débarrasser de ce respect des blancs que sa mère, abandonnée pourtant par le marin qu’elle avait aimé, lui avait inculqué. Ce n’était pas seulement pour faire plaisir aux officiers qui fréquentaient son bar et par orgueil qu’elle ne voulait pas recevoir des noirs. Lorsque l’affreux Blanchard était venu la relancer jusque là et, l’imbécile, pour se faire pardonner peut-être, avait maladroitement commandé un planteur-punch, elle avait refusé de le servir. Comme il insistait, elle s’était mise en colère et avait crié :

—Sortez ! Je ne veux plus vous voir ! Vous avez beau vous appeler Blanchard, vous n’êtes qu’un sale nègre . . .¹³ (13)

Unlike the restaurateurs in White’s novel, Isaure does not blame her reluctance to serve blacks on her customers. It is her own excessive respect for the white race, a respect for a white father who abandoned her and her mother, that leads her to eject Blanchard from her bar. In contrast to her respect for the white race, Isaure exhibits unabashed disrespect for the black race. She refuses service to Blanchard for the unspeakable offense of attempting to

¹² “curse of being neither black nor white” (Beatrice Stith Clark’s translation, 255)
Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from Clark.

¹³ She was unable to rid herself of the respect for whites that her mother, abandoned by the sailor she had loved, nonetheless had instilled in her. It was not only to please the officers who frequented her bar and through pride that she did not want to accommodate blacks. When that dreadful Blanchard had dropped in on her and, idiot-like, perhaps to assert his rights, had awkwardly ordered a planter-punch, she had refused to serve him. When he insisted, she became angry and shouted:

“Get out! I don’t want to see you anymore. What good is it that your name is ‘Whitey,’ you’re only a dirty nigger . . .” (162-3)

assert his rights and calls him a “dirty nigger,” for which she is later rebuked in a court of law. “Le Tribunal,” we learn, “avait reconnu qu’on ne traite pas un noir de nègre, car la Martinique ne fait pas partie des Etats-Unis d’Amérique”¹⁴ (13). Martinique, in theory, is a place where people of all races have equal protection under the law, in direct contrast to the United States, where black people are supposedly considered “dirty niggers.” Isaure, however, as a *métisse*, considers herself superior to Blanchard, and, despite her own black ancestry, sees fit to degrade Blanchard. She notes the irony of his name, pointing out that to call oneself “Whitey” does not make a person white. What she does not realize is that by calling Blanchard a “dirty nigger,” she is attempting to present herself as white, or at the very least, as “not black.” Indeed, she goes so far as to say that she is disgusted and afraid of blacks. She tells two of the patrons in her bar, a pair of officers in the French army, “[J]e n’ai jamais couché avec un noir. Ils me dégoûtent, ils me font peur”¹⁵ (12). She speaks of blacks in the third person, distancing herself from them, othering them through her fear and disgust.

In other contexts, however, Isaure self-identifies as black. When Lieutenant du Taillant invites her to a dance, she balks:

“Au Lido? C’est impossible. Vous savez, au Lido, ils ne reçoivent pas de noires.”

[du Taillant répondit:] “Mais vous n’êtes pas noire, Isaure, vous êtes à peine métisse, vous avez la peau presque blanche. Dans quelques années, quand vous aurez gagné des millions avec votre bar, vous vous ferez construire une maison sur le plateau Didier et vous passerez pour une créole.

Isaure secoua la tête.¹⁶ (44)

¹⁴ “The court found that a black is not to be treated like a ‘nigger,’ for Martinique is not a part of the United States” (163).

¹⁵ “I’ve never slept with a black. They disgust me and I’m afraid of them” (162).

¹⁶ “‘At the Lido? Impossible. You know they don’t allow blacks.’

Du Taillant, the white French officer, the foreigner, assures Isaure that, for all intents and purposes, she is white. Indeed, Capécia observes in *Je suis martiniquaise* that in Martinique “il est admis qu’on est blanc à partir d’un certain nombre de millions”¹⁷ (149-50). Du Taillant recognizes the fluidity and the nuances of the race/class system in Martinique, observing that with enough money, she could live in the white quarter and thus be white. However, Isaure insists that she will not be accepted at the Lido because she is black. Later on, she refers to the *békés* in the third person, much as she had done with the blacks earlier on. “D’ailleurs,” she tells du Taillant, “je les méprise, ils ne sont bons qu’à manger, qu’à boire et qu’à faire des enfants”¹⁸ (45). Just as she separates herself from the blacks, whom she fears, she distances herself from the whites, whom she purports to detest. Her language, however, seems to betray traces of envy for the *békés* and their way of life. The *béké* life, according to Isaure, consists of leisure activities—feasting, drinking, and fornicating. Indeed, she once hoped that some day her son, François, would be able to lead that kind of life. We learn that during a particularly trying time in her life, “[s]a seule consolation était son fils François, ce beau petit garçon plus clair qu’elle... Elle était fière d’assister à son développement. Autrefois, elle se disait: je vais gagner beaucoup d’argent pour lui et, quand il sera un homme, il sera considéré comme béké goyave, il habitera une belle maison sur le

[du Taillant replied:] ‘But you’re not black, Isaure. You’re hardly métisse, your skin is almost white. In a few years when you have earned millions with your bar, you’ll have a house built high in Didier and you’ll pass for a Creole.’

Isaure shook her head.” (181) Didier is, in Clark’s words, a “[r]esidential district in Fort-de-France where, traditionally, only upper class whites or very rich gens de couleur lived” (261). Du Taillant uses the word “*créole*” to refer specifically to white Creoles, or *békés*.

¹⁷ “it is accepted that one is white if one has a certain amount of money” (119-20)

¹⁸ “Besides, I despise them. They’re good for nothing but eating, drinking, and making babies.” (my translation)

plateau Didier”¹⁹ (68). She, like du Taillant, once saw the race/class system in Martinique as flexible; blessed with his white skin, he could, with enough money, move to the wealthy *béké* quarter, and thus be a *béké*. However, she concludes that the black blood that flows through her veins has made her dreams impossible. The narrator reminds the reader that Isaure “avait . . . du sang noir. Et quand on a du sang noir on est une noire”²⁰ (68). Once again, the discourse of blood arises, condemning Isaure and François to blackness under a “one-drop” rule that, in Martinique, is not codified in law so much as in custom. Capécia’s choice of wording, “une noire,” is very telling. Firstly, by using the feminine form, she alludes to the rule that originated in the *Code noir* stating that a child follows the status of the mother. It is Isaure’s black blood that defines her and François, not her white blood, nor the “pure” white blood of François’ father. Furthermore, by using the noun form, “une noire,” rather than the adjective, “noire,” Capécia essentializes race. The adjective “noire” describes a person, whereas the noun, “une noire,” defines the person.

Indeed, Isaure’s fear of blacks may not be directed towards black people, but rather of the black race, specifically her own blackness and the possibility of atavism. Frantz Fanon, in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, issues his famous condemnation of Capécia based on his reading of her first novel, *Je suis martiniquaise*. Based on the preference for white or light-skinned men that pervades Capécia’s work, Fanon declares that “c’est vers la lactification

¹⁹ “her only consolation was her son François, that handsome little boy even lighter than she... She was proud to witness his development. In times gone by, she would say to herself: I will earn a lot of money for him and, when he’s a man, he will be treated as a *béké goyave*, and he’ll live in a lovely house on the plateau Didier.” (my translation)

²⁰ “also had black blood. And when one has black blood, one is a black” [Capécia uses the feminine here]. (My translation)

que tend Mayotte²¹. Car enfin il faut blanchir la race ; cela, toutes les martiniquaises le savent, le disent, le répètent. Blanchir la race, sauver la race, mais non dans le sens qu'on pourrait supposer : non pas préserver « l'originalité de la portion du monde au sein duquel elles ont grandi », mais assurer sa blancheur”²² (38). Indeed, Isaure's attitude towards François appears to support Fanon's claim. She consoles herself by imagining François as a wealthy *béké* living amongst the whites. However, when she watches him sleeping in his bed, she observes that “[i]l avait la peau plus claire que sa mère, mais les cheveux plus crépus. La race noire disparaît moins que la blanche”²³ (25). She notices that, although François has lighter skin and a greater percentage of white ancestry than she, his hair betrays his black ancestry more than hers does. His hair is evidence for Isaure of the resistance of the black race to fading away, of the persistence of blackness, and of the reality of atavism. Isaure's “curse,” then, is not that of being neither black nor white, but that of being almost, but not quite, white. Despite her white skin, she cannot escape her black blood, for the risk remains that any child that she bears, even by a white man, could have black features. This

²¹ It should be noted that Fanon conflates Mayotte the author with Mayotte the protagonist and narrator of *Je suis martiniquaise*. He says of this novel, “Un jour, une femme du nom de Mayotte Capécia, obéissant à un motif dont nous apercevons mal les tenants, a écrit deux cent deux pages—sa vie—où se multipliait à loisir les propositions les plus absurdes” (34) [“One day a woman named Mayotte Capécia, obeying a motivation whose elements are difficult to detect, sat down to write 202 pages—her life—in which the most ridiculous ideas proliferated at random” (Charles Lam Markmann's translation, 42) All translations come from this edition.] Christiane Makward devotes an entire chapter of her book *Mayotte Capécia, ou l'aliénation selon Fanon* to cross-referencing *Je suis martiniquais* with Capécia's life, and Makward's research clearly demonstrates that, while *Je suis martiniquais* is indeed based on Capécia's life, it is not truly an autobiography, as many portions of the novel are fictional. It should also be noted that “Mayotte Capécia” is a pseudonym; the given name of the woman presumed to be the author of both novels was Lucette Céranus. In recent years, as Sharpley-Whiting notes in her book, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (1998), “the authenticity, i.e., Capécia's authorship of [*Je suis martiniquaise*] has recently come under scrutiny” (36).

²² “what Mayotte wants is a kind of lactification. For, in a word, the race must be whitened; every woman in Martinique knows this, says it, repeats it. Whiten the race, save the race, but not in the sense that one might think: not ‘preserve the uniqueness of that part of the world in which they grew up,’ but make sure that it will be white” (47).

²³ “He was of lighter complexion than his mother, but his hair frizzier than hers. The black race fades out less than the white” (170).

risk is further compounded by the notion, rooted in both law and tradition, that a child follows the status of his mother.

