

WHITE AND BLACK BOTH CAST SHADOWS: UNCONVENTIONAL
PERMUTATIONS OF RACIAL PASSING IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

By Derek Adams

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes to build upon a critical tradition that explores the formation of racial subjectivity in narratives of passing in African-American and American literature. It adds to recent scholarship on passing narratives which seeks a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between the performance of racial norms and contemporary conceptions of “race” and racial categorization. But rather than focusing entirely on the conventional *mulatta/o performs whiteness* plot device at work in passing literature, a device that reinforces the desirability of heteronormative whiteness, I am interested in assessing how performances of a variety of racial norms challenges this desirability. Formulating a theory of “black-passing” that decenters whiteness as the passer’s object of desire, this project broadens the framework of the discourse on racial performance in revelatory ways. Racial passing will get measured in relation to the political consequences engendered by the transgression of racial boundaries, emphasizing how the nature of acts of passing varies according to the way hegemonic society dictates racial enfranchisement. Passing will be situated in the context of various modes of literary representation – realism, naturalism, and modernism – that register subjectivity. The project will also explore in greater detail the changing nature of acts of passing across gendered, spatial, and temporal boundaries. Ultimately, black-passing will reveal the necessity of the performance of racial norms to any individual or societal understanding of the concept of “race.”

INTRODUCTION: FOR COLOREDS ONLY?: RACIAL PASSING AND A REGIME OF LOOKING

It's funny about passing. We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it.

– Irene Redfield, *Passing*

The literary merits of the African American canon have been so intensely debated by critics and scholars throughout the last century that it makes this broad point of contention an under-productive starting point for this dissertation project. Instead, I begin with a single ideological strain within this debate concerning the development of one of the canon's most recognizable subgenres, the racial passing narrative. The relevance of racial passing to our nation's history has been magnified in the last three decades, as passing narratives have enjoyed a symbolic rejuvenation in much critical literary discourse. New approaches offered by scholars such as Giulia Fabi, Mar Gallego, Steven Belluscio, Gayle Wald, Elaine Ginsberg, and Catherine Rottenberg, to name a few, continue to revolutionize the way racial categories are constituted and interpreted in passing narratives. Generally speaking, narratives of passing chronicle the experiences of protagonists who, because of their mixed-race heritage and/or light-skinned physical appearance, are able to cross the physical and metaphorical boundaries of race.¹

Thaddious Davis's definition of "passing" in the introduction to Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) is one of the more commonly referenced definitions: "[passing is] the movement of a person who is legally or socially designated black into a white racial

¹ The concept of "passing" is not limited to categories of race. There are a multiplicity of examples of passing that take place across lines of gender, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity both in literary texts and within the social world in which those texts are constructed.

category or white social identity [...] When passing as white, these individuals [have] merely relocated themselves to a space not demarcated as black, and thereby escaped the association of color with inferiority that has been one of the most enduring legacies of slavery in the United States” (Larsen viii). A litany of prominent texts are categorized as racial passing narratives according to this definition: William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter* (1854), Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy, or the Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Charles Chestnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James W. Johnson’s *Autobiography of an ex-Coloured Man* (1912 & 1927), Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928), and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) are considered the cornerstones of the genre. Each of these narratives follow a light complexioned, racially ambiguous, mulatta/o character as s/he moves out of a rigid, restrictive black world into a white social world replete with educational, economic, and social opportunities typically denied people of color. This basic *mulatta is born black – becomes white*² plot device supplies the conventional narrative structure that functions as the foundation for the traditional racial passing narrative.

The literary tradition has become one of the most important tools in understanding social responses to racial categorization, particularly through its method of implicitly critiquing the fixedness of racial identity. The subgenre illuminates the capacity of its mixed-race, passing protagonists to deconstruct the stability of a white/black racial binary

² Many passing narratives end with the tragic mulatta figure regretting her decision to abandon her richly nourishing black community for a culturally barren, white community and opting to return to the racial world she previously inhabited. This plot device, then, might also be read as *mulatta is black – becomes white – returns to black*.

around which individual behaviors and lifestyles were, and continue to be, structured by the white hegemonic order. The ability of mulattas/os to pass themselves off as either black or white serves as one way of illustrating the absurdity of eugenicist claims professed by the white hegemonic order about the inherent nature of whiteness and blackness. Whiteness, it is stereotypically presumed, marks an individual's intelligence, trustworthiness, Christian piety, patriotism, stout work ethic, and national enfranchisement. It is a validation of all the exemplary qualities of human beings, and represents their greatest potential. Blackness, on the other hand, becomes synonymous with dishonesty, physical aggression, animalistic sexuality, corruptibility, limited intellectual capacity, and exclusion from the American body politic. In fact, it was often presumed that black men and women were not considered fully human, existing in some liminal stage between humanity and animalism. Through this lens, blackness comes to symbolize the deplorability of the human species. These sorts of proclamations, arising from European Enlightenment philosophies³ and adopted by American social institutions, were intended to highlight the genetic superiority of whites and inferiority of blacks. A myriad of social apparatuses are engineered to enforce this collective (white) racial hegemony that valorizes whiteness as the antithesis of blackness.

Racial passing, we must remember, was and is a real-life response to these pervasive cultural attitudes embodied in horrific social practices such as Jim Crow

³ See Emanuelle Eze's *Race and the Enlightenment* (1997).

segregation and the enforcement of black codes.⁴ By crossing the racial boundary between white and black worlds, what W.E.B. DuBois eventually terms the “color line,” men and women socially designated black move “from a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege” (Ginsberg1). Although visual markers of identity are associated with particular racial identities, social designations of blackness are primarily determined as a collective enterprise of the white hegemonic order. The passer is capable of moving between social designations, thereby demonstrating the fluidity of black and white racial categories. Passing occurs precisely because racial categories are not fixed or mutually exclusive, often overlapping and interpenetrating. As Ginsberg explains, “the genealogy of the concept in American culture reveals the origins of passing in the sexual exploitation of black slave women by white men” (5). The need to control not only the productive labor of black men, but also the productive and reproductive labor of black and white women to maintain its authority contributed to the white hegemonic order’s enforcement of strict policies regulating intra- and interracial interactions. To challenge these policies, as the passer inevitably does in passing between racial categories, is to undermine the authoritative foundation on which white hegemony subsists. Any violation of these policies, especially the willful penetration of the color line, resulted in perverse and severe punishments, including death. The severity of these punishments is an indication of the collective anxiety produced by racial passing.

⁴ In his book *The Black Codes of the South* (1965), Theodore Brantner Wilson offers an extensive examination of the types of unwritten, yet socially and (often) institutionally enforced “codes” intended to govern the behavior of black men and women, and to regulate multiple facets of black livelihood. One emblematic code is the impermissibility of black men physically touching white women in any context.

Ironically, it is the sexual interpenetrations of the color line largely by white, slaveholding men and resulting in multigenerational racial intermixing that makes racial passing possible.

Racial passing literature offers textual illustrations of the social consequences of racial intermixing. Frequently, passing narratives force white male and female characters to confront the hypocrisy of their beliefs about racial difference once they discover their thought-to-be-white friend, consort, or paramour is a member of the “despised” race. Traditional passing narratives thrive on this sort of shocking, “gotcha” revelation that dispels ideologically racist myths about black men and women. The subgenre is celebrated by many critics for its active response to the stereotypes espoused in Enlightenment philosophies. Employing characters not easily susceptible to visual categorization, racial passing narratives actively debunk these stereotypical assumptions made on behalf of the white hegemonic order. The presumed inherent-ness of the qualitative characteristics ascribed to blackness and whiteness is shaken apart as the racial passer deconstructs the fixedness of individual racial categories.

Not all scholars share this enthusiasm for the merits of passing literature though, frequently attacking celebratory examinations of the passing subgenre as undeservedly complimentary.⁵ The tragic mulatta/o, as Juda Bennet suggests, is “[an] elusive subject [...] hidden in larger studies about representations of race” (Bennet 1). However, because

⁵ The voluminous body of criticism is too large to outline in its entirety. One place to begin is Robert Bone’s *The Negro Novel in America* (1959) and Hugh Gloster’s *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1948), both of which make parallel claims about the lack of character complexity in early African American literature, due largely to the need of these authors to prove the humanity of the members of their race to the public.

the racial passer is almost always someone who is socially (but not visually) designated black, and because so few black individuals were capable of engaging in racial passing, then racial passing narratives are not representative of a black experience. There are limits to the ways it can function as a representation of race. In addition, these critics collectively question the motives of African American authors in scripting stories premised on the desire of black men and women to become socially and symbolically white. Making whiteness an emblem of desirability leads to the systematic stigmatization of the authors of passing narratives as “accomplices of the dominant racist ideology, even branded as ‘traitors’ to their race” (Gallego 6). Certainly such critics had a tendency to overlook or undervalue the genre’s most celebrated elements: its potential for creating complex black characters that struggle with crises of identity; calling into question the ethics of ambition in light of race and family loyalty; and affording characters an opportunity to occupy multiple subject positions in different social and racial situations. However, they offer an adequate explanation for the reception of a subversive body of literature that effectively undermines fixed racial categories in a country that flourishes on racial stratification. Surprisingly, even though acts of racial passing produce significant amounts of collective anxiety (most aptly depicted in George Schuyler’s novel *Black No More*), narratives of passing are widely read and circulated amongst whites, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance (Gallego). Critics of the subgenre argue that passing as a thematic strategy pandered to the interests of a white reading public who consumed these texts precisely because their passing protagonists valorize whiteness

through their actions. For instance, Nella Larsen's *Passing* opens with her mulatta protagonist, Irene Redfield, eating at a rooftop café in Chicago's high-class, yet racially segregated Drayton hotel. While Irene's presence in the hotel café calls attention to the inability of the white hotel workers and patrons to detect her blackness visually and/or through her behaviors, and therefore highlights the absurdity of claims to inherent white superiority and black inferiority, Irene's desire to dine there also suggests something about how she views the world on the white side of the color line. As readers come to find out, Irene and her husband, a dark-skinned physician named Brian, are members of the black bourgeoisie who lead a tragic, comically barren, upper-middle class life. In light of her financial means and her social status, choosing to pass as white for the satisfaction of supping at this segregated café implies her belief in its superior quality, a quality stemming from its white ownership and white clientele. It signals, as Thaddious Davis points out in the introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Irene's "adoption of white values, standards of beauty, and behavior" (Larsen xx). Ironically then, Irene's passing upholds the associated values of the very white/black binary that not only prevents her from frequenting the Drayton without disguise, but her beliefs and actions also reinforce the existence of the color line even as she subverts it through her racial passing.

Passing protagonists may expose the fluidity of racial categories, but the physical, psychological, emotional, and social risks they take to participate in the white world reinforce the idea that white livelihood is substantively better than black livelihood. Even

if the white social world depicted in these novels is “everything but ideal,” passers ensure that there is still something to be had in it that cannot be accessed in the black world (Gallego 189). Implicitly, the desire to pass is tied up in socioeconomics and not necessarily race. As Valerie Smith points out, a passer is generally motivated by class considerations, looking to partake in the educational and employment opportunities of those in power. But, Smith states, “[P]eople describe the passing person as wanting to be white, not wanting to be rich,” thereby equating economic lifestyles to a specific racial identity (Smith 36). As a result, this desire to succeed educationally and economically becomes conflated with a desire to achieve whiteness. The white hegemonic order has not been undermined because passing narratives (such as Larsen’s) feed into its project of maintaining the superiority of whiteness over blackness.

These opposing stances on the merits of racial passing narratives embody Irene’s ambivalent stance on racial passing mentioned in the epigraph. This dissertation addresses two important questions concerning the ambivalence she expresses toward racial passing lifestyles. First, do all acts of racial passing reinforce the desirability of whiteness? And second, do all racial passing performances necessarily involve crossing the color line? This project enters the discourse on racial passing and race representation through these questions, but diverges from popular sentiment by presuming the answer to both questions is “no.” Certainly racial passing is reliant on specific performances of racial identities, but I do not believe that it is always premised on a universal desire for whiteness, nor does it necessitate a crossing of the color line. I closely examine a group

of outlying literary texts that are not classified as conventional⁶ passing narratives, but are deeply invested in a tradition of racial passing and performance. Their outlier status is attributable to the unconventional permutations of racial performance that their protagonists engage in. The passing protagonists in these texts attempt to have predetermined racial identities read onto their bodies, but not necessarily in order to move “from a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege” as Ginsberg suggests. In many instances, these protagonists actually perform racial identities that reaffirm the passer’s categorization as a subordinated and oppressed subject. Nor do these acts of passing always involve a crossing of the color line.

I begin the examination of these unconventional narratives with a recalibration of the definition of racial passing in relation to the color line that opens the subgenre up to new ways of understanding racial performance outside of a conventional white/black framework. The narrowness of the conventional definition of racial passing, I argue, deceive scholars into reducing race to a simple binary divorced from other factors that contribute to the constitution of identity categories. I then articulate a theory of “black-passing” that attempts to account for and explain permutations of racial performance not predicated on a desire for whiteness. Utilizing this theoretical lens in my body chapters, I center the analysis on a unique group of literary texts by Herman Melville, Mary White Ovington, Toni Morrison, and ZZ Packer, all of which challenge the fixedness of racial categories in unconventional ways. As texts authored by both African American and

⁶ I use the term “conventional” to mark the standard *black-to-white-to-black* plot device operating in traditional narratives of racial passing.

Caucasian American authors and written over a 150-year span, I attempt to account for the ways in which an author's own identity influences the reception of her or his work relative to the sociopolitical context in which they are crafting it. In closely examining this body of literature, I aim to broaden the parameters of the racial passing discourse so that it more aptly explains racial performance in relation to the desirability and undesirability of both whiteness and blackness. The methods these authors use to depict racial performativity exposes readers to new avenues for approaching and interpreting the constitution of racial categories and the representation of race through acts of passing. They also complicate the arguments made over the subversive potential of racial passing. The actions of passing protagonists, more specifically "black-passers" who do not desire whiteness, may be more subversive in deconstructing the racial ideologies of the white hegemonic order than initially thought. However, their actions are also more reliant on the order's validation of racial identity than previously admitted. Taking this into account, my analysis reconsiders the degree to which racial passing actually subverts the white hegemonic order and to which it imbues the passer with the agency to self-affirm.

Racial Passing and the Color Line

The foundation for the supremacy of whiteness within the white hegemonic order, its assumption of an inherent superiority, collapses in on itself once the racial passer

crosses what W.E.B. DuBois comes to define as the color line.⁷ The color line and the mulatta/o figure work in conjunction as the principle thematic elements that structure passing narratives. As a concept, the color line is the symbolic division between whiteness and blackness that dictates a specific sort of racial existence based on which side of this binary individuals fall on. As an imagined entity (for there is no literal line running through towns and cities that separates Anglo- and African- Americans) the color line works to order every facet of existence – education, economic and employment opportunities, public services, neighborhoods, businesses, public transportation, the military, and government – into specific, racial collectives according to this imagined white/black binary. This binary, in turn, gets situated in relation to other dualities – good/evil, human/inhuman, lawful/lawless, pious/pagan, etc. – that reinforce the presumption that those existing on the black side of the color line do not merit the same quality of life afforded to those on the white side. Although the color line influences the behavior of the characters in these passing narratives and produces real consequences for those who come into contact with it, the color line exists only as an abstraction. It has no materiality, but is rather an artificial construct utilized by dominant culture to maintain white privileges.⁸

Employing mixed-race, mulatta/o individuals in passing narratives who are capable of crossing the color line allows authors to demonstrate the elusive, yet palpable

⁷ The statement, "...the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" was first made by DuBois in his address, "To the Nations of the World," in London at the first Pan-African conference, July 1900.

⁸ Peggy McIntosh discusses the implications of an unearned set of "white privileges" and how they shape racial self-perception in her essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1988).

dimensions of this racial boundary and to dismiss many of the stereotypical racial connotations it engenders. Their undetected movement between black and white worlds explodes the idea that there is something inherent or fixed about whiteness (superiority) and blackness (inferiority) that maintains these social spheres as mutually exclusive.

Many recent scholars have constructed new lenses through which to read and better understand the operation of passing in these narratives and their influence on the categorization of race. This body of scholarship navigates away from the limiting views of the genre, and focuses instead on more nuanced examinations of its subversive potential. Thaddious Davis describes Larsen's ability to "map" onto passing "the added discourses of hybridity, biraciality, simultaneity, multiple subjectivities, and plurality" in a way that allows her text to transcend race. For Davis, passing narratives are spaces in which the operation of mixed-racial identities on the construction of racial categories can be investigated. She also claims that passing narratives such as Larsen's that free their characters from the more obvious, socially determined markers of racial identity, "create a fluidity of similarly constructed bodies and colors which in a group cannot be assigned to wholesale racial otherness" (Larsen xi). This ability of passers to deflate a variety of "visible" distinctions raises questions about the role that factors such as wealth, affluence, and education have on determining racial differences between whites and blacks.

In her book *Passing and the Rise of the African-American Novel* (2001), Giulia Fabi links passing as a literary trope to the rise and development of the African-American novelistic tradition. She understands passing as a highly subversive textual strategy that

sheds light on the ability of pre-Harlem Renaissance authors to incorporate contemporary sociopolitical and cultural attitudes regarding racial and sexual identities in their work. Her work acknowledges the literary artistry and ideological complexity African American authors employ in passing narratives. Their “all-but-white” characters function as the symbolic representation of miscegenation, an important trope that signifies the interpenetrations of the color line meant to separate the races. “The passer” she writes, “whose body is marked by whiteness and disguises a mixed genealogy, enabled early African American writers to question whiteness as ‘unmarked category’[...] as the invisible standard to racialize others” (Fabi 5). Emerging from this site of racial, gender, and sexual anxiety, collision, and collusion, the passing protagonist responds to critical resistance to the artistic merits of pre-Harlem Renaissance fiction. These complex, “all-but-white” characters who struggle with moral dilemmas concerning abandoning one’s race and culture effectively undermine the assumption that African American authors employ flat or stock characters in their literature that stereotypically signify on behalf of all black men and women. Fabi also imbues her characters with the agency to question the unexamined power assumed by the white hegemonic order.

Mar Gallego’s work in *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies* (2003) is another unique examination of racial and gender formations set against what she terms “generic passing.” In her examination of passing narratives of this period, she concludes that these texts “[adopt] a suitable veneer [...] to tackle a very problematic topic, namely a rather unconventional critique of Eurocentric

ideology and worldview from an African American standpoint” (Gallego 8). As a response, in part, to criticisms such as Richard Wright’s,⁹ she suggests that authors of passing narratives invented revolutionary methods for destabilizing white institutional authority by metaphorically masking their texts. By passing as “generic passing” narratives, these texts legitimated a non-hegemonic, African American perspective on racial categorization. The subversive potential of this new, non-hegemonic perspective in undermining white hegemony was couched in multilayers of passing operating beneath the surface of the generic passing face of a text.

The aforementioned critics offer up more comprehensive examinations of passing narratives and take on the reductive assessments of the merits of this body of literature. Each also offers up an alternative definition of racial passing that influences the way these narratives get read. Thaddious Davis, in describing passing as “the movement of a person who is legally or socially designated black into a white racial category or white social identity,” places emphasis on the geographical relocation of mulattas/os into recognizable spatial constructs based on race. This notion of “movement” reaffirms the existence of a recognizable color line that shapes how racial identities get read onto bodies. Mar Gallego offers up a slight variation on this concept. She writes, “[passing novels] depicted “mulatto” or “passing” protagonists, inevitably and tragically wavering between two worlds and unable to come to terms with their multiethnic and multicultural

⁹ Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) is a scathing critique of the African American literary tradition that precedes him, in which he argues that African American authors were received by white America as “French poodles who do clever tricks.” The uniqueness of his critique, despite its pessimistic tone, is its implicit acknowledgment of the existence of a uniquely African American body of literature in the nineteenth century, an acknowledgment few other critics of Wright’s day offer.

allegiances” (Gallego 5). Although the passer possesses a multiplicity of identities and allegiances, they get situated between “two worlds,” one white and one black. Seeing oneself as existing between “two worlds” legitimates the fixedness of these racially demarcated spaces, which further fixes the naturalness of white and black as distinct racial categories. The “multi”-identity of passing protagonists is reduced to the either/or framework of the white/black binary that the act of passing calls into question. Giulia Fabi moves away from the spatial emphasis toward a thematic one when she writes “[p]assing is a literary trope that accounts for the hypervisibility of all-but-white characters in the foreground of African American texts” (Fabi 4). Her emphasis on visibility in relation to “all-but-white[ness]” situates passing on the body of the mulatta/o as well as on the space s/he inhabits. Her definition, though, accentuates the centrality of “whiteness” in relationship to all forms of racial otherness, particularly blackness. As “all-but-white” characters, the implication is that these protagonists are “white” in everything (appearance, attitude, behavior, mannerisms) except their social circumstance. Ultimately, the desire of these protagonists to pass as white in order to change their social circumstance is an attempt to align their self-perception with the white hegemonic order’s perception of whiteness as superior.

Each of these definitions of what constitutes passing are essential to the examination of this literary tradition. However, they all maintain the presupposition that the mulatta/o figure, and her or his dilemma in navigating between a black and a white racial world, functions as the element upon which the passing narrative hinges. Racial

passing, then, gets read as a way of achieving a collectively validated whiteness at the expense of vacating one's blackness, of crossing the color line into its white unknown regions. It continues to be understood through a reductive, conventional white/black binary. Steven Belluscio expresses concern over this supposition in his book *To be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (2006). Belluscio points out that this deep investment in an imagined white/black binary, primarily through our fascination with mulatta/o protagonists, to explain racial passing implies the existence of distinct white and black racial worlds that cannot be found in the world outside of the text. Insistence on imposing these two distinct worlds on our imagination overshadows the ways that national identities are determined through racial performance. He advocates for a more complete definition of racial passing that goes beyond a limiting white/black framework. He argues that, "the critical focus on passing as a black/white binary results in the reification of the essential characteristics of these racial identities that passing narratives are attempting to deconstruct." In other words, the naturalness of white and black racial categories is reinforced through the *mulatta is black – becomes white* conventional passing narrative plot device. The desire of the passing protagonist to become white implies the superiority attached to that specific racial identity, even as "white" is being challenged as a natural category. This problem leads him to look at racial passing "[as] an act of rebellion that results in the deconstruction of boundaries," thereby opening up examinations of passing to the crossing of various barriers of identity

that are not necessarily racially bound. For Belluscio, passing becomes a means for better understanding the role of culture and ethnicity in acts of self-definition (Belluscio 5).

Elaine Ginsberg's edited collection of essays *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996) promotes a similar shift away from overly simplistic readings of racial passing. In her introduction, she writes, "Although the discourse of race passing and discussions of race-passing narratives traditionally assume a black/white binary and a related class system, complications of that dichotomy in fiction belie any such simple assumptions" (Ginsberg 11). For Ginsberg, actions such as cross-dressing, gender-bending, pretending to be rich, and being white while trying to pass as black are all examples of complications to a traditional white/black binary that redefines racial passing. These acts not only take on their own cultural meanings, but influence the way that traditional acts of racial passing are understood. She goes on, "In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for *creative self-determination* and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with *multiple subject positions*, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress" (16, emphasis mine). Her ideas of "creative self-determination" and "multiple subject positions" are a positive shift away from tradition that moves the discourse on racial passing beyond its narrow framework.

In her brilliant analysis of the multifaceted nature of passing in *Crossing the Line* (2000), Gayle Wald also challenges passing as an inherently white/black phenomenon: "to pass is to transgress the social boundary of race, to "cross" or thwart the "line" of

racial distinction that has been the basis of racial oppression and exploitation.” It stands out that there is no assumption of the specific racial identity of the passer in this definition. The passer, according to Wald, is not always a mulatta/o tragically straddling the line between worlds demarcated as white and black. The “hypervisibility” of the mulatta/o, which establishes whiteness as a focus, is not a requisite feature of the passing narrative for her. She goes on: “[To pass] is also [...] to capitalize on the binarism of the dominant racial discourse to negotiate the multifarious needs, fantasies, and aspirations that are mediated and expressed through the racial sign. Passing entails, then, *not racial transcendence*, but rather struggles for control over racial representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances” (Wald 6, emphasis added). Through this idea of control over the representations of race within a racial symbolic order, rather than transcendence of it, we can begin looking at passing as an act that involves more than a desire for whiteness. Passing, or crossing the line, is a means of self-determination that occurs at the socially imagined site of racial distinction – the color line. But the direction that passing takes is individually determined, not collectively predetermined. Light-skinned blacks may pass into the white world, but white men and women, as illustrated in John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961) and Steve Miner’s film *Soul Man* (1986), discover reasons for passing into the black world.

I concur with the claims of these critics advocating for a redefinition of racial passing that goes beyond a traditional white/black binary. Too, I remain firmly invested in the idea that racial passing is always attached to an impulse to escape the

discriminatory practices exercised by the white hegemonic order in its manipulation of racial hierarchies. Even a casual instance of passing such as Irene's rooftop excursion in *Passing* is an example of wanting to escape discrimination. I do not maintain, however, that racial passing always involves a crossing of the color line. Some of the most intriguing racial passing performances involve black men and women pretending to a predetermined black identity that does not correlate with the individual black identity they have fostered for themselves, or of white men and women who do the same. This type of intra-racial passing involves crossing a line not between races, but between an individually determined identity (i.e. self-affirmation) and a collectively predetermined identity within a single racial category. In other words, blacks might pass as socially black and whites might pass as socially white, two distinct forms of passing. To pretend to any identity, even one that does not result in a crossing of the color line is to inevitably "pass" without necessarily aligning the passer's self-perception with the perception of the society into which s/he passes. To "pass" I argue is to willingly perform any socially predetermined set of behaviors that marks a particular racial identity onto a passer's body as a means of subverting the restrictive set of discriminatory practices meant to govern the racial circumstances of the passer's existence. Passing, then, results in the manipulation of the binarism of the racial symbolic order for the benefit of those who suffer under its construction, regardless of racial identity. I intend to resituate the literary texts of Melville, Ovington, Morrison, and Packer in relation to this new definition of passing to further demonstrate the historical depths and subversive potential of the

permutations of this literary tradition. Their inclusion in the critical discourse on the subgenre will expand its parameters and shed new light on the constitution of racial identities.

Additionally, because of the fluidity of racial categorization, this dissertation will examine the role that various modes of literary representation – realism, naturalism, and (post)modernism – play in the development of this body of literature. It presumes that, because definitions of whiteness and blackness transform as social perceptions of racial identity change over time, different modes of literary representation give rise to varying conceptions of “race” and therefore various definitions of racial passing. Chapter One delves into the realist impulse in Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1854) as articulated through the actions of its most powerful character, Babo. Chapter Two examines Mary White Ovington’s novel *The Shadow* (1920), a text whose protagonist, Hertha, finds she is incapable of self-definition because of the degree to which her identity is shaped by naturalist social perceptions of blackness and whiteness. It describes the frustrations Hertha encounters as her self-perception as a black woman falls under the assault of the public’s perception of her as a white woman. Chapter Three looks at two short stories, Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” (1983) and ZZ Packer’s “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere” (2004), as their female protagonists attempt to engage in substantive human relationships while transcending the limitations of socially governed identity categories. In both of these texts, the color line virtually disappears thereby giving new meaning to acts of passing.

Racial Passing and the Regime of Looking

We can better understand this reclassification of the conventional passing tradition in the context of Kalpana Sheshadri-Crooks' notion of "race" as a facet of the "regime of looking." In her book *Desiring Whiteness* (2000), Sheshadri-Crooks acknowledges the historicity of race and the oppositional debate between biological essence and social construction, claiming that race is neither totally a genetic accident, nor merely an empty social construct. "Racial practice is ultimately an aesthetic practice," she writes, based largely on the ways visual markers inscribe racial identities onto bodies at the same time that those markers are culturally invested and interpreted by the white hegemonic order (Sheshadri-Crooks 19). As such, the aesthetic components of racial identity lock the concept of race within an inescapable system of visual rigidity called the "regime of looking." This regime dictates our interpretations of race and racial identity according to a series of socially predetermined visual clues, necessitating the racialization of bodies through visual validation.