Although Mimi and Isaure both grew up in Creole societies, as defined by Bernabé et al., their status within those societies and their way of relating to blacks and whites are very different. While Mimi's turn-of-the-century New Orleans and Isaure's World-War-II Martinique are both Creole societies, both by self-definition and by the definition put forth in the *Éloge de la créolité*, there are subtle, but important, differences between their respective societies' definitions of the term "Creole." In Mimi's society, there is a minority amongst the Creoles who insist that they are of "pure" white blood, but the general Creole populace acknowledges its hybridity, and is even proud of its diverse origins. Nonetheless, there exists prejudice against visibly black people, but the Creoles take great care to attribute this prejudice to the "foreign" Americans. Isaure's Martinique, on the other hand, under the rule of French law as well as under German occupation, is dominated by a small and wealthy white Creole upper class that adheres to the one-drop rule, which prevents mixed-blood Creoles from holding the position of authority that they occupy in Mimi's New Orleans. Mimi, then, in her privileged position, is virtually unaware of race prejudice until her father marries a dark-skinned black woman. Isaure, on the other hand, is both victim and purveyor of racism; she is excluded from certain places, such as the Lido, by the *békés*, just as she excludes blacks from her bar. Mimi does not experience this liminal status until she leaves New Orleans for Atlanta, where she is legally classified as black, but is seen as foreign by the local black community. One common thread that links Mimi and Isaure, however, is their hybridity. As Isaure rightly observed, she and Mimi, as Creole women, are in the unusual

position of being neither white nor black, and, as Sollors would add, they are at the same time both white and black.

Chapter 4

Pasé pou Blan, Pasé pou Nwè/Passing for White, Passing for Black

Although both Mimi and Isaure have fluid racial identities, identifying one moment as white and the next as black, their act of passing is different from that of a conventional mulatta passing subject as described in contemporary writings on racial passing. Wald's analogy of "crossing the [race] line," for example, does not apply to Isaure, as Martinican society is not divided in a strict black/white binary. In Negritude Women, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting describes the social strata of Martinique as consisting rather of four classes: "békés, or white Creoles, white French 'metropolitan officials,' 'the colored bourgeoisie,' and the black working class" (99). These classes are based on race, economic class, and birthplace; significantly, in Martinique, only birthplace is considered wholly static. Due to her light skin and to the economic success of her bar, Isaure is a member of the colored bourgeoisie at the outset of the book. From the very beginning of the novel, Isaure is incapable of truly crossing the line separating black from white, for she already straddles the line. The colored bourgeoisie enjoys the same economic stability as the *békés*, but their black ancestry places them in the same racial group as the black working class. Wald's statement that "[t]he interest of narratives of racial passing lies precisely in their ability to demonstrate the failure of race to impose stable definitions of identity, or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner" (ix) does not truly apply to *La négresse blanche*, because it is not the act of passing that demonstrates the weaknesses of the notion of race; it is the mere existence of Creoleness that does so.

Likewise, although Mimi's New Orleans is under American rule, where the one-drop rule governs racial identities, the influence of centuries of French and Spanish rule, including the *Code noir*, undermines the authority of American law, and tradition takes precedence over law. As a child, Mimi learns from her father that "most Creoles are a little bit of everything" (40). Unlike Isaure, however, Mimi feels no impulse to choose between her black roots and her white roots. Although, as demonstrated by Mary's ostracism at the hands of Creole restaurant owners, racial prejudice exists in New Orleans, the race line appears to be less fixed in New Orleans than in Martinique. Before Mary's arrival, Jean and Mimi had no trouble eating at the finest restaurants in New Orleans; their black blood is not an impediment to equal rights, at least for light-skinned Creoles. Neither Jean nor Mimi is impelled to hide their black ancestry. On the contrary; Jean openly brags that his great-grandfather who ended a twenty-five year sugar crisis was "a Negro from San Domingo" (40). Whereas Isaure has a split subjectivity of sorts, changing her speech patterns to suit her audience and identifying with a different race at any given moment, it never occurs to Mimi that she could have any reason to hide her black heritage. Indeed, she laughs when her father tries to warn her of "the embarrassments that blood can bring [her]" (37) in America. It is not until she arrives at her first meeting of the Fleur-de-Lis Club that Mimi recognizes the prejudices of a race-based class system. As she looks around the room, Mimi observes that "none of the women present were darker than a light brown, their complexions varying from that shade to one indistinguishable from white" (48). However, although some of the women appear white, Mimi learns that the women of the Fleur-de-Lis Club are not white, and indeed, they look down on those who pass for white. Mimi overhears some of the women gossiping about Mrs. Adams:

“ . . . it seems Mrs. Adams has been going to the Grand Opera House and buying seats in the orchestra, ‘passing’ for white, and seeing all the plays that’ve been coming here. Well, the other day, as she was going in, some coloured person saw her and went and told the manager. She tried to bluff it out but it didn’t work—they made her get out.”

“Serves her right,” sweetly commented one of the informative one’s companions, satisfaction in her tone. “Going where she isn’t wanted . . .” (49)

Mimi is granted access to the Fleur-de-Lis Club due to her light skin, and the members of the Fleur-de-Lis Club enjoy a privileged status in the black community, much as Mimi and Jean did in the Creole community in New Orleans. However, the story of Mrs. Adams demonstrates that the privilege of the light-skinned blacks has its limits. Although the Fleur-de-Lis Club welcomes light-skinned black women with open arms, the Grand Opera House does not. The racial line that Mimi had been able to straddle in New Orleans is impenetrable in Atlanta, and due to her stepmother’s darker complexion, Mimi is forced, for the time being, at least, to forsake her white privilege and to identify with the black community. Wald’s race line, then, is not as solid for the Creole passing subject, at least in what Bernabé et al. call “zones of creolization,” as it is for black and mulatta subjects.

Moreover, Wald’s definition of “passing” as “a strategic appropriation of race’s power . . . [by] racially defined subjects” (ix) does not truly apply to either Isaure or to Mimi. Firstly, while the women are “racially defined” in the sense that they are legally considered black, or at least as not-white, neither woman is phenotypically black, nor do they self-identify exclusively as black. Indeed, under Kroger’s definition of passing as “when people effectively present themselves as something other than what they understand themselves to be” (7), both Mimi and Isaure could be accused of passing for black just as much as they could be accused of passing for white. Within the space of one evening, Isaure tells du

Taillant, “[les noirs] me dégoûtent, ils me font peur”²⁴ (12) and “laissez-moi, je ne suis qu’une pauvre négresse”²⁵ (19). If race is truly a binary, as dictated by the discourse of passing, then Isaure’s assertions cannot both be true. There are a few different explanations for the inconsistency. If Isaure truly sees herself as black, then she passes for white when she tells others the black race in telling du Taillant that she is afraid of them. If, on the other hand, she sees herself as white, then she passes for black when she describes herself as a “poor Negress.” There are, however, two other possibilities that the discourse of racial binaries ignores. The first possibility is that, as a person of mixed heritage, or mixed “blood,” she is both black and white, and, therefore, cannot be accused of passing for either black or white. The second possibility is that, as a member of a Creole “race,” distinct from both the white and black races, Isaure is neither black nor white, and whenever she attempts to identify with either race, she is passing. By the end of the novel, it seems that Isaure has come to the conclusion that the final possibility is the correct one, at least as long as she lives in Martinique. She finds herself in the middle of a racial conflict, hated by both blacks and whites. The narrator tells the reader:

Quant à Isaure, elle avait à souffrir quantité de petites vexations non seulement de sa belle famille mais des noirs eux-mêmes.

Du temps de son enfance, alors que les blancs étaient tout-puissants, les sang mêlé étaient traités par eux comme des nègres. Maintenant qu’un racisme contraire s’était développé, ils étaient aux yeux des noirs presque aussi impopulaires que les blancs. (153-54)²⁶

²⁴ “[blacks] disgust me and I’m afraid of them” (162)

²⁵ “Leave me alone, I’m only a wretched negress [sic]” (166)

²⁶ As for Isaure, she had to undergo countless harassments, not only from her in-laws but from the blacks themselves. Since her childhood days, when whites were all-powerful, they treated the mixed-bloods like blacks. Now that a reverse racism had developed, in the eyes of the blacks they were almost as unpopular as the whites. (242)

In this light, it is not surprising that Isaure bemoans her “curse of being neither black nor white.” Not only does she find herself treating both blacks and whites as Other, both the blacks and the whites also treat her as such. The *métis* population of Martinique is the enemy of all and the friend of none. Isaure’s internal struggle between her own blackness and whiteness is thus mirrored in the larger racial conflict between the white and black Martinicans. In both conflicts, Isaure finds herself powerless due to an inability to identify with either whiteness or blackness.

Mimi also finds herself in the position of having a black identity thrust upon her. In New Orleans, she is not conscious of race; she does not identify people based on their heritage. The narrator recalls: “In New Orleans she had thought that all people were hers—that only individuals mattered. But here [in Atlanta] there were sharp, unchanging lines which seemed to matter with extraordinary power” (54). Upon her arrival in Atlanta, Mimi is automatically placed on the black side of the race line, due in part to her association with her darker-skinned stepmother. In New Orleans, she and Jean are not racially defined. Before Jean marries Mary, Mimi and Jean are treated as members of the Creole community in good standing. Even after Jean marries Mary, Jean and Mimi’s status does not truly change. They are not shunned by their Creole friends as Mary is. The narrator observes that “Jean and Mimi received invitations to dinner, to parties which did not include Mary” (29). Also, when the Creole restaurant owners apologetically eject the Daquins from their restaurants, they make it a point to mention that they do not object to Jean and Mimi’s presence, but rather to that of Mary, the “*femme de couleur*” (32). In Atlanta, however, Mary brings Mimi to the Fleur-de-Lis Club meeting, thereby introducing Mimi formally into a black social circle,

albeit one composed entirely of light-skinned women. She sympathizes early on with Mrs. Adams, who was also forced against her will to identify as black. The narrator recalls:

[Mimi] felt a deep warmth within her for this woman who, because she so avidly wanted the entertainment, the touch with the world of ideas, the stimulus that came from the plays which came to Atlanta, and which her race barred her from seeing respectably, made her run the risk of discovery. And to the same degree that she felt a yearning to touch, to smile at Mrs. Adams and thereby let her know that she sympathized with her, did Mimi detest with a burning intensity the pettiness and envy of her detractors. (49)

Just as Mimi thought it laughable that her own black ancestry could cause her problems in the United States, she thinks it unfair that the light-skinned Mrs. Adams should be treated as a second-class citizen due to her heritage. It should also be noted that like Mimi, Mrs. Adams' blackness was exposed to the manager of the theater against her will. The gossiping woman tells her companions that "some coloured person saw [Mrs. Adams] and went and told the manager" (49). Nonetheless, although Mimi does not identify wholly with the black race, she also does not consider herself white. She observes that "in her few contacts with white people she had felt a certain chill that she was not aware of when with her own people" (54). Much like Isaure, Mimi others both whiteness and blackness. The term "her own people" is used ambiguously here. It is unclear whether she is referring to the black race or to the Creole people of New Orleans; regardless, it is clear that she does not see herself as part of the white race. Therein lies one of the major differences between Mimi and Isaure. Whereas Isaure aspires to whiteness, or, in the words of Fanon, feels an impulse towards a sort of lactification, Mimi's ideal world is the New Orleans that she recalls, where "all people were hers, [where] only individuals mattered." However, just as Isaure is powerless to define herself as either white or black, Mimi is powerless to define herself as neither white nor black.

This powerlessness differentiates the Creole passing subject from her mulatta counterpart. Wald defines passing as an act of self definition, “a practice that emerges from subjects’ desires to control the terms of their racial definition, rather than be subject to the definitions of white supremacy” (6). For the Creole woman, however, passing is not an act of self-definition; indeed, it cannot be, because her self-definition as Creole (or, in Isaure’s case, as *métisse*) does not exist on the axis of the black/white binary that forms the basis of the very concept of racial passing. When the Creole subject defines herself as white or as black, then, it is not an act of self-definition, but rather an act of self-*re*definition. Ironically, this re-definition is couched in the very terms of the white supremacy that, in Wald’s view, is undermined by the act of racial passing. The black/white binary paved the way for the *Code noir*, the Jim Crow laws, and the “one-drop” rule, which provided the means for the segregation and subjugation of blacks and Creoles alike. On the other hand, for the authors of the *Éloge de la créolité*, the Creole identity is a liberating one, one that places the power of definition in the hands of the Creoles themselves. It is no mistake or coincidence that they use the reflexive pronoun “nous” in their declaration: “nous *nous* proclamons Créoles”²⁷ (13). It is Creoleness, not passing, that empowers the Creole. For Bernabé et al., Creoleness is “a sort of mental envelope in the middle of which [their] world will be built” (75), an environment in which to create a world where people are not divided by the race line, where, as Mimi says, only individuals matter.

The utopic vision of Creoleness is consistent with the views of Mae Street Kidd, who, like Mimi and Isaure, rejected the binary racial structures imposed by the white supremacy. She tells Hall about two black women who snubbed her one day because they thought that she was passing:

²⁷ “we declare *ourselves* Creoles” (75). My emphasis.

I believe they really thought I was trying to pass for white and that made them angry, and they intentionally snubbed me because they were darker than me. They didn't have the option they assumed I had. It's so very obvious that I'm so much whiter than I am black that I have to pretend to be black. But I can truly say I've never been ashamed of my mother's blood that made me legally a Negro . . . I remember an old movie from the fifties called *Imitation of Life*. It's about a young light-skinned woman named Sarah Jane, who rejects her black mother and passes for white. I cannot imagine doing a thing like that to my mother. I'm proud to be who she made me—a person of mixed blood who happens to be mostly white. When people ask me what I am, I say, "American." That's all I need to say. (177)

Like Mrs. Adams, Kidd is scorned by those who cannot pass for white as she can. Unlike Isaure, Mimi, and Mrs. Adams, however, Kidd neither desires nor attempts to pass for white, and moreover, she does not feel comfortable labeling herself as black either. Racially, she identifies as a "person of mixed blood," and she acknowledges both her black and white ancestry; indeed, like Jean, she is proud of her black ancestry. Given the choice, however, Kidd prefers to identify herself not in terms of race, but in terms of nationality. Much like the Creole identity of Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, Kidd's American identity comprises a variety of different racial backgrounds, and unlike the white, black, and *béké* identities from Isaure's Martinique and Mimi's Atlanta, it has no class implications. A heterogeneous collective identity such as Kidd's Americanness or the Creoleness of Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant is empowering for those who are marginalized when classified by race, class, or sex. Likewise, Audre Lorde finds strength in numbers. She observes in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" that

[c]ertainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them . . . [W]e do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives. We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance. (115-16)

By identifying as American rather than as white or black, or even as biracial, Kidd places herself in a group that is composed of many different races, ethnicities, religions, and social classes. In doing so, she renders herself unable to see either whites or blacks as entirely Other, which in turn enables her to accept both her own whiteness and her blackness. She thus avoids the internal conflict between whiteness and blackness that plagues Isaure and Mimi. Likewise, Creoleness, as a coherent hybrid identity, removes the race and class conflicts that existed under the *Code noir* in the French colonies and the one-drop rule and Jim Crow laws in the United States.

Although a Creole identity does exist in Isaure's Martinique, Creoleness does not truly exist there. In Martinique, in the 1940's, when *La négresse blanche* is set, the word Creole has both racial and class connotations; rather than referring to all locally-born people, regardless of race, it refers only to the *békés*, the upper-class, locally-born white population of Martinique. Du Taillant brings attention to the fact that Isaure is not a part of the Creole community when he tells her, "quand vous aurez gagné des millions avec votre bar, vous vous ferez construire une maison sur le plateau Didier et vous passerez pour une créole"²⁸ (44). Isaure sees the *békés* as Other, but she also recognizes the slim possibility of assuming a *béké* identity. However, even after she marries Pascal, she encounters resistance and hostility, both from her husband's *béké* family and from the black Martinicans. Isaure laments her plight: "Il fallait être ou blanc ou noir mais pas entre les deux comme Isaure et son fils. Elle avait enfin réussi à épouser un blanc, un béké goyave, mais elle n'était pas

²⁸ "when you have earned millions with your bar, you'll have a house built high in Didier and you'll pass for a Creole" (181).

devenue blanche pour cela et sa belle-famille le lui faisait cruellement sentir”²⁹ (154).

Isaure’s sister Ophelia explains to her why Pascal’s family refuses to accept Isaure: “Parce que tu as eu un enfant d’Emmanuel, parce que tu as tenu un bar à Fort-de-France, parce que tu as servi les gaullistes et surtout, évidemment, parce que tu as été la femme de Pascal qui a été tué par les noirs”³⁰ (162-63). Isaure’s son François is one obstacle to her attempt to become white. Although François’ father is white, a child traditionally follows the status of the mother, as ordained in the *Code noir*. François was raised as a member of the colored bourgeoisie, and furthermore, although his skin is lighter than Isaure’s, his frizzy hair betrays his blackness. For Pascal’s family to accept Isaure both as white and as Pascal’s wife, they would also have to accept François both as white and as Pascal’s stepson. Isaure’s economic status is another obstacle to her acceptance. Even if her in-laws could accept her as white, the fact that she owned a bar marks her as bourgeois, and therefore unfit to live with the *békés* in Didier. Finally, Pascal’s family blames Isaure for Pascal’s murder at the hands of the black workers on his plantation. Indeed, as a *métisse*, Isaure makes a perfect scapegoat. In times of racial tension, both blacks and whites direct a great deal of hostility towards people of mixed blood, for mulattoes represent a breach of the boundaries separating the two races. The *métis* body is itself a racial battleground, a space that houses two races in conflict. It is the unfortunate fate of the person of mixed blood to be othered by both blacks and whites. Isaure reflects that “[d]u temps de son enfance, alors que les blancs étaient tout-puissants, les sang mêlé étaient traités par eux comme des nègres. Maintenant qu’un racisme

²⁹ “It was better to be either white or black, not between the two, like Isaure and her son. She had managed to marry a white, a *béké* goyave, but for all that, she had not become white and her in-laws made her feel this keenly” (242).

³⁰ “Because you had a child by Emmanuel, because you kept a bar in Fort-de-France, because you served Gaullists and, above all, because you have been the wife of Pascal who was killed by blacks” (247).

contraire s'était développé, ils étaient aux yeux des noirs presque aussi impopulaires que les blancs"³¹ (153-54). The ultimate obstacle to Isaure's passing is the absence of an inclusive form of Creoleness in Martinique. Just as the Gaullists struggle with the Pétainists, the blacks and the whites in Martinique are engaged in a struggle for power, thus creating an environment of mutual distrust and of fear and scorn of the Other. Because the people of mixed blood do not belong entirely to one side or the other, they are othered by all and accepted by none.

While Mimi, unlike Isaure, is able to maintain a coherent hybrid Creole identity in New Orleans, she is not unable to do so in the non-Creole regions of the United States. As in the case of Isaure, racially-motivated violence is one of the reasons for Mimi's inability to maintain her Creoleness in Atlanta; indeed, it is a hate crime that first leads Mimi to explicitly identify herself as black. As she watches a mob of white men attack and kill a black man on Marietta Street in Atlanta, she suddenly finds herself very conscious of race, and she realizes that her father's warning was true; her black blood truly is a disadvantage in the United States. The narrator recalls: "To [Mimi] before that dread day, race had been a relative matter, something that did exist but of which one was not conscious except when it was impressed upon one. The death before her very eyes of that unknown man shook from her all the apathy of the past. There flashed through her mind in letters that seared her brain the words, 'I too am a Negro!'" (74). Whereas Isaure finds herself lost in the middle of racial strife, othered and hated by both blacks and whites, Mimi ceases to acknowledge her white blood. She firmly takes a side in the conflict; after the attacks of September, 1906, she treats whites as the enemy, and as such, she cannot maintain an identity that does not other

³¹ " Since her childhood days, when whites were all-powerful, they treated the mixed-bloods like blacks. Now that a reverse racism had developed, in the eyes of the blacks they were almost as unpopular as the whites" (242).

whiteness. Indeed, we learn that Mimi developed a sense of loathing towards the white race after witnessing the mob violence. The narrator tells the reader:

Mimi dated thereafter her consciousness of being colored from September, nineteen hundred and six. For her the old order had passed, she was now definitely of a race set apart. At times this created within her moods of introspection which ventured dangerously near the morbid. At other times it inculcated a deep and passionate scorn of those who were her own and her race's oppressors. She chuckled when she read or heard of or saw their imbecilities, their shortcomings. She looked with scorn on their provincialism, their stupidity, their ignorance. Conversely, she found herself magnifying the virtues, the excellencies of her own people and, at the same time, she tried to explain away through a process of subtle sophistry all their faults. (77)

In replacing her Creole identity with a black one, Mimi erases any traces of hybridity from her conception of race. She equates blackness with virtue and refuses to acknowledge any true faults therein; on the other hand, whiteness is equivalent to vice, and Mimi can find no good in the white race. Mimi does not, as Lorde advocates, "develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change" within her life; rather, she uses difference as a justification for hatred. Just as Mimi shies away from her own whiteness, favoring a "pure" black identity, she favors "pure" blackness in all of its forms. Her love of the Creole music of New Orleans, for example, gives way to a distinct preference for unadulterated black music. We are told that "[i]n New Orleans she had been stirred by the music which had a distinctive Negro note but which had been influenced to a definite extent by French songs that made it a sort of Africanized French. Here she felt much more vividly the rhythmic surge and sweep of the Negro music untouched by other influences . . ." (91). Indeed, from the moment when she declares herself a Negro, Mimi never re-adopts her Creole identity. The closest she comes to accepting her own hybridity is when she recants her hatred of whites. She tells her lover, Carl:

“Before I came to Atlanta I never thought much about ‘white people’ or ‘coloured people.’ I just thought of people as people. And then came that terrible night of the riot. After that I hated all white people and began to think every Negro was perfect even though my common sense told me I was foolish. Now I begin to see the good and the bad, in white people and coloured people—and that’s something.” (109)

Mimi seems to idealize her youthful view of race, where people were not marked by race, where Frenchness (or whiteness) and Africanness were not mutually exclusive. She admits that her unwavering confidence in black people and her resolute scorn for white people was foolish. Furthermore, her words, “and that’s something,” suggest that her regression towards Creoleness—her blurring of the line between white and black through her recognition of both good and evil in both whites and blacks—is in fact progress.