In the second part of her argument, Sheshadri-Crooks asserts that "Whiteness," capital W, functions as the master signifier of a totalizing structure closely paralleling the framework for Lacan's sociolinguistic structure. It is through this structure that all racial identities (including whiteness) get organized. As a construct, Whiteness is regarded as the emblem of racial wholeness and unity in the world of the Symbolic,¹⁰ making it the ultimate object to be desired. Within this system of signification, the racial anxieties

¹⁰ See Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits* (2004).

experienced by many black men and women are produced through the precarious relation of blackness to its master signifier Whiteness. Sheshadri-Crooks explains, “Each term in the structure establishes its reference by referring back to the original signifier [Whiteness]. The system of race as differences among black, brown, red, yellow, and white makes sense only in its unconscious reference to Whiteness, which subtends the binary opposition between ‘people of color’ and ‘white’” (Sheshadri-Crooks 20). This relation engenders a racial looking on the part of society performed on black bodies (or any raced bodies for that matter) that make them visual spectacles. White bodies are also trapped within the regime of looking, but the close referential proximity between whiteness and the master signifier Whiteness means that they do not become visual spectacles to nearly the same degree as black bodies. In many instances, the closeness between whiteness and Whiteness serves as an invitation to associate the racial wholeness Whiteness symbolizes with white bodies. Our perception of race as differential categories is shaped by the structural references enacted through the master signifier within a regime of looking. As the subject of the gaze of the regime of looking, blacks desire the racial wholeness of the non-raced other represented in the whiteness of those most closely related to the Whiteness (34). The qualitative value of all races are determined and signified in relation to this notion of Whiteness. In conventional passing narratives, the passer seeks acceptance as white in a white world because of the seemingly secure and natural relation of “white” to Whiteness.

The “regime of looking” resonates with W.E.B. DuBois’s theory of “double-consciousness,” in which the “two-ness” African Americans experience, as both Negroes and Americans, is the direct result of the way they are relegated to looking at themselves. The American Negro, he argues, is born with a (metaphorical) veil that inhibits his ability to develop a true sense of self that derives from his own self-perceptions. Of this veil, DuBois writes, “[it] only lets [the Negro] see himself through the revelation of the other world,” an American world which “yields him no true self-conscious” (DuBois 11). As a result, all Negroes, regardless of the visible shade of their blackness, look at themselves through the eyes of others, judging themselves according to an American standard beyond their control. They are trapped within this specific racial regime of looking in which their black bodies remain spectacles even to themselves. The American standard against which the black woman and man measures himself or herself functions as a virtual substitute for Whiteness, the master signifier in the racial-linguistic structure Sheshadri-Crooks outlines. In the United States, despite political rhetoric, the term “American” is a virtual synonym for whiteness.¹¹ The passing protagonist, looking to reconcile her sense of two-ness, is drawn to the national and racial unity that American symbolizes. That wholeness also represents an escape from racism, that combination of horrid, loathsome practices that haunt the livelihood of racial passers before they assume white identities. Racism and racial privilege are enacted through this “regime of looking”

¹¹ The refusal to legally recognize blacks as enfranchised citizens and the shedding of culture in public on the part of European immigrants for social acceptance suggests linkages between American-ness and whiteness.

that relies on the collectively produced visibility of race. It is the principle mechanism for racial categorization.

Many traditional passing narratives situate their passing protagonists at the intersection of the regime of looking and double-consciousness, a site from which the passer is compelled to embrace a white racial identity. For Larsen's protagonist, Irene Redfield, she may deplore the disparaging remarks against blacks espoused by her colleague's husband John Bellew, but she also chooses to eat at the "whites-only" Drayton café whose policies on race mirror Bellew's negative attitude about blacks. Appearing (as white) at the café offers her a reprieve, albeit a temporary one, from the pressure of struggling against her two warring senses of self, American (white) and African (black).

Certainly many passing protagonists fit this characterization of blackness, struggling with a sense of two-ness and feeling driven to desire whiteness. But this yearning to achieve whiteness and the belief in the naturalness of its symbolic unity is problematic, considering that it is not evident in every instance of passing. This project is interested in exploring the operation of passing in instances when the master signifiers Whiteness and American cease to be desired or desirable. I collectively define these unconventional permutations of racial performance as "black-passing." Black-passing is the performance of any predetermined set of racial behaviors that are not premised on the desire to achieve heteronormative whiteness. Black-passing opens up the possibility of exploring racial categorization outside of a traditional white/black racial framework. The

act coopts the “regime of looking” operating at the color line that energizes white racial hegemony (and its enforcement of prescribed racial practices), and employs it to make spectacles of white bodies. In undermining the desirability of whiteness and thereby the desirability of blackness, black-passing allows for the destabilization of assumptions concerning the fixed superiority and inferiority of particular racial groups. An examination of the various permutations of the concept of racial passing through a black-passing lens will produce a new framework for understanding the development and subversive potential of the passing discourse in American literature.

Chapter One – As Black as it Gets: Performing Blackness in 19th-century

American literature. Expanding the definition of racial passing opens Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855) to examinations of black performances of blackness in response to fugitive slave laws. Babo’s performance of racial identity in Melville’s short story indicates a choice to pass as a member of the underprivileged community of black slaves assumed to be inferior to their white counterparts. In this chapter, I will investigate the motivation of two of Melville’s passing protagonists, Babo and Benito Cereno, to engage in black-passing. Absent of any desire for whiteness, the black-passing they perform challenges the boundaries of traditional passing narratives. Utilizing Agamben’s theory of “bare life,”¹² I will analyze Babo and Benito Cereno’s black-passing as a form of literal self-preservation within a rigidly defined racial hegemonic order. I will base my analysis on Agamben’s claim that black sovereignty is premised upon their condition as

¹² See Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1998)

exceptions of the law, and that black men and women must perform an identity of “exclusive interiority” in which they become the center of political discourse through their symbolic exclusion from it (Agamben 14). I will use this text to further weigh the connections between literary Realism (the dominant mode of representation of the era) and socio-political conceptions of racial identity in the United States. In turn, I will challenge the “bootstrap theory” of American individualism and argue that the potential for racialized others to construct their own identities in the nineteenth century is limited to acts of passing. I also intend to argue that black-passing functions as the medium against which non-black American identities are constructed.

Chapter Two – This Ain’t Blackface: White Performances of Blackness in Mary White Ovington’s *The Shadow*. Expanding the definition of racial passing to include black-passing allows us to understand Mary White Ovington’s transformation of the passing plot in her novel *The Shadow* (1920). In employing a visibly white woman as a racially ambiguous character, Ovington challenges the way in which racial identity is written onto bodies through a regime of looking. Her novel questions the way (mis)reading these identities shapes the social roles members of each racial group are expected to perform. In this chapter, I will examine her novel’s protagonist, Hertha, through a black-passing lens to reveal a link between performances of blackness and the construction of white-American identities. I will argue that the novel’s inclination toward literary Naturalism demonstrates the investment of social, political, and religious institutions in specific readings of racial identities within a white/black framework. In

assessing her protagonist's motivation to black-pass as a black woman, I will link her apprehension over being made "conspicuous" to the anxiety of the tragic mulatta in having her "true" racial identity publicly exposed. I will also explore how the framing of passing narratives changes through spatial relocation, as Hertha's journey takes her from the rural South into the urban North. This raises questions about the impact of industrialization and urbanization on the manufacturing of racial identities. I will also assess the how the political consequences engendered by racial passing change as the act shifts from an attempt at material self-preservation to one of symbolic self-preservation.

Chapter Three – Imagining Black and White Others: Black-Passing in Post-racial American Literature. In Morrison's short story *Recitatif* (1983), her two female protagonists Twyla and Roberta develop and maintain a friendship that seemingly transcends race. One character is black, the other white and Morrison never reveals for the reader which is which. The color line that effectively anchors racial passing in a world of diametrically opposed categories of whiteness and blackness virtually disappears as Morrison tries to free her text up from chains of predetermined racial meanings. The transcendent post-racial identity the two aspire to comes at the expense of Maggie, the mute kitchen woman at the St. Bonaventure orphanage the two protagonists meet at. Their collective imagining of Maggie as a racial other, I argue, is an example of racial performativity emblematic of black-passing. I will also utilize Audre Lorde's conception of "difference" and its potential for generating substantive human connections to illustrate the critique of hegemonic norms at work in the short story.

I will extend this argument to account for the hegemonic norms governing gender and sexuality in ZZ Packer's short story "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" (2003). Her text illustrates how the rigid norms of race, gender, class, and sexuality function as barriers to human connection. For Dina, the story's protagonist, black-passing becomes her primary method for maintaining intimacy with her companion Heidi. She disguises the anxiety stemming from her relationship with Heidi by attributing it to racial anxiety fueled by her blackness. However, because the story is set in a post-racial time and place (Yale University in a post-Civil Rights era), there is no palpable color line anchoring the supposedly inherent racial differences between whites and blacks. Dina, therefore, imagines and performs a predetermined black identity as a contrast to the predetermined white identity she imposes on her white peers. These racial performances, which I characterize as black-passing, magnify racial difference as a way of masking one female's desire for another female.

By examining these texts through a black-passing lens, I hope to broaden the parameters of the discourse on racial passing literature and on representations of race. Black-passing adds layers of complexity to this literary subgenre that is so often negligently dismissed as useless drivel or overly celebrated as radically subversive. The critical lens moves us away from a fixation on the desirability of whiteness and the deplorability of blackness towards a more comprehensive framework for understanding the motivation of individuals to racially pass. As such, black-passing returns us to the

idea that passing is not simply a black phenomenon, but rather a racial performance that black individuals (or any raced individuals for that matter) may participate in.

The project concludes with a discussion that situates the unconventional permutations of racial passing demonstrated in these texts within the context of the conventional passing narrative tradition.

**CHAPTER ONE: AS BLACK AS IT GETS: PERFORMING BLACKNESS
IN 19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE**

“I can’t understand how anybody as intelligent as you like to think you are
can show evidences of such stupidity”

- Brian Redfield, *Passing*

Originally published¹³ in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in 1855, Melville’s novella *Benito Cereno* is one of the most significant racial narratives in American literature. The narrative details the experience of an American ship captain, Amasa Delano, after he boards a slave ship that has been overtaken by its African cargo. Babo, the mastermind behind the slave rebellion and engineer of a new racial symbolic order, stages a racial “performance” for the ages. In order to avoid certain death at the hands of Captain Delano for his takeover of the *San Dominick* and his usurpation of white authority, Babo feigns deference and docility befitting the social position of a black servant. So convincing is his performance that he completely fools Delano into believing that he is nothing more than a happy slave.

Harold Scudder, acknowledged as the discoverer of Melville’s source material for the novella, identifies the roots of the narrative in Chapter 18 of the real-life account of a slave ship rebellion titled *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World; Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific and Oriental Islands* (1817). Although there are substantial changes between the source material and the novella Melville constructs,

¹³ Eventually, the novella is published as part of the now canonized collection *The Piazza Tales* (1856)

having its roots in a real, material slave rebellion lends credence to the seriousness of the racial subject matter at work in *Benito Cereno*. It is precisely this issue, however, that becomes contentious for literary scholars. At the heart of the debate surrounding this text are the abolitionist merits of a story that deeply criticizes the deplorable effects of institutional slavery at the same time that it restores that system of human degradation by story's end. But all critics agree that race is an integral, if not the essential, component of the narrative. The narrative tension is driven by the racial anxieties of the story's protagonists as they struggle to define and comprehend the meaning of racial identity outside of the boundaries of a concretely defined white hegemonic order. In elevating race to the forefront of his audience's perception, Melville creates a text that challenges many commonly held assumptions about the relationship between race, racial categorization, and institutional chattel slavery.

This chapter offers a reading of *Benito Cereno* that situates the text even more ambiguously between abolitionist and proslavery extremes. By placing greater emphasis on the primary action (performance of racial norms) of the novella's black protagonist, Babo, instead of on the secondary action (his slave revolt), I make a case for the reclassification of the novella as a narrative of passing. The ramifications of the performance of racial identities in the text, I argue, take precedence over the trepidation produced through the rebellion of the slaves. Melville's text, therefore, is part of a passing discourse that explores the meaning of racial identity when the boundaries

(physical, social, political, and psychological) dividing blackness and whiteness are blurred and/or crossed.

Because Babo's racial performance is not premised on accomplishing a reading of whiteness on his body, his actions call into question the conventional *mulatta is black – becomes white* passing narrative structure. My analysis applies a "black-passing" framework to the narrative as a way of explaining his unique motivations for engaging in racial passing. This theoretical expansion of racial performance, as it applies to Babo, opens the text to examinations of performances of blackness as a response to fugitive slave laws. Agamben's theory of "bare life,"¹⁴ adds an additional layer to the analysis, revealing not only Babo's black-passing as a form of literal self-preservation within a rigidly defined white hegemonic order, but also the centrality of the politically disenfranchised to the regular functioning of slave societies. Ultimately, this chapter claims that *Benito Cereno* is a nineteenth-century narrative of black-passing that effectively undermines the stability of white and black racial categories, even as those categories are intentionally reinforced by the racial performances of the story's central characters. Melville's novella emblemizes the socially and politically subversive nature of this unconventional permutation of racial passing.

The Negro!

¹⁴ "Bare life," the subject of the first chapter of *Homo Sacer* (1998), is a philosophical-lingual term signifying "that fact of living common to all living beings." Agamben qualifies bare life as the biological essence of a living being before that essence gets incorporated into the bio-political nexus of sovereign power. This concept is more fully explicated in the latter half of this chapter.

Melville's novella *Benito Cereno*¹⁵ ends with a pointed exchange between Captain Amasa Delano and the titular Benito Cereno during their return voyage to Lima, following Cereno's escape from Babo's slave insurrection:

“You are saved,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; “you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?”

“The negro.”

These last words exchanged between the two men are the final utterance offered in the novella, signaling the linguistic and temporal termination of the narrative. Yet, they offer no resolution for Benito Cereno, who, three months after the trial and execution of this “negro,” follows his leader, Captain Aranda, to the grave. Although the conversation can be read multiple ways, one thing in particular stands out about Cereno's utterance – his reference to Babo as “the negro” and not by his name places emphasis on the underlying power of Babo's racial identity in shaping the narrative. Small in stature, Babo is not a particularly menacing figure. But as the emblem of black potentiality, his dark essence looms eerily over the narrative even after his life has expired. It is so powerful that Cereno and Delano cease to communicate once the potentiality of his identity has been invoked. Beyond it, there is nothing left to say.

¹⁵ Although eventually published as part of the (now canonized) collection *The Piazza Tales*, Melville's novella was originally published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1855.

In a manner ripe for trauma studies theorists, Benito Cereno's ominous response to Captain Delano's query highlights his psychological fragility once he is forced to confront the underlying realities of a white hegemonic order. Having escaped imprisonment at the hands of his African captors, Benito Cereno certainly attains physical freedom. As Captain Delano suggests, he is no longer subject to the misfortunes of a slave revolt masterminded by the nefarious Babo. His claim assumes that, had it not been for his own arrival onboard the *San Dominick*, Benito Cereno certainly would have met a lamentable end at the hands of his enslavers. Delano's insistence upon Cereno's relief at escaping his imprisonment is incongruous with Cereno's newly acquired understanding of what constitutes freedom. Delano refuses to consider Cereno's own revelation during his enslavement – the sharp distinction between being freed from imprisonment, in a physical sense, and being free of the emotions and memories of imprisonment, in a psychological sense. Cereno's material existence has been preserved through Delano's recapturing of the fugitive slave ship, and, in turn, the restoration of white hegemony within a Western racial hierarchy. However, his livelihood remains trapped within the racial disarray of his immediate past, prompting an examination of the associations between freedom and racial categorization.

The limitations of Cereno's freedom demonstrated in this conversation can be read as more than his inability to forget the events that transpire aboard the *San Dominick*. Foremost, it serves as his acknowledgement, perhaps an unconscious one, of the instability of the nineteenth-century eugenicist notions of race that privilege

whiteness over blackness.¹⁶ The white hegemonic order presupposes essentialist notions of mastery and servility meant to regulate interactions between whites (as masters) and blacks (as servants). That Babo is capable of taking control of the ship is an indication of the false premises upon which these essentialist theories are constructed. If the stereotypes of intellectual inferiority were based on fact, he would be unable to wrest control of the ship from his superior, white captors. But more importantly, this conversation between Cereno and Delano reveals the extent to which the legitimacy of white and black racial categories and their accompanying “inherent” essentialist notions of inferiority and superiority requires an acting out of specific racial norms. This helps explain why Cereno struggles so greatly with the idea of himself as free once he and his crew have been delivered by Delano. Although elevated to serve as Captain of the vessel, the highest rank available within this context, Cereno is relegated to a position of complete powerlessness that severely distorts his understanding of his whiteness. Neither his whiteness nor his captainship (which is merely an extension of that whiteness) gives him agency over the unfolding of events once Babo executes his plot. Cereno finds himself deeply haunted by his encounter with the unfamiliarity of his own racial identity outside of the hegemonic organization of racial norms. The authenticity of his “white” identity crumbles once Babo deconstructs the white hegemony operating on the ship. In fact, the greatest threats to his life occur when Delano proves unwilling to see beyond the

¹⁶ Emanuelle Eze’s *Race and the Enlightenment* (1997) outlines the evolution of race as a Western ideological construct through the progression of the European Enlightenment. Many of the works and authors he critiques argue for an understanding of race on the scientific level, particularly as a function of biology and heredity. Under such a framework, “scientific” cases are made for the assumed inherent inferiority of black individuals.

artificiality of his own racial assumptions couched within this order. The issue Cereno is now plagued by concerns what precisely his whiteness signifies when the mechanisms for the enforcement of white hegemony are eliminated. How is racial categorization meant to be understood in this new social context? How and what do whiteness and blackness signify beyond the limits of traditional racial perceptions?

Slave Revolt or Passing Narrative?

To begin answering the aforementioned questions, the categorization of Melville's text as a narrative of slave rebellion must first be reconsidered. In his essay "Fixing Meaning: Babo as Sign in 'Benito Cereno,'" Reinhold Dooley identifies *Benito Cereno* as a "narrative of a suppressed slave rebellion" focused on "racism and moral culpability." Racism and morality are important elements in the development of the story's characters; they explain the vicissitudes of each character's reading of the situation aboard the *San Dominick* based on their relationship to these two concepts. However, labeling Melville's novella as the narrative of a suppressed slave rebellion places unwarranted emphasis on the reestablishment of the racial hierarchy Babo destroys through his insurrection. The bulk of the narrative entails the interactions between Delano, Cereno, and Babo before Delano and his crew suppresses the slave rebellion. While his categorization of the text points to the events that culminate as a result of the racial tension onboard the *San Dominick*, only a mere few pages at the end of the text are devoted to the actual suppression of the slave rebellion. Nor does the slave rebellion itself ever take precedence in the narrative.

The majority of the details addressing Babo's takeover of the ship are sparse, offered almost entirely through the legal deposition that follows the central narrative. From these notarized "declarations" only portions are extracted to include in the text, pointing to the underdevelopment of this aspect of the story. The chronological gaps in this "official" narrative cause readers to question Benito Cereno's reliability as the agent of this legal account. He is an individual suffering from significant amounts of psychological trauma resulting from his captivity at the hands of Babo, as evidenced by his fainting spell when confronting the accused. Melville's utilization of these legalistic documents directs the attention of his readers to the suppression of the events that engender the story. This is not to suggest the secondary importance of the slave insurrection to the story's development, but rather to emphasize the necessity of repressing the facts of the insurrection in order to maintain the enchanted vision of the white hegemonic order that Delano brings with him aboard the ship.

We can also safely assert that this is not an American antebellum slave story (in the way William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853) and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) operate as abolitionist documents), although examining the consequences of institutional slavery is one of its central themes. As Eric Sundquist points out in his essay "Benito Cereno and New World Slavery," Melville shifts the chronological placement of the narrative from 1805 to 1799 to align it historically with "the age of democratic revolution, in particular the period of violent struggle leading to Haitian independence presided over by the heroic

black general Toussaint L'Ouverture" (95). He further points out that Melville changes the name of Benito Cereno's ship from the *Tryal* to the *San Dominick*, as a way of drawing connections between slave insurrection and Haitian independence. Haiti, the name adopted by the country San Domingo (San Dominigue, a virtual homophone for Cereno's ship) as a rhetorical gesture signifying their independence, functions as a primary reference point for American fears of slave insurrection. The violence enacted by Toussaint L'Ouverture and his successors against white planters in the Caribbean fueled proslavery fears of slave insubordination in the United States, hence the violent response to Nat Turner's slave rebellion in 1831 (Sundquist). Too, Melville geographically sets the story off the southern coast of Chile in Santa Maria harbor, indicating its international character. While these proslavery fears and abolitionist concerns are indirectly related to the specifics of this narrative, they are not its primary focus.

It proves equally difficult to ascertain what type of story we are dealing with by assessing who owns it. The story is revealed through its three principle characters: Benito Cereno, Captain Delano, and Babo. Benito Cereno serves as the story's titular character, but also happens to be the individual lacking the agency to verbally articulate his narrative. Our only insights into Cereno's story are the few pieces of the legal deposition included toward the end of the text. These narrative bits merely outline specific events that precede the narrative the reader engages. This is especially ironic considering that the legal deposition identifies Benito Cereno as the "deponent," literally the legal witness to all that has transpired (Melville 239). Yet, the story he tells Captain Delano concerning

the plight of the *San Dominick* is an artificial construct, the parameters of which are determined by Babo. As the italicized introduction to one excerpt illustrates, his enslavement by Babo forces him to “impose” a prescribed tale of the crews’ misadventures on Captain Delano (248). In other words, this segment of the story, despite its intended fictitiousness, is shared property. Cereno’s retort – “The negro” – to Delano’s query is the only utterance in the narrative that he truly owns, one that is not directly (but is, perhaps, indirectly) governed by his captor, Babo.

Although Captain Delano narrates events as they unfold before the reader, outside of the legal deposition he does not possess any part of the story. His uncertainty concerning the plight of the crew and its cargo persists until he leaves the *San Dominick*. He does not become aware of what is really transpiring aboard the ship until Cereno plunges into the ocean in pursuit of him and his boat. Delano’s deep desire to read a scripted Western racial hierarchy onto the ship and its crew causes him to suppress the truth behind the events that unfold before him. His misreading is both an unconscious and a conscious one. During the infamous shaving scene in the cuddy, Delano imagines, “that in the black [Babo] he saw a headsman, and in the white [Cereno] a man at the block” (214). This momentary flash provides him a brief glimpse into the truth of the situation aboard the ship, one that he passes off as “[an] antic conceit [...] from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free” (214). Later in the scene, the “hollowness” of Cereno’s manner engenders an idea in Delano that, “possibly master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in words and deed, nay, to the very tremor of

Don Benito's limbs, some juggling play before him" (217). But as before, he chooses not to trust his instinct and pursue the truth behind the "juggling play." Instead, Delano "speedily banishe[s]" the notion as whimsy, thereby emphasizing his willing, but unwitting, suppression of the truth. This suppression is also a conscious one. In discussing Benito Cereno's despondency at falling victim to Babo's machinations on the return voyage to Lima, he says, "But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it" (257). His insistence implies that Cereno's dejection is voluntary and that a willful suppression of the past is possible and will lead to the reconciliation of his fears. He emphasizes that more important than the events that have transpired is the necessity of eliminating them from one's memory. Once Cereno performs the same process of suppression that Delano has, then his uneasiness will be alleviated.

Delano also vehemently believes the supposed superior/inferior relationship between the Portuguese sailors and their African cargo to be part of the natural order of their existence. For instance, at one point Delano witnesses one of the enslaved African women breastfeeding her infant child:

His attention had been drawn to a slumbering negress, partly disclosed through the lace-work of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts, was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam's; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rotting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the negress (198).

The imagery Delano employs in his description of the "negress" and her child is intended as a reflection of animals existing in nature. The genderless child is seen as a "fawn" with "two paws" whose grunt as it tries to suckle from its sleeping mother's breast is not

formed language, but rather a guttural, animalistic ejaculation. Its “stark naked” body signals an absence of those civilizing influences that would require the child be properly clothed in the presence of others. The “slumbering” mother, described “like a doe,” awakens to Delano’s gaze, but acts as if “[she is] not at all concerned at the attitude in which she had been caught.” Her unconcern demonstrates her own lack of concern for Western notions of propriety in the eighteenth century. Gazing majestically as the act unfolds, Delano thinks, “There’s naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love.” Delano’s desire for the reinforcement of his naïve belief in the inferiority of blacks causes him to romanticize the exoticness of the situation before him. The story we get from him is one he fantasizes of, one that echoes the pastoral idealization of slavery prominent in his native United States.¹⁷ His concern with reading naturalness into the superior/inferior binary marks his unreliability as a narrator and his virtual absence of agency over the formation of the underlying narrative.

Nor do readers believe this story to be owned entirely by Babo. His precarious situation onboard the *San Dominick* does not afford him the opportunity to articulate his story as the independent, freethinking individual we know him to be by the end of the text. Rather, his reflections on what occurs onboard the ship must necessarily be understood as a response to the set of restrictive racial norms Delano’s presence symbolizes. These norms become a form of imprisonment limiting his speech, actions,

¹⁷ Thomas Nelson Page’s *Marse Chan* (1884) and Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s *The Leopards Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) are examples of slave pastorals that glorify the desire of black men and women for the order and security of the plantation. These texts epitomize the mutual dependency of blacks and whites on each other in maintaining the stability of slave societies.

and behaviors. Under this symbolic form of captivity, the story he “tells” is actually the fictitious journey told to Delano through Cereno. To tell this fictitious story and to maintain Delano’s misguided, yet strongly desired, racial illusions, to make it palatable, Babo necessarily adopts the persona of a servile, powerless African properly situated within Delano’s concept of white hegemony. This identity allows him to script the fictitious narrative in a way that completely masks the underlying narrative of slave rebellion, while also avoiding the severe consequences of directly destabilizing the white superiority assumed as part of a Western racial hierarchy.

As a result, two figures emerge from this central tension – Babo as he knows himself to be and Babo as Delano knows and expects him to be. The former is the empowered leader who orchestrates the slave rebellion and overtakes the vessel, the latter a symbolic figure that the former manipulates in order to mislead his potential enslavers. These two conflicting identities can be better understood in relation to DuBois’s theory of double-consciousness.¹⁸ According to DuBois, the Negro’s existence is characterized by the “peculiar sensation...of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (DuBois 11). For DuBois, this constant self-scrutiny is a sort of panopticism¹⁹ meant to condition Negroes to act according to a predetermined set of behaviors. Babo’s docility demonstrates his active participation in this process of viewing himself through an

¹⁸ See W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

¹⁹ In his discourse on the formation of the subject through institutional discipline enacted on bodies, Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975) describes “panopticism” as a mechanism of perpetual surveillance that “assures the automatic functioning of [institutional] power.” So totalizing is the gaze behind the system of surveillance, and so concerned with being its object, that subjects internalize these mechanisms to the degree that they begin policing their own behaviors.

external lens of whiteness and superiority that reflects white hegemony. He fully understands that in order to survive, he must perform those predetermined behaviors that will reinforce Captain Delano's sense of racial superiority. Doing so necessitates that he see himself from Delano's white-American perspective.

His dual identity, however, does not present him with the same sort of existential crisis DuBois claims all Negroes face when viewing themselves through this lens. There are two principle reasons for this: first, the identity Babo assumes in the presence of Captain Delano is complete artifice, an abstract, incongruous entity that, in itself, symbolizes nothing about the authentic individual Babo understands himself to be; and second, the identity Babo assumes is not premised on a desire for whiteness.²⁰ His racial performance is staged not so that he may be perceived as a genetic or assimilated member of the socially privileged racial group (whites), but rather so that he will be mistaken for one of the lowliest members of the subordinate racial group (blacks). He manipulates Whiteness as a linguistically ordered master signifier to reinforce his blackness. The docile, servile African persona he takes on is foreign to Babo outside of the specific social context he finds himself in, a context premised upon a certain form of blackness in relation to Whiteness. It is a scripted blackness that carries certain expectations intended to reinforce white superiority through black inferiority. His performance, then, characterizes him as a racial passer engaged in the process of black-passing. He is an

²⁰ In *Desiring Whiteness* (2000), Sheshadri-Crooks posits Whiteness as a master signifier within a "regime of looking" against which all subcategories of race are measured, thereby producing a desire in all racialized subjects to achieve the wholeness it represents. Babo's actions as a black-passer appear to undermine this desirability, forcing consideration of blackness as an escape from imprisonment within a regime of looking.

individual who willingly performs a particular set of behaviors that allow him to be read as a typified black individual, incongruous to his own self-perception, as a means of subverting a restrictive set of social conditions meant to govern his existence.

Because the majority of the primary narrative centers on Babo's performance of servility as a response to Captain Delano's presence on the ship, we might more accurately categorize Melville's novella as a narrative of passing. Babo's actions as a passer, a performer of a predetermined (in this case, black) racial identity, are the fundamental actions that shape events in the text. Critics of Melville's novella have often hinted at this interpretation of Babo's role in the story. In "Orders of Power: The Authority of Babo in Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" Alan Shima describes Babo's performance onboard the ship as a "miming [of] the forms and images that construct blacks as obedient yet unintelligent attendants" (Shima 305). He understands Babo's performance as a "grand charade" that "subverts the logic of the racial politics" serving as the backdrop for the narrative. In his aforementioned essay, Reinhart Dooley examines the fluidity of systematic (i.e. racial, linguistic) meaning as it appears in the novella. Dooley labels Babo's racial performance as an "elaborate masquerade," claiming that Babo performs a racial role that intentionally establishes him as an "embodied sign, offered up to interpretation by Captain Delano" (Dooley 42). As an "embodied sign," Babo's masquerade prompts Captain Delano to invest him with meaning according to the logic of the white hegemonic order Delano represents. Hyejin Kim makes a similar observation concerning Babo's performance in "Questions of Social Order in Herman

Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" He deems it a "calculated performance" capable of exposing race "as a social fiction, not a substantial, natural category" (Kim 1124). In donning the worst traits of the slave system (i.e. docility, infantilism, ignorance, and submissiveness), Babo's racial performance demonstrates his recognition "[of] the social, cultural boundary of race as a fiction of law and custom" (1128). These identifications all point to the importance of Babo's staged performance to the narrative, which can then be used to situate the novella in relation to other narratives of racial performativity, specifically passing narratives.