As is the case with Isaure, Mimi has a child who is both part of her motive for passing, as well as an obstacle to passing. During her poor days in Philadelphia, Mimi worries about her ability to feed and care for her son. The narrator informs the reader that “there came to [Mimi] periods of depression. Most frequently these occurred when she thought of [*Petit*] Jean’s future. Suppose her own health failed. She could not go on indefinitely this way, common sense told her, going without food, improperly clothed, saving nothing” (170-71). Shortly afterwards, though, after *Petit* Jean’s operation, Mimi realizes that she must part from him in order to provide for his needs. The narrator explains:

Though [Mimi] tried to keep the thought from her mind, she knew that she had come to the parting of the ways. I wonder I ever thought I could go through with it, she reflected. For my own sake I don’t care. But I’m not making enough money to keep up and I won’t be able to save anything at this rate for the future—for *Petit* Jean’s future, she amended. (178)

Mimi realizes that she cannot earn enough to provide for her own needs as well as for her son’s future, and, moreover, that “[t]here was little chance of her making any great progress in Philadelphia” (181). She decides to move to New York, and she writes to her Aunt

Sophie, who lived there. Aunt Sophie tells Mimi exactly the thing that she had feared:

“Alone you will have little trouble, especially if you come to New York. But with the baby it will be harder—you would have to be away all day—and people, even here, do talk. I know just how you feel about it, but why don’t you put Jean in a home until you can get on your feet?” (181). Just as Mimi needed to pass for a widow in Philadelphia in order to maintain a veneer of respectability,³² she would need to pass for childless in New York. In order to provide for Jean, she has to leave him behind and deny his existence. Moreover, in order to ensure that he will be well cared-for in her absence, she decides to pass for white. The narrator explains Mimi’s decision:

[Mimi] was unwilling to put [*Petit Jean*] in a Negro orphanage, for their all-too-slender resources made it problematical if he would receive the care and attention he needed. She would rather struggle along in her present hopeless way than have him neglected. Nor would she want to place him in a white orphanage as a Negro child—she knew the insults and slights that he would be forced to suffer. The only recourse left to her and the one she decided upon was to place him in a Catholic orphanage and say nothing about his Negro blood. This had been done, she knew, even with children not nearly so fair as Jean. His French name would be an additional safeguard to him and further assurance that he would be given all the advantages available. (182)

Petit Jean is first an impetus for Mimi to pass for widowed; secondly, he is an obstacle to her intention to pass for childless in New York. In order to remove this obstacle, she has Jean pass for white, which means that she, too, passes for white. It should be noted that once again, the Daquin family name separates the Daquins from the black community. However, whereas their Frenchness was reason for scorn in Atlanta’s black community, Mimi finds that it is to her advantage to have a foreign, and thus supposedly non-black, name. This was also the case when one of the Atlanta rioters happens upon Mimi and her father in the road during

³² “Mrs. Manning, with whom [Mimi] lived, had glanced significantly one day at her left hand as she sought gently to induce Mimi to talk. To avoid suspicion Mimi had gone to a pawnshop on South Street . . . She knew that the bearded Jew who sold her the ring had guessed her secret, her guilt had made her so nervous. She had taken the first one that fitted her finger . . .” (158).

the 1906 race riots. In his terror, Jean cries out in French, and his would-be attacker apologizes, telling Jean, “Scuse me, brother! I thought you were a nigger!” (75).

Much as François links Isaure to her black origins and the invented child draws her towards whiteness, *Petit Jean* serves as a link between Mimi’s past and her future. After Mimi leaves Jean and moves to New York, she misses her son terribly, and her longing for him links her to her painful past. The narrator recalls:

[h]er aunt . . . delicately drew from her the story of her unsuccessful struggle in Philadelphia against odds that proved too great for her. The one link with that nightmare of pain and worry and anxiety was her aching need of *Petit Jean* . . . Only the thought that some day soon she would be able to have him with her again comforted her, only the realization that she could not possibly make her way as fast toward that goal if he were with her restrained her from going back to Baltimore and taking him from the home. (188)

White expresses *Petit Jean*’s “linking” function more explicitly later on: “The one link to both [Mimi’s time in Atlanta and her time in Philadelphia] . . . was *Petit Jean*, and he served as a link and as the centre of all her hopes for the future” (197-98). Mimi’s longing for her absent child simultaneously pulls her back into her painful past in Philadelphia and forward to an unknown future where Mimi envisions an end to her struggles. However, unlike Isaure, who tended to conflate whiteness and ease, Mimi envisions her future in terms of family unity and economic security without the racial connotations that pervade Isaure’s attempts at social climbing. Passing is not her goal, but a means to achieve her goal. When Mimi tells her aunt of her intention to pass, she presents this decision as another means of overcoming the obstacles that separate her from her son: “I never thought I’d want to leave my own people,” Mimi tells Aunt Sophie. “I wouldn’t leave them now but they’ve driven me away . . . I’ll see you, of course, but I’m leaving Harlem, leaving coloured people for good. I’ll live my own life, make more money than I can here, I’ll be able sooner to have Jean with me,

and—well, there’s no other way out . . . [White’s ellipsis]” (207-8). Isaure laments her curse of hybridity, but Mimi reluctantly takes advantage of her own liminality, moving between the black world and the white world as her needs dictate.

Indeed, Mimi is not devoid of affection for the French culture that comprises a significant portion of her heritage. After she becomes second-in-command at Madame Francine’s, she takes *Petit Jean* out of the orphanage in Baltimore and places him in the care of a “kindly French family” (239) in Westchester County, which suggests an affinity for those who share her Gallic roots. Furthermore, when Mimi feels isolated and overburdened, she consoles herself by wandering in the various ethnic neighborhoods of New York. As she wanders through the Spanish, Turkish, Romanian, and Sicilian quarters, she feels a connection with “these people, who, if for no other reason than that they, like her own race, had known bitter persecution, appealed to her with colour and romance and kindred emotions” (238). “But,” the narrator adds:

most of all she loved the lightness and gaiety of the streets where the French lived, to listen to their gay love-making and the delicately beautiful songs which flowed forth as naturally as did the speech which she knew and loved. She sat in cafés and lazily watched men and women playing bezique at the small tables as they sipped greenish drinks from tall glasses . . . All, all these Mimi loved, not alone because in these varied scenes she could forget her own perplexities, but because they were lovable and exotic and charming in themselves . . . [White’s ellipsis] (239)

Of all of the peoples in New York, the French are the most alluring to Mimi, both because of their familiarity and their exotic nature. She knows and loves their language, and she appreciates their natural musical ability. The use of the word “natural” suggests that the French New Yorkers possess some kind of essential Frenchness, but in spite of her own French ancestry, Mimi still finds them exotic. She simultaneously identifies and disidentifies with Frenchness, much as she found herself in the paradoxical position of being both an

insider and an outsider in Atlanta's black community. In spite of her liminal racial/ethnic/national status, however, Mimi continues to think of herself as black above all.

The narrator explains:

Though she denied it to herself, sometimes with a trace of bitterness that her own people had forced her to live a life of duplicity and deceit, nevertheless, she felt frequently a yearning for contact with her own people, for whom she had the same passionate love of the days following the riot in Atlanta despite all she had suffered at their hands.

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 colorfulness 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 most cordial. (241)

Although she resents the black people who sent her into exile, Mimi longs for the black community, where she felt a vivacity that was not inherent to her white community in New York. Although the language of the phrase "the warm colorfulness of a life among her own" suggests that Mimi senses an essential blackness within herself, there seems to be an element of choice to her reluctance to associate with whites, for the reader is told that Mimi could have made friends among her white associates had she chosen to. Nonetheless, Mimi's innate aversion to whiteness, embodied in the chill that she feels when whites attempt to socialize with her, ultimately excludes her from the white community of New York.

Ultimately, Mimi decides that it is impossible to straddle the two worlds of whiteness and blackness, and the call of blackness is the more powerful of the two. As she sits in Carnegie Hall listening to a black singer, she feels an overwhelming affinity for the black race. The narrator recounts Mimi's thoughts:

To her sitting there in the semi-darkness came a vision of her own people which made her blood run fast. Whatever other faults they might possess, her own people had not been deadened and dehumanized by bitter hatred of their fellow men. The venom born of oppression practiced upon others weaker than themselves had not entered their souls. These songs were of peace and hope and faith, and in them she

felt and knew the peace which so long she had been seeking and which so long had eluded her grasp. (299)

The repeated use of the words “her own people” reinforces the essentialist bond that Mimi had developed with the black people following the Atlanta race riots. However, in 1906 Mimi’s black identity would have been couched in terms of absence and opposition, that is, she constructed her identity in terms of what she was not: she was not white, and she did not possess the faults of the white race. In her seat in Carnegie Hall, she thinks of her race in positive terms, in terms of “peace and hope and faith,” and this epiphany removes the negativity that pervaded her ideas of race. Mimi discovers freedom for the first time since leaving New Orleans, and this freedom allows her to leave her white husband and her white social milieu and return to “*Petit Jean*—[her] own people—and happiness!” (300).

Insofar as Mimi’s conception of race differs in many ways Isaure’s, it colors her relations with her husband and child in a very different way than Isaure’s construction of race colors her relationship with her own husband and child. For Isaure, marriage to Pascal initially seems to be a way to become white. Afterwards, however, she discovers that this is not the case. The narrator explains Isaure’s conundrum: “Elle avait enfin réussi à épouser un blanc, un béké goyave, mais elle n’était pas devenue blanche pour cela et sa belle-famille le lui faisait cruellement sentir”³³ (154). The wording of this passage suggests a burning desire, even a desperation, to marry a white man—Fanon’s “lactification” impulse—and for Isaure the purpose of this marriage was to become white. Mimi, on the other hand, marries Jimmie Forrester reluctantly, fearing that he might discover her secret. From the very beginning, she discourages him from getting to know her better. After Jimmie first expresses his love for her, Mimi rebuffs him, saying “Don’t be foolish. You have seen me twice. You know

³³ “She had managed to marry a white, a béké goyave, but for all that, she had not become white and her in-laws made her feel this keenly” (242).

nothing whatsoever about me other than that I work for my living at Francine's. I might be an adventuress—" (252). In this response, Mimi both discourages Jimmie from learning more about her and hints that she has a secret that she would like to keep secret. Mimi does have feelings for Jimmie, but she worries that she would "live in constant terror all [her] life, fearing that he would find out about Jean, about [her] race" (252). Both Mimi and Isaure marry white men as a part of their attempts to pass, but the men do not play the same role for the two women. Pascal knows about Isaure's ancestry; Isaure has nothing to hide from him in that respect. However, marrying him is one of the primary avenues to whiteness for Isaure; Pascal is her point of entry into the *béké* community. Mimi, on the other hand, has firmly established her place in New York's white community by the time she marries Jimmie. The marriage does not grant her entry to the white community; rather, it only provides her a means by which to gain social contacts amongst Jimmie's friends and associates. Indeed, if anything, Jimmie is a threat to Mimi's passing; by marrying Jimmie, Mimi ends her solitary existence and develops ties closer than the business relationships that comprised all of her ties with the white community before her marriage. If Jimmie or any of his associates discovered her secret, it would be the end of her life as a white woman. Isaure's marriage empowers her to a slight degree, while Mimi's marriage makes her vulnerable.

Furthermore, for each woman, children are a link to racial identity. For Mimi, *Petit Jean* is an emblem of blackness, of "her people." When Mimi decides to move to New York, her aunt reminds her of the difficulty that *Petit Jean* would cause her: "Alone you will have little trouble, especially if you come to New York. But with the baby it will be harder—you would have to be away all day—and people, even here, do talk. I know just how you feel

about it, but why don't you put Jean in a home until you can get on your feet?" (181). As Mimi discovered in Philadelphia, *Petit Jean's* presence raised questions about her marital status. To bring him to New York with her would open her to scrutiny and, therefore, to the risk that her past sexual indiscretion will be discovered. After Mimi begins to pass for white, she has even more motivation to hide her past, for fear that she will be exposed as black. Thus, even after she becomes prosperous, Mimi places *Petit Jean* with the "kindly French family" (239) in Westchester County rather than bringing him to live with her. Conversely, when Mimi decides to stop passing, her first thought is not of returning to the black community, but rather of "*Petit Jean*," then of "[her] own people—and happiness!" (300). Mimi's thoughts seem to follow a logical progression: *Petit Jean* is the means by which she will return to her own people, and among her own people, she will rediscover happiness.

Isaure has a more complicated relationship with children, both with her real child, François, and with the imaginary child that she invents in order to manipulate Mme. Guymet, Pascal's mother. François is her child by Daniel, a white man, but she sees in him both black traits that he inherited from her, such as his frizzy hair, and white traits, particularly his fair skin, inherited from Daniel. Although François links Isaure to the white world via Daniel, he is visibly hybrid and, thus, under the *Code noir*, he is firmly rooted in the black world. Nonetheless, in the beginning of the novel, she hopes that he can some day enter into *béké* society. François, then, both irrevocably ties Isaure to blackness and offers the fleeting hope of whiteness. After Pascal's death, aware of the conflict that can be caused by a *métis* child, Isaure avenges her rejection by her in-laws by telling her mother-in-law that she is pregnant with Pascal's child. Explaining why she has decided to leave Martinique, she tells Mme. Guymet:

—Je ne veux pas, déclara Isaure, que mon enfant naisse dans cette île.
 Elle vit nettement tressaillir la vieille dame et elle en éprouva de la joie.
 —Comment ? Votre enfant ?
 —Eh bien oui, je suppose qu’il n’est pas seulement celui de Pascal ?
 —Celui de Pascal ? répéta la vieille, hébétée.
 —Pascal ne vous avait pas dit que nous attendions un enfant ?
 —Mais . . . vous n’étiez pas mariés que depuis . . .
 —Qu’est-ce que cela prouve ? fit cruellement Isaure qui ajouta : Pascal m’avait épousé pour cela, parce qu’il était un honnête homme. Vraiment, vous ne le saviez pas ?

Ah ! Quel plaisir Isaure prenait à mentir ! C’était une vengeance de noir, cela, une vengeance du temps où les noirs n’avaient que ces armes un peu basses, le mensonge, la ruse, pour lutter contre la force et l’intelligence des blancs. Devant cette créole qui était sa belle-mère, quoi qu’elle fît, quoi qu’elle dît, elle s’affirmait une négresse.³⁴
 (168-9)

Here Isaure uses the imaginary child not to draw herself towards whiteness, but to perturb Mme. Guymet by drawing her towards blackness. Isaure reminds her mother-in-law that Pascal’s child is also Isaure’s, that Mme. Guymet’s grandchild will have “black blood.” Unlike François, who divided Isaure between whiteness and blackness, this nonexistent child, born of Isaure’s lie, affirms Isaure’s blackness. Métissage becomes a weapon that Isaure can use to punish the in-laws who rejected her and her son because of their hybridity. In a final ironic twist of fate, it is through this fictitious child that Isaure is temporarily able to pass into whiteness. As Mme. Guymet attempts to convince Isaure to stay in Martinique so as not to separate Pascal’s family from his child, Isaure declares her blackness, but Mme. Guymet

³⁴ “I don’t want my child to be born on this island,” Isaure declared. She clearly saw the old lady wince, and she took joy in this.
 “What? Your child?”
 “Well, yes, I suppose he’s not only Pascal’s.”
 “Pascal’s?” the old lady replied, dumbfounded.
 “Pascal didn’t tell you we were expecting a child?”
 “But . . . you’ve only been married since . . .”
 “What does that prove?” Isaure asked cruelly, adding, “That’s why Pascal married me, because he was an honest man. Really, you didn’t know?”

Ah, what pleasure Isaure took in lying! This was a black vengeance, a vengeance from the times when blacks had only these crude weapons, the lie, the ruse, to fight against the strength and intelligence of the whites. Before this Creole who had been her mother-in-law, in whatever she did, in whatever she said, she affirmed herself as a Negress. (my translation, based on that of Clark, p. 250)

replies, “Mais non cela n’est pas vrai, votre peau est presque aussi blanche que la mienne”³⁵ (185). In order to prevent her bloodline from being contaminated, Mme. Guymet is willing to grant Isaure the right to consider herself white, but by this time, Isaure has decided to reject her liminal status and live her life as a Negress, albeit “une négresse blanche” (185).

Both Mimi and Isaure struggle with their liminal identities, and both eventually reject both liminality and whiteness in favor of blackness, but they reach this end through very different routes. Isaure aspires towards whiteness from the beginning of the novel; she has relationships only with white men, she attempts to speak like a *béké*, and she straightens her hair in order to look more white. Because the Martinican construction of race is a somewhat fluid hierarchy rather than a strict binary, Isaure initially sees race as something that is not static, and whiteness is something that she aspires to achieve through changes in behavior, appearance, and economic status. Mimi, on the other hand, is not even aware that she is not white until shortly before she leaves New Orleans. She is aware of her black ancestry, but, like most people in New Orleans during the time of the novel, she does not subscribe to a strict racial binary. Also, because her family, unlike Isaure, is well-off and well-established in New Orleans Creole society, Mimi has no real need or desire to change her social standing. Mimi lives in a society where Creoles of mixed blood are the norm—indeed, they are the dominant class—but Isaure lives in a society where the ruling class pretends to be of pure white blood and where those who have black ancestry are generally, but not universally, excluded from positions of social dominance. When Mimi does begin to pass, though, she does so in the U.S., where even the slightest trace of black ancestry marked a person as black. Whereas Isaure is able to at least make headway into *béké* society in spite of the fact that she is known to have black ancestry, Mimi cannot pass without hiding her heritage.

³⁵ “But that’s not true. Your skin is almost as white as mine” (258).

Moreover, whereas Isaure attempts to pass on a permanent basis, Mimi passes out of necessity, and while she is passing, she feels a constant pull towards her child and the black community that she has left behind. Both women attempt to pass for financial gain as well as to raise their social standing, but for Mimi, passing is a means to an end, while for Isaure, passing is the end in and of itself. Lastly, Mimi stops passing because she cannot tolerate the hypocrisy and bigotry of the white society into which she passed and because she cannot bear to be separated from her son and from the black people with whom she feels a sense of belonging that she does not feel amongst white society. Isaure also develops a resentment towards her white in-laws, which does lead her to embrace blackness, but she also is forced to give up her attempts to pass because, unlike Mimi, Isaure is not able to truly attain equal status with the white *békés*.

Chapter 5

Ovwè tè kréyòl/Goodbye, Creole Land

Due to the central role that place plays in the formation of the Creole identity, the Creole subject's psychical migration of passing is often accompanied by a physical migration. Indeed, most passing narratives include an element of physical migration; as Samira Kawash notes in Dislocating the Color Line, "The coincidence of the thematics of geographic mobility and race passing is not accidental. Practically, if one is to pass, one must go somewhere else, where one's identity is unknown" (139). Ginsberg elaborates on the problem of passing and migration in the introduction to Passing and the Fictions of Identity. She observes:

As the term metaphorically implies, [the passing subject] crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary—indeed *trespassed*—to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other. Enabled by a physical appearance emphasizing "white" features, this metaphysical passing necessarily involved geographical movement as well; the individual had to leave an environment where his or her "true identity"—that is, parentage, legal status, and the like—was known to a place where it was unknown. (3)

The act of passing is one of trespass, in which the passing subject enters a social space to which she does not legally have access. Unlike most crimes, which are often followed by a speedy getaway, the "crime" of passing cannot take place until after the passing subject's flight; indeed, the passing subject flees *toward* the scene of the "crime." Furthermore, the act of passing is a psychical migration as much as it is a physical migration. Carol Boyce-Davies explains in Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject (1994):

“The re-negotiating of identities is fundamental to migration . . . It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates [black women’s] identities” (3). Just as a traveler encounters numerous cultures as she traverses the land, the passing subject encounters multiple identities as she negotiates her identity in terms of race, nationality, and social class. The act of passing is a *mise en abîme*, a psychological journey embedded within a physical one, each of which feeds off of and feeds into the other. The passing subject’s desire to adopt a new identity necessitates a physical journey, and the encounters with new locales, cultures, and peoples draws attention to the complexity of the passing subject’s cultural make-up, for, if she is a successful passer, she negotiates each new place and each new identity with the skill of a native.

The Creole passing subject, however, requires a more specific type of migration than the mulatto passing subject. Specifically, the Creole passing subject must not only migrate to a place where her racial identity is not known; she must migrate to a place where the Creole identity itself is not recognized. Just as the mulatto passing subject undergoes a psychological migration (from a black identity to a white one) at the same time as her physical migration, the Creole passing subject’s physical migration coincides with a migration from a heterogeneous racial identity to a racial identity, either black or white, that is rooted in a binary construction of race. The migration from Creole space to non-Creole space can be described in terms of what Édouard Glissant calls “atavistic cultures” and “composite cultures.” He describes these two types of cultures in his book, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*:

Cette perception de ce qui se passe dans le monde [le processus de créolisation] repose sur la définition . . . entre deux formes génériques de cultures. Des formes de cultures que j’appellerai ataviques, dont la créolisation s’est opérée il y a très longtemps . . . et des formes de cultures que j’appellerai composites, dont la

créolisation se fait pratiquement sous nos yeux. Les pays de la Caraïbe . . . font partie de ces cultures composites. On s'aperçoit que les cultures composites tendent à devenir ataviques, c'est-à-dire à prétendre à une sorte de perdurabilité, d'honorabilité du temps qui semblerait nécessaire à toute culture pour qu'elle soit sûre d'elle-même et pour qu'elle ait l'audace de s'affirmer. Les cultures ataviques tendent à se créoliser, c'est-à-dire à remettre en question . . . le statut de l'identité comme racine unique.³⁶ (22-3)

In order to pass, the passing subject must leave a composite culture and place herself within the context of an atavistic culture, where she can ignore her hybridity and pretend, as is typical of atavistic societies, to possess some sort of racial purity, the “racine unique” to which Glissant refers. As Glissant notes, the path that the Creole passing subject takes, moving from a dynamic hybrid identity to a static one, is the same path that all composite cultures take. Through her mimicry of the process of cultural re-invention, the Creole passing subject can be read as representative of her native land and its culture, thereby reinforcing the strong ties between place and identity.