While these critics are aware of Babo's racial performance, they overlook its centrality to Melville's critique of racial norms. They tend to treat it as a secondary issue in the text, privileging a reading of the narrative as one of a slave rebellion. They see Babo's racial performance as an extension of the slave rebellion he engineers rather than as the impetus of the rebellion itself. But the rebellion at the heart of the narrative, Babo's destabilization of the white hegemonic order, is engendered through his racial passing. His performance, which functions as a critique of the manner in which racial identities get written onto bodies, is the literary device upon which the entire narrative hinges. Much as the plots of many other passing narratives rely on the plight of the identity crises of their tragic mulatta/o protagonists, *Benito Cereno* uses the "plight" of a tragic Negro, Babo, to construct its narrative tension. But this is not a typical passing narrative, as his motives for passing, while seemingly similar, are radically different from those of his literary counterparts.

In terms of similarities, Babo's takeover of the *San Dominick* and its crew is indicative of his desire to be free from the slave-like conditions that govern his existence. His rebellion demonstrates characteristics that contradict the assumed inherent inferiority of Negroes that served as the lynchpin of nineteenth-century racial attitudes: he is crafty, and resourceful, conducting the rebellion with limited tools and resources; he is resolute in achieving a specific purpose; he tempers his cunning with restraint, opting to spare the lives of many of the crewmen responsible for his captivity (and any argument made for the necessity of saving these crewmen for his own benefit only points to his ability to accurately and logically assess his circumstances, another revered trait); and he controls events with an unsettling artistry. In the infamous "shaving" scene, Delano describes him as "a Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue-head," an image situating Babo as a refined craftsman shaping the crude, blocky object that is his white counterpart (217). To a degree, these revered characteristics parallel the qualities that Delano, the (self-proclaimed) civilized, enlightened character in the narrative, professes to demonstrate in the execution of his duties aboard his own ship, *Bachelor's Delight*. Through his leadership, his crew is well disciplined, his ship well-ordered and maintained; believing Cereno's crew victims of malaria, he is compassionate toward their difficulties, mourning the loss of those vanquished on their journey; he generously offers up his own supplies of food and water to the ravished crew; and he is well-versed in the codes of hospitality, reciprocating that extended to him by offering Benito Cereno a brief reprieve aboard

Bachelor's Delight. In many ways, Babo and Delano are more similar to one another than are Cereno and Delano.

More importantly, Babo's desire to be rid of his slave-like restraints and his ingenuity in subverting the prevailing stereotypes concerning Negro inferiority are similar to the function of other passing protagonists in their respective narratives. In William Wells Brown's famous nineteenth-century novel *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* the titular mulatta, Clotel, passes as a white woman to avoid detection by those who would see her reinserted into the "peculiar institution"²¹ of chattel slavery. Clotel's journey back to the South to retrieve her newly enslaved daughter involves a performance of whiteness possible because of her mixed-race heritage. Her metaphoric and literal "trespass" of the color line suggests the falsity of the fixedness of racial categories meant to reinforce white superiority. Too, this performance illustrates a degree of agency over how her body gets read as a racial text. The potentially violent and sexual retribution Clotel faces in having her true identity revealed as she makes her journey magnifies her courage, her resoluteness, and her unyielding love and compassion for her child, characteristics that establish Clotel's humanity as a part of her blackness. She proves to be Babo's equal in cleverness and manipulation of the white hegemonic order to accomplish specific ends.

²¹ Ann duCille's essay "Marriage, Family, and Other "Peculiar" Institutions in African American Literary History" is an especially poignant examination of the etymology of slavery's nickname, the "peculiar institution."

Still, despite these similarities, Babo's passing differs immensely from Clotel's. Her form of passing is an insertion into the racial symbolic order at its dominant pole (whiteness), while his passing solidifies his placement at the polarized end (blackness) of the same spectrum. Her movement between social worlds works to invert racial dynamics in a way that morally, ethically, and intellectually elevates blackness above whiteness. Her noble nature, in concert with her white appearance, not only exposes the hypocrisy of white racial attitudes concerning black inferiority, but it places her in a white social system that grants her a series of privileges she would otherwise be denied. Babo's subversion of the racial order through his rebellion, though, is not an inversion of the racial hierarchy in order to privilege blackness over whiteness. This absence of a desire for whiteness is especially evident by the fact that Babo's aim is not to rule the Portuguese sailors intent on capturing and transporting him to foreign soil, but rather to utilize them to escape his enslavement within an oppressive Western racial hierarchy. Outside of his basic survival, there are no long-term privileges involved in the black-passing he is performing. We might better understand his performance of black racial norms in relation to examples of passing extracted from one of the sub-narratives of Brown's *Clotel* and also Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

In Brown's text, a less obvious, but more intriguing example of racial passing than that of his titular mulatta involves two escaped slaves as they make their way to the North. The two men, both of whom appear visibly black and might otherwise be

incapable of racial passing, stage a performance of blackness that allows them to move unmolested through the southern states. The performance is carried out by having one man ride the horse they have secured, while the other walks dejectedly before horse and rider. The rider proceeds to whip the man on foot, chastising him for his naïve attempt to flee the plantation. (The two men switch places in each town they encounter.) White onlookers find the spectacle of this black-on-black slave enforcement amusing in the same way that Delano finds Babo's performance of blackness endearing. And like Delano, the onlookers are oblivious to the underlying narrative of escape, so intently focused are they on the fictitious narrative of black inferiority that reinforces their sense of racial superiority. Through their ingenuity, the two escaped slaves manufacture a narrative that so completely masks their deception, they are capable of securing their own freedom before the gaze of those that would see them enslaved.

The strength of this narrative lies in a precise performance of blackness. For the man on foot, he must pass as a disconsolate, black slave that begrudgingly surrenders to the demands of his "black master." A passing performance is also required of the rider, who must demonstrate anger and disbelief at a black individual who fancies himself capable of fleeing plantation life. He must convincingly pass himself off as an unintelligent man (each speaks in dialect, a parochial form of speech that connotes a lower social and educational status) who so greatly buys into the prevailing ideologies surrounding the benefits of slavery that he is willing (and can be trusted) to capture and return other blacks to that repressive system of human chattel. This form of blackness

appears incongruous with their desire as black men to escape slavery and the ingenuity with which they concoct such an elaborate and risky scheme. But both perform stereotypical blackness so convincingly that they undermine the myth of black inferiority, even as they reaffirm it.

A similar example of black-passing can be drawn from Douglass's slave narrative, in which Douglass himself stages performances of blackness that contribute to his attaining literacy. After moving in with the Auld family in Baltimore, Douglass acquires literacy in an unconventional manner. Having learned basic letters from the copybooks of his young charge, he scribbles the letters at random on a wall. As literate whites pass by, he points to what he has written and brags about being able to spell certain words. Mocking him for his illiteracy, these whites go to the wall and correctly spell the words he boasts of knowing. When they leave, he commits the writing on the wall to memory, and in this manner slowly develops a modicum of literacy. The cleverness of this ruse is amusing in its own regard, as it undermines the very notion of power that Douglass himself ascribes to literacy. The supposed intellectual superiority of those literate beings that unwittingly educate him is exposed as a farce. Their ability to read text is an ineffective tool for reading the truth in certain social situations, as is the case with Capt Delano. In other words, being literate is not always necessarily indicative of intellectual superiority. The power of literacy is in connecting an individual with a larger social collective through the use of specific symbols. The success of Douglass attaining literacy and making this connection with the wider world hinges on his

performance of black ignorance, not his illiteracy. He is already more adept at reading into the operation of race and racialization in social situations such as this, thereby demonstrating his cleverness and ingenuity even as he reinforces his supposed inferiority. To achieve his own ends, he must effectively pass as someone who is mentally deficient, a dumb black whose ego for being able to scribble letters on a wall must be immediately checked by showing him his own ignorance. But in reminding him of his ignorance, his white teachers are unaware of an underlying narrative of racial passing at work in their interaction. Black-passing, the impetus through which these enslaved men accomplish their ends, serves as a tool of empowerment through deception. Effectively performing blackness and inferiority becomes a means of demonstrating individual superiority. In this respect, Melville is signifying²² passing as a literary trope from authors like William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass in the construction of his narrative.

Both of these examples of passing mirror the type of black-passing Babo employs to achieve his own ends in the aftermath of his rebellion against the crew of the *San Dominick*. Carrying out the rebellion is not an act of passing, despite the resulting subversion of white superiority onboard the ship. Babo's rebellion and takeover of the ship, and his imposition of an alternate racial reality, are all part of the underlying narrative that he attempts to mask through black-passing. It is not until Delano arrives on the ship that Babo performs as the pitiful African servant Delano expects him to be. The

²² In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) Henry L. Gates, Jr. defines "signifying" as an act through which an author's work is connected to the work of other authors through an appropriation, direct or indirect, of their thematic and stylistic strategies. For Melville, signifying on the texts of Brown and Douglass

dynamic behind Babo's newly formed racial order transforms once Delano boards the *San Dominick*, bringing with him the full force of the white hegemoni order Babo previously deconstructs through his rebellion. This marks the moment when Babo must feign subservience to Cereno by performing a specific form of blackness that adheres to an essentialist racial ideology. Babo must necessarily repress his own admirable qualities (i.e. leadership, intelligence, ingenuity), the very qualities Delano prides himself on, as a mechanism for survival in this new context. His black-passing is the adoption of characteristics intended to magnify an unremarkable, slave-like meekness that embodies a slave's existence. Rather than passing as a member of the dominant racial group, his racial performance emblemizes the black servility upon which slave societies flourish.

Babo's black-passing performance is so entirely convincing that Delano believes the interactions he witnesses between Cereno and Babo to be harmonious. As Cereno explains to Delano his indebtedness to Babo for his own preservation and for the management of his "ignorant brethren," Delano fancies the "beauty of [a] relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other." Finding himself completely enamored with Babo's dismissive reply to Cereno's praise, Delano shouts, "Faithful fellow! [...] Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him" (Melville 176). The irony behind his utterance is not lost on readers. Labeling Babo "friend" rather than "slave" indicates the extent of his belief in Babo's reliability and harmlessness, to the point where he symbolically removes him from the realm of inferiority and places him on a socially privileged footing nearly equal to that of

him and Cereno. This is not, however, a misreading of the relationship between the two men. “Faithful” and “fidelity” are terms used to describe mutual devotion between individuals in a relationship, a commitment that Cereno and Babo have made to one another. The production, articulation, and perpetuation of the fictitious narrative manufactured for Delano requires their shared commitment. Critic Jason Richards explains this commitment as a mutually produced burlesque resulting simultaneously in blackface and whiteface minstrelsy.²³ He claims that by sustaining and inverting traditional roles throughout the novella, Melville encourages readers to observe the duplicity of the performance at hand. “[Babo],” he writes, “enacts this masquerade by deploying Cereno’s body as a white mask,” much as minstrel performers “‘inhabited’ black bodies to indulge racial fantasy and burlesque blacks” (Richards 74). In a way, then, Cereno is being forced to participate as a racial passer. As Babo’s “white mask,” he must pretend to the characteristics associated with captaincy and whiteness that reinforce the superiority stripped away by Babo’s rebellion. The two are passing in concert to tell this story, which, if fully accepted by Delano, will ensure their mutual survival. In this respect, the fidelity Delano believes he sees is precisely what he describes it as – a “spectacle,” both black and white.

²³ In his essay “Melville’s (Inter)national Burlesque: Whiteface, Blackface, and ‘Benito Cereno,’” (2007) Richards builds on popularized claims evoked in Eric J. Sundquist’s *Benito Cereno and New World Slavery* (1986) and Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) of Babo’s racial performance as an invocation of minstrelsy. The latter critics argue that minstrelsy was both the acknowledgment of the value of blackness to the cultural and artistic milieu and also the theft of its representations in those spheres.

What Delano does misread is what Babo's "blackness" signifies within this specific context, viewing it as natural, organic, and fixed rather than as artificial and fluid. He chooses to only examine Babo's blackness in relation to a conventional white/black binary in which whiteness and blackness carry predetermined characteristics that bolster white superiority and black inferiority. Everything he interprets within this binary becomes part of the staged spectacle produced by Babo and Cereno to lead him away from discovering the true narrative beneath their fictitious one. His misreading highlights the most important of all Babo's qualities; that Babo intimately understands the functioning of racial identity within and outside of the framework of the white hegemonic order in a way that his captors do not. His thorough understanding of the foundational importance of black servility to this ideology allows him the agency to control the narrative, and, in turn, Cereno and Delano.

It is imperative to remember that Babo's black-passing is performed both through his gestures and through his verbal articulation. There are many instances in the novella that depict Babo physically supporting the fragile Cereno. Although described as "small of stature," Babo frequently acts as a crutch for the faltering ship captain. Like the "negress" who awakens and sweeps her infant into her arms, Babo appears as a sort of maternal cradle wrapped around the infantile Cereno. Cereno's dependence on Babo is similar to the infant's dependence on the "negress" for sustenance. Yet, despite his dominance (physical and psychological) over Cereno, Babo remains visually unassuming, always positioning himself slightly beyond the perceptual focal point of the

action. Readers see him “slipping aside a little,” perched carefully next to his captive in a position of servility. He intentionally avoids becoming the center of attention, a metaphor for his aim in (black-)passing beyond Delano’s questioning gaze.

This is true of Babo’s manner of verbal articulation as well. Likely, the skillful employment of language on Babo’s part would immediately expose him as something more or someone other than a servant. Linguistic mastery (marked by “proper” grammatical and inflected use of any given language, Portuguese in this case) would connote sophistication and education, privileges considered taboo for blacks in general and even more so for slaves. He would risk arousing Delano’s suspicion if he takes the initiative to freely speak his mind, or takes it upon himself to articulate the false narrative of their calamitous journey. In fact, similar to Cereno, Babo seems to own only a single phrase in the narrative – the ominous “follow your leader” etched into the bulkhead beneath the skeletal remains of the ship’s original captain, Don Aranda. This is the only form of articulation we see or hear from him that does not derive from, nor is measured against, Delano’s presence on the ship. After he is discovered as an insurrectionist, Babo chooses to say nothing: “His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words” (Melville 258). His survival in the presence of Delano is predicated on his ability to pass himself off as unequivocally inferior in all things to his captive Benito Cereno. This explains the majority of his utterances, which are nearly all in response to something Cereno says to Delano or that Delano says to Cereno.

Babo's stereotypically black utterances are an interesting mixture of deference and confidence that fuel Delano's misreading of his servility, but that also demonstrate his absolute command over lingual conventions. For instance, when Delano offers to purchase Babo from Cereno, without hesitation Babo replies, "Master wouldn't part with Babo for a thousand doubloons" (Melville 194). The deference comes through in Babo's third-person reference to himself. Absent of the subjectivity imbued to a first-person speaking subject (I/me), he inserts himself into the linguistic exchange as an object, as someone or something acted upon. He also cleverly refers to Cereno as Master, setting up a duality (Master/Babo =master/slave) between Cereno and himself that further reinforces his servility. Although he does not necessarily speak in the "lower-class" regional dialect spoken by black characters in texts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), he uses specific rhetorical strategies suggestive of a barbaric provincialism Delano is likely to believe in. His manner of speech reinforces this belief. Delano describes the utterance as a "murmuring" rather than an assertion or statement, meaning that the gesture behind the utterance is deferential. Delano ascribes this deference to "the strange vanity of a faithful slave...scorning to hear so paltry a valuation put upon him by a stranger" (195). Delano understands Babo's feeling affronted as a failure to acknowledge his true monetary worth as a slave, which further sustains his assumed servile nature.

But the immediacy of Babo's response confirms his confidence in answering Delano's proposal, a trait uncharacteristic of a slave. Delano is aware of this surprising aspect of Babo's character. Before he offers to purchase Babo, readers see how he

regards the faithful slave: “Delano could not avoid again congratulating his host upon possessing such a servant, who, though perhaps *a little too forward* now and then, must upon the whole be invaluable to one in the invalid’s situation” (Melville 194, emphasis added). Delano is aware that Babo takes the initiative to speak even when not called upon, and that, at times, the frankness of his speech is unbecoming of a slave. But the combination of his gestures and his verbal speech lead Delano to write his confidence off as bizarre but not alarming. Grand oratory and gesticulation would expose Delano’s assumption of Babo’s racial inferiority for what it is, an illusion. Babo, therefore, carefully crafts his speech and gestures in a manner that maintains this illusion. Because all of Babo’s verbal articulation and gesturing that gets written into the text occurs in the presence of Delano, readers cannot be sure if these forms of communication reflect Babo’s speech patterns and body language outside of a black-passing context. But regardless of whether this is or is not the case, both support his actions as a black-passer.

Not only is his own performance of blackness convincing, but so too is that of the other slaves aboard the *San Dominick*. So reliably do they perform their tasks that once the fictitiousness of their tale becomes suspect, Delano reflects, “[If the story was an invention] then every soul on board, down to the youngest negress, was his carefully drilled recruit in the plot” (Melville 192). The use of the phrase “carefully drilled recruit” is especially important as it contrasts sharply with the general disarray Delano observes on deck. The phrase itself implies order and discipline, which are usually developed through a highly structured system of leadership. Cereno appears incapable of supplying

this leadership; he is thought by Delano to perhaps be “one of those paper captains [...] a commander who has little of command but the name” (179). It is through Babo’s leadership that the meticulous performance of the crew masks the true situation aboard the *San Dominick*. In this sense, Babo is not simply a somewhat intelligent pretender, but rather a “passing” mastermind that has ingeniously manipulated the dominant racial hierarchy to engineer a new social (and racial) order on the slaver. His leadership through feigned deference effectively dispels the myths of black inferiority, even as his actions reinforce its conditions.

This collective performance of blackness is so precise that it leads Delano to figure that it is Cereno who is an imposter, a man who is passing as someone other than he truly is. His misgivings concerning the narrative Cereno reports leads him to entertain the idea of Cereno as a “burglar” and “assassin” bent on deception and treachery. The drifting of the ship, its overall disarray, and especially the lack of confidence and leadership Cereno exudes make Delano skeptical of his host’s intentions: “And might not that same undiminished Spanish crew, alleged to have perished off to a remnant, be at that very moment lurking in the hold?” (191). Cereno, who Delano expects to live up to the reputation of his command, comes off as entirely deferential, subservient, and cowardly. He fails to measure up to Delano’s standard for a ship captain, hence his skepticism. But it also points to the real issue Cereno struggles with in this situation – his whiteness as a performance. The realization Cereno makes during this experience is that the inherent superiority of the whiteness he assumes in this context no longer has an

anchor in reality. Cereno's inability to perform the necessary measure of whiteness to maintain the ruse demonstrates the falsity of the ideological premises of white hegemony. Not only is Cereno not superior to his black counterpart Babo, but he struggles to even pretend to be so. He is completely at the mercy of his captor. Perhaps this is an indication that he has learned at what cost white hegemony is purchased, and what it tells us about the nature of human enslavement. He now has to live fully aware of his role in the perpetuation of a system of slavery premised on the imposition of "inferiority" on the racial other, which he comes to find is a complete fabrication. He can now see that his white privilege derives not from anything unique about himself, but through a series of institutional forces manipulating interpretations of "race" over which he has little or no control. Too, once Babo eradicates Whiteness as the master signifier through his rebellion and his black-passing, Cereno becomes racially discombobulated and loses all sense of self. He is wholly incapable of self-definition. Indeed, he has become the ultimate slave.

To return briefly to the issue of who owns the narrative, I propose that we think about Melville's novella outside of the traditional white/black binary Delano invests so heavily in. Instead, because there are two Babo's in the text (the man and the performer), it is more productive to think of this text as at least two simultaneous narratives – one of institutionally sanctioned racialization within the framework of the white hegemonic order that solidifies "white" and "black" as authentic categories, and another in which racialization is the destabilization of the regime of looking that governs how race gets read onto bodies. The former narrative, of course, functions as a mask for the latter. It

supplies a diversion that makes possible a momentary escape from participation in and enforcement of racial ideologies and practices that permeate slave societies. It requires all three men (Delano, Cereno, Babo) working in concert for its development and its consumption by readers; both Delano who is constantly reading into the situation aboard the ship, and the reader who has purchased Melville's text. The latter, however, carries with it severe and dangerous consequences. Because of its potential to expose the instability of racial categories, this second narrative threatens the institutional authority upon which the white hegemonic order sustains itself. Therefore, we need to more fully grasp the role of institutional power in shaping racial categories in the nineteenth century.

Racial Passing, Institutional Power, and Realistic Fiction

In 1850, as part of a compromise between Southern slaveholding interests and anxious Northern Free Soilers, the United States Congress passed a resolution mandating the return of all runaway slaves back to their slave masters. This resolution, officially titled the *Fugitive Slave Act*,²⁴ served to reinforce the institutional apparatuses already at work in the policing of the peculiar institution, but that had begun to erode through abolitionist efforts. The mechanisms of abolition – including Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, antislavery newspapers such as William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, the antislavery lecture circuit, and literary texts and slave narratives – exerted

²⁴ This piece of legislation was intended to reinforce the mechanisms of the legal disenfranchisement of black men and women that were a part of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and Article 4, Section 2 of the US Constitution. Both wedded the extradition of slaves to the obligations of states to one another.

significant force against the enslavement and disenfranchisement of black women and men in the body politic. Legal challenges include the *Rachel v. Walker* (1838) case tried in the Missouri Supreme Court, and the *Priggs v. Pennsylvania* (1843) decision that would eventually come before the Supreme Court as a challenge to the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act.²⁵ Proslavery proponents, however, remained adamant in their conviction that blacks be excluded from the life of the nation except as laborers in its economic and industrial machinery, negotiating a deal that would ensure the legal obligation of the federal government in backing the South's slave economy. This antislavery/proslavery debate proved fundamental in shaping the experience of black existence. The black body became its object of scrutiny and white men (and women, perhaps) became beneficiaries of its objectification. The condition of all blacks in the United States, but more specifically slaves, as less-than-human reinforced white superiority, even that of antislavery proponents, through black denigration. This superiority of Whiteness upon which the dominant cultural, social, political, and economic institutions thrived was being challenged through abolitionist efforts.

So hotly contested were the debates over slavery, and so ingrained in the social imagination were the fears of unleashing black sexuality and aggression on a helpless

²⁵ In the *Rachel v. Walker* case, a black woman, Rachel, appealed that she and her son had been held illegally as a slave by slave trader William Walker in the state of Michigan. The case went before the Missouri Supreme Court where Rachel won her appeal. The case served as precedent for the 1856 *Dred Scot v. Sanford* case that went before the United States Supreme Court. In the *Priggs v. Pennsylvania* case, slave catcher Edward Prigg and his three associates were tried for the illegal seizure and sale of former slave Margaret Morgan. Refer to the collection of essays *The Law of American Slavery: major historical interpretations* (1987) ed. Kermit Hall for a broad examination of these and other similar court cases where the relationship between slavery and constitutionality is addressed.

white American public that the “bare life” of the black woman and man was always at stake. The protagonist of Giorgio Agamben’s book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), “bare life” is a philosophical-lingual term signifying “that fact of living common to all living beings” (1). Agamben qualifies bare life as the biological essence of a living being before that essence gets incorporated into the bio-political nexus of sovereign power. Building on theories of biopolitics popularized by Michel Foucault, Agamben argues, “the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (6). As a force rooted in an individual’s visceral being, bare life operates on a literal level. A being is alive or not, it has bare life or it does not. But when bare life is merged with politics, life takes on a social dynamic that makes it more substantive than mere natural life. The living being now exists in the realm of the politically symbolic, a world where one might possess bare life while simultaneously being socially dead.²⁶ We might more aptly characterize the difference as one between life (bare life) and livelihood (biopolitics).

Bare life is relevant to the conversation on *Benito Cereno* because of its importance in the workings of slave societies. Pre-industrial slave societies, such as the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, fed (politically, socially, and economically) on biopolitical power drawn from the biological vitality of enslaved

²⁶ The specific example Agamben uses to highlight this distinction between bare life and political life (Aristotle’s “life according to the good”) is the distinction drawn between man and animal. In the realm of human politics, man transcends bare life through its capacity for language, which allows it to qualify life not simply as pleasant or unpleasant, but as good or bad and as just or unjust.

women and men. Agrarian economies, particularly those in the southern states, necessitated bodies imbued with bare life that could perform the physical labor (plowing, planting, hoeing, irrigating, picking, producing, reproducing, etc.) those economies demanded. One of the novella's most basic plot elements, the transportation of African slaves, is based on the need to replenish and/or solidify the wellspring of bare life that allows slave economies to flourish. Babo and his fellow Africans are being stripped of their political-ness, removed from a biopolitical world, and inserted into a manufactured, politically barren world of a bare life existence. At stake in Babo's rebellion, then, is the bare life energy of he and his fellow slaves. Essentially, whites would treat their deaths strictly as an economic loss without any impact on the qualitative value of their humanity. It would register as a loss of life, but not as a loss of livelihood.

The tricky situation slave holders and managers of agrarian economies had to contend with was utilizing bare life without turning their human commodities into members of the body politic. To continue accumulating wealth they had to engineer methods to systematically enforce the expenditure of bare life energies, while simultaneously engineering methods of disenfranchisement that ensured their human chattel remained nothing more than bare life commodities. Agamben makes clear the impossibility of such an action. Revising Foucauldian theses on the characterization of modern politics, he writes:

[T]he realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested (9).

What Agamben points out is that there is no clear point of separation between bare life and human political life within a political system; bare life is always a factor in the constitution of a given political society. And those beings characterized solely by their bare life energies (i.e. chattel slaves) get labeled as “exceptions” to these societies, but actually exist at their center. The attempted exclusion of them from the body politic is an indirect form of their inclusion at its heart. Not only do their bodies fuel the machinery of agriculture and industry, but they also fuel the debate between proslavery and antislavery proponents, who, because of this debate, are recognized as participants in the body politic.

In this specific socio-historical context, racial passing can be read as an attempt on the part of passers to reinvest their bodies with specific political and social meanings that transcend a bare life existence. For mulattas/os, this is accomplished primarily by physically appearing white. When whiteness is read on the body of the passer, s/he escapes relegation to the existence of a slave whose life force is sapped for economic gain. The passer is then capable of participating in the body politic as a willing subject and not as an ignored object. For those passers who engage in black-passing, the aim is nearly identical even though the means are different. For the two previously mentioned escaped slaves in *Clotel*, black-passing allows them to literally escape a bare life existence, which in turn affords them a limited amount of freedom to search out their own livelihoods. In his acquisition of literacy, Douglass injects himself into the body politic

by mastering the tools of the linguistic system that structures its communication network. It merely requires racial performances that ensure blackness will be read on their bodies.

But despite the various racial permutations being read on the bodies of passers, death is the consequence awaiting each type of passer when discovered. Concrete, impenetrable categories of blackness and whiteness are so integral to the maintenance of the white hegemonic order of slave societies that racial passing, the subversion of those very categories, engenders the swift, harsh extermination of bare life. Allowing the passer to escape this fate would be to passively accept the political implications of crossing the color line. Those who benefit from maintaining the white hegemonic order must ensure that the exposed passer suffers the requisite consequences. The promptness and cruelty with which Babo is dispatched after being discovered as a passer attests to this reality. In a clearly one-sided trial no testimony is offered in Babo's defense. The depravity of chattel slavery and its effects on those it enslaves is never considered in judging his actions and their motivation. Babo is beheaded and his decapitated appendage is placed on a pole. His judges and executioner turn his head into a public spectacle as a deterrent to slaves plotting future insurrections against their masters. It serves as a reminder of what happens when the power of white hegemony is challenged.

Highlighting the risk involved in racial passing during the nineteenth century is important in developing a theory behind the passing tradition in literature. The threat of discovery shapes the narrative being told and how it gets told. In the case of "Benito Cereno," the cautionary ending – this is what happens to those who are discovered – can

be read as a warning against slave rebellion (but more precisely, racial passing), an authorial decision that plays on the fears of Melville's white reading public. Despite the relatively few and insubstantial slave rebellions that occurred in the United States in the nineteenth century, collective fears of slave rebellion permeated the nation's social imagination.²⁷ Melville constructs Babo's tale in a way that substantiates fears of an uncontrollable black population let loose in a white society, hence the need for their (political, but not biopolitical) segregation from it. But Melville is also creating a narrative that undermines this topical reading of racialized existence in his text. His use of Babo, particularly in the final pages of the text, illustrates what Agamben is trying to articulate about the centrality of bare life to the functioning of a biopolitical society. Although Babo's bare life has been destroyed and he no longer exists in the world, he becomes a symbol around which the biopolitical world of the living orients itself. The trial, the legal deposition, and the relationship between Delano and Cereno, all of which are part of a biopolitical society, are made possible through the attempted exclusion of Babo from that world. The way Melville describes Babo's decapitated head is telling: "[T]he head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (Melville 258). The reference to the head using the verb "met" implies that he continues to live on, albeit figuratively, even after he has been executed. He registers

²⁷ With the exception of Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, the fear of slave uprisings in the United States are not rooted in the materialization of a grand scale rebellion such as that of Touissant L'Overture in Santo Domingo at the end of the eighteenth century. However, evidence of the existence and extent of these fears is well documented in Ida B. Wells "The Red Record," a data-based testimony offering state-to-state statistics on the number of racially motivated lynchings in the United States following Abraham Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation."

in the body politic as a symbolic focal point around which others (i.e. “whites”) organize and socialize. Mentioning the whites’ desire to gaze upon the decapitated head points to a realist trend in the literature of the era that considers race a part of a regime of looking.

The contentions between proslavery and antislavery factions in the United States eventually precipitate a climate of racial anxiety so intense that it culminates with the nation’s first Civil War. Literature, specifically realist fiction, became an important venue through which authors, both black and white, responded to these contentions as part of the public discourse. In order to be received as a legitimate part of the public discourse, literary texts depicting and exploring racialization in this era, especially those composed by African Americans and former slaves, had to follow a precise set of rules and conventions. One obvious example can be found in the introductions to slave narratives, in which legally recognized, prominent white intellectuals testify to the author’s capabilities as a writer and storyteller. William Lloyd Garrison’s introduction to Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative, for instance, authenticates Douglass as an author and also confirms the validity of his personal testimony. The same is true of Lydia Marie Child’s introduction to Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in which she establishes the personal credentials of her black colleague. Another example of following conventions involves the formulaic incorporation of religion, specifically Christianity, in characterization. African American authors necessarily employed spiritually pious and bodily chaste (mainly female) characters as a refutation of

the moral degradation and corruptibility stereotypically assumed of blacks.²⁸ In fact, their piety and chastity were often set up as foils to the demonic greed and lust of white perpetrators of the institution of slavery. In Brown's *Clotel*, the mulatta protagonist's struggle to remain physically and spiritually uncorrupted stands in sharp contrast to the morally disgraceful decision of her white husband, Horatio Green, to abandon her for a southern white woman capable of advancing his social status.

When adhering to these prescribed formats, there was a modicum of liberty an author could take in critiquing racial attitudes and practices. In the construction of "Benito Cereno," Melville uses this liberty and cleverly scripts the narrative in a way that causes it to be read according to a prescribed set of conventions. Labeled as a narrative of a slave rebellion, Melville's text shapes the expectations of his audience around a prevailing mythos of blackness. For proponents of slavery, slave rebellion narratives play on collective fears of slave uprisings and their threat to the safety of white Americans. They read Babo as an evil figure whose unprovoked maliciousness leads to the death of an innocent ship captain (we do not know whether the original captain of the *San Dominick*, Don Aranda, owned slaves, but we do know that he chose not to keep them locked in the hold at all times) and many of his crew. Babo's actions stoke their hatred toward what they believe is an attempt on the part of slaves to destroy civilization and refashion it according their primal urges. To them, Babo is the embodiment of pure evil.

²⁸ This point is central to Robert Bone's claim in *The Negro Novel in America* (1959) that African American literature of the nineteenth century, in insistently framing all black characters as stereotypically flawless, is stylistically and thematically inferior to white literary texts.

For abolitionists, slave rebellion narratives incite a much more sympathetic response to the condition of slaves. They see narratives such as Melville's as the validation of their belief in the humanity of slaves. Babo's takeover of the *San Dominick* and her crew demonstrates the sheer vileness of slavery and the extent to which human beings will go to avoid that ghastly reality. The deaths of Don Aranda and his men are the consequences of participating in a system of human trafficking. Babo's actions are so entirely motivated by the despicability of slavery because, not only is he enslaved aboard the *San Dominick*, but there is evidence to suggest that he was also a slave in his native African homeland.²⁹ Babo is the embodiment of victimization, his actions justified retribution against those who would deny him his humanity. But both of these interpretations are sentimental, politically motivated misreadings of the narrative.

In his book, *Black and White Strangers* (1993), Kenneth Warren discusses sentimentality and aestheticization in relation to realistic fiction and its aim to capture the essence of black existence. Realistic fiction, moving away from the realm of the fantastic and romantic, sought to create narratives arising from the everyday. Warren writes, "An aestheticization of the everyday, realistic fiction could retain craft and artistry but give them new life by wedding them to the practical, the familiar, the quotidian" (49). The difficulty with narratives that depict slavery is that they are so politically charged it becomes difficult not to interpret the everyday as the fantastic. The life of the slave gets

²⁹ In a scene where Atufal's "punishment" for his insubordination is being discussed, Delano professes to see a "royal spirit" in him. Babo responds, "Yes, those slits in Atufal's ears once held wedges of gold; but poor Babo here, in his own land, was only a poor slave; a black man's slave was Babo, who now is the white's" (183). The physical contrasts between the hulking Atufal, an acknowledged member of the African ruling classes, and the insubstantial Babo reinforce this idea of Babo's slave status in Africa.

written as either so egregiously terrifying (being beaten, lashed, raped, starved, and lynched) or so simplistically pastoral (eating, lounging, singing, napping) that neither functions as a wholly realistic account of black existence. Stock black characters remain overused and underdeveloped. The result, often, is a body of literature that, because of its sentimentality and aesthetics, fails the project of realistic fiction. Unfortunately, the expectations of readers in the middle of the nineteenth-century, a time of increasing racial anxiety and trepidation that is nearing its tipping point, are trapped within a web of sentimentality that influences their expectations of narratives that deal with slavery.

Traditional passing narratives frequently fall short of the expectations of realistic fiction in their attempt to depict black existence. Take Brown's *Clotel* and its depictions of black life in the context of institutional chattel slavery, for instance. *Clotel*, very fair skinned and with physical features that allow her body to be read as white, seems to be anything but black. The "one drop rule" guarantees that she will follow the condition of her mother and be socially and politically treated as though she were completely of African descent. However, the fairness of her complexion and the straightness and color of her hair make her seem more genetically related to her white enslavers than to her enslaved brethren. White readers are inclined to interpret this as a reflection in her personality as well. She weathers the most vicious, embarrassing abuses and injustices in a manner that shrouds her in an aura of regality ostensibly unsuitable for someone on the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy. Her attitude better suits a tradition of knight errantry than that of a despised and barbaric mass of enslaved individuals. As a "black" woman

facing the might of an extremely pervasive, covetous slave institution, her piety and optimism make her too good to be true. Many scholars echo this sentiment, pointing out that it is often the whiteness of passing protagonists that makes them steadfast in the face of extreme prejudice.³⁰ Her existence as a black woman is more aptly characterized as an exception to the rule of black existence rather than as its rule.

On the reverse side of this coin is Roxy's son Valet de Chambre in Mark Twain's *Pudd'n'head Wilson* (1894). A thirty-one parts white child with a mulatta mother, de Chambre was destined for slavery "by a fiction of law and custom." Wanting to provide her child a life other than as a slave, Roxy switches her own nearly white infant son with the male infant of the prominent, white Driscoll family. Although he is not the story's protagonist, de Chambre's passing is the most symbolically significant form of passing that occurs in the novel (eventually Roxy passes in order to return to her real son). He is raised as an unwitting racial passer, becoming a member of the white race not because he desires whiteness, but because his mother desires it for him. The interesting plot twist in Twain's passing narrative involves de Chambre's moral decline. The beneficiary of the wide array of privileges awarded whites, he comes to despise members of the African race. His despicably harsh treatment of black and mulatta/o characters, including his birth

³⁰ The essential argument espoused is an inversion of the one-drop rule, in which inheritance of the smallest iota of black genetics guarantees an individual being labeled and treated as socially black. See Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), Kimberly A.C. Wilson's "The Function of the 'Fair' Mulatto: Complexion, Audience, and Meditation in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*" (1994), and Teresa Zackodnik's *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2004) for discussions on the racial politics of mulattas and mulattos.

mother, attests to a perverse racial bigotry seen only in the vilest characters in literature.³¹ He is more an archetype of black wickedness than a realistic black character.

What these texts and their passing characters hint at (in Twain's case, satirically) is that more nuanced, realistic depictions of black existence in relation to slavery are often trumped by a desire for literature to reinforce the political and social expectations of a primarily white reading public. Passing protagonists that function as the epitome of Christian virtue or satanic malevolence serve specific political purposes, yet they are flat, unchanging. But in acts of black-passing, readers catch glimpses of the roundness and complexity of passing protagonists such as Babo who, unlike his contemporary passers, is neither wholly good, nor wholly evil. He is not a saint-like Christian, as is Clotel, resolutely devoted to black racial uplift. Nor does he preserve and utilize the white hegemonic order to exalt whiteness to the detriment of blacks as does de Chambre. He occupies a position between both extremes that speaks to a more nuanced, realistic interpretation of black existence.

The nuance becomes clearer when assessing Babo's motivation for leading an insurrection and taking control of the ship and its Portuguese crew and African cargo. Babo's detestable treatment of Cereno and the other Portuguese sailors is commonly ascribed to his malignant nature. Many critics believe Babo delights in forcing others to do his bidding. Combined with his general unconcern for the plight of his African counterparts, Babo seems an evil man preying upon the undeserving. Melville's imagery

³¹ Shakespeare's Iago (*Othello*) and Faulkner's Percy Grimm (*A Light in August*) are examples of characters who, like Chambre, delight in their own abominable depravity and disregard for human life.

is suggestive of an evil disposition; Delano observes the dagger-wielding hand of Babo “snakishly writhing” from the bottom of Delano’s boat. The serpentine image connotes Christian iconography and the association between the serpent and original sin. The bestial symbols used to describe he and the other Africans is suggestive of an animalistic existence devoid of any rational thought or ethical and moral behavior. This commonly held assumption disregards his malevolence as a product of his experience as a slave, though. The horrendous conditions of the Middle Passage he is forced to suffer are so perverse, the degradations so extreme, we can reasonably assume that they contribute significantly in driving him to rebel against his captors. The bleakness of a future of complete servitude, powerlessness, and uncertainty would unsettle the stoutest individual. Facing that future, Babo chooses not to passively accept his circumstances and takes the only avenue other than death open to an ambitious slave – murderous rebellion. Captain Delano himself muses, “Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man,” a sentiment as applicable to Babo as to any of the white characters in the text (218). Melville uses Babo’s malignity to inform his readers that the deplorability of the institution of slavery brings out the worst attributes in its perpetrators and its victims.

But Babo’s evil is always tempered. He does not exact wholesale revenge on the Portuguese sailors. Babo is fully aware of the necessity of balance in securing his own power. Not only does he need his fellow Africans to control the Portuguese sailors, but he also needs the Portuguese sailors to maintain his control over the Africans. Their disappearance could potentially result in the upending of his command at the hands of the

Atufal and his African associates. Babo's rebellion, then, is not simply a satiation of some thirst for oppressing others. It is a well thought out, tightly controlled, and carefully balanced response to the malicious situation he has been inserted into. His actions are so surprising and disturbing because we do not expect anyone capable of such calculation in light of the atrocities he faces as an object of slavery.

Readings of the text as a narrative of a (suppressed) slave rebellion overlook the passing narrative that, despite its obviousness, seems to lie beneath the surface of the slave rebellion. The reader, experiencing the story from Delano's point of view, is actually encouraged to unwittingly ignore the narrative beneath the slave rebellion in the same way Delano is misled about the underlying narrative of the *San Dominick* and her crew. To naively read the novella as the story of a slave rebellion is to disregard Melville's intent in critiquing the performance of racial norms. Melville is not writing the narrative simply to warn against the deadly consequences of a slave revolt. The slave rebellion, after all, is eventually discovered and almost immediately suppressed, leading to the re-imposition of the white hegemonic order on those who would defy it. As such, the slave rebellion is literally contained, both within the physical text and through the efforts of Delano and his men. Through this lens, readers see the slave rebellion as a somewhat minor, easily quashed incident that does not threaten their understanding of the world. The slave rebellion will not cause Melville's contemporary audience any concern because of how handily the situation is taken care of. It may cause brief moments of

skepticism such as Delano experiences, but they have no lasting impact on maintaining the white hegemony his white audience benefits from.

It is in these brief moments of doubt, though, that Melville's true project becomes clear. Emerging from beneath the controllable, slave rebellion narrative are glimpses of the realization lying at the heart of his text – that there is no fixedness to racial categories, particularly blackness and whiteness. The categories are nothing more than artificial constructs based on interpretations of visual markers on human bodies. Individuals socially interact as though the categories are real (after all, there are melanin differences written into human genetic strains), but they are based on abstraction notions of blackness and whiteness that get written onto bodies through a regime of looking. Babo seizes the power behind this production of knowledge to achieve his own desires. On an individual level, Babo proves every bit as commanding as Captain Delano, and in many ways is his superior largely because of his knowledge of the fluidity of racial categories. He can control Delano through a manufactured narrative of racial fixedness that reinforces Delano's sense of the white hegemonic order. Delano's complete obliviousness to Babo's passing is evidence of his effectiveness. Delano believes in the inherent inferiority of blacks (Babo and his African co-conspirators) and the superiority of whites (himself and the Portuguese crew) while he is simultaneously being manipulated by one of the blackest, and by his own determination, lowliest characters in the text. The text, then, operates like Babo, manipulating readers to focus on a narrative that feeds their own

desire for racial harmony, while another more powerful, and in many ways more important, narrative reveals the falsehoods at the foundation of that desire.

Through his novella, Melville becomes a puppeteer, tethering his readers and forcing them to dance to his tune. Not only, then, is Melville's novella a narrative of passing, but the text itself performs a sort of passing that masks its sharp, biting critique of the white hegemonic order and its appended stereotypes. Mar Gallego explains this calculated textual strategy as "generic passing,"³² a practice in which a text, from a generic standpoint, draws on other literary genres and modes to mask its real intentions. For passing narratives, their hybridity and highly subversive content requires "that they take on a sort of cover, drawing from other genres or modes [...] in order to 'pass' as mere stories of racial passing when, in fact, they become ideal instruments to reflect upon all kinds of 'passing'" (191). In her assessment of passing novels of the 1920s, various modes of passing (cultural, social, and sexual) that effectively undermine heteronormative, white, male privilege lie beneath the surface of a more acceptable, politically correct narrative of racial passing. Gallego claims that authors like Nella Larsen (*Passing*) wind up using a racial passing narrative to disguise her more thoughtful and equally important examination of black female sexuality. Larsen's protagonist Irene Redfield's racial passing is a cover for her sexual desire for Clare Kendry that surfaces in

³² See *Passing Novels of the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies* (2003)

unique ways throughout the text.³³ Interestingly, Irene's desire for Clare, who marries a white man and perpetually passes as a white woman, is a desire to possess her whiteness.

Although Gallego applies "generic passing" to traditional passing narratives, the theoretical framework is applicable to Melville's novella. But rather than couching his critique of racial norms in a traditional racial passing narrative, he has his novella don a fictional mask that causes it to be read as the narrative of a slave rebellion. The safety of this cleverly conceived mask affords Melville an opportunity to comment critically on the hypocrisy of Western racial normativity and the perverse behaviors it gives rise to. It opens his work to a discourse on race and racialization that looks at highly contentious issues such as slavery from a non-white perspective. "[T]he deployment of a protective and conventional disguise," Gallego writes "helps the authors [of passing narratives] not only to portray racial passing in the literal sense, but also and very importantly, to widen the concept of passing..." (191). Melville does precisely this, widening the concept of passing to include black-passing, that interesting mode of racial performance that is not premised on a desire for whiteness. The black-passing at work in *Benito Cereno* gives the text, "a twofold character [that] generate[s] anti-conventional critiques" of prevailing racial ideologies (8). The novella is part of a passing discourse traceable in nineteenth-century American literature. Through this thematic thread, we can recognize Melville's text as an attempt to establish his critique from a black standpoint. Disguising his critique in this manner avoids the potential repercussions of significantly threatening the white

³³ This point is argued much more persuasively in Judith Butler's "Passing, Queering," a critical essay that explores the manifestations of black female desire at work in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*.

hegemonic order of the time. His readers, whose social privileges derive from this order, would likely detest an overt violation of their racial expectations.

The Shadow of Slavery in America

“The negro.” The beauty of this ending to Melville’s novella is the forceful nature of the truth behind the phrase. The Negro is a dark cloud that casts its shadow over the entire narrative. The revelation of the ominous truth behind the blackness of the “negro” and the events he carries out on the *San Dominick* is a nightmare for those who are forced to experience it and live with its horrific memories. For Benito Cereno, the falsity behind the truth of his inherent racial superiority is exposed through this “negro” and his insurrection. The Negro is a symbol of this stark reality that so deeply permeates the psychological fissures of Cereno’s mind that he can no longer live with himself. That Delano treats the Negro as a symbol of a mildly frightful, fairytale adventure only makes the revelation of the fluid nature of racial categories more grotesque. It highlights the absurdity of Delano’s own imagining of a racial utopia – blacks so faithfully wedded to their white masters that one hesitates in calling the slave a slave. Delano tries to comfort Cereno when he tells him the past is past, but as William Faulkner famously proclaims, the past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past. Its inescapability haunts us as we live out our present lives. Delano insists on reading the events as a geographically and temporally isolated incident, fully contained in the “past.” He fails to see the more lasting impact of Babo’s true rebellion against white hegemony, and how, like poison, it infects the

present. There is now nowhere Benito Cereno will be able to travel to, no corner of the world he will be able to reach where he will not have to confront the meaning of his racial identity after its legitimacy is called into question through Babo's black-passing. He knows its insignificance now that he has been forced to perform it outside of the refuge of the white hegemonic order.

The brilliance of Melville's story is that it pushes its readers toward a similar realization – the Negro hangs like a pall of darkness over a supposedly democratic society. The social and political imagination of the United States is haunted by the shadow it casts over the citizenry, forcibly shaping every aspect of their stable American existence. Charles Swann convincingly argues this point in relation to the South, claiming that the American southerner's conspicuous public muteness concerning slave rebellion is a “silence of suppression and repression.”³⁴ Not only is the nineteenth-century reader haunted by the Negro in their midst, but so profoundly terrifying is the prospect of slave rebellion that many whites refuse to name it. Swann writes that the silence of the Southerner, “implies assent to the picture that Melville among others draws of smiling black masks behind which revolt lurks (either potentially or in actuality) – and that Melville permits and even intends such a reading (Swann 172). The wide array of tools to police the enslaved (overseers, prisons, watch-houses, armed militias, vigilante justice, black codes, legal regulations, the “one drop rule,” etc.), he claims, is evidence enough of southern fears of slave uprisings. These fears are a testament to the degree to which the

³⁴ See Charles Swann's “*Benito Cereno: Melville's De(con)struction of the Southern Reader*” (1986).

Negro permeates American existence. Americans are not haunted by the black masks presented to them, but rather, are afraid of what transpires behind those deceptively gesturing masks. Melville utilizes *Benito Cereno* to capture the essence of these fears. His decline into oblivion at the end of the novella stems from the brief glimpse he is forced to take of the black-passing reality behind the mask, a glimpse that Melville invites his readers to take as well.

But being faced with the quandary of peeking behind the black mask and witnessing the reality of black-passing or of accepting the face-value of the mask becomes the moral knot that Melville presents to his readers. In one of the most curious scenes in the novella, we read the following conversation between Captain Delano and an “aged sailor” knotting rope:

“What are you knotting there, my man?”
 “The knot,” was the brief reply, without looking up
 “So it seems; but what is it for?”
 “For someone else to undo”

Any scrupulous reader will recognize this scene as a metaphor for the thematic and moral “knot” that Melville tosses at the feet of his readers. *Benito Cereno* is a racially, socially, and culturally charged text wound into a political, economic, and legal knot, at the center of which lies its ultimate truth – “the negro.” Unknotting the combination of “double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed-well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming-knot,” will reveal to his white readers what leads Cereno to his demise – the looming shadow of blackness that shakes apart the stability of white and black racial categories. He seems to be telling his audience that what has been presented to you is

your whiteness and its inability to protect you outside of a strictly governed white hegemonic order. What all whites should fear, especially those like Delano whose initial puzzlement at the knot is trumped by his unshakable belief in the naturalness of white hegemony, is not simply the physical uprising of the enslaved, but their capacity to expose the farcical premises behind the formulation of blackness and whiteness.

Despite this metaphorical “knot,” I emphasize again my earlier point that Melville does not intend his text as an abolitionist document, even though he has a personal stake in the debate on institutional slavery.³⁵ This point is the premise of Sidney Kaplan’s highly influential essay “Herman Melville and the American National Sin: The Meaning of ‘Benito Cereno’” (1957). Kaplan argues that a desire to imagine Melville as an abolitionist through *Benito Cereno* is a “generous wish rather than hard fact” (Burkholder 37). For Kaplan, Babo’s “malign evil” and the bestial imagery used to describe the Africans, coupled with Delano’s warmly patronizing regard for them, signals the author’s belief in the inferiority of Negroes. Delano, it turns out, is nothing more than a naïve pawn in Babo’s sinister game. Kaplan has a point. It is difficult to find evidence in the text that resolutely affirms Melville wrote it as part of an abolitionist agenda. There is also much in the text that suggests the inferiority of the African cargo, particularly the ease with which they are overtaken once Babo’s plot has been exposed. But this is the case only if you read Melville’s text topically. He does not intend his characterization of

³⁵ His father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, a renowned statesman and public figure who eventually serves as Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, was involved in multiple political and judicial cases in which the constitutionality of slavery is questioned. See Frederic H. Chase’s *Lemuel Shaw: chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, 1830-1860* (1918).

the Africans as affirmation of proslavery sentiment. The inferiority of the Africans is an intentionally scripted black mask disguising an unbridled potentiality and power that threatens the known racial order. We must understand their black-passing for what it is, if we intend to unravel the knot Melville deliberately places before us.

My purpose in defining Melville's novella as a narrative of passing is to illustrate the influence of African American texts on canonical authors of the nineteenth century. Melville utilizes performances of blackness as a literary trope in *Benito Cereno* in a manner that aligns his text with narratives of racial passing. Melville, an unquestionably canonical American author – *Billy Budd*, “Bartleby the Scrivener,” and *Moby Dick* are texts regularly discussed in English courses and included in instructor bibliographies – is not writing in a racial vacuum. Instead, he is inserting the social and political issues of his day into the heart of his writing. When we think about his text as part of a passing discourse, we see a confluence of literature from two distinct traditions centered on issues of race and racialization that have been presumed to be mutually exclusive. These texts, speaking to one another, signifying each other, create a new body of knowledge on the production of racial norms that sheds light on the way Americans in the nineteenth century understood the constitution and functioning of enfranchised subjects. The consequences confronting Melville for creating a highly controversial racial narrative necessitate veiling it beneath a typified narrative that his audience will be more receptive to. The retaliation he faces in undermining white hegemony, to a degree, parallels the

severe consequences African Americans face in (tres)passing through, into, and beyond the rigid lines dividing white from black.

And there are other permutations of passing at work in the novella that warrant a full investigation. Its phallocentrism calls into question the gendered and sexual connotations of Babo's black-passing that are often overlooked or that do not get explored in any substantive way. His small stature and his deference are gendered feminine characteristics, but his physical gesturing is a performance of femininity that actually leads to the emasculation of Benito Cereno – “[Don Benito] unconsciously fell into the ready arms of his attendant;” “[U]nwilling to leave [Don Benito] unsupported while yet imperfectly restored, [Babo] with one arm still encircled his master” – and the impotence of Captain Delano, whose inability to detect the passing narrative taking place is a symbolic form of sexual impotence. But these examinations of the text will remain unexplored until we remove Melville's novella from the shadow of its topical slave rebellion mask and place it beneath the illuminating lens of the (black-)passing tradition.

**CHAPTER TWO – THIS AIN’T BLACKFACE: WHITE PERFORMANCES OF
BLACK AUTHENTICITY IN MARY WHITE OVINGTON’S *THE SHADOW***

“I was interested, as I had been for a long time, in the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them”

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

“It’s easy for a Negro to ‘pass’ for white. But I don’t think it would be so simple for a white person to ‘pass’ for coloured”

- Irene Redfield, *Passing*

Although she may not have had this particular woman in mind, Mary White Ovington (1865-1951), author of the little known novel *The Shadow* (1920), certainly emblemizes the sentiment Toni Morrison expresses above concerning the influence of black people and black racial identity on the development of literature written by white authors. A white woman from a middle-class New England family, Mary White Ovington is best known for her extensive work as cofounder of the NAACP and associate of prominent civil rights activists such as W.E.B. DuBois and Joel Spingarn. Her well known non-fictional work *Black and White Sat Down Together: The Reminiscences of an NAACP Founder*, published serially in the *Baltimore Afro-American* from 1932-1933 (and published posthumously as an anthology in 1951, 1952, and 1995), chronicles her development as a race-conscious community advocate and social activist for racial and gender equality in the early part of the twentieth century. *Black and White Sat Down Together* offers a hearty sampling of Ovington’s early interactions with prominent black individuals, including hearing Frederick Douglass speak at Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church and Booker T. Washington speak at the Social Reform Club in Manhattan; covering

meetings of Washington's National Negro Business League and DuBois's Niagra Movement for the *New York Post*; serving as Executive Secretary and Treasurer of the NAACP, and eventually chairing its Board of Directors; and even living as the only white tenant in the all-black Tuskegee Apartments in Manhattan. Ovington would also eventually organize and participate in multiple conferences that addressed the status of the Negro and of women in the United States. These interactions greatly shaped the development of her character and the trajectory of her career.

Morrison's theory about black influences on white authors is equally applicable to Ovington's adult literary fiction. *The Shadow*, a relatively unknown novel published in 1920 and that has received little critical attention, supplies its readers with an unconventional narrative of racial passing. *The Shadow* is indebted to groundbreaking literary examinations of racial fluidity and fixity in the work of Frances E.W. Harper, William Wells Brown, William Dean Howells, Charles Chestnutt, and James Wheldon Johnson. Their revolutionary depictions of racially ambiguous, emotionally conflicted, passing protagonists opens the doorway for Ovington to create one of the most unique passing protagonists in American literature, Hertha Ogilvie. Hertha's story is unique in that she is a biologically white female who lives her life believing she is black. Her biological grandparents on the day of her birth, and ashamed of their grandchild being born out of wedlock, decide to abandon the bastard infant to a black family on the other side of a southern town. This black family – the Williamses – raises Hertha as a natural member of their family, even though they are aware she is not biologically black. (It is

important to note that the other characters in the text believe her to be a fair-skinned mulatta and not a full-blooded African American). She, however, develops a familial bond with her black Mammy, black sister Ellen, and black brother Tom that solidifies her identification with a black community. As her family settles on the Merryvale plantation in Florida, Hertha takes up work as the house servant of John Merryvale and his sister Miss Patty, living out life as the impoverished black companion of her white employers. It is from this position of black inferiority that Hertha's racial passing adventure begins.

In her novel, Ovington employs many operative themes and literary devices that distinguish traditional passing narratives as a unique subgenre. Her use of racially charged language and tropes, and her characterization, especially her treatment of the "tragic mulatta" figure, illustrate the extent to which her text is invested in traditional passing narratives. However, much like Herman Melville's aim in *Benito Cereno*, Ovington structures her novel in a manner that exploits many of these traditional literary devices to expose a hidden truth behind the hegemonic racial order – the performative nature of socially determined blackness and whiteness. Ovington twists the plot of the traditional passing narrative structure by inverting the racial identity of the passer and altering the racial roles of the members of the community into which she passes. In the first half of her novel, the passer is white, not black or mulatta, and the community into which she passes is black, not white. As a white woman who lives out a black racial identity, Hertha unintentionally penetrates the color line, but from the side of dominance (whiteness) to the side of inferiority (blackness). Her passing goes against the grain of the

hegemonic racial order, obstructing the natural ordering of whiteness as desirable and blackness as undesirable.

Then, in the latter half of the novel, Ovington cleverly transforms this passing narrative into a black-passing narrative by once again altering the racial roles Hertha performs. Nearly two decades after her birth, her ailing grandfather and last surviving member of her biological family, George Ogilvie, sends a letter to Hertha's employers through an attorney explaining her racial inheritance and leaving her a sum of two thousand dollars from the family estate. Once it is discovered that Hertha is white, she agrees to leave the Merryvale plantation and the South, thereby finding herself separated from the black family and community that has nurtured her. She is eventually coerced into moving to Boston to live as the white companion of Miss Witherspoon, Miss Patty's houseguest. On her way north, Hertha decides to abandon Miss Witherspoon and settle in New York, hoping to make a life of her own in an unfamiliar world.