Isaure feels the link between Martinique and her Creole identity all too keenly. While she lives in Martinique, she finds herself in an uncomfortable position of liminality, no matter where she lives or what social position she occupies. She vacillates in her racial identity, but she always finds herself an outsider. She looks down on dark-skinned Martinicans like Blanchard, but she sees herself as unworthy to attend a ball at the Lido, and after her marriage to Pascal, she finds herself despised by both her in-laws and the black plantation workers. Isaure's body, like her homeland, is what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a borderland. Anzaldúa explains:

³⁶ This perception of what is happening in the world [the process of creolization] depends upon the definition . . . of two different generic forms of cultures: the forms of culture which I call atavistic, in which creolization has taken place long ago . . . and the forms of culture that I will call composite, in which creolization is taking place practically before our eyes. The countries of the Caribbean . . . are part of these composite cultures. It seems that composite cultures tend to become atavistic, that is, to claim a sort of perdurability, of honor earned through time, which would seem necessary for every culture in order to be sure enough of itself and to have the audacity to affirm itself. Atavistic cultures tend to creolize, that is, to question . . . the status of identity as stemming from a common root. (My translation)

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book [Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza] is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

. . . It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. (19)

Just as Martinique is a place where white French landowners coexist with descendants of African, Chinese, and Indian slaves, Isaure's body is a meeting-place of cultures, and, as Anzaldúa points out, the borderland is not a comfortable place to dwell. Throughout the course of the novel, Isaure attempts to escape the borderland of her body, primarily by attempting to achieve a state in which she is not marked as black, or through "lactification," as Fanon calls it. By the end of the novel, however, Isaure gives up her quest as futile. The narrator shares Isaure's thoughts: "Il fallait être ou blanc ou noir mais pas entre les deux comme Isaure et son fils. Elle avait enfin réussi à épouser un blanc, un béké goyave, mais elle n'était pas devenue blanche pour cela et sa belle-famille le lui faisait cruellement sentir"³⁷ (154). Because she is unable to escape the psychical borderland of her body while dwelling in the physical borderland of Martinique, Isaure comes to the decision that she must leave her homeland. She thinks to herself: "Elle partirait, c'était décidé. Mais trouverait-elle un pays où échapper enfin à la malédiction de n'être ni noire ni blanche?"³⁸ (179). Her complaint implicitly blames the land of Martinique for her plight. In order to escape her liminality, Isaure must find a place where she is permitted to take on a racial identity that

³⁷ "It was better to be either white or black, not between the two, like Isaure and her son. She had managed to marry a white, a béké goyave, but for all that, she had not become white and her in-laws made her feel this keenly" (242).

³⁸ "She would leave, that was certain. But would she find a country where she could finally escape the curse of being neither black nor white?" (255).

falls on one of the poles of the black-white binary. By the time she decides to leave the island, Isaure has essentially decided that she is unable to become white, and she simply wants to find a place where she can be black. When she tells the lie that serves as her pretext for fleeing Martinique, “elle s’affirmait une négresse”³⁹ (169). When Mme. Guymet returns to try to convince Isaure to stay in Martinique, she reminds her mother-in-law in no uncertain terms that she is black. Mme. Guymet pleads with Isaure:

—Pour l’amour de Pascal, restez avec nous. Pour l’amour de cet enfant qui portera son nom, le nom de mon mari.

—Je suis une négresse.

—Mais non cela n’est pas vrai, votre peau est presque aussi blanche que la mienne.

—Une négresse blanche, si vous voulez, une négresse quand même . . . Mes ancêtres étaient des esclaves. Et maintenant si nous ne sommes plus des esclaves, nous sommes des lépreux . . . Et puis j’ai tenu un bar, j’ai eu des amants, j’ai eu un enfant qui n’est pas de Pascal . . .⁴⁰ (185)

As with du Taillant, Isaure insists upon her blackness even after a white person—in this case, Mme. Guymet—insists that Isaure is white. This time is different, however. This time, rather than insisting upon her blackness as a means of denying her whiteness, she does so as a means of denying her *métissage*. In the beginning of the story, Isaure vacillated between blackness and whiteness, never settling on either pole and never adopting a hybrid identity. By the time she has decided to leave Martinique, however, she has realized that she is, as far as her Martinican compatriots are concerned, at the same time both black and white, but she does not fully belong to either race, and it is against this hybridity that she rebels when she declares herself a Negress. When Mme. Guymet tries to point out the inconsistency between

³⁹ “She affirmed herself as a Negress” (my translation).

⁴⁰ “For the love of Pascal, stay with us. For the love of this child who will bear his name, the name of my husband.”

“I am a Negress.”

“But that’s not true. Your skin is almost as white as mine.”

“A white Negress, if you wish, but a Negress all the same. My ancestors were slaves, and now that we’re no longer slaves, we are lepers. And also, I have kept a bar, had lovers, had a child who’s not Pascal’s . . .” (258).

Isaure's self-identification and her skin color, Isaure explicitly rejects hybridity by classifying a white Negress as "a Negress all the same." Also implicit in Isaure's declaration of blackness is a declaration of the imaginary child's blackness. Isaure invokes the memory of her slave ancestors, and Mme. Guymet, as one of the hypothetical child's ancestors, cannot help but note that the child links the Guymet bloodline to a black one. The Guymet name, then, which Mme. Guymet so eagerly attached to her nonexistent grandchild, would become a black name, under Isaure's new standards, which bear a strong resemblance to the American "one-drop" rule. Rather than "lactifying" the black race, Isaure attempts to exact her revenge upon her white in-laws by blackening their race.⁴¹ Unfortunately for Isaure, her plot would fail as soon as it was revealed that she was not, in fact, carrying Pascal's "black" baby. Her false pregnancy, then, is yet another reason why she must leave Martinique. If she remains and her lie is revealed, she will not only face the scorn of her in-laws and possibly the entire *béké* community, but her failure to subvert the oppressive racial structure of Martinique will be revealed, and Isaure will once again be condemned to the uncomfortable borderland of *métissage*.

Whereas Isaure's sole migration takes place after the end of the novel, Mimi undergoes several migrations, each accompanied by a shift in identity. Indeed, she sees each episode of her life—each home, as well as each identity— as a room. Each identity is a discrete, finite location, separated from the other rooms by a closed door, or a separate book that Mimi can open only when she has closed the previous one. The first home that Mimi leaves is her

⁴¹ It should be noted that Capécia includes an anecdote in *Je suis martiniquaise* in which the narrator attempts to blacken her white classmates by throwing black ink on them. This, too, is a means of avenging racial injustice. Mayotte recalls: "Dans tous les cas, je ne me laissais pas insulter. Lorsqu'un enfant m'avait manqué de respect, en me traitant de négriillon, par exemple, je sortais mon encrier du pupitre et lui flanquais une douche sur la tête. C'était ma façon de transformer les blancs en noirs" (9). ["In any case, when a classmate failed to respect me—treating me like a little 'nigger,' for instance—I took out my inkwell and threw it, showering his head. This was my way of changing whites into blacks" (30).]

birthplace, New Orleans. Even before she and her family leave, Mimi knows that when she does leave, it will be for good. One day, while Jean laments the changes that are taking place in his beloved city, he tells Mimi that “[i]t can’t be worse in Atlanta” and “[t]hen . . . Mimi [knew] that they would some day soon leave New Orleans never to return” (33). Little does she know that when she leaves New Orleans, she will also leave her Creole self behind.

The first stop on Mimi’s journey is Atlanta, where she is thrust into that city’s upper-class black society. In Atlanta, racial identity is subject to the one-drop rule, and moreover, Mimi is clearly marked as black due to her stepmother’s skin color, which, although light, is still clearly not white. However, the Daquins find themselves among the upper crust of Atlanta’s black community due to the lightness of their skin, and Mimi is quickly introduced to the Fleur-de-Lis Club, where she mingles with other women, none of whom are “darker than a light brown, their complexions varying from that shade to one indistinguishable from white” (48). Mimi’s migration to Atlanta is thus accompanied by a psychological migration from Creoleness to blackness. However, Mimi does not stay in Atlanta long. After she reveals that she is pregnant with Carl Hunter’s baby, she realizes that if she stays in Atlanta, she must either marry Carl, whom she despises for suggesting that she abort the baby, or she must face the scorn of the entire community. As Mimi listens to her stepmother’s rant, she realizes that “there was much right in what [Mrs. Daquin] said. [Mimi] would be condemned, her name derided. She knew that she could not remain in Atlanta. Even if she could, the looks of disdain, the insults, would be unbearable” (152-3). As she rides the train to Philadelphia, Mimi “stared at the darkening landscape long after the lights in the car were turned on, and wondered what was written on the pages of that second book whose cover she was now lifting . . .” [White’s ellipsis] (154). Each episode of Mimi’s life is a separate story,

separated by the covers of a book. The physical segregation provided by the covers of these metaphorical books emphasizes the link between each episode of Mimi's life with a distinct, separate physical location. Moreover, the finality of the act of closing the cover of a book mirrors the finality of Mimi's flight; she cannot return to her old neighborhood in Atlanta without reassuming the identity that had been imposed upon her there, that of a young black woman with a scandalous past.

Although she does not pass for white in Philadelphia, Mimi does buy a wedding ring in order to pass as a widow and thus attain an air of respectability, as well as to deflect questions about *Petit Jean*. Mimi takes advantage of her new surroundings to create a new identity. The wedding ring, like the book cover, separates the Philadelphia Mimi, the poor, respectable widow, from the Atlanta Mimi, the upper-class woman impregnated by the roguish Carl Hunter.

Dissatisfied with her life in Philadelphia, Mimi decides to move to New York and live with her Aunt Sophie, in hopes that she could earn a better living and provide for her son's future. There, Aunt Sophie tells her, she will need to pass as childless by putting *Petit Jean* in an orphanage. In order to provide for Jean, she must leave him behind and deny his existence. Moreover, in order to ensure that he will be well cared-for in her absence, Mimi decides to briefly pass for white. She takes him to a white Catholic orphanage and says nothing about Jean's (or her) black ancestry. After leaving *Petit Jean* in the orphanage in Baltimore, Mimi goes to Harlem, where she resumes her black identity for a brief time while she lives with her Aunt Sophie. However, by leaving *Petit Jean* behind, she separates herself from another part of her past and of her identity. As Mimi shifts her location from Philadelphia to Harlem, her identity shifts from that of a widowed mother to that of a

childless young woman. Once again, as she rides the train to her new home, Mimi feels as if she is closing the cover of yet another book. The narrator tells us that “[j]ust as she had had the feeling upon leaving Atlanta that she had closed the pages of a volume in the story of her life, so now did Mimi sense intuitively that the second book was being shut, never to be opened again” (184). Mrs. Plummer, the eternal thorn in Mimi’s side, also recognizes Mimi’s strategy of migration and revision of identity. When she espies Mimi at a ball in Harlem, Mrs. Plummer asks her cousin, “Who is that girl with the green dress and red hair—I mean what name does she go by here?” (202). Mrs. Plummer recognizes both Mimi’s need and her ability to re-create her identity as she moves from place to place.

Mrs. Plummer also turns out to be the reason for Mimi’s next migration. When Mrs. Plummer tells her cousin about Mimi’s past, the news travels fast, and Mimi quickly earns the scorn of her peers. Once again, Mimi decides to flee, but this time, she does not flee New York City; she simply flees Harlem for a white neighborhood. Nonetheless, when Mimi tells her Aunt Sophie of her decision to pass, she uses language that evokes images of flight or of escape. She says:

I never thought I’d want to leave my own people. I wouldn’t leave them now but they’ve driven me away—driven me to the point where I’ve either got to drop out of sight where I won’t be hounded again or else I’ll do something terrible. If that girl can pass I think I can too. My name is French, I can speak French—at least well enough to feel anybody who isn’t French—I can sew, and they’ll never think me anything else but French. I’ll see you, of course, but I’m leaving Harlem, leaving coloured people for good. I’ll live my own life, make more money than I can here, I’ll be able sooner to have Jean with me, and—well, there’s no other way out . . .
[White’s ellipsis] (207-8)

Mimi speaks of being “driven away” from “her own people,” and the only way to escape her shame is to disappear. The parallel construction of the phrase “I’m leaving Harlem, leaving coloured people for good” suggests that leaving Harlem and leaving black people are one and

the same, as if the physical location of Harlem were an avatar of blackness. Moreover, Mimi tells her aunt that one of her motives for passing is to be able to “make more money than [she] can here [in Harlem].” It is not simply her new white identity that will help her earn more money; she will also benefit from the affluence of her new white milieu.

After Mimi decides to pass, she once again sees her transition in terms of a book closing, but this time, she also compares her transition to the act of walking from one room to another in a railroad flat. The narrator recounts Mimi’s thoughts:

Again Mimi had the feeling she was closing a book in her life and opening a new one. Just like a novel by Rolland, she thought. Or, better, her life to her was like one of those Harlem apartments of seemingly interminable length, with no hall and with each room opening into the next one. Railroad flats, she had heard them called. She felt she was always opening the door of another room, passing through it, then opening and closing behind her, never to be reopened, the door of the next cubicle. Those years of childhood in New Orleans had been the first one, happy and carefree years she was more content than ever afterwards. The next had been Atlanta, then Philadelphia, then Harlem. Four separate lives, and here was a new one opening before her. (209)

The concrete space of the railroad flat, more so than the metaphorical space of the book, illustrates the division of Mimi’s life into discrete segments, each associated with a distinct space. Mimi sees her past in terms of four separate lives, each one lived in a different city, with no overlap whatsoever.

When Mimi decides to stop passing at the end of the novel, she closes behind her not only a metaphorical door, but a physical one as well. However, this door does not close until after Mimi sees a series of open doors in her mind, doors that open her eyes to the history of her African-American ancestry. As Mimi sits in Carnegie Hall listening to a black singer performing “Nobody Knows de Trouble I See,” “the music served as magic metal keys which opened before her eyes mystic rooms, some of them long closed, some of them never opened for her before, all of them musty through long dark days and longer nights of disuse”

(297). In these “mystic rooms,” Mimi sees white invaders seizing Africans for sale in the New World, a slave ship en route to the Americas, black slaves picking cotton in the fields, and various other scenes, all accompanied by “these same weirdly sweet notes which now were being voiced by the slender dark figure on the platform yonder” (299). Throughout her life, Mimi has compartmentalized her life within closed books and behind closed doors; this is the first time that she sees open doors, and through these doors, she sees her African and African-American roots, and it is in these roots that she sees her future. Rather than running away from her past, Mimi realizes that she must embrace it and return to “her own people,” but in order to do that, she must close one more door behind her: the door to the house that she shares with her white husband, Jimmie. The morning following the concert at Carnegie Hall,

A brilliant but cold sun was creeping over the housetops out of the East as [Mimi] softly closed the door behind her and stood upon the topmost step. Another book in her life was being closed with the shutting of the door . . .

“Free! Free! Free!” she whispered exultantly as with firm tread she went down the steps. “*Petit Jean*—my own people—and happiness!” . . . (300)

It is notable that, whereas Mimi had heretofore compartmentalized her life into closed spaces, her story ends with her entering an open space. This is significant because, in closing the door behind her, Mimi once again shuts herself off from her past, but this time she does so in a different context than before. All of Mimi’s previous flights were flights away from her past and “her people.” This time, Mimi is fleeing towards her people and towards *Petit Jean*, who is the physical manifestation of her scandalous past, the product of her illicit liaison with Carl. By closing the door behind her, then, she does not deny her past altogether; she simply refuses to let it define her or to chase her away. Up to this point, Mimi has made psychical migrations from one metaphorical closed room to another, the doors to

each of which confined her to a specific identity, be it real or contrived. Throughout her life, Mimi's surroundings have dictated her identity: in the Creole milieu of New Orleans, she was labeled as Creole; when she entered Atlanta's black society with her stepmother, she was marked as black; in Philadelphia she was forced to adopt the identity of a widow so as to deflect questions about her past, and so on. Even when she decides to pass for white, she does so in order to escape her scandalous past and to provide for her son. When she closes the door behind her at the end of the novel, however, she takes her identity and her destiny in her own hands. She leaves Jimmie and the white milieu of New York not because of poverty or scandal, but rather out of a desire to be reunited with her people and her son.

Both Mimi and Isaure's attempts to pass result in failure—that is, failure to pass as white, or failure to achieve a state in which they are no longer marked as Other by the dominant white societies in which they lived. For Edward Said, the women's failure to pass could be construed not as a failure on the part of the attempted passers, but rather as a failure on the part of modernity to allow Mimi and Isaure to find their "true home," an identity in which the women feel comfortable, and one that is not marked by alienation. In his essay, "Reflections on Exile," Said describes the modern period as "the age of anxiety and estrangement," adding that "[m]odern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees" (357). Just as Davies juxtaposes physical and psychical migrations in her concept of migratory subjectivities, Said links physical exile with psychical exile. Exile, for Said, is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (357). Likewise, Delia Caparoso Konzett suggests that homelessness is a defining characteristic of modernism. In her book, Ethnic Modernisms, she describes the modern era as one "in which migration and displacement . . . redefine the term 'home' in a new variation

of being at home in permanent homelessness” (3). Moreover, she notes, “[t]he anxieties centered around dislocation and ethnic contamination . . . are tangible in almost every aspect of America’s modern culture” (4). Mimi leads her entire adult life in exile, away from her hometown of New Orleans. Her departure from New Orleans marks the beginning of not only a physical exile, but also of a psychological one, an exile that has Mimi constantly searching for her home and her people. Isaure, on the other hand, feels that she is an outsider on her native island of Martinique, amongst whites, blacks and *békés* alike, and thus feels that she must undertake a physical exile in order to escape the alienation of Martinique’s Creole social structure. It is important to note here that the stories of Mimi and Isaure’s exile are situated not only within specific spaces, but also within specific times. In La négresse blanche, Capécia repeatedly makes allusions to World War II and the Vichy régime. Likewise, White repeatedly makes references to famous events, such as the Atlanta Race riots of 1906, as well as World War I. Moreover, one of the reasons for Jean’s decision to leave New Orleans was the “changes in the Creole quarter.” The narrator enumerates these changes:

The old families were dying off, poverty was forcing others to sell their homes. One by one the old houses were razed by boisterous, unfeeling house-wreckers and in their places were going up cheap, viciously plain and garishly ornate apartment houses. One by one the old places disappeared. Graceful lines of sloping roofs were replaced by harshly severe brick or wooden eaves, leaded glass dim with years was ruthlessly removed for plain sashes turned out by thousands by unimaginative factory hands, newel posts of carved brass and delicate balustrades of ancient mahogany were thrown away and in their stead came cheap pine ones, all carved alike. (33)

Both novels are set against a backdrop of modernity, and the reader cannot help but be aware of the time period in which the novels are set. It is notable that the authors of both novels use conflict as a means of situating the stories in their respective time periods. Indeed, the first clue that White gives the reader as to the temporal setting of the story comes in the form of a

newsboy selling papers, shouting “Extry! All about the Japs licking the Rooshians! All about the big battle!” (10). It is very important that the two novels should be situated in the midst of war and strife. The conflicts against which the novels are set—the Atlanta race riots, the racial strife in Martinique, the two World Wars, etc.—mirror Mimi and Isaure’s internal conflicts, which leave the two Creole women torn between their white skin and their black upbringing. In an era of “anxiety and estrangement,” Mimi and Isaure cannot help but feel alien in their own bodies, never at home no matter where they are.

Another obstacle to Mimi and Isaure’s quests for identity is the lack of true Creole spaces. Although Mimi’s New Orleans and Isaure’s Martinique are, to a certain degree, zones of creolization, neither can be considered a true Creole space. Glissant offers an explanation as to why these two spaces cannot cultivate a true Creole identity:

[L]a créolisation suppose que les éléments culturels mis en présence doivent obligatoirement être « équivalents en valeur » pour que cette créolisation s’effectue réellement. C’est-à-dire que si dans des éléments culturels mis en relation certains sont infériorisés par rapport à d’autres, la créolisation ne se fait pas vraiment. Elle se fait sur un mode bâtard et sur un mode injuste.⁴² (17)

Similarly, Bhabha describes the role of the ideal interstitial space, embodied in the work of African American artist Renée Greene: “This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). A true Creole space is one in which blackness and whiteness (as well as any other racial identities found in that particular space) are on equal social footing, spaces in which a person of mixed blood does not feel torn between two or more conflicting cultures. Creolization is not an erasure of difference, but

⁴² Creolization presupposes that the cultural elements in question are “of equal value” in order for this creolization to truly manifest itself. That is, if some of the cultural elements are made inferior in relation to others, creolization does not truly take place. It takes place in a bastardized form, an unjust form. (my translation)

rather a de-hierarchization of difference. In a space in which a true Creole identity is not recognized or where Creolization has not been fully achieved, a person of mixed blood is alienated from herself. She shares blood with both the oppressor and the oppressed, and she is inclined to join the oppressor and resent the oppressed, or else to resent the oppressor and feel solidarity with the oppressed. Neither Isaure's Martinique nor Mimi's America—not even New Orleans—can truly be called Creole spaces, for in the end they both prove hostile to the Creole subject.