During her time in New York, Hertha lives in a constant state of fear, but not for reasons readers would initially think. She is concerned, primarily, with the truth of her racial past being discovered. Her fears of her desired racial identity being revealed govern how she interacts with others. She only allows herself to make a few friends and she is always guarded in conversing with them. She struggles to trust anyone with her personal story. She is so concerned about them finding out about her imagined black racial identity that she even goes so far as to tell others that she has no family simply to avoid having her racial identity questioned. It becomes evident that her physical relocation off the

Merryvale plantation does not end her psychological connection with the black identity she forms while living there, nor with the black community largely responsible for shaping this identification. Hertha, therefore, finds herself as a biologically white woman who imagines herself as a black woman racially passing in the white world. It is in this voluntary imagining of the self as a racial other that we see the operation of black-passing.

The racial disarray of Hertha's situation sheds light on the fluidity of racial categorization. Through this complicated racial web, we see how Ovington tinkers with the narrative structure of racial passing to convince readers of the absurdity of claims concerning the naturalness of racial stereotypes, not just black stereotypes. Unknowingly and unintentionally, Hertha passes out of the white social world into which she is born and enters the world of blackness and institutionally sanctioned servitude. Then, on a technicality, she is pressured into passing out of the black social world with which she is familiar in order to enter a white world of social privilege and equal opportunity that she does not feel she belongs to. Ovington makes it impossible to pin down Hertha's true racial identity.

This chapter explores the extent of Hertha's black-passing in the imagining of self as racial other and the degree to which her performance challenges the stability, and the necessity of fixed racial categories. I begin by situating the text, its racially transformative protagonist, and its author against the backdrop of the Harlem

Renaissance. I propose that Hertha is a post-racial individual,³⁶ and that the novel's underwhelming reviews relate directly to a hegemonic misreading of her racial identity. I then compare this misreading to characterizations of Ovington's own racial identity in the same context, arguing that her whiteness influences the critical reception of her fiction. From there, I move to a close-reading of the novel's racial passing features, starting with the relationship between Hertha's unintentional passing as a black woman and the plight of the tragic mulatta figure in the novel's early stages. I then go on to discuss how this experience motivates her to actively pursue a black-passing lifestyle in the novel's later stages. Through these discussions I formulate two central arguments. First, Hertha's actions as a black-passer reveal the performative aspects of both whiteness and blackness, and thereby all other racial identities. Whereas most passing narratives illustrate the performative aspects of whiteness through black characters that adhere to hegemonic racial behaviors, Hertha's black-passing represents the (at least) two-sided nature of a passer's racial performance. Ovington uses Hertha to assert that passing must be understood as a racial phenomenon, not simply a black phenomenon. Second, in imagining herself as a racial other, the liberation Hertha experiences through her black-passing is not an escape from racial discrimination in the traditional sense. She is not moving from a subordinated group to a dominant one. Rather, her black-passing solidifies her membership within a subordinated racial group, a community she finds emotionally and spiritually liberating. It is in this sense that her black-passing undermines the

³⁶ I use the term "post-racial" here to signify Hertha's transcendence of predetermined racial markers used to situate individuals within a traditional white/black binary.

supposed desirability of heteronormative whiteness and the undesirability of blackness that are foundational to the discourse on passing narratives.

Racial Authenticity and the Harlem Renaissance

Considering the controversial content of *The Shadow* and its indebtedness to a tradition of racial passing literature, it is curious that Ovington's novel has not received more critical attention in conversations about literature and race. Out of print and with an expired copyright, the novel has virtually disappeared from. In fact, copies of the novel are now only available through the combined efforts of Project Gutenberg and Nabu Press, organizations committed to making available classic works of literature with expired copyrights as part of the public domain.³⁷ Ovington's work is absent from anthologies of American and African American literature, even the more comprehensive eighth edition of the *Norton Critical*. At the very least, Ovington's extensive work as one of the founding members of the NAACP, and as book reviewer, contributor to and editor of magazines focused on black life, should solidify her place within the conversation on racial identity and literature in the early twentieth century. Casual mentions of her role as an NAACP organizer and book reviewer are made in Cheryl Wall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* and David Levering Lewis's *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. And

³⁷ The philosophy of Michael Hart, founder of Project Gutenberg, is that "Everyone in the world (or even not in this world (given satellite transmission) can have a copy of a book that has been entered into a computer" – <http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gutenberg:About>. As a counterpart to the Gutenberg Project, Nabu Press issues public domain reprints of such texts.

while her nonfiction and sociological explorations of the Negro problem³⁸ have been critically examined by scholars, her literary fiction has been overwhelmingly ignored. H.L. Mencken does review Ovington's novel in his *Smart Set Criticism* in 1920, a noteworthy accomplishment considering his position as one of the foremost literary critics of his day. But his mischaracterization of both the author and the text provide only a limited understanding of the potential of Ovington's novel. This is surprising considering the popularity of African American novels that deal with similar themes such as Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy: or Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Like Hertha, Harper's protagonist Iola, unbeknownst to her, is raised as a member of a racial group (white) that she does not biologically belong to.³⁹ Once the truth of her racial heritage is revealed, Iola, now a slave, faces serious challenges to her understanding of the hegemonic racial order. Formerly a believer in the benefits of institutional slavery and benevolent masters, Iola's experience moving from freedom in the north as a white woman to slavery in the south as a mulattas exposes her to a more problematic understanding of racial categorization and its accompanying power hierarchy. The novel's plot twists, its use of regional dialect, and its melodramatic tendencies are echoed in portions of *The Shadow*. In her book *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (1999), Shirley Wilson Logan reminds us that not only does Harper's novel of

³⁸ According to her reminiscences in *Black and White Sat Down Together*, the Negro problem "was first of all to be concerned with securing greater freedom for a proscribed race" so that they may achieve for themselves social advancement. In her book *Half a Man*, she identifies it as "race prejudice [that] arrests [the Negro's] development as certainly as severe poverty arrests the development of the tenement child. In other words, the Negro problem involves existing in a state of arrested development.

³⁹ In the era of slavery into which Iola is born, black children follow the condition of their mother. So even though her father is white and her mother a quadroon, Iola, an octaroon, is still a black slave.

racial passing go through five different reprints in its first year of publication, but it was the most widely read African American novel of the time. Barely three decades later, Ovington's *The Shadow*, despite its corresponding plot twists and melodramatic themes, received no such consideration in critical and literary circles. As a formative force in shaping attitudes about black men and women during this era, I question how an author like Ovington and a text as enlightening as *The Shadow* remain relegated to the margins of our critical perception.

Ovington's own white racial identity may function as one potential explanation for her absence in the discourse on literature and race. *The Shadow* is originally published in 1920 by Harcourt, Brace & Company, situating it within the sociopolitical context of the New Negro Renaissance. This period, now commonly termed the Harlem Renaissance, witnessed the first largely successful collective attempts on the part of African Americans to assert authority over artistic and cultural representations of their racial identity. The Renaissance, or more specifically the era spanning from the end of World War I to the early years of the Great Depression in the United States (roughly 1919-1932), marks a significant turning point in the formulation of black identity in the United States. In literature, the Renaissance provides an opportunity for African Americans to rewrite stereotypical depictions of black characters as happy slaves, pandering servants, second-class citizens, and flawless Christians.⁴⁰ A profusion of

⁴⁰ Bone's assessment of pre-Harlem Renaissance literature in *The Negro Novel in America* includes biting remarks concerning the underdevelopment of complex black characters. His devaluation of the literary merit of this period relates specifically to the proliferation of stock black characters in race-centered fiction.

novels, poems, plays, short stories, nonfiction, and critical essays that offer revolutionary depictions of the life of Negroes were published and widely consumed by audiences both black and white. But the most influential text to come out of the era is *The New Negro* (1925), an anthology of creative and scholarly work that offers critical perspectives on the intricacies of this movement.⁴¹ Alain Locke, Howard University assistant professor of philosophy, organized the anthology in the wake of a special issue of *Survey* magazine. Considered the father of the movement, Locke assembled prominent intellectuals and artists in an attempt to change the culture of black representation through the perspective of black men and women. Concerning the movement and his literary project, he states:

This volume aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially – to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years...Of all the voluminous literature on the Negro, so much is mere external view and commentary that we may warrantably say that nine-tenths of it is *about* the Negro rather than of him, so that it is the Negro problem rather than the Negro that is known and mooted in the general mind...So far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speak for himself (foreword, xxv).

In the anthology's opening essay "The New Negro," Locke discusses the Harlem Renaissance in relationship to the prevailing stereotypical characterizations of black men and women in literature outlined by Robert Bone and Hugh Gloster:

The day of "aunties," "uncles," and "mammies" is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the "Colonel" and "George" play barnstorm roles from which they escape with relief when the public spotlight is off. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts (5).

⁴¹ In his introduction to the 1997 edition of the text, Arnold Rampersad identifies the origin of *The New Negro* anthology as a project of *Survey* magazine in 1924 that focused on Harlem and black Americans for one of its special issues. Rampersad explains that a combination of factors impacting Harlem – radical changes in racial demographics, an influx of Caribbean immigrants, and continued problems with health, housing, unemployment, and crime – created the necessary conditions for the *Survey Graphic* special issue.

Based on Locke's proclamations, the Harlem Renaissance is an exclusively African American project, particularly in its mission to formulate new representations of black identity. Letting the Negro "speak for himself" suggests that the movement is excavating spaces for the voices of racially marginalized artists in public discourse. This leaves little space within the discourse for a white woman like Ovington to articulate her own sentiments concerning the revolutionary redefinition of blackness in literature. The Renaissance and its proponents were not searching out the voices of white women such as hers in its project to redefine blackness.⁴² Her novel, and its reception with the reading public, was circumscribed by the temporal, geographic, and racial circumstances in which it is produced. As a white woman writing against the backdrop of this cultural transformation she lacked the visible racial credibility to authenticate her narrative as an account of the Negro "speak[ing] for himself," or herself.

Ovington, however, subtly manipulates Hertha's narrative in a manner that influences her audience's perception of what constitutes racial authenticity. Through the employment of black voice in her novel, Ovington attempts to establish herself as a racial insider. In his analysis of voice and ethos in African American literature, David G. Holmes claims that a certain amount of cultural and racial authenticity is derived from the presence of an authentic black voice in a narrative. He writes, "all literal and many figurative ways of describing race in America have been flawed because race remained

⁴² It must be noted that some Caucasian men were highly influential participants in the Harlem Renaissance. Notably, Carl VanVechten not only published the best-selling novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), he opened doorways for the publication of the work of prominent Harlem Renaissance figures such as Claude McKay. Too, three of the contributors to *The New Negro*, Paul Kellogg, Albert C. Barnes, and Melville J. Herskovits, were similarly white.

an object to be interpreted or read rather than a way of reading culture” (Holmes 25). Hertha, who like her sister Helen speaks in an Anglo vernacular, fails to substantiate a black identity through the aural elements of her voice. Without seeing the visual markers of race written onto her body, one would presume that Hertha is a white woman according to her white, upper-middle class patterns of speech. Her manner of speech contrasts sharply with Mammy’s black southerner dialect. But the rhetorical manipulation of her voice signals her identification with the polemical struggles of the black community she participates in, which in turn hints at some measure of cultural and racial authenticity. Through Hertha’s limited authenticity, Ovington establishes the ethical credibility to shift focus away from Hertha’s racial identity onto the practices of the hegemonic culture that obstruct her self-affirmation. In this way, Ovington has us critique race from a position just beyond the supposedly fixed racial identities of her protagonist. We are actually reading the hegemonic racial order through the lens of Hertha’s constantly shifting racial identities. This assures her readers that race is important in the present moment, but as a tool for interpreting and reading a culture of race and not as a marker of identity. As a result, she unconventionally establishes ethos with the project of the Harlem Renaissance by subtly situating her own voice within the discourse on the transformation of black identity. The intricacy of her particular approach simply requires a more thorough, in-depth examination of her rhetorical strategies that critics of and since the Harlem Renaissance have been unwilling to provide.

A second, and equally applicable, explanation for the exclusion of Ovington's novel from discussions of Harlem Renaissance literature is its emphasis on black-passing. The ability of black-passing to deconstruct fixed racial categories in an unconventional manner poses a unique threat to the stability of the hegemonic racial order. The dearth of conventional passing narratives during this period – James Wheldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man*, Walter White's *Flight*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, and George Schuyler's *Black No More* – or even narratives that explicitly take up issues of color – Rudolph Fischer's *The Walls of Jericho* and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* – reflects a collective anxiety concerning the destabilization of distinct categories of blackness and whiteness. Narratives of passing are praised for their capacity to challenge the fixedness of racial categories through the passer's penetration of the color line. The passer's racial performance exposes the assumed naturalness of white superiority and black inferiority as farce. But there is a safety in the conventional passing narrative that ensures its acceptance in the larger social world in which it is read. The desire of the passer to achieve heteronormative whiteness, to risk the extreme physical and social consequences of being discovered as a racial passer in order to live a white existence, reinforces the allure of white livelihood. Clare Kendry, Larsen's other mixed-race passing protagonist, embodies this sentiment. Clare not only marries the white racist banker John Bellew,⁴³ but she is openly dismissive of

⁴³ Dick Brown's constant bellow when he confronts Tom and Hertha at the end of *The Shadow* is echoed in the last name of Clare's husband John Bellew. The overlaps in their racial attitudes, their demeanor, and their infatuation with racially ambiguous women make it possible that Larsen modeled John after Dick. Bellew is nearly a carbon copy of Ovington's antagonist.

any warnings of the consequences of her racial passing. When Irene tells her “It’s not safe. Not safe at all,” Clare casually replies, “Safe! Safe! Damn being safe!” (Larsen 66). Although we should commend Clare’s assertiveness, it is also an indication of her recklessness. She later confesses to Irene, “Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really ‘Rene, I’m not safe” (81). Her actions and her attitude present white livelihood as so entirely attractive that it is worth risking the threat of death be it her own life or that of others. *The Shadow*, then, emerges as part of a corpus of texts that acceptably transforms social perceptions of racial categorization through the penetration of the color line. However, in transgressing the color line outside of the traditional *mulatta is born black – becomes white* narrative framework, the novel sets itself apart as a distinct type of narrative that does not celebrate whiteness. By employing a central protagonist whose racial performances are not premised on the achievement of a white racial identity, Ovington’s black-passing novel undermines the desirability of heteronormative whiteness in a way that conventional passing narratives do not.

The racial passing that occurs in *The Shadow* is an unconventional challenge to the hegemonic racial order precisely because Hertha’s racial ambiguity distorts our perception of distinct categories of blackness and whiteness. Ultimately, she fails to exist in the world as a white woman, living in perpetual fear of being made “conspicuous” and having her (black) racial past revealed to the white men and women she has befriended in New York. Nor is she successful in existing in the world as a black woman. At the end of

the novel, when she finally returns to the Merryvale plantation because of her Mammy's failing health, she sees herself living, "Away from the cabins and the dark pines, from the circumscribed life, from the narrow opportunity [of black existence]" (Ovington 352). The black family of the Williamses, like so many other black families in African American literature, finds itself scattered throughout the United States. This geographic dislocation signifies the metaphorical distance between herself and her black past, as represented through her family's empty cabin behind the pines in the final section of the story. In this sense, Hertha is never racially legible as either a white woman or a black woman. Even the fairytale existence of white heteronormativity suggested by her romantic reunion with Merryvale's son, Lee, is plagued by a "black shadow, a shadow of man's making, lying beside her path" (352). So intertwined are whiteness and blackness within Hertha that she seems to exist in a unique social space in which she has been both black and white, and yet is neither at the same time. The racial metamorphoses from white-to-black and then black-to-white obfuscate her racial legibility. As someone who is neither entirely legible as black, white, or mulatta in a historical moment (the Harlem Renaissance) polemically steeped in racial anxiety, she operates as a prototypical post-racial⁴⁴ character that stokes this anxiety.

Although the term "post-racial" is never used in the text, there is no more appropriate designation to explain Hertha's racial identification by the end of the novel.

⁴⁴ Post-racial is a term currently used to denote a move away from a traditional line of theory and inquiry that places race at the center of identity politics and debates. Theo Goldberg's *The Threat of Race* (2009) and Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000) offer fuller definitions of the concept and explain its theoretical currency in an increasingly global society.

In an essay titled “Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Postracial Horizon,” Barnor Hesse describes postracialism as “the political horizon of racism’s depoliticization.” Hesse asserts that postracialism represents a progressive move away from our national investment in a politically divisive racial discourse, one that has served as a foundation for critical examinations of race over the last few centuries. The depoliticization of race through postracialism, Hesse proclaims, opens doorways for understanding racial identity not simply as genetic marker or social construct. Instead, race becomes something beyond this limiting discourse that supplies racially fluid individuals such as Hertha pathways for self-affirmation that do not rely on a traditionally politicized spectrum. Although Hertha’s racial identity is certainly politicized as part of a discourse on racial identity within the novel, its slipperiness also represents the potential to imagine the self beyond that horizon. Brett Ashley Kaplan echoes this sentiment in the essay “Anatole Broyard’s *Human Stain*: Performing Postracial Consciousness,” anticipating the phenomenon of what he terms “post-racial consciousness.” Kaplan asserts that identity politics have turned away from “multiculturalist insistence on difference [...] toward a post-racial consciousness where identities need not be grounded primarily in race” (Kaplan 126). He examines the character Coleman Silk, protagonist (modeled after Anatole Broyard) of Phillip Roth’s racial passing narrative *The Human Stain* (1997) as a potential blueprint for understanding oneself outside of traditional notions of race. Broyard’s and Coleman’s refusal to be racially classified, “offer[s] Roth an opportunity to explore how racial identities can be surpassed and to imagine a post-racial

consciousness where the limiting identitarian strictures that feed racism can be abolished” (126). The racial illegibility of these two men through their refusal moves them outside of the Western white/black racial framework that would otherwise dictate their opportunities for self-affirmation. Ovington creates Hertha through a similar post-racial framework. She is the early twentieth-century prototype for the racial illegibility Kaplan and Hesse explore, both of whom are hinting at a social climate in which visible racial identity is not expressly polemical. The outward markers of her racial identity are not adequate for understanding how she chooses to self-identify, nor how she fits within a traditional racial framework. Hertha’s actions work to move her beyond that specific framework. She is a woman born white, raised black, exposed as white, who then continues feeling black in a white world, then feeling white in a black world. She is complicated, to say the least.

But readers must tread carefully when identifying Hertha as a post-racial figure, lest her value to the discourse on race and subjectivity be undermined by our contemporary understanding of post-racialism. In an article in *Communication Studies* discussing the dialogue on whiteness and race in our present “post-racial” era in the United States, Liliana Herakova and her collaborators problematize the contemporary correlations drawn between post-racialism and color-blindness. Promoting and organizing a series of discussions on race at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst they discovered that post-racial attitudes amongst many undergraduate and graduate students reflect a silence regarding the institutional operation of racial discrimination in

the twenty-first century. Many, they claim, interpreted the acknowledgment of race as a marker of inequality “was in and of itself the enactment of racism [...] a morality that absolves systematic racism while pointing a finger at those individuals who acknowledge racial inequality as racists” (Herakova et al, 373). They recognize post-racialism, often, as a failure to acknowledge the still lingering traces of racism in a way that devalues much of the progressive work done to achieve racial equality.⁴⁵ Jonathan Rossing presents a related concern in his essay “Deconstructing Postracialism: Humor as a Critical, Cultural Project.” In discussing the productive potential of satire to expose the gaps in post-racial discourse, he defines post-racialism as “a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic of the past with no viable place in contemporary thought” (Rossing 46). Clearly Rossing disagrees with such a premise, advocating for race’s centrality within national discourse, particularly in popular culture. But he, along with Herakova and her associates, points to a collective apprehension concerning the acknowledgment of the racial injustices of an American past, the very concern Hertha is saddled with once the truth of her racial identity is revealed. Hertha’s trepidation at facing this reality indirectly foreshadows the collective reluctance of the society in which she exists to face the roots of its own racial past. Toni Morrison’s description of “American Africanism,”⁴⁶ a term for the “denotative and connotative blackness” of the non-white, Africanist

⁴⁵ Herakova et al. identify the election of Barack Obama, the United States’ first visible minority to serve as President in 2008, as a key moment in understanding the post-racial sentiment making its way into the dialogues they continue hosting at UMass. Barack Obama himself, they proclaim, contributes largely to this attitude through one of his most influential speeches to date. In it, Obama claims, “There is no black America, there is no white America, there is only the United States of America,” a line frequently used to justify the end of race’s importance in our understanding of American identity.

⁴⁶ See *Playing in the Dark* (1992).

presence permeating the foundations of American society, highlights a parallel collective reluctance to acknowledge blackness in literary and critical circles:

For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as “knowledge.” This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular “Americanness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States ... The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination (5).

This “American Africanism” is not so much a shadow of a repressed past as it is the unacknowledged lifeblood throbbing at the heart of the American literary imagination. The reluctance Morrison describes, and that Hertha personally experiences, is a reflection of a larger sociocultural resistance to confront the unforgivingly intense, unwarrantably violent, and illogically perverse dimensions of the coexistence of whites and blacks throughout the history of the United States. Hertha’s newfound post-racial consciousness and black-passing lifestyle signify an embrace of this “American Africanism.” Her pretense of whiteness simply shades over her embrace of this blackness. Certainly Ovington intends Hertha as a post-racial, black-passing figure to suggest that “American Africanism” is at the heart of her understanding of the world and of herself. In fact, race figures so prominently in Hertha’s life that it functions as the driving force in the novel. Without it, there is no story.

The connection between the white racial identity of *The Shadow*'s protagonist and of its author is another variable that helps clarify the relative lack of critical attention paid to Ovington's novel during and since the Harlem Renaissance. Hertha's biological whiteness reveals to readers the complex nature of Ovington's own experiences with racial self-identification. As Carolyn Wedin points out in *Inheritors of the Spirit* (1998), in a section titled "Catalyst of the Harlem Renaissance" Ovington's novel chronicles the journey of a visually white woman whose every instinct attests to a feeling of blackness in her soul, a reflection of Ovington's own experiences as a white female who identified with black culture:

The book reveals something of an inner life about which Ovington was otherwise reticent. She was clearly no stranger to love, physical passion, and moral decision – Hertha's intense feelings are very real. Nor was she against marriage between compatible social sensibilities. Most important, Ovington clearly suffered pain from negotiating between the white and black worlds. As she had written to W.E.B. DuBois early in the century, she was ashamed of her own race. She identified, rather, with the despised. In choosing to explore the outer and inner worlds of a woman white on the outside, black on the inside, Mary White Ovington mapped her own psyche (212).

In light of her white, middle-class, suburban upbringing in New England, it is surprising that Ovington so strongly identifies with "the despised" and their deplorable conditions. But in many ways representing Ovington's own racial experiences and feelings, her novel's protagonist had to be white. It was the only way for Ovington to articulate the personal struggles she had encountered in her own life as a white woman who identified with black culture. A white woman who dedicated nearly five decades of her life to advocating on behalf of and actively working toward racial equality for black men and women, Ovington was intimately familiar with the multifaceted dimensions of black culture and livelihood. Both her fiction and nonfiction serve as an example of the unique

perspective from which she wrote about black existence, not simply as outsider or insider, but rather some combination of the two. Unfortunately for Ovington, even though she racially identified with the black authors who were transforming depictions of Negro individuals in their literature, and even though her fiction attempts to transform stereotypical depictions of the deplorability of black life and the desirability of white life, it never gained the traction it needed to become part of the larger discussion on race and literature.

Crossing the Line: Hertha's Middle Passage

To comprehend Ovington's unconventional stance on racial categorization, it is imperative to assess the unconventional methods by which her protagonists crosses the color line. Once it is discovered that Hertha is not the black woman she thinks herself to be, nor the mulatta others suspect she is, she experiences an existential crisis concerning how she fits within the hegemonic racial order of the South. Hertha's crisis of identity stems, in part, from believing she is black and not a white woman passing as black. It is also heavily augmented by the fact that she now has no control over how her racial identity gets interpreted. Although her adopted family accepts her as a black woman and as a member of the black community, their position within the racial symbolic order does not permit them the sociopolitical authority to legitimize this identity. Ellen tells Hertha, "Miss Patty is getting something she has no right to, and you're not getting your birthright, to be yourself, to develop the highest in you" (Ovington 54). Despite the

obvious play on the idea of birthright because of Hertha's dual racial identity, Ellen's words point to the relative absence of sociopolitical power any of them have to allow Hertha to self-affirm. It is Miss Patty and her racial kin that assume such authority. Under the weight of a southern social order that firmly believes in the naturalness of racial eugenics, Hertha will never be at liberty to identify as the black woman she believes herself to be. She is trapped within a regime of looking governed by hegemonic white interests that dictate the validity of her racial identity.

This absence of sociopolitical authority is especially emblemized in Hertha's conversation with Mammy once Mr. Merryvale determines she must accompany him to his household. John Merryvale, Hertha's (now former) employer and patriarch of the Florida plantation her family resides and works on decides that she cannot remain in the cabin with her black family while she prepares to leave for Boston with Miss Witherspoon. Unbefitting a woman of her station, despite the years she spent with her black family, Merryvale determines that Hertha is to room as a guest in his household. Addressing Mammy's exasperation at the prospect of losing her daughter to the Merryvale's, Hertha says, "I haven't gone yet, Mammy. I'm right here." In the geographic sense, her statement is factually accurate. She is still physically present in Mammy's home. However, Mammy's response reveals her metaphorical absence from the abode: "No, but I can't keep you no longer; you's crossed de line when you is Miss Hertha Ogilvie. You's gone across" (Ovington 92). This conversation speaks to Hertha's temporary racial indeterminacy, a brief moment in which her own identification with

blackness is usurped by the whiteness being socially written onto her body. Literally, Hertha has not “crossed de line.” Symbolically, though, her whiteness has catapulted her into a white social world presumably hermetically sealed from the world of black men and women by the color line.

Hertha’s movement between racial spheres is essentially a metaphoric relocation, although eventually becoming a geographic shift. In fact, it may be more accurate to assert that the proverbial color line separating white and black social worlds that Mammy claims she crosses has been redrawn in a way that situates Hertha on its white polarity. This convenient redrawing of the color line is a racial form of gerrymandering, performed to maintain the illusion of racial fixity upheld by the white hegemonic classes of the South. To preserve the power hierarchy within this system of domination that privileges whites at the expense of blacks, the hegemonic racial order must necessarily constrain the racial fluidity Hertha’s unintentional passing has given rise to. The stability of the entire racial order in the world of the text depends on the naturalness of divisions between blacks and whites. Her performance of blackness undermines these natural divisions, exposing them as social constructs rather than genetic certainties. In mistaking one of their own for a lowly servant, the other white characters in the text have actually revealed the false premises upon which their racial determinations and attitudes are designed.

Unlike many tragic mulatta figures in traditional racial passing narratives, Hertha does not find the prospect of entering the white world desirable, instead preferring to remain with her family for as long as she can before her move north. Life at the

Merryvale household is an unwelcome prospect, but not because of any potential discomfort or inhospitable treatment. The living arrangements at the estate are quite generous, and Miss Patty, whom she served as companion and her Bostonian houseguest Miss Witherspoon are both looking forward to educating her in the ways of white, middle-class womanhood. Their fascination with her circumstance and their reverence for the Ogilvie family suggest that the two women intend to treat her amicably.

Rather, Hertha's misgivings about crossing the line into the Merryvale household are directly related to her anxiety about abandoning her past. Crossing that line signifies Hertha's shift from her black racial identity – as Hertha Williams – to a new, foreign, white racial identity – as Hertha Ogilvie. All of her life experiences reinforce her connection with the black racial identity and black existence her adopted family and their household represent. In crossing into the Merryvale home, her ties to this world with which she is intimately familiar are being severed. Mammy's instructions to, "Keep us in you' heart, but don' try to lib in our worl', not at fust," indicate that only when Hertha has firmly planted herself in the white world will she be able to fully mend that connection (Ovington 108). But at that point, Hertha will be mending and maintaining her relationship with her family as an outsider and not as one of its members. As a member of the white race, her relationship to her family will always be governed by the limitations of socially sanctioned white/black interactions. Therefore, even as a white woman she will lack the agency to self-identify as black.

In a subtle and sadly ironic manner, losing her home and her family through Merryvale's insistent decree to live as his guest actually works to further solidify Hertha's identification with the black world. Historically, her plight parallels, albeit to a much lesser degree, the extreme consequences suffered by black men and women within a system of institutional chattel slavery. Like African men and women removed from their homelands throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and brought to America's shores, Hertha is being torn away from her heritage and homeland, cast upon the shores of an unfamiliar world. Hertha's unconventional crossing of the color line, then, can be interpreted as a reversal of the Middle Passage,⁴⁷ that tragic, deadly, morally irreprehensible voyage that catalyzed the systematic enslavement of countless human beings. Her loss also speaks to the hardships black families faced when separated and sold to plantation owners through the slave trade. For not only is Hertha being told that she cannot remain in her family's cabin, it has also been determined that she cannot remain on the Merryvale estate. As her sister Ellen, the highly educated schoolteacher reminds her, "You know the South. You can't be both white and black" (Ovington 95). Her inability to completely embody either a socially predetermined black or white racial identity is inconsistent with the racial dogma of the South. Having occupied both racial identities serves as a constant reminder of Hertha's racial fluidity

⁴⁷ The Middle Passage is the second leg of a triangular trade connecting Europe, Africa, and the Americas involving the transport of African slaves to the shores of the United States. Although there are conflicting reports concerning the number of slaves transported and the reason why Africans were chosen for chattel slavery, there is little disagreement about the horrendous conditions they suffered during those month-long sea voyages. Herbert Klein's *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (1999) attempts an objective, comprehensive examination of the phenomenon.

and the ease with which she unintentionally transgressed the color line, thereby ensuring her expulsion from a society that subsists on concrete racial divisions.

Hertha's unintentional passing is dangerous to this system of discrimination precisely because of the way she is treated by the Merryvales while as a member of the black race. When coming to collect Hertha from Mammy's cabin, John Merryvale proclaims, "My dear, we have done you a great injustice" (Ovington 91). His statement seems out of sorts considering her relatively honorable treatment at his hands. Ovington portrays Merryvale as a fairly progressive southerner, decrying the sexual deviancy of white slave masters and even going so far as condemning the peculiar institution of slavery – "We [southerners] thought that we were right, but we know now that we were mistaken" (71). Yet, his former statement is an indication that even the most socially progressive white southerners are aware of the racial inequalities visited upon blacks, particularly in the South. As a black woman, Hertha is neither physically nor sexually violated by any of the Merryvales, but the apologetic tone of his statement reveals his own passive acceptance of a system of discrimination and inequality that had disadvantaged her because of her presumed blackness. It implies that there is an inevitable injustice that comes with being perceived and treated as a black individual, and that Hertha has suffered through those moments while existing as a black woman.

Although she is not cognizant of the degree of her mistreatment until after the truth of her past is revealed, Hertha eventually reflects, "[s]he was so accustomed to the circumscription of the world of black people that only when her freedom was granted did

she fully realize her slavery. As the slave was bound to its master so she was bound to the Negroes, unable, except through deceit or sin, to leave their world” (Ovington 86). At this point, she begins to realize the depth of the discrimination she faced as a black woman which, as is the case with most systems of oppression, had otherwise remained unnoticed and unquestioned. As readers, we appreciate Ovington’s play on the idea of Christian morality and ethics (a prominent theme in African American literature), particularly considering that it is through the sin of her biological mother (premarital sex) and the deceit of her biological grandparents (child abandonment) that she becomes a member of the “world of black people.” And the only way for her to have left the black world her biological family condemns her to was through similar “sinful” and “deceitful” practices, including socially taboo interracial marriage and racial passing. The perversity of this situation symbolizes the potential discrimination of whites that often results as an unintended consequence of the discrimination of blacks.⁴⁸ Hertha certainly was not born black; she was made black through the immoral actions of whites.

Believing herself to be enslaved by the Merryvales as a “guest” in their house only exacerbates Hertha’s existential angst. “She wearied of Miss Witherspoon and even of her dear Miss Patty;” Hertha reflects, “they were so bent upon running her as though she were a private show” (Ovington 102). In a way, she becomes the object of the fancy of these two women, a fascinating spectacle of unscripted racial experimentation and

⁴⁸ One cannot help but think that the more ominous final moments of George Schuyler’s passing novel *Black No More* (1931), in which two prominent white southerners are lynched by a white mob they are responsible for creating, is influenced, at least in part, by Ovington’s plot devices.

coincidence that ignites their imaginations. Hertha's racial indeterminacy allows them to openly exercise their control over the racial identity that gets read onto her body. In her discussion of black sexuality in the cultural marketplace, bell hooks writes, "Objectified in a manner similar to that of black female slaves who stood on auction blocks while owners and overseers described their important, salable parts, the black women whose naked bodies were displayed for whites at social functions had no social presence. They were reduced to mere spectacle" (hooks 114). Not visibly black, but certainly racialized, Hertha's body is being regarded with the same voyeuristic wonder by these two women. With them, Hertha has no authority to self-affirm. Her (in this case, white) identity is based entirely on the conclusions Miss Patty and Miss Witherspoon draw from George Ogilvie's letter. Like the female slave on the auction block, she becomes an exotic type rather than a distinct individual.

Hertha's existential crisis very closely relates to the psychological struggles of African Americans as outlined by DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois writes of the American (re: white) world that it, "yields [the African American] no true self-conscious, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois 11). Hertha is similarly being relegated to knowing herself through the lens of this other world. Initially, she understands herself almost exclusively through the black world she has participated in for two decades – "She was so accustomed to the circumscription of the world of black people..." (Ovington 86). And although others such as her sister Ellen do not always see it in the same way – "I can't look ahead and see you

a servant in a white man's home" – every part of Hertha's being is deeply invested in a black experience. Seeing herself as a white woman creates a sense of cognitive dissonance within her because of the burden it places on her as a racial orphan. She is being forced to abandon her black family in the same way she was abandoned to them shortly after her birth. She was led by her biological grandparents to engage, unknowingly, in racial passing, and now she is being pressured to live as a white woman in adherence to the expectations of the hegemonic racial order. In both situations, Hertha is not afforded the agency to self-affirm her own racial identity. To negotiate this racial web and achieve some measure of control over how her racial identity is interpreted, Hertha elects to engage in black-passing, envisioning herself as a black woman performing a white identity.

Escaping the Racial Past

Hertha's first attempt at self-affirmation comes in the second section of the novel when she abandons Miss Witherspoon upon their arrival in New York on their way to Boston. Hertha wearies of her Bostonian associate scripting every facet of her future life in the north, largely for her own social benefit. Witherspoon believes her social status will rise having befriended this young girl whose conflicted, troublesome racial history "has a touch of romance," she claims. "You have to tell [others] something of your past, and

how much better to have it known so that there will be no questioning,” she tells Hertha (Ovington 104). Her amusement with Hertha’s tragicomic personal history infuriates Hertha; “Are you telling every one about me?” she asks angrily. Her anger is rather uncharacteristic considering her usually calm demeanor, providing readers insight into the seriousness with which she regards her racial identity. Having her racial identity regarded so trivially by Witherspoon stokes her ire, particularly after she is told she is free. There are two principal reasons that Hertha reacts in this manner. The first involves Hertha’s motivation for leaving the Merryvale plantation: “It was partly to escape [her] story that she was leaving [the South].” She wants to put distance between the white life she is expected to live and the black life she has already lived. She knows that she will never feel free to live as a white woman if she is constantly haunted by her black past. Mammy tells her, “Keep us in you’ heart, but don’ try ter lib in our worl’, not at fust” (108). This is the looming controversy that haunts Hertha throughout her black-passing journey in New York. She must negotiate keeping her black heritage in her heart without trying to live in the world that validates her black racial identity.

The second, and more important reason, involves becoming empowered in order to self-affirm. In taking up life as a white woman and moving north, Hertha is attempting to redefine herself racially. Until this moment, the racial identity read onto her body (and thereby her social, political, and economic identity), has always been determined by the hegemonic racial order represented by figures such as the Merryvales. Within the hegemonic racial order, and because of her familial identification with the Williamses,

Hertha has never been granted the agency to self-identify. Witherspoon's insistence on telling Hertha's personal story to her friends and acquaintances in Boston is an extension of this practice of reading a racial identity onto her body, a practice that perpetually undermines Hertha's ability to self-identify. Although not maliciously intended, Witherspoon's actions would force upon Hertha a lifetime of social gatherings and scenarios in which she is treated as "That girl," the one who used to be black but is now white. Outraged at this prospect, Hertha tricks Witherspoon into continuing on to Boston without her, thereby assuming the agency to control representations and own her racial self.

Hertha's power to self-affirm does not completely liberate her from the regime of looking that governs her existence as a black woman. Living in a white social world and finding acceptance as a member of the white race, readers are initially inclined to believe that Hertha's self-identification as a white woman allows her to escape her past. The manner in which she is received by her roommate Kathleen, her coworkers at the Imperial garment factory, and even her eventual suitor Richard Shelby Brown (who she calls Dick) reinforces the idea that Hertha has assumed a white identity that fits within the parameters of the hegemonic racial order. But this identity is artifice and does not reflect her racial consciousness as a black woman. Her insecurity when she is in the presence of others, even her close friends, reflects an anxiety experienced by many racial passing protagonists in African American literature – the fear of discovery. Hertha frequently experiences this fear while living as a white woman, an emotion that strongly

impacts the way she interacts with others. The most obvious instance comes in her interactions with Dick, an aspiring southern businessman who travels to New York in search of financial opportunities. Hertha first encounters Dick while perusing books in the public library. He approaches her to ask her opinion on a set of books he has selected. Hearing the slight southern accent in her verbal response, he shouts “There, I knew the minute I set eyes on you that you were from the South!” (Ovington 152). His excitement at meeting a fellow southerner is innocent enough, but Hertha’s agitation at this recognition points to the unconventional nature of Hertha’s self-identification. “This forward youth was making her conspicuous” she reflects. This idea of being made conspicuous, of being rendered visibly legible, works against Hertha’s own desire to remain anonymous. This seems odd since Hertha is not misanthropic, actually preferring to keep company with those close to her. Rather, her pensiveness is an indication that Hertha is not entirely comfortable with having attention paid to her past, especially in connection to the white identity she is supposed to assume. Having her southern roots exposed during her northern excursion invites questions about her family origins. The answers to such questions trap Hertha within a regime of looking that does not allow her to self-affirm as either black or white. In New York, she can never be perceived as wholly white if associations are made to her black racial heritage.

The anxiety attached to having her identity exposed again arises in the second section of the book when Hertha inadvertently participates in a labor strike held by the

female employees of the Imperial garment factory.⁴⁹ In support of the “strike-breakers,” Hertha agrees to voluntarily give up her job, an action of little consequence considering the financial buffer provided by her grandfather’s inheritance. But Hertha does not voluntarily join the demonstrations. Caught in the iron grip of her young Jewish coworker Sophie Switsky, she is swept away in the tide of strike-breakers to a meeting at Union Hall. Her first thought as she is being dragged away is telling: “Yet here she was on the avenue in a crowd that was *attracting attention* from the many passers-by. Supposing Richard Brown should *see* her or one of the nice people who bowed to her at church!” (Ovington 197, emphasis mine). Using Brown’s formal name Richard instead of Dick, and using third-person references to herself while reflecting on the hypothetical scenario of being discovered suggest a distance between the movement she is swept up in and the woman she is expected to be. Minutes later, after Sophie delivers a speech to the attendees at Union Hall, Hertha experiences a similar anxiousness. Sophie calls her to the stand to share her story – “Tell what you did!” – but Hertha adamantly refuses, commenting, “[W]ith a sudden shock self-consciousness returned [...] The horror of being made conspicuous swept over her again” (198). Once again, Ovington is using the term “conspicuous” to express Hertha’s concerns with her physical legibility. Even as a

⁴⁹ The Imperial Garment factory strike in *The Shadow* is likely modeled after the New York Shirtwaist strike of 1909 (supported in large part by the National Women’s Trade Union League), in which thousands of women laborers lobbied for higher wages and improved factory working conditions. There are many similarities between the working conditions these women faced and the experiences of the female workers in Ovington’s novel. We also know from Ralph Luker’s and Carolyn Wedin’s research that Ovington was deeply invested in advocating on behalf of women’s rights and saw the struggle for racial equality intricately linked with the class struggle. Although only having been in New York for one year when the shirtwaist strike begins, it would definitely be of interest to a woman like Ovington. Theresa S. Malkeil’s *The Diary of a shirtwaist striker* (originally published in 1910) provides a firsthand account of the struggle.

white woman, Hertha is concerned about how others are viewing her. She desires to avoid their notice because being made conspicuous will force her to explain the complexity of her racial inheritance to those who would judge her through the regime of looking. She will lose the modicum of power she has gained through her black-passing to identify as a black woman who is passing as white.

While Hertha's nervousness at attracting attention and being seen is unusual for someone in her social position, readers are likely to attribute it to being associated with the strike-breakers, groups that were not always well received in the early part of the twentieth century. Acting as a fairly commonplace individual living in a vibrant urban area rather than the rural plantation, Ovington situates her protagonist against a backdrop that reduces her individuality. Hertha's description of the city in the opening of the second section of the novel reveals the degree of anonymity this backdrop affords her:

Noise! Thundering, reverberating noise. Noise that never ceases, noise that deadens the brains and makes the hand jerk in response to the jarred nerves; always, day and night, throughout the length of the city streets, the clamor of inanimate things. In the morning when Hertha slipped to her seat, the last but one in the fourth line, she started her own thundering whir. The forty machines, all going at once, sounded like nothing so much as the great beetles that flew about her southern home in the summer evenings. But the beetles came but rarely and went with the withdrawal of the lamp, while here in the workroom the drumming was incessant (117).

As a pedestrian garment worker, Hertha is nothing more than another whirring machine adding to the booming din of the factory and the noise of the city. She pretends to be just another beetle in order that she might mitigate the racial overtones of her previous life. However, there are racial elements evident in her anxiety at being made conspicuous that explain why she does not want to be identified with the general din of the workers once

they go on strike. Certain complexities of Hertha's self-identification would perplex anyone not familiar with her racial heritage. In the instance with Dick Brown, Hertha is concerned that her racial identity might be called into question. In asking Hertha to acknowledge and discuss her southern roots with him, Dick forces her to confront the racial history she has left behind. It puts her in the uncomfortable situation of either denying her black racial heritage and further severing her ties to the black family she wishes to reconnect with, or acknowledging that heritage and suffering the social ostracism of this southerner who despises Negroes. Hertha's resistance to revisiting her past is an indication that the person she really believes herself to be is not the white woman that Dick and Kathleen believe they are befriending. Rather, she is a woman who feels in her soul that she is black, yet who gets caught up masquerading as a white woman. The white face others see is simply a mask disguising this identity as it allows her to exist in their white social world.

What she says while marching with the strike-breakers augments the performative aspects of the identity she has assumed. Her social station, along with her monetary inheritance, presumably insulates her from the plight of the working classes, which could cause prominent whites like Dick Brown or Miss Witherspoon to question her participation in labor marches. As a striker, she would stand out to him as someone who does not belong to the social (and racial) class he associates her with. Concerned that she might be seen by either Dick Brown or the people who "bow to her" at church unnerves Hertha to the point of near hysteria, causing her to resist participating in a strike that she

agrees with in principle. Dick's overt racist attitude toward black men and women, "The niggers, now, they're a worthless lot [...] a lot of worthless coons that won't do a lick of work unless they're driven to it," is an obvious explanation for Hertha's anxiety about having her racial past discovered by him. His outright racism is reminiscent of the mindset of an overseer who firmly believes that black men and women must be "driven" to be industrious.⁵⁰ Too, the white men and women belonging to the Episcopalian Church that she attends as Hertha Ogilvie accept her only on the basis of her white racial identity. Passing through the doors of the church is symbolic of Hertha's entrance into the white world: "To enter [the church's] portals and take part in its ritual seemed to her as much in keeping with her new character as sitting down at table with white men and women" (Ovington 166). However, were these white men and women to discover the true nature of her racial past, that doorway would unlikely be open to her any longer.

Still, we cannot overlook the keyword "character" in the Hertha's musing as she enters the Episcopalian Church, which in this case has dual meanings. It refers to one of Hertha's personality traits as a woman of religious principle, but more importantly speaks to her staged dramatic performance of a particular racial identity. Hertha is as much a "character" in the story of her white, northern life as she is a character in Ovington's novel, performing a set of behaviors for an intended audience. The white racial identity she assumes in New York is not an inherent part of her being, but rather a measured

⁵⁰ The gruesome, perverse practices of the slave breaker Covey in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Dr. Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1862) emblemize Dick Brown's stereotypically racist sentiment about the work ethic of black men and women.

enactment of hegemonic racial norms. This further solidifies her self-identification as a black woman adhering to the social behaviors of a white woman.

The impulse to remain racially inconspicuous to the likes of Dick Brown parallels the desire of passing protagonists such as Angela Murray (*Plum Bun*) and Mimi Daquin (*Flight*) to avoid having their racial identities revealed in public. In the case of Mimi Daquin, she sends her dark-skinned, illegitimately conceived son to an out-of-state boarding school so that she may continue her career advancement as a successful, white, fashion designer in New York City. His presence is not only economically difficult for her to maintain, but it presents questions about her own racial identity that might stymie her employment and social opportunities. And for Angela Murray there is a moment in the text where she and her light-skinned mother encounter her dark-skinned father and sister in a shopping facility one afternoon. In order to avoid being detected as racial passers, both Angela and her mother disregard their dark-skinned family members as black strangers with casual indifference. Like Daquin and Hertha, the Murray women do not want to be made conspicuous, lest they suffer the repercussions of embodying the violation of the color line. This consequence of remaining inconspicuous attests to the limitations Hertha experiences in self-affirming as a black woman through black-passing. It prevents her from expressing her true feelings about issues related to her people that are commonplace in the discussions her white colleagues hold. For instance, during a conversation between her two white boarders Miss Wood and Miss Pickens, and Dick on the sexual impurity of black women in the South, Hertha offers only mild opposition –

“No! I don’t agree.” Her reluctance to elaborate is directly tied to her fear of being made racially conspicuous. She thinks to herself, “Unless she told her whole story, nothing that she might say about the Negroes [in their defense] would count, and she was not prepared to tell her story” (Ovington 265). To offer her own fuller perspective based on lived experience would be to invite her colleagues to racially categorize her against her will. It would effectively undermine the authority she derives through black-passing.

Hertha’s fear of being made racially conspicuous proves accurate once she encounters her brother Tom Williams in New York City. Unbeknownst to Hertha, her brother Tom works as an elevator operator in a “great department store” in New York that she frequents. Although desperate for Tom’s company, Hertha realizes that talking to Tom as a white woman is socially impermissible and that talking to him as a black woman will make conspicuous the racial heritage she has been hiding from the white world. Social convention makes it impossible for them to interact with one another in a public space. Tom must stop the elevator between floors for them to even have an opportunity to speak to one another. The two agree to meet at the all-black Siloam Church Tom attends in order to talk candidly. While entering the church, Hertha reflects, “[T]he church with its dark-faced congregation recalled her past, and the past brought continually back to her present problem” (Ovington 294). Tom represents that present problem: “She only dimly realized that to her he was not only her brother, but also the member of a race that she understood better than she as yet understood the white race of which she was now a part” (294). He is a physical manifestation of her racial heritage

that she ardently desires to reconnect with, but their reunion makes it impossible for her to continue living in the world as a white woman. Her relationship with Tom will expose her black-passing performance. The familiarity that Tom ensures, “It was the first time she had been to a Negro quarter since her advent to New York and in a short two hours she was wholly at home,” poses a threat to her power to self-affirm through black-passing (295). If she is discovered, she will no longer control how her racial identity gets interpreted.

This tension comes to a head when Dick Brown discovers the complicated nature of Hertha’s racial identity. While on a walk with Dick one summer evening, and per the incessant suggestions of him and others, Hertha contemplates telling him about her black upbringing. Frustrated with her reluctance, Dick steps aside to light his cigar. At this moment of separation, and unaware of Dick’s proximity to Hertha, Tom approaches his sister bearer of the news of their mother’s failing health. The scene that ensues is one echoed throughout African American literature:

Then behind her came a sound like the bellowing of some wild creature, and Dick flung himself upon the Negro. With a blow he struck the lad to the earth, and holding him fast beat him freely.

“Let him alone,” Hertha cried, pulling with all her might at Dick’s arm. “He did me no harm!”

The man never heard her. His eyes bulging, his breath coming quick, he pounded the prostrate boy with a fury that made Hertha cry out in horror.

“What’s up?” A group of men came running in from the street. “What you got?” one demanded. “A nigger? Gimme a turn at him” (322).

The stereotypical characterization of barbaric white men maddened by the thought of a black boy touching a white woman (for Tom lightly touches his sister’s arm to snap her

out of her reverie) recalls images of mob violence and vigilante (in)justice running throughout African American literature. Their paranoia is the result of an unsanctioned penetration of the color line in which a black male physically touching a white female gets equated with rape. In her book *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (1997), Martha Hodes traces the evolution of this white male paranoia. She claims that “White anxiety about [sexual liaisons] between white women and black men ... is a historical development that evolved out of particular social, political, and economic circumstances.” The anxiety of southern white men after the termination of the American Civil War and freeing of people of color “begin[s] to provoke a near-inevitable alarm, one that culminated in the tremendous white violence of the 1890s and after” (Hodes 1-2). The physical violence Dick and the other white men enact on Tom’s body is the material consequence of violating a rigidly policed racial border that functions as one of the pillars structuring their understanding of black-white coexistence. Tom touching his sister’s arm demonstrates the permeability and fragility of this boundary, vulnerabilities that the men try to mask through violence. Hodes continues, “any toleration of such transgressions meant that those flaws [of the Southern systems of race] would also be exposed” (7). Despite Hertha’s desperate pleading, the white men have no intention of ceasing their physical assault on Tom. In fact, Dick goes so far as to call for a rope so they may “string this damned buck on the nearest tree!” Neither literally nor symbolically has Hertha been violated in any way, as her pleas to Tom’s attackers indicate. In fact, only the racial sensibilities of these white men have

been violated by Tom's touching of Hertha's arm. It is only after Hertha declares her racial heritage publicly – “He's my brother, he's a right to speak to me! I'm colored, I'm colored!” – that the men desist (Ovington 324). She eventually realizes that there is nothing she can do as a white woman to save her black brother. It is only as a black woman that she can do anything to protect him from the racist mob. Through her declaration, Hertha self-affirms as a black woman thereby making conspicuous the racial heritage she struggles so tirelessly to keep concealed from Dick. As a black woman, Tom's touching of Hertha is not a violation of their cherished color line, and therefore does not warrant his physical abuse and potential lynching. Hertha's self-affirmation, though, is a re-gerrymandering of the color line in which she resituates herself on its black side. As was the case when Mr. Merryvale and Miss Witherspoon redrew the color line to situate Hertha on its white polarity, she has not actually “crossed de line” as Mammy intones. She treats everything leading up to that moment as her transgression of the color line, situating herself with the black community of her past.

Self-identification takes on another dimension when Hertha reveals her identity to her Jewish roommate Kathleen. Deeply rattled by the recent confrontation between her, Tom, and Dick, and emotionally shaken by the news of Mammy's failing health, Hertha loses her usual composure. Looking upon her, Kathleen thinks, “She had never seen her untidy or seriously perturbed. But this figure before her was a distorted image of its former self” (Ovington 327). Another instance in which Ovington's brilliance is encapsulated by her use of double meanings; readers understand how Kathleen's

observation operates on two levels. Literally, Hertha is flustered and disheveled which gives her an “untidy” appearance uncharacteristic of the orderly, genteel southern woman she presents herself as. Symbolically, though, the Hertha standing before Kathleen is a “distorted image” of the black woman she believes herself to be. The disheveled face before her is merely a shell of whiteness, the fissures of which have been highlighted by Hertha’s agitation and perturbation at having her racial identity made conspicuous.

Hertha’s sharp retort to Kathleen’s query is equally as unusual as the image Kathleen sees before her. Revealing to Kathleen that she intends to head home to care for her mother, someone whose existence she has vehemently denied, Hertha bitingly tells her, “Don’t you touch me. You don’t want to know me, you don’t want to be near me. I’m colored!” (328). This proclamation of her racial heritage does not have the same effect on Kathleen as it does on Dick. Dick reacts by yelling at Hertha, “Damn you. You damned white-faced nigger, I’ll teach you to lie to a white man. You hear me? You’ve had your play with me, and by Christ, I’ll have mine now.” Kathleen, on the other hand, responds kindly by stroking Hertha’s head, professing, “My darling, as though that mattered [...] What do you take me for? What sort of devil would I be if I cared for a thing like that! Now don’t fret any more, darling, but sit down while I make you a cup of tea.” Separated by a single page, the juxtaposition of these two responses sharply contrasts Kathleen’s heartfelt nurturing and soft caresses with Dick’s callous aggression and threats of violence. Dick appears to be the very devil Kathleen mentions that cares for “a thing like that,” while she appears very Christ-like in her open-mindedness and

acceptance of her friend's racial heritage. Finding genuineness in Kathleen's response, Hertha decides to inform Kathleen of the deeper story of her racial heritage: "I believe you. And now I'll tell you the whole truth. I'm not colored, I'm white" (Ovington 329). This idea that there is a whole truth to be had and that only those who are open-minded (i.e. Kathleen) will have access to it is one of the key messages in Ovington's novel. It establishes the foundational aspect of Hertha's whiteness – it can only be known in conjunction with her black racial past. Had Dick been willing to accept Hertha as a woman whose whiteness is informed by her ties to a black community, had he allowed himself to hear the "whole truth" she had to tell, he and Hertha may have found happiness together. But his outright refusal to acknowledge the possibility that whiteness is informed by its connection to blackness restricts his potential to foster and maintain intimate relationships with women like Hertha. Whereas Dick views blackness as a physical state of being, "You damned white-faced nigger," Hertha views it as a state of mind, "I shall never be white again."

Happily Ever After?

I end the subtitle of this section with a question mark intentionally. Indeed, one of the central questions Ovington poses to her readers at the end of *The Shadow* concerns whether the life journey Hertha is about to embark on is one of happiness. Upon her return to the Merryvale plantation her Mammy dies, her sister Ellen moves away to begin a new educational project with a colleague in Georgia, and her brother Tom resolves to

continue living in New York to take up work as a handyman, thereby making it impossible for Hertha to live with them as the black woman she used to be. In this way, Hertha's power to self-affirm is once again thwarted. Without a united family of Williamses to anchor her black identity, Hertha lacks the agency to self-identify as a black woman. Absent a biological connection to the black race (signified by George Ogilvie's letter), Hertha requires a collective validation of her blackness by others. She does not receive this validation though. When deciding on her future in the South, she implores her sister to take her along to assist in setting up the school in Georgia. Ellen's response, "I don't believe we could have a white teacher. The white people wouldn't stand for it," shatters Hertha's fantasy of being accepted as a black woman (Ovington 344). "I'm tired of the white world," Hertha retorts. "I'd truly like to go with you, Sister. Couldn't I?" But Ellen remains persistent: "It wouldn't be possible [...] if you came with us, it would be like putting a jewel in a room with thieves." Through her statement, Ellen, one of the more thoughtful and intellectual characters in the text, outwardly invalidates Hertha's black racial identity. Her *diamond in the rough* metaphor situates Hertha as the beautiful, yet powerless victim (jewel) of the appetites of ruffians who fancy her for their own consumption. She is put in the unusual position of being desired by the very people who discarded her (whites) and being excluded from the very people who openly welcomed her (blacks). And as for her potential happiness with Lee Merryvale, it is only after this exchange with Helen that Hertha resolves to take up a romantic relationship with him, suggesting that it is of a secondary importance to her racial contentment.

Initially there seems to be a moment of reconciliation and mutual attraction between the two. When Lee finally sees Hertha on the plantation, he tells her, “Cinderella, I searched the world over for you. I hunted day and night but there was no fairy godmother to help me” (351). Readers are inclined to associate amorousness and merriment with the connection he draws between Hertha and the fairytale figure Cinderella. However, that happiness is overshadowed by Hertha’s own reflection that closes the novel:

But as she moved through the sunshine to the broad steps of this stately home her thoughts went back to the dark pines, the home of her past, and a throb of pain smote her heart. For on ahead, through the long, happy years, she saw a black shadow, a shadow of man’s making lying beside her path (352).

Although she has escaped the danger of her tragic courtship with Dick Brown and returned home to find acceptance in the affections of a man familiar with her black and white racial heritage, her newfound happiness is plagued by a darkness beyond her control. This black shadow is a barricade to the happy ending her return to Merryvale seems to promise. The shadow Ovington describes is analogous to the shadow Babo casts over the life of Benito Cereno once the curtain has been pulled back on the true nature of their relationship. It is as though Hertha will live out the post-racial existence that Benito Cereno never survives to see.

We must be careful not to read too casually into Ovington’s metaphor. Carolyn Wedin rightly points out that “The shadow [that closes the novel] cannot be race itself, for that is not manmade. The shadow is a strange and pervasive notion among some white Americans that race alone makes the difference [...] That the shadow in the minds of the viewers is established by Ovington’s choice of a character who possesses not even one-

sixteenth black blood [...] but one with no black blood at all” (Wedin 211). She elaborates further on Ovington’s ambivalent stance on happy endings as the straddling of the debate in black literature about defeatist endings. “Happy endings,” she explains, “whitewashed American reality while tragic ones admitted the powerlessness of black victims.” Ovington, once again, appears to have her feet on both sides of a dividing line. She lacks the authority to self-affirm.

In this sense, it would be inaccurate to classify Ovington’s novel as spiritually and emotionally uplifting in the sense of the conventional passing narrative, an optimism that many critics associate with the general undervaluation of passing narratives. Guilia Fabi reminds us that conventional, “whitefaced” passing novels encountered increasing artistic restrictions and pressures to conform to norms of “a white-dominated academic establishment” that has “occasioned the scholarly disparagement or neglect of the early novels which were accounted for as well-meaning but ultimately self-defeating attempts to revise the tragic mulatto motif that was so popular among white writers” (Fabi 2). Whereas some of Hertha’s contemporary passing protagonists like Angela Murray and Mimi Daquin ultimately find genuine happiness in conformity in the aftermath of their being discovered as racial passers,⁵¹ her own post-discovery experience is much less affable. It might be better understood in relationship to the end of Harriet Jacobs’ slave

⁵¹ In the conclusion of White’s *Flight*, Mimi Daquin retrieves her son from boarding school and returns to the black community in Baltimore that she continually reminisces and dreams about while living life as a white woman. Fauset, on the other hand, ends *Plum Bun* with her protagonist moving to Europe to live freely as a black woman. Although Angela Murray does not conveniently return to the black world she inhabited before she passes into the white world, she publicly embraces her blackness in a way that reaffirms her black self-consciousness.

narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1862). At the end of *Incidents*, the slave protagonist, Linda Brent, is given her freedom by her former employer, leading her anti-slavery audience to exalt the narrative as emotionally and spiritually uplifting. But the dark metaphors that permeate the end of the slave narrative speak to something tragic beneath the surface of Brent's freedom that subverts any emotional or spiritual optimism. Her reference to the Declaration of Independence as a document "[espousing] a self-evident truth that all men are created by their Maker free and equal, and endowed with certain inalienable rights – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is intentionally juxtaposed with brief anecdotes of men and women that have been denied these foundational rights. Of the promises of freedom, she cautions her readers that "Human nature will be human nature; crush it as you may, it changes not; but woe to that country where the sun of liberty has to rise up out of a sea of blood" (Jacobs 259). Although her narrative stokes abolitionist fervor, that Linda is not able to secure her freedom herself suggests that her freedom has not given her the power to self-actuate. She does not feel particularly empowered. This is the same situation we find Hertha in at the end of *The Shadow*. She has been granted acceptance by Lee Merryvale which warms the hearts of her readers looking for a fairytale romantic ending, but her power to self-affirm as black, white, or both is entirely diminished. With the exception of her time as a black-passer, every identity she has assumed over the course of her life is wholly dependent on the validation of others. Ovington structures this ending intentionally. She knows that either returning home to the black world and restoring Hertha to her previous life, or making

her feel comfortable as the uncomplicated white companion to Merryvale is too convenient an ending for the perilousness of the trials her heroine has faced. Like Jacobs' narrative, the seriousness with which she wants readers to regard the racial subject matter of the text would be completely undermined by a conventional restoration narrative. What she leaves readers with is an unconventional ending to an unconventional narrative of racial passing that does not allow them to remain comfortable with romanticized notions of overcoming hegemonic racial norms.

The question mark in the subtitle also represents the critical ambiguity with which Ovington's novel has been regarded; there has been no happy ending for the novel. In his *Smart Set Criticism*, H.L. Mencken, one of the only critics to have reviewed Ovington's novel, calls *The Shadow* "a bad novel." In some ways, we might be inclined to agree. Its conventional novelistic style does contain "a good deal of the familiar banality" of the genre. The romantic themes running throughout are often overly melodramatic. Hertha's highly improbable racial heritage as a white girl who grows up "unrecognized" in a black family, then passes over into the white world while detesting the ignorance of her racial kin, then returning to the black community and resolving to be "colored" herself demonstrates the novel's deep investment in the fantastic rather than the ordinary elements of everyday life.⁵² And as Mencken reminds us, "The serious novel does not deal with prodigies; it deals with normalities" (Mencken 320). Reception of Ovington's novel is clouded over by the general indifference Mencken's critique demonstrates.

⁵² See Edgar Dryden's *The Form of American Romance* (1988) for a clearer outline of the distinction drawn between romantic fiction and novelistic fiction.

Mencken's critique has its limitations, though. Qualifying *The Shadow* as a "bad" novel requires measuring it against conventional standards of "good" novels; as Ovington demonstrates, the thematic elements of the narrative she crafts are anything but conventional. Reversing and inverting the racial roles of the traditional passing narrative structure causes readers to reassess any basic understanding of racial categorization; creating a racially ambiguous protagonist who cannot find acceptance as either wholly white, wholly black, or wholly racially mixed forecasts future conversations about racial transcendence and post-racial identity; and the desire of a white woman to exist in the black world as a familial member of a black family completely undermines the desirability of white existence that passing narratives are so heavily criticized for. Once we accept the sociocultural depths and the forward thinking insights Mary White Ovington's novel provides into racial categorization, we begin to better understand why Ovington would defy certain elements of novelistic convention, particularly representing a typical black experience. She was using Hertha's fantastic story to theorize post-racial consciousness before such a concept existed in critical discourse. And if the novel in some ways reflects her own unique experience as a white woman who at her core identifies with black culture, then the novel does serve as a reflection of the ordinary and the everyday, and not the "untypical." Mencken's critique misses this point, as evidenced by the racial label he places on Ovington. He identifies the novel as "a first attempt by a *colored* writer to plunge into fiction in a grand manner" (emphasis mine). His assumption of Ovington's blackness shades the entire critique: "Let [Ovington] forget her race

prejudices and her infantile fables long enough to get a true, an unemotional and a typical picture of *her people* on paper, and she will not only achieve a respectable work of art, but also serve the cause that seems to have her devotion” (Mencken 320, emphasis mine). I imagine Ovington feeling flattered at the racial association Mencken draws. For Ovington, “her people” were as much the black men and women she spent her life engaging and empowering as they were her biologically white family, friends, and associates. But Mencken does not intend the flattery. He is using the association to critique the insider/outsider dimensions of the narrative Ovington tells. He implies that she should be supplying readers with a “realistic picture of this inner life of the negro by one who sees the race from within,” but is yet unaware of Ovington’s own outsider status. Ovington is a black insider socially, but an outsider biologically. She is someone who has seen and lived race on both sides of the color line in unique ways that no conventional narrative structure will ever be able to capture. Some might say that narrativizing this experience in the form of a sentimental novel makes for a poor literary work. I believe it makes it groundbreaking.

The novel is revolutionary in other ways as well. The *white woman passing as black* phenomenon that Hertha lives out is relatively unheard of at this time. Plenty of lynching plays and minstrel shows throughout the nineteenth and early parts of the twentieth centuries saw performers don blackface disguises as parodies of black culture.⁵³

⁵³ Koritha Mitchell’s *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (2011) and Patricia R. Schroeder’s “Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race” offer more nuanced examinations of minstrel performances through these art forms. They focus on the methods through which these performers signify blackness through performance in order

These types of overt racial performances, though, had a different intention than Ovington's purpose in writing *The Shadow*. Her intentions align more closely with Twain's aims in *Puddn'head Wilson* to give voice to the dispossessed. Roxy, Twain's protagonist, and Hertha are both characters white in appearance but treated as members of the black race. Neither of their actions are an attempt to mock black culture through a staged performance. In a way, both of them actually parody white culture as a means of exposing the absurdity of hegemonic practices and attitudes toward race.

Too, Ovington's novel provides one of the first instances in American literature of the racialized woman surviving on her own in the city. Certainly Theodore Dreiser's (an author highly praised by Mencken) protagonist Carolyn Meeber⁵⁴ serves as the pinnacle of the self-sufficient (or self-made) woman in the city, but her racial identity is not one of the principle factors under discussion in the novel. The focus is primarily on her gender. And while there are real-life examples of African American women providing for themselves while taking up residence in urban areas (i.e. Frances Harper, an emancipated Harriet Jacobs, and Anna Julia Cooper), there are few, if any, literary examples of this phenomenon before Ovington writes *The Shadow*. Hertha revolutionizes the way we think about racial self-identification in part because she transforms the way we interpret female empowerment. As a woman whose ability to survive in the city is not premised on her marriage to a male provider, Hertha advances early feminist ideals about a woman's

to subvert the hegemonic racial order and self-affirm. Both also look extensively at the power dynamics at work in such performances.

⁵⁴ See *Sister Carrie* (1900)

self-sufficiency and ability to provide for herself. Her independence paves the way for self-empowered female protagonists in the work of Jessie Fauset (*Plum Bun*), Nella Larsen (*Quicksand*), Walter White (*Flight*), and Wallace Thurman (*The Blacker the Berry*). And of these four prominent Harlem Renaissance novels, only Thurman's does not directly deal with racial passing.

Black-passing opens pathways for Ovington to express such sentiments and take unconventional stances on hotly contested debates surrounding race and literature. *The Shadow* undermines the desirability of whiteness and challenges any claim to its potential for the psychological liberation of racially ambiguous protagonists like Hertha. Hertha's ardent desire to remain with her black family even after discovering the extent of the injustices heaped upon her because of her supposed racial heritage is a testament to that challenge. Her white appearance does not shield her from suffering through the racial discrimination that denies black men and women basic human rights, a reality that exposes the hypocrisy of the white hegemonic order to which she biologically belongs. Shining light on this hypocrisy is a staple of the social critiques written into traditional passing narratives. It supplies an effective tool for illustrating the need of white hegemony to manufacture spaces for the transference of the guilt and shame of its own members. Catherine Rottenberg points out that "the fractured and competing nature of the norms circulating in society opens up potential spaces for subjects to "perform differently" [...and] that agency materializes in the interstices of competing norms – some dominant, others not – where the conflictual nature of norms open up spaces of

negotiation” (Rottenberg 9). So not only is it within these spaces that they attempt to hide the results of their moral transgressions, but it creates potential spaces for individuals to imagine and manufacture, and enact new forms of racial performativity.

The real injustice Hertha faces, though, is never being given the freedom to develop her own racial conscious within such spaces, even after she is freed from the world of black social limitation. Existing in the white world, Hertha does not feel at liberty to share her racial heritage or her desire to return to her family with others, always in fear of being made racially conspicuous. Eventually, while living in New York, Hertha engages in black-passing as a means of self-identification, but even that has its limitations. By envisioning herself as a black woman passing as white, she is able to preserve her connection with the black social world that shapes and informs so much of what she knows about life. However, she is never able to return to this world once she has left it. Her Mammy tells her that she will be able to come back to them “When yer gits yer place firm in de white worl,” but it never happens. In the end, she is never able to place herself firmly in the white world (mostly because she does not and cannot envision herself as white), and the black world to which she wishes to return disappears. She drifts racially ungrounded.

Unfortunately, the novel has met the same sad fate as its protagonist, Hertha. Both struggle to find acceptance in a world of convention; both intentionally and unintentionally defy categorization; both have fallen under a black shadow not of their making; and both have been casually discarded as so much trash without another thought.

For the novel, this means watching its copyright expire, going out of print, and disappearing from literary discourse. But the most important element the novel and the protagonist share is engaging in acts of black-passing that radically transform the way readers understand the operation of race in our social world. Hertha aligns herself with conventional tragic mulattas figures without reinforcing the desirability of heteronormative whiteness. The novel, on the other hand, aligns itself with conventional passing narratives in African American literature without reproducing the desirability of convention narrative. Mar Gallego reminds us that passing narratives are “instrumental in delineating a more coherent and inclusive African America canon where meanings and concepts are constantly revised and updated in the attempt to open up new venues for the shaping of more adequate concepts of self and community” (Gallego 192). Both the novel and its protagonist, each with roots in traditions of blackness and black culture, promote such revision. They call on us to question the conventions through which black racial identity and community get constituted. Hertha and the novel are both post-racial entities that deserve much more critical consideration than they have received. Their post-racial dimensions offer methods for (re)reading white and black culture through the lens of race, rather than reading race through the lens of culture. It poses a unique set of challenges that attest to Irene Redfield’s proclamation that opens this chapter – it most certainly is not easy to pass as “coloured.” Passing as “coloured” undermines the desirability of whiteness.

CHAPTER THREE – IMAGINING BLACK AND WHITE OTHERS: BLACK-PASSING IN POST-RACIAL AMERICAN LITERATURE

“African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end”

– Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?*

“The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racist act”

– Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*

As the concept of “race” changes, so too do literary representations of racial passing. Up until this point, I have discussed racial passing in relationship to DuBois’s sociopolitical construct, the color line.⁵⁵ It served as a useful tool for understanding the power dynamics at work in individual and collective determinations of racial identity. The ability of Hertha and Babo to self-affirm in defiance of the edicts of the white hegemonic order symbolized by the color line presented new methods for reconceiving of the subversive potential of racial performance, specifically black-passing. But as we move into the latter stages of the twentieth and early stages of the twenty-first century, the color line figures less and less prominently in conversations about racial categorization (some of the reasons for which I outline below). The debate between “race” as genetically predetermined and “race” as socially constructed begins to wane after the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s runs its course. Without a firmly rooted symbol of racial division to anchor these debates, the fixed/fluid conversation on “race” morphs into a discussion of potential “racelessness.” The decades following the Civil Rights era encompass an ardent push towards a politics of identity eventually theorized as post-racial, where the

⁵⁵ See *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

category of race takes a backseat to global, multinational, and multiethnic identity formations.

It is within the context of post-racial identity politics that I continue my investigation of the operation of black-passing in American literature. This chapter focuses on two short stories, Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" (1985) and ZZ Packer's "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" (2004). Although separated by almost twenty years, the narratives share certain thematic elements and plot devices that make them worth looking at in conjunction. Both texts are set against the backdrop of a post-racial environment in which white and black racial categories are not clearly demarcated; both are narrated through female protagonists who experience alienation because of their racial, sexual, and gender identities; both employ female protagonists who are emotionally involved with another female character; and both deal with the complexities of racial categorization interwoven with formations of gender and sexuality. Most importantly, however, both outline narratives of black-passing that redefine the act of racial passing in a post-racial context. The stories told in these texts utilize variations of black-passing that reveal for the reader the continuing significance of race in a world presumed to have progressed beyond race.

I begin my textual analysis with Morrison's story "Recitatif." The story follows the interracial interactions of two women, Twyla (the story's narrator) and Roberta, at three different stages in their lives: as eight-year-olds at the St. Bonaventure orphanage for girls, in a chance meeting at a Howard Johnson's some years later, and as married

mothers in Newburgh, New York twenty years afterward. The relationship between the two women is radically different in all three stages, yet is always both contentious and amiable. The complications in their interactions at each stage are directly related to the issue of race. During their time in the orphanage it is explicitly mentioned that one of the girls is black and the other white. In true Morrison fashion, though, the narrator never reveals which is which. Morrison structures the story so that two women remain racially indeterminate throughout the course of the narrative. Despite their racial differences, however, they are able to forge a strong bond that allows them to identify with one another and develop a sense of community. This connection is created and maintained through their mutual imagining of a racial other, Maggie, the bow-legged, mute, kitchen woman at St. Bonaventure. Defining themselves against Maggie, Twyla and Roberta self-affirm by displacing their own alienation and anxiety about racial difference onto the body of this marginalized woman who they imagine is substantively different from them. I argue that this displacement signifies a new form of racial passing in a post-racial context. The performance of a collective identity through their mutual imagining of otherness, and their insistence on repressing that otherness, I argue, is an instance of black-passing. It illustrates the viability of race in reaction to unanchored categories of blackness and whiteness. It also signifies the operation of the story as an unconventional component of the passing discourse in American literature.

I extend this argument to account for the uncanny similarities in the relationship between Dina and Heidi, the two female protagonists of Packer's "Drinking Coffee

Elsewhere.” As with Twyla and Roberta, Dina and Heidi are also an interracial pair whose companionship is greatly shaped by formative moments of alienation and stereotyping related to their gender and sexuality. In Packer’s story, however, the characters are not racially indeterminate; readers know that Dina is black and Heidi is white. Their story takes place on the politically-correct, race-neutral campus of Yale University sometime near the turn of the twenty-first century. With no visible signs of racial discrimination or inequality, it is curious that Dina’s racial identity leads her to experience deep levels of anxiety, even going so far as to self-identify as a misanthrope to avoid interacting with other, primarily white, students. Heidi on the other hand is looking to develop a greater sense of community with her peers. She desires inclusion and acceptance. Embarrassed after having a sexual encounter with some random guy made public, she finds herself banging on Dina’s door one night looking to talk to someone who will not judge her for it. Dina begrudgingly lets her into her dorm room, and the two go on to become great friends. Through their mutual alienation, the two girls eventually develop a warmhearted, romantic interest in one another, culminating in an emotionally intimate bedroom scene. Their relationship remains steady until questions are raised about its homoerotic nature. Dina intentionally sabotages the relationship once other students begin to make assumptions about her sexual orientation. My analysis of this story centers on the fragile relationship between these two women and is framed through two principle claims. First, Dina’s anxiety about being labeled as a sexual other (i.e. “lesbian” or “homosexual”) because of her relationship with Heidi leads her to play up

the racial divisions between herself and Yale's white students. Dina uses racial otherness to mask her erotic desire for a member of her own gender. Second, because there are no concrete distinctions between races, or symbols of overt racial division (i.e. the color line) in the context of the story, Dina has to manufacture a predetermined blackness and whiteness that are diametrically opposed and can be anchored in a pre-post-racial history of racial tension. This elaborate imagining of self as racial other is a form of black-passing that, as is the case with Twyla and Roberta, draws attention to false presumptions of racelessness that permeate post-racial societies.

Both narratives utilize a black-passing model that illustrates the continued centrality of race in the structuring of post-racial societies. Although the forms of black-passing in each story slightly vary, they each serve as a mechanism for transcending subtly defined norms of gender, class, and sexuality that are rarely, if ever, overtly enforced through institutions in a post-racial setting. My analysis explores the possibilities of racial passing within and beyond a discourse of categorization and demarcation, even as literal and symbolic boundaries of identity formations disappear. As such, I investigate threads of black-passing in relation to fragmented, de-centered, non-normative subjectivity situated in a post-racial context.

Post-Racial Authorship and Racial Passing Fiction

It is difficult to pinpoint its precise beginnings, but the short Civil Rights era⁵⁶ of the 1960s radically transforms the cultural, social, and political landscape of the United States. A bevy of activist leaders (i.e. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Eldridge Cleaver, Ella Baker, Harvey Milk, Gloria Steinem), social and political organizations (the Black Panther Party, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Women's Liberation Movement), and civil rights legislation and legal cases (*Brown v. Topeka*, The Civil Rights Act, *Roe v. Wade*) become part of this intense period of social revolution intent on destabilizing the status quo and moving the country toward fulfilling its promises of equality for all citizens. Theorists and intellectuals (such as the French feminists) who were highly influential to and highly influenced by the movement persisted in formulating theories that revolutionized our understanding of identity formations and self-affirmation. Even academic institutions were swept up in the revolutionary fervor, eventually opening certificate and degree programs in fields like African-American literature and culture, Gender and Women's Studies, Queer Studies, and Ethnic Studies to name a few. In many ways, the various movements and its supporters are successful in eliminating the barriers of a legally segregated, openly discriminate society, impediments that made it exceedingly difficult for individuals to socially interact across boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and culture. Pathways for social mobility are

⁵⁶ In *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (2004) Nikhil Singh profoundly argues that what becomes known as the era of Civil Rights in the United States during the 1960s is one part of a much broader socio-political push for equal rights spanning multiple decades. His argument that the popularity of the 1960s movement frequently eclipses a more expansive push for equality leads to his distinction between the short and the long Civil Rights eras.

made more widely available for minority populations, women and men of traditionally underrepresented groups enter colleges and join previously inaccessible areas of the labor force in droves, minority artistic and cultural productions become more widely represented and accepted in the mainstream, and overt racism becomes socially taboo.

The end of the short Civil Rights era midway through the 1970s, however, does not signal the end of racism and racial discrimination. Instead, it creates a misplaced faith in the effectiveness of the now waning revolution, encouraging members of society to see race as a social ill that has been resolved. Certainly the overt signs (i.e. “white only,” “colored only,” etc.) of legally sanctioned racial discrimination are dismantled, but newfound reassurances of equality with the elimination of racial barriers to integration and social mobility lead to an unexpected change in the national attitude concerning race – it no longer matters. Unforeseen and unacknowledged complications in enacting and maintaining a doctrine of equal rights begin to bubble to the surface of our social conscious in the wake of such thinking. The casual attitude about race is as follows: *race was a problem, Civil Rights the solution; the races marched, the racists relented. End of story*. As Herakova and her associates⁵⁷ discovered in their race-centered dialogues at UMass, not only do citizens of a post-racial society question why we even talk about race as a subject, they largely consider any discussion of the substance of race to our culture a racist proposition. They explain the dangers of this reasoning – “Such logic produces a morality that absolves systemic racism while pointing a finger at those individuals who

⁵⁷ See “Voicing Silence and Imagining Citizenship: Dialogues about Race and Whiteness in a “Postracial” Era” (Herakova, et al).

acknowledge racial inequality exists as racists” (Herakova 373). This culture of silence and dismissiveness surrounding the possibility of racial inequality in the post-Civil rights era reveals one of the failures of the civil rights movements. Even though rights advocates and organizers achieved substantive legal change, the tepid social acceptance of racial difference demonstrates the limitations of their achievements. The denial of potential racial discrimination implies a tolerance of racial diversity rather than a celebration of it. Despite the brilliant insights of Audre Lorde,⁵⁸ who warns us that difference “must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic,” (Lorde 111) attitudes of racelessness continue to dominate the discourse on race in a post-racial era. Within this post-racial environment, the category of race is not being used as a tool for connectivity, as Lorde had hoped, but rather as a means of division between those who ignore race and those who are never ignored by it.

Paul Gilroy expresses misgivings about the collective pining of underrepresented groups for a sociopolitical investment in race and what he terms “raciology” in this newly formed, post-racial environment. Gilroy explains in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (2000) that marginalized groups “have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture” in response to the various forms of egregious discrimination they faced, and that they will not “lightly or prematurely give

⁵⁸ Although composed of a collection of her essays and speeches composed over many years, throughout *Sister Outsider* (1987), Audre Lorde implores her readers to divorce themselves from a framework of tolerance and enthusiastically embrace their differences across lines of race, gender, sexuality, social class, ethnicity, religion, and education so that they may realize the unheralded creative potential of their lives.

[them] up.” So “hard-won” are these identifications, and so entrenched are they in the psychological processes of self-affirmation for the marginalized, that the ways in which they reinforce and perpetuate racial ideologies is conveniently disregarded. “These groups,” he argues, “will need to be persuaded very carefully that there is something worthwhile to be gained from a deliberate renunciation of “race” as the basis for belonging to one another and acting in concert” (Gilroy 12). He is asking us to reconsider racial identity in a new, post-racial context that pokes at the fabric of racial hierarchies once they have been “purged of any lingering respect for the idea of ‘race.’”

In his controversial book *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), Kenneth Warren (whose quote opens this chapter) expresses similar misgivings concerning this new social attitude toward post-racial “race” in relationship to the constitution of an African-American literary canon. Warren echoes the sentiment that the post-Civil Rights era marks the end of our conventional understanding of race and African American identity, and in turn elicits a reconsideration of the classification of texts written by black men and women in a post-racial environment. He writes, “African American literature itself constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within the domain of a literary practice responsive to conditions that, by and large, no longer obtain (Warren 9). He claims, essentially, that the termination of the Civil Rights era, through the elimination of legally sanctioned Jim Crow practices, signals the end of African American literature. He goes on to state, “black literature was an imaginative response not merely to the lived reality but also to the legal fact of segregation” (42). For Warren,

outside of the framework of the Jim Crow society that unified texts written by black men and women as a literature and gave life to a body of theory and criticism on black unity, community, and identity, African American literature loses its tenability as a viable literary enterprise. (Despite the revisionist impulse evident in Warren's title, it is much more useful and important to treat his theory as a call for scholars and critics to establish new tools and theoretical lenses for understanding the relationship between literature and identity. Careful critics will never be dismissive of the category of race or of a corpus of texts written outside of the framework of Jim Crow.)

Gilroy's and Warren's implications are obvious; trivial uses of blackness and whiteness are no longer sufficient for articulating the experience of black men and women, especially in literature. Through their proclamations, authors, particularly those who identify with or are identified as African American, now face a new set of challenges when crafting fiction that revolves around issues of race and racial identity. The question for these authors becomes how one incorporates the still tangible, ever palpable elements of racial existence into a literary work in ways that are meaningful to an audience fully immersed in post-racial culture. Relying too heavily on traditional modes of race representation risks reifying outdated systems of racialization that diminish the social progress that has been achieved through civil rights movements. Authors who write about post-Civil Rights racial formations strictly through a pre-Civil Rights lens are likely to struggle developing ethos with their intended audience. They will be accused of not understanding or comprehending the experiences of racialized women and men in a new

era of post-racial politics. Even worse, they risk being labeled racist. As Herakova suggests, giving voice to the post-racial silence now surrounding race often results in backlash against these voices and the mediums through which they are articulating. Invoking race in its traditional sense is to invite these types of harsh, unjustified criticisms. Moving too far ahead into areas of post-identity formations – i.e. post-racial, post-ethnic, post-postmodern, etc. – produces a similar result. Entirely leaving behind race as a viable category of inquiry, specifically in relationship to blackness and whiteness, is to devalue the experiences of the very racialized individuals an author is trying to represent in her/his text. An author whose fiction overlooks and/or underappreciates the covert, subtle forms of racial discrimination these individuals continue to suffer from inadvertently marginalizes their life experiences. Authors must figure out ways to balance their representations of race and racial experience in ways meaningful to a society whose engagement with race radically transforms in a post-racial era.

As two authors writing in a post-Civil Rights, post-racial era, Toni Morrison and ZZ Packer are confronted with meeting this new challenge. Both, thankfully, prove up to the task. And both do so, at least in the texts analyzed in this chapter, through less overt, more subtle discussions of performing racial norms. By setting up narratives of race and interracial interactions absent any clear racial demarcations between characters (Morrison) or between social worlds (Packer), the two defy the silence of racelessness that pervades the post-racial societies in which they compose their texts. A black-passing

framework exposes the subversive potential of race in spaces not racially demarcated. Black-passing helps readers to draw out and interpret the intricacies of each author's racial formulations, despite their subtlety, to better understand the vital depths of their representations of race in relationship to post-racial sensibilities.

Blank Slates: Imagining Racial Otherness

In light of the monumental success of the writing career of Toni Morrison, whose accolades include, but are not limited to being awarded the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the American Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and being selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities for the Jefferson Lecture, and the proliferation of her fiction and non-fiction in academic programs, departments, conferences, bookstores, libraries, and homes across the country, it is no surprise that there exists an unmanageable glut of theoretical and scholarly examinations of her work. Her novels in particular have seemingly been analyzed through every possible critical and literary angle accessible. Any basic search in an online database (keyword: Morrison) yields literally tens of thousands of reviews and critical essays that explore some aspect of her work in a supposedly new and revolutionary way. But what may come as a surprise to any researcher concerns the relative lack of critical attention paid to her only short story "Recitatif." Somehow, this powerful short narrative depicting the significance of race and interracial relationships in a non-rationally demarcated space slips through the cracks of our all-encompassing, text-devouring

Morrison-machine. The story has not even been published yet individually, found only in anthologies of short fiction such as *Ancestral House* (1995, Ed. Charles H. Rowell), *Leaving Home: stories* (1997, Ed. Darlene Z. McCampbell & Hazel Rochman), and *Skin Deep: Black Women & White Women Write About Race* (1995, Ed. Marita Golden & Susan Richards Shreve).⁵⁹ What possible explanation is there to account for our critical inadequacy? And why have I chosen to contribute to the analytical glut I have so smarmily dismissed? The answer is quite simple. There is something uniquely unconventional about this narrative that makes it difficult to categorize. The post-racial dimensions Morrison adds to her already complex themes and plot devices is a deterrent for the casual critic, but provides compelling scenarios that can be adequately explained and assessed through a black-passing lens.

Of the few critical examinations of the short story, many of them at some point reference the same passage from Morrison's non-fictional masterpiece *Playing in the Dark* (1996):

The principal reason these matters loom large for me is that I do not have quite the same access to these traditionally useful constructs of blackness. Neither blackness nor "people of color" stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. *The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (The only short story I have ever written, "Recitatif," was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial.)* (xi, emphasis mine).

⁵⁹ To furnish my analysis in this chapter, I use the edition of Morrison's story found in Golden and Shreve's *Skin Deep*.

(Most critics cite only the italicized portion of the passage above, but I include it in its entirety because it is important to understand Morrison's comments about "Recitatif" in the context of a larger project concerning representations of racial categorization through language.) Understandably, Morrison scholars would want to include this passage in their examinations since it provides us brief insight into the author's own perspective on her aims in crafting the text. But in terms of her larger project, we can understand "Recitatif" as an attempt to reinvent narratives of race that are not anchored to "racially informed and determined chains," so that we get a better sense of the functioning of race outside of a limited historical framework. Employing racially distinct, yet racially ambiguous protagonists for whom race is an essential component of their lives and their relationship moves the narrative outside of a traditionally rooted white/black framework. She makes it impossible to approach her narrative as a conventional interracial story.

One of the ways in which Morrison broadens our understanding of race occurs through her cognitively dissonant positioning of the reader in the narrative. Readers of "Recitatif" find themselves trapped in a web of racial uncertainty carefully and deliberately sprung on them by Morrison. Freeing up the text from "racially informed and determined chains" causes readers to confront the ways in which their own ideas about race are linked to traditionally rooted ideologies of racial categorization. In his essay "Page and Screen: Teaching Ethnic Literature with Film" David Goldstein explains the discomfort this experience causes. Of teaching the story in his course on ethnic literature

and film, Goldstein writes, “[Morrison] plants seemingly contradictory clues throughout the short story, which readers [...] interpret according to their own preconceptions. In class discussions, this brilliant story turns students inward, as they must explore how they filled in missing information to arrive at their own conjecture regarding the characters’ racial identities” (Goldstein 564). For Goldstein’s students, the act of reading “Recitatif” functions as an act of self-discovery. They are revealing to themselves their own dependency on racial predeterminations to fill in the blanks Morrison intentionally leaves in the narrative.

In “Black Writing, White Reading,” Elizabeth Abel explains this reader-response analysis in relation to her own approach to reading the short story. She claims that readers are likely to assign racial identities to Twyla and Roberta based on the way their own racial identities color their perspective. She writes, “I was introduced to “Recitatif” by a black feminist critic, Lula Fragg. Lula was certain that Twyla [the story’s narrator] was black; I was equally convinced that she was white; most of the readers we summoned to resolve the dispute divided similarly along racial lines” (Abel 103). As Abel eventually points out, the racial divisions in interpretation amongst her and her colleagues, and any possible resolution to the debate they raised were not nearly as significant a revelation as are her own set of racial biases she discovers during the process. In looking for a resolution, she finds herself manipulating the racial identities of each protagonist to conform to her theoretical expectations as a white feminist who privileges psychology

over politics.⁶⁰ For Abel, reading “Recitatif” is an act of racial self-discovery that exposes her own reliance on preconceived racial determinations to make meaning in the text.

Trudier Harris’s⁶¹ reading of “Recitatif” mirrors the reader-response angle that is part of the analytical framework Goldstein and Abel utilize for their own analyses, but with a twist. Harris takes her analysis of the story a step further by exploring the act of masking involved in reading the text. She states, “[Through her story] Morrison unseats the received expectations we have of African American literature and African American writers. She thereby positions readers with a racial discomfort that they either overcome, entering the text by the rules she creates, or that they consistently try to overcome by probing the text for blackness and whiteness, eagerly waiting and watching for the *disguise* to slip and the racial markers to reassert themselves” (King 110, emphasis mine). Critical attention is again being drawn to the manner in which Morrison coerces readers into confronting their own racial expectations by reading her story outside of a racially determinate framework. But I am especially interested in the characterization of the text’s free-floating, racial signification (what might be considered its “racelessness”) as a “disguise.” It suggests that beneath the surface of the text is another narrative masked by the racially indeterminate (at least for the reader) faces of its two protagonists. In this way, we can think of “Recitatif” as a narrative of race that, when misread by readers

⁶⁰ Although not the focus of this chapter, it is important to point out that a significant portion of Abel’s analysis is devoted to assessing the methods through which white feminist readings of black women’s texts “disclose white critical fantasies” that color the way their work is received and utilized within feminist discourse. It opens up for her a series of questions concerning the nature of feminist discourse and the ways in which reading is informed by the biological bodies of black women.

⁶¹ See Harris’s essay “Watchers Watching Watchers: Positioning Characters and Readers in Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’ and Morrison’s ‘Recitatif.’”

unwilling to adhere to Morrison's rules, performs racelessness to mask its subtly dominant investment in race and racial formations. The multilayered dimensions of the text allow it to operate on levels that pass beyond the detection of casual readers. It is essentially a narrative centered on race that passes as a narrative of racelessness.

Mar Gallego's examination of conventional passing novels helps illuminate the multilayered subversiveness in "Recitatif." According to Mar Gallego in *Passing Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (2001), the hybrid nature of passing narratives is what allows them to function on multiple levels. She claims, "Because of their hybrid nature and their highly subversive content, [passing narratives] can be regarded as double or multiple narratives..." (pg #). Although her assertion is in reference to traditional passing narratives written well before Morrison writes her short story, it applies directly to "Recitatif" in terms of its racial elements. The text is a "multiple narrative," operating on at least two levels. On its surface level, the text appears unconcerned with race since it never makes the racial identities of its protagonists explicitly legible to readers. We know that the two central female characters have a racial identity, one black, one white, but we are never privy to which is which. If the racial identity of each is not important to point out, it is reasonable to assume that it is not important to the narrative. But Morrison is emphasizing a more subtle point. At its core, the text remains heavily invested in the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta. The number of "relativistic," racial and cultural signifiers written into the text are clues that identity formations such as race and social

class matter immensely (Abel). As Goldstein⁶² reminds us, Morrison does not completely remove black and white racial demarcations from her text. They are actually a substantive part of her literary project. And Morrison's quote concerning racelessness and literary discourse that opens this chapter suggests that she sees the enforcement of racelessness as a counterproductive enterprise. For her, to tell a raceless story would be to reinforce the post-racial indifference captured in Herakova's study, an apathy that Morrison seems to be inverting and actively writing against. Rather, Morrison simply makes it impossible to attach ever-important racial demarcations to the individual characters in her story, a point wonderfully articulated in Knoflíčková's essay "Racial Identities Revisited: Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif.'" Knoflíčková writes, "Discursive omission of clear racial signifiers indicates that it is not the color of the skin or any other physical attribute that is significant to the daily life of the individual, but rather the ideas and assumptions that were ascribed to these physical characteristics by society" (Knoflíčková 24). Were we capable of attaching specific markers of racial identity to either of the female protagonists, it would undermine Morrison's attempt to free up the language of her story from "racially informed and determined chains." She is using race, in the form of floating categories of blackness and whiteness that cannot be attached to Twyla and Roberta, as a lens through which to critique a culture of race, as articulated by David G. Holmes,⁶³ permeating a society that pretends to racelessness.

⁶² See Goldstein's "Race/[Gender]: Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif.'" *Journal Of The Short Story In English* 27, (1996).

⁶³ See David G. Holmes' *Revisiting Racialized Voice: African American Ethos in Language and Literature* (2004).

Concerning the “multiple narrative” dimensions of passing texts, Gallego goes on to say “[that] they take on a sort of cover, drawing from other genres or modes such as autobiography, satire, romance, fairy tale, science fiction, the sentimental novel, etc., in order to ‘pass’ as mere stories of racial passing when, in fact, they become ideal instruments to reflect upon all kinds of ‘passing’” (Gallego 191). In the case of “Recitatif,” Morrison draws on elements of post-racial fiction to cover over the story’s racial elements. The racial indeterminacy of the protagonists on the part of the reader blankets highly charged racial issues sewn into the fabric of the text, including civil rights struggles, desegregation, bussing practices, and “racial strife.” Gallego’s comments on the possible function of the “multiple narrative” helps clarify the patterns of racial indeterminacy we read in the story. She writes, “By making use of a multiple ‘generic passing,’ [passing] narratives ultimately turn into metaphors of themselves: they pass in order to fulfill their mission, proclaiming their unconventional message where notions of race, identity, and gender are constantly deconstructed and reconstructed” (191). This is precisely what readers see unfolding in “Recitatif” once we understand the ways in which our own racially-rooted beliefs condition our interpretation of and relationship to the text. Categories of race are certainly being “deconstructed and reconstructed” continually throughout the short story. Detaching the two female protagonists from any overt or explicit demarcations destabilizes the foundational premises for investing bodies with blackness or whiteness. As Abel aptly demonstrates, any attempt the reader makes to reconstruct their racial identities based on the relativistic clues scattered throughout the

text ultimately falls apart. Perhaps even more perplexing is the possibility of reading either racial identity onto either protagonist. However, it proves impossible to anchor any definitive reading of blackness or whiteness in either Twyla or Roberta. It is through this unconventional approach to characterization that the text becomes a metaphor of itself, pretending to the racelessness it offers on the surface of its narrative. But the racelessness is pretense, as the text's investment in racial formations beneath its surface reveals. This is foremost a narrative about race that pretends or passes as a narrative that is unconcerned with race. We might best classify this pretense as a raceless/race-laden binary.

Building on the link between disguising/passing and the raceless/race-laden binary as it relates to Maggie, Twyla, and Roberta, an even stronger case can be made for the passing nature of Morrison's text. An analysis of Twyla and Roberta's treatment of Maggie, the deaf, presumably mute, St. Bonaventure kitchen woman with "legs like parentheses," reveals a practice similar to the one Morrison employs in creating a hybrid narrative operating on multiple levels. The *parentheses* image is the key. Typically, items located inside of parentheses are of secondary importance, thought of as a casual aside in addition to something more important outside of the parentheses. Maggie initially seems to be regarded by Twyla and Roberta the same way, secondarily. Regard for Maggie is only an inadvertent thought that makes its way into Twyla's dreams of the apple orchard she had frequented with Roberta while in the orphanage. Reflecting on an instance when the "gar-girls" (a slightly older gang of female bullies at St. Bonaventure who constantly

antagonize the protagonists) ridicule and assault Maggie on her way to the bus stop, she muses, “Nothing really happened there. Nothing all that important, I mean. Just the big girls dancing and playing the radio. Roberta and me watching. Maggie fell down there once. The kitchen woman with legs like parentheses. And the big girls laughed at her [...] I don’t know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked” (Morrison 89-90). The repetition of the *parentheses* image reinforces the connection between Maggie and secondary-ness. It is the only thing Twyla recalls about the woman, her unimportance to her own memories. Maggie’s material absence throughout the rest of the narrative inclines readers to disregard her in a similar way.

The perversity of her secondary treatment is manifest not only in Twyla and Roberta’s refusal to come to Maggie’s defense when she is assaulted by the gar-girls (it is eventually revealed that Maggie is physically abused after she falls), but also in the insults they hurl her way in the wake of the assault. Thinking back on an instance in the apple orchard when she saw Maggie ridiculed by the gar girls, Twyla reflects, “We should have helped her up, I know, but we were scared of those girls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil” (Morrison 89-90). Their fear is understandable in light of their age, highlighted by the lipstick and eyebrow pencil that, unlike the gar girls, they do not wear. In fact, because Twyla and Roberta fall victim to attacks from these older gar girls themselves, readers are likely to sympathize with them based on the helplessness Twyla expresses. Morrison tempers this sympathy, though, reminding us that the two are as

much responsible for Maggie's victimization as are the gar girls. Watching her walk through the orchard, and under the pretense of testing whether or not she can actually hear, Twyla and Roberta shout to Maggie, "Dummy! Dummy!" and "Bow legs, bow legs!" Again, Twyla invokes the image of parentheses, drawing our attention to the secondary-ness of Maggie. The image reinforces the idea that Maggie is of little importance to her recollections. In fact, after the two finish shouting to her, Twyla recalls, "We got along all right, Roberta and me" (90). Juxtaposed with their mutual ridicule of Maggie, it is as if the sense of community they create between one another is somehow tied to the way they alienate Maggie. Their friendship flourishes in light of her suffering. They are imagining her as an "other" against which they can define themselves, demonstrating Maggie's centrality⁶⁴ to their own sense of identification and to the characterization of the story as a black-passing narrative.

Helene A. Androne accounts for Twyla and Roberta's disregard for and inappropriate treatment of Maggie as a collective displacement of their anxieties concerning being abandoned by their mothers to an orphanage. Unlike the other residents of St. Bonaventure who were "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky," Twyla and Roberta have living mothers who have consciously left them at the orphanage (Morrison 90-91). They find themselves alienated from their peers for this reason. The absent-presence that is their living mothers prevents them from becoming full members

⁶⁴ As described in Chapter One, Agamben theorizes the centrality of "bare life" to slave societies. Maggie operates as a similar type of biopolitical energy in "Recitatif" that proves central to the constitution of the society of St. Bonaventure and also Twyla and Roberta's relationship.

of the St. Bonaventure community of orphans whose dead parents represent a unifying present-absence. Androne claims that “the memories of their mothers frame memories of this experience with Maggie in the orchard. This is because Maggie embodies Twyla’s and Roberta’s intersecting pasts. Rather than dealing directly with their maternal realities of absence and presence, memories of Maggie become the center of strife between them” (Androne 137). Essentially, the *not-quite-orphan* status of the two girls opens a pathway for them to establish a collective identity that transcends their racial differences, magnified in their initial meeting. Strife, however, particularly that based on their racial differences, accounts for at least half of the interactions between them in the text. It is what keeps them connected over the course of nearly thirty years.

Howard Sklar offers an equally interesting explanation for the collective dismissal of Maggie based on her disability status in an essay titled “‘What the Hell Happened to Maggie?’ Stereotype, Sympathy, and Disability in Toni Morrison’s ‘Recitatif.’” He claims that the protagonists’ agonizing over their disregard for Maggie functions as Morrison’s intentional manipulation of the reader’s emotions. Sklar illustrates the role disability plays in the conversations between Twyla and Roberta. He notices that the questions and comments the two generate concerning Maggie’s racial identity are ignored (until the end of the narrative) in light of her disability status. Sklar is emphasizing the secondary importance of race to the narrative in light of Maggie’s status as disabled. I’m inclined to agree with Sklar to a certain extent. Maggie’s disability situates her as a victim of abuse and ridicule, working to generate sympathy in the reader. Too, her race is

obviously ignored by both protagonists in critical moments throughout the short story. But these moments of ignorance indicate the primacy of repressing race as much as it signifies the secondary nature of its importance. Qualifying Maggie's race in any of their conversations would undermine the way that race does not matter to their relationship. It would effectively attach it to the predetermined chains Morrison is seeking to liberate her story from.

While the points Sklar and Androne make are important, it is imperative that readers escape Morrison's trap that causes them to overlook or casually dismiss the importance of Maggie's racial identity to the narrative. Kelly Lynch Reames⁶⁵ identifies Maggie and her racial identity as the centerpiece of the entire narrative: "What holds the story together structurally is the racially ambiguous Maggie, who at first appears incidental [...] The memories of Maggie that Twyla tries to piece together structure the narrative, providing reference points and transitions and creating a mystery for Twyla that compels the narrative" (Reames 137). As a reference point for, amongst other things, the racial identities of the protagonists, Maggie's function in the text parallels the function of race in the text; it initially suggests its "incidental" nature. This is Morrison's strategy for drawing a post-racial cover over the more substantive matters of race that plague the rest of the text. As we come to find, the racial dimensions of Twyla and Roberta's perception of Maggie colors the way they racially self-identify. In Abel's opinion, she is "a blank parenthesis, a floating signifier" devoid of any specific racial

⁶⁵ See *Women and Race in Contemporary U.S. Writing: from Morrison to Faulkner* (2007).

markers (Abel 103). The image informs the way the two girls see themselves in relationship to Maggie, whose “blank[ness]” allows the them to invest her with racial markers against which they can define themselves. This accounts for their contentious debate over their perceptions of Maggie’s racial identity towards the end of the text:

“Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you’re not. You’re the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot.”

The coupons were everywhere and the guts of my purse were bunched under the dashboard. What was she saying? Black? Maggie wasn’t black.

“She wasn’t black,” I said.

“Like hell she wasn’t, and you kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn’t even scream.”

“Liar!”

“You’re the liar!” (105).

Maggie is perceived by Twyla and Roberta as both black and not-black, although the reasons for each perception are never clear. Harris reiterates the importance of Maggie’s racial identity, stating, “Whether Maggie was black or not, both Twyla and Roberta were intent upon denying her humanity by stepping over her body into another state of being” (Harris 114). It is precisely this new “state of being” that interests scholars of racial passing. By denying Maggie her humanity (a practice regularly associated with and exercised by the hegemonic classes, as is amply illustrated in *Benito Cereno* and *The Shadow*), Twyla and Roberta create an opportunity to redefine themselves as *not-Maggie*. Whereas the two are otherwise distinct individuals who are seen as members of different races and have experienced substantially different upbringings, their identification as *not-Maggie* is a form of mutual self-identification. Androne describes their identification similarly: “Maggie represents the intersection of their identities and their desire to revise

their pasts to explain their present selves” (Androne 137). Through their mistreatment of Maggie, and Twyla’s eventual repression of it, both female protagonists assume the power to self-affirm that is integral to the racial passer. They can continue living in a world of *not-Maggie* at the expense of her humanity, using the blankness of her body to act out raceless/race-laden fantasies that parallel the racial fantasies of post-racial readers.

Morrison’s employment of literal and symbolic signage in the latter half of “Recitatif” further demonstrates the unconventional passing nature of her narrative. The latter half of the story, which revolves around the use of signs, details the interactions of the two female protagonists twenty years after their chance meeting in the Howard Johnson cafe. At this point, both women are married, both live in suburbs (Twyla in Newburgh, Roberta in Annandale) that are in close proximity of one another, and both have taken on roles as mothers,⁶⁶ Twyla giving birth to one son and Roberta marrying a widower with four children. The interactions between the two women in this section of the story remain framed by racial difference, but this time their age does not shield their interracial relationship from ideologies of race espoused by the larger society in which they now participate. The section opens with – “*Strife came to us that fall. At least that’s what the paper called it. Strife. Racial Strife*” (103). The strife being referred to is the integration of public schools; however, there is no mention of specific dates that anchors this push for integration in the post-Civil Rights era. It is simply assumed. The text deals

⁶⁶ For the purposes of this chapter, I talk about the two women’s roles as mothers in this section of the story primarily as a plot device that brings them together after twenty years without contact and fuels their contentious interactions. The psychoanalytic elements of this portion of the story, specifically as it relates to Twyla and Roberta filling the absent-presence left by their mothers, merit a more worthwhile, in-depth examination than can be supplied here.

with racial segregation that occurred over the course of decades in the post-Civil Rights era of the United States.⁶⁷ The line does illustrate, however, Twyla's implicit acknowledgment that her ideas about race and racial identity, unlike when she and Roberta were children in the orphanage, are directly influenced by the larger society in which they live. The newspaper she reads and the episodes of the "Today" show she watches are socially constructed signs that have penetrated the barrier insulating private life from public life, an obstruction that informs the interracial relationship between Twyla and Roberta. Eventually the two women find themselves at odds concerning the bussing practices that were an integral part of the integration of public schools, Twyla passively accepting bussing and Roberta actively protesting it. Their disagreements are argued through signs.

Driving by her son Joseph's junior high school one August day, Twyla sees Roberta picketing with a crowd of women who, in true Morrison fashion, also remain racially indeterminate. Most noticeable about Roberta, though, is the enormous sign – "bigger than [Roberta's] mother's cross" – that she is picketing with. It reads, "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!" Readers are not certain of Roberta's racial identity based on the stance she takes on bussing. Abel says it is possible that social class influences the stances each woman takes:

If we are familiar (as I was not) with IBM's efforts to recruit black executives and the racial exclusiveness of the firemen's union in upstate New York, where the story is set, we read Roberta

⁶⁷ Cultural references in this part of the story, such as *The Price is Right* game show and *The Brady Bunch* sitcom (which originally aired from 1969-1974) seem to narrow the window in which integration is taking place. However, because reruns of *The Brady Bunch* aired into the early 1990s and *The Price is Right* still airs in 2012, neither reference definitively establishes a timeframe for this portion of the narrative.

as middle-class black and Twyla as working-class white. Roberta's resistance to bussing, then, is based on class rather than racial loyalties: she doesn't want her (middle-class black) stepchildren bussed to a school in a (white) working-class neighborhood; Twyla, conversely, wants her white working-class child bussed to a middle-class school (regardless of that school's racial composition). (106).

Roberta, then, might be a black woman protesting having her stepchildren bussed to a white neighborhood, but the "if" conjunction at the opening of Abel's statement makes it impossible for readers to anchor this interpretation definitively. We know only that she is protesting bussing practices, telling Twyla "They want to take my kids and send them out of the neighborhood" (Morrison 104).

In complete disagreement with Roberta's stance on bussing, Twyla decides to openly debate the point with her. She tells Roberta, "So what if [your children] go to another school? My boy's being bussed too, and I don't mind. Why should you?" (Morrison 104). Not to be outdone by her counterpart, Twyla decides to make her own sign to communicate her opinion on the issue. Her first sign reads "AND SO DO CHILDREN****," which is clearly a direct response to the declaration of mothers' rights made by Roberta's sign. And like Roberta's sign, it is impossible to deduce Twyla's racial identity based on the stance it reflects on bussing practices.

This relational signage is Morrison's brilliance at work, reflecting the racially indeterminate, yet distinctly oppositional identities of the two women. For the reader, Roberta's sign has no referent. It is a floating signifier that could potentially represent the anger of a black mother whose kids are being bussed into a lower-class, white public school or a white mother upset that her kids are being bussed into a black public school.

Twyla's acceptance of Joseph being bussed to a school in a different neighborhood can possibly reflect either a white or black mother's contentment at having her son attend a racially homogenous or upper-middle class school. Bussing practices involved *white kids-to-black schools and black kids-to-white schools* integration practices.⁶⁸ That we do not know the racial identities of their children or their partners (their interracial friendship suggests that either or both could be in an interracial marriage) makes pegging Twyla and Roberta's racial identities based on the stances they take even trickier. Twyla's sign, on the other hand, has a referent (Roberta's sign), but that referent is itself merely a signifier of their oppositional differences. The original idea behind the conflict, signified by the two distinct groups of demonstrators that both women picket with, and to which either of their signs responds, is lost. The two signs, therefore, can only be understood in relation to one another and not in the context of the larger debate, embodied by the racial strife articulated in the newspaper and on the "Today" show that shadows over their lives. Twyla even tells us, "People changed signs from time to time, but Roberta never did and neither did I. Actually, my sign didn't make sense without Roberta's" (Morrison 106). When Twyla quits picketing, she knows she will not be missed because, "nobody understood my signs anyway." Morrison even mocks the meaningfulness of the sign, having Twyla's father-in-law clean his fish on it. We do know, though, that their opposing signs symbolize their racial difference. Morrison has charged her narrative with

⁶⁸ *Family Experiences in Operations Exodus; the bussing of Negro Children and Rethinking Educational Equality* (1974) provide in-depth examinations of post-Civil Rights era bussing practices that involve white and black children.

relativistic signs of racial and cultural difference that are not anchored in or by any specific entities, just as the protest signs of Twyla and Roberta are not anchored in any specific entity. Mutually self-affirming in opposition to Maggie in a post-racial world of floating racial signifiers is to pass as raceless. This is clearly an instance of black-passing.

The reconciliation that takes place between the two women one Christmas Eve night a few years after the integration protests reveals their reliance on Maggie for maintaining their post-racial relationship. In every other instance in the short story, one specific set of questions effectively ends their interaction and temporarily terminates their friendship: Twyla asks Roberta “Is your mother well?” and Roberta responds by asking her “Is your mother still dancing?” Invoking painful memories of these phantoms further engenders the vulnerability and alienation these two protagonists experience. Neither of them is willing to confront the reality that their present-absent mothers represent, so terminating their interaction is a way of avoiding having to answer the rhetorical questions they pose to one another. By the end of the story, however, neither woman asks this question of the other. Instead, Twyla declares to Roberta that her mother “never did stop dancing.” Roberta reciprocates, telling Twyla, “And mine, she never got well.” This mutual acknowledgment of the source of their vulnerability and alienation opens a new pathway for their relationship.

The strength of this relationship is still dependent on their mutual identification as *not-Maggie*, though. Just before Twyla offers her declaration, Roberta confesses to her something she recalls about the day they saw Maggie fall in the apple orchard:

Listen to me. I really did think [Maggie] was black. I didn't make that up. I really thought so. But now I can't be sure. I just remember her as old, so old. And because she couldn't talk – well, you know, I thought she was crazy. She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that's not true. And I don't want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day – wanting to is doing it (109).

We see through Roberta's recollection the way Maggie functions as a virtual substitute for her and her mother – “She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too” – which explains, in part, her desire to watch Maggie be hurt. Maggie represents the insecurities Roberta experiences and struggles to repress. We also register the earnestness with which she regards Maggie as black – “I really thought so.” And although Twyla initially questions Roberta's claim that Maggie is black (she muses, “She wasn't pitch-black, I knew”), she does so without conviction. It is through these memories of Maggie, or at least the recognition that neither of them knows the truth about what happened to her in the apple orchard, that the two begin to mend their relationship. Each had invested in a specific reading of race on her body. In fact, it is only after they both admit to their uncertainty that they are able to take a step forward in their relationship, finally confessing to and confronting the reality of their present-absent mothers. It is Maggie, her story and her race that catalyze this reconciliation. The difference Twyla and Roberta manufacture between themselves and her is the metaphorical glue that binds the two protagonists together over the span of their lives. We cannot know whether the *not-Maggie* identities they form are premised on a desire for heteronormative whiteness, but it does afford them the liberty of looking beyond their

own racial identities in order to act out racelessness. This makes their act of self-affirmation an unconventional permutation of racial passing that I characterize as black-passing.

Although the type of passing Twyla and Roberta engage in is relatively subtle, it is passing nonetheless. Both characters are pretending to an identity of mutual racelessness situated against the race-invested body of Maggie, who exists as a repressed other that haunts their lives (and the text) as a present-absence. Maggie's raced body is a signpost against which Twyla and Roberta measure and recreate themselves. The signs of racial inequality may have been dismantled through the Civil Rights movements, but Twyla and Roberta's treatment of Maggie stands as a reminder that post-racial, integrated societies conduct practices of racelessness that are equally malicious and alienating. We can assert, therefore, that race functions in the story the same way as Maggie, as a present-absence that colors the narrative and the relationship between its two female protagonists. The fact that their signs, both literal and symbolic, can only be understood in relationship to one another's implies that their racial identities can only be understood in relationship to one another's. Each symbolizes the difference in the other, although we can never ascertain which is which. But that difference is transcended by their difference from Maggie. Overcoming the inadequacy they feel at being "othered" themselves, the two female protagonists exploit Maggie by imagining her as a raced other and themselves as raceless. Because traditional racial demarcations are absent from the narrative, it is impossible to detect any conventional traces of passing. We do see black-passing at work

in the text, however. Twyla and Roberta, two figures who have racial identities that substantively define who they are, living out a post-racial existence where race is essentially meaningless is one form of black-passing.

Orientation Games

Like “Recitatif,” ZZ Packer’s short story “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere,” the central story in her collection of the same name (2003), receives little critical attention outside of the occasional book review. Of those reviews, nearly all praise Packer’s literary talents, but few offer in-depth analyses of the individual stories in the collection. The lack of critical attention may be attributable to the collection’s recent publication. Or perhaps, like “Recitatif,” Packer’s titular story of raced characters existing in spaces not racially demarcated deters the casual critic. The thematic overlaps it shares with Morrison’s text may provide a more useful framework for understanding how such a complex and powerful story slips past our collective critical gaze.

Ultimately, the story is one of labels. Dina, the story’s protagonist, resists being labeled, particularly when it comes to her sexual identity. Readers are never quite sure whether Dina is lesbian, but she falls in love with a young, slightly overweight, white student named Heidi. Coming to grips with the meaning of this substantive, heartfelt desire for another female fuels Dina’s anxiety and becomes the driving force behind the narrative. Ironically, Dina labels Heidi as a lesbian when they first meet: “She fit the bill. Short hair, hard, roach-stomping shoes. Dressed like an aspiring plumber. And then there

was the name Henrik...” (Packer 109). This impulse to immediately stereotype others – “Aren’t you a lesbian?” and “Do you have a cat” – is odd considering her own disdain with being labeled. In particular, she is always defensive when her sexual identity is called into question; when she is handed an invitation to a leather party by a fellow student, she angrily tells Heidi, “He thinks we’re fucking gay” (114). The defensiveness (which mirrors Hertha’s trepidation at being made “conspicuous” as a racial passer in *The Shadow*), is taken to a new level in conversations with her psychiatrist, Dr. Raeburn, eventually culminating in one of the most intense and revealing scenes in the story. It is this anxiety with having her sexuality called into question that opens up new avenues for comprehending the black-passing elements of Packer’s text.

Because of its unconventional, post-racial character, Packer’s text does not immediately stand out as a passing narrative. Instead of watching a tragic mulatta make the dangerous and emotionally agonizing trek across the color line, and thereby adhering to the prototypical structure of conventional passing narratives, Packer’s story follows Dina as she struggles in her transition from an urban Baltimore neighborhood to the Yale University campus community. The contrast Dina draws between these two worlds is stark. From Dina’s unhappy