Isaure's treatment of Blanchard reveals Martinique's racial inequity from the very beginning of the novel. She ejects Blanchard from her bar, calling him a "nigger" and making fun of his name. She is tried and sentenced to a six-month suspended sentence for her insult, but the futility of the judge's gesture becomes more and more evident as the story progresses. By drawing attention to the incongruity between Blanchard's name and his skin color, Isaure draws attention to the incongruity between the social status of black and white Martinicans and the anxiety surrounding the fluidity of the color line in Martinique. Later on in the novel, Isaure reveals insecurities that suggest that her attack on Blanchard was also a defense mechanism. When du Taillant invites her to a ball at the Lido, Isaure balks, insisting that blacks are not allowed at the Lido, thus demonstrating that she is well aware of the status of blacks as second-class citizens and also that she has first hand knowledge of the exclusionary practices of *béké* society. It seems odd that she, who identifies herself to du Taillant as black, should engage in the same discrimination of which she is a victim. However, her mixed blood and light skin places her in a slightly higher social position than Blanchard, and she recognizes that she must take advantage of that inequity in order to maintain her social status. She oppresses Blanchard because if she does not join the ranks of

the oppressors, to the degree that a *métisse* can do so, she will be oppressed to an even greater degree than she already is.

At first glance, Mimi's New Orleans appears to be a Creole space. Mimi is oblivious to the very idea of racial prejudice, and even racial difference seems to be a foreign idea to her. Jean proudly refers to his ancestor, the "negro from San Domingo," and his African ancestry never proved to be an obstacle for him. However, there are subtle indications of racial prejudice and racial difference even in Jean and Mimi's Creole haven. For example, Jean tells Mimi of the "white Louisianians'" reluctance to admit to their mixed ancestry. By using the term "white Louisianian," Jean acknowledges the existence of racial divisions, even within the so-called Creole space of Louisiana, and by speaking of the white Louisianian as Other, he makes it clear that he does not identify as white. Moreover, the reluctance of the white Louisianian to acknowledge the mere possibility of black ancestry suggests that blackness is inferiorized in respect to whiteness even in New Orleans. Mary's treatment by the restaurateurs confirms this racial inequity. When they make their excuses to Jean, they explain that the "American guests . . . object to *une femme de couleur*" (32). Although the one-drop rule does not yet appear to be in effect, there is clearly some sort of race line, and Mimi and Jean find that they are not on the same side of this line as Mary. It is significant, though, that the objection is attributed to the American guests, rather than the natives of New Orleans. Although the Americans cannot be held solely responsible for the existence of racial difference in New Orleans, they have brought it out into the open, and they are more diligent in the enforcement of the race line than the native Creole population. Indeed, the arrival of the Americans in Louisiana appears to have turned Louisiana from a zone of imperfect creolization to a zone of decreolization, a zone in which sharp racial distinctions

begin to develop where none had existed before, or, to use Glissant's terminology, the composite culture of Louisiana has begun the transition towards atavism.

Mimi finds it difficult to bring her Creole identity with her to Atlanta, not only because of her association with her stepmother, but also because of the racial inequality in Atlanta. It is after witnessing the brutality of the 1906 race riots that Mimi begins to identify as black. The racial imbalance in Atlanta, manifested in the victimization of the black population by the white population, leads to the fragmentation of Mimi's identity. Alienated and repulsed by whiteness, she rejects her white heritage and identifies wholly with the black race. At the end of the novel, Mimi goes through this process of alienation once again, albeit in a slightly different form. At a dinner party, Mimi speaks with a Chinese visitor, Wu Hseh-Chuan, about Eastern perceptions of the West and about the hypocrisy of Western religion. She asks Wu, "From your distance, can you see whether we of the West are headed towards greater wisdom or destruction?", to which Wu responds:

"Who can tell? The great nation or people or civilization is not that one which has the greatest brute strength but the one which can serve mankind best. The machine has been created—and it in turn is mastering its creators. I have been in your country many times and I feel 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) [White's ellipsis]

Upon hearing the black race compared so favorably to Western civilization as a whole, Mimi begins to feel discontented with her place in white American society. As she lies in bed after the dinner party, she feels "[h]er discontent . . . taking form. She felt a new confidence filling her as she realized that perhaps there was some valid reason for the vague unrest which had been troubling her" (283). One reason for her unrest, as the reader quickly discovers, is that she feels alienated by the bigotry that pervades her white milieu, particularly her own husband's prejudices. Mimi reflects that "Jimmie was a dear but he was

frightfully boisterous and uncouth and boring at times. And he annoyed her with his smug little prejudices. He didn't like Jews or Japanese or Italians or any other group that wasn't his own. She remembered his patronizing sneer at the Jews the night before as they drove to the Crosbys'" (289). The impulse for Mimi's final flight was not simply a desire to return to a black environment, but also a desire to distance herself from her alienating white milieu and its prejudices.

Mimi and Isaure's identity problems, then, cannot simply be reduced to a question of Creole spaces and non-Creole spaces. Indeed, there are no true Creole spaces in either novel. Mimi passes through several distinctively non-Creole spaces, including Atlanta, Philadelphia, and New York City, but neither her hometown of New Orleans nor Isaure's Martinique are truly creolized. Rather, they are zones of imperfect creolization. Isaure's lament effectively summarizes her problem. In Martinique, she truly is cursed with "la malédiction de n'être ni noire ni blanche" (179). A certain degree of creolization has taken place in Martinique, as evidenced by Isaure's ability to maintain a fluid and hybrid racial identity. However, the island of Martinique is not wholly Creole, for racial divisions and racial tension still exist. Indeed, Isaure's desire to pass demonstrates what Glissant sees as Martinique's failure to fully creolize. In a truly Creole society, whiteness and blackness would be held in equal regard, and there would be no advantage to shifting one's racial identity from black to white or vice-versa. In the imperfectly creolized space of Martinique, however, Isaure is condemned to a liminal societal status, neither black nor white, but rather a member of a hybrid race, othered by blacks and whites alike.

Mimi, on the other hand, starts out in a Creole space, where she is able to maintain, for a time, a true Creole identity. However, with the arrival of Americans and American customs

and law, Mimi witnesses the beginnings of the decreolization of New Orleans, or the transformation of New Orleans from a composite space into an atavistic one. Upon arriving in the non-Creole, or atavistic, space of Atlanta, Mimi is reluctantly thrust into black society and, therefore, into a black identity. An episode of racial violence exposes Mimi to the degree of racial inequality in America and cements Mimi's black identity. As Mimi wanders through America's physical and racial landscapes, she witnesses many instances of racial prejudice that serve to further alienate her from whiteness and draw her closer to the black community that she left. By the time Mimi makes her ultimate flight, a flight back to blackness, her experience with race relations in America have decreolized Mimi's identity, much as the American influx to New Orleans led to the decreolization of that city, and a return to Creoleness has become all but impossible for Mimi.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: *Èk alòs . . . /And so . . .*

The main goal of this thesis was to fill in gaps in two areas of scholarship—racial passing and Creole identity—by examining these two topics in conjunction. That is, by examining the Creole passing subject, I hoped to elucidate the impact of the Creole racial identity on the racial constructions that underlie the passing tradition, as well as identifying the effects of Creole spaces on the act of passing. Moreover, I hoped to bring the discourses of racial passing and of Creoleness to a more global level by examining racial passing across national boundaries and discourses and by interrogating the construction of Creoleness outside of the Caribbean context.

The nature of the topics at hand makes it very difficult to draw any grand, over-arching conclusions based solely on a study of two works. There are as many definitions of passing as there are critics of the passing narrative, and likewise, there are multiple forms of Creoleness, even within the francophone Caribbean context. It is, however, possible to draw some conclusions regarding White's Flight and Capécia's La négresse blanche in hopes that these conclusions may serve as points of departure for more in-depth study of specific aspects of the Creole passing narrative.

First, it is clear that the notion of Creoleness disrupts the racial structures that form the basis of the act of passing. Creoleness resists classification in strict black/white terms; most definitions of Creoleness encompass racial and ethnic identities—such as Asian, Indian, and native Caribbean ethnicities—that do not exist in a black/white racial binary. A subject who

identifies as Creole cannot truly be said to pass for either white or black because whiteness and blackness are not mutually exclusive on the plane of Creoleness.

In the two works examined in this thesis, however, there are limits to the deconstructive power of Creoleness. Creoleness transgresses the boundaries of race only in places where Creoleness is a viable racial identity. In spaces where racial identity is governed by the one-drop rule, Creoleness is subsumed by blackness, as the one-drop rule does not recognize any racial categories other than pure whiteness, which is defined by a complete lack of discernible non-white ancestry, and blackness, defined by the “taint” of non-white ancestry. Moreover, as Glissant notes, a Creole identity is only viable in an environment in which the cultural elements that make up Creoleness are held in equal esteem. If there is a racial imbalance, the Creole subject’s identity becomes fragmented and the Creole subject becomes alienated from one or more of the elements that make up her Creole identity. Indeed, the existence of a Martinican Creole passing narrative exposes the failure of *créolité* to develop fully in Martinique. In a truly creolized society, a Creole subject would be in perfect equilibrium and would not feel any impulse towards whiteness or blackness. Other literary works that exhibit what Fanon calls the “lactification” impulse, such as Capécia’s Je suis martiniquaise and Jacqueline Manicom’s Mon examen de blanc further expose the failure of *créolité*, as they demonstrate a pattern of denigration of blackness in Martinique.

There are several possible directions in which this project could continue. One issue that merits follow-up is the problem of passing in the Francophone Caribbean. The genre of the passing narrative is not nearly as prevalent in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti as it is in the United States. However, the “lactification” impulse, which is in many ways similar to the passing impulse, is a common theme in the literatures of these three islands. A comparison

of the passing impulse—that is, the impulse to whiten the self—and the “lactification” impulse—the impulse to whiten the black race as a whole—would further clarify the intricacies of race relations in the francophone Caribbean and explain the failures of *créolité* to create a racial utopia in this region.

Furthermore, by comparing White’s Flight with other American passing narratives (those featuring Creole subjects as well as those featuring non-Creole mulatto subjects), one could formulate a more complete definition of the Creole identity as it is constructed in the United States. Currently, most scholarship on Creoleness focuses on the Caribbean Creole, while the Louisiana Creole, and the southern U.S. Creole in general receives little scholarly attention. After developing a more thorough study of Creoleness in the United States, one could draw a more detailed conclusion about the place of the Creole subject within the genre of the American passing narrative.

Lastly, the issues of gender and sexuality in Flight and La négresse blanche merit more in-depth attention. The problem of gender is central to both novels, particularly regarding the role of the female body as locus of procreation and of miscegenation. For Mimi, *Petit Jean* is a major motivation for passing, as well as one of her primary motives for returning to the black community. For Isaure, a fictitious child proves to be a tool to help her pass, albeit with limited success. A comparison between these two female passing subjects and two or more male Creole passing subjects could demonstrate the interaction between race and gender for the Creole passing subject, thus complementing the current scholarship on race, gender, and sexuality in the mulatto passing subject.

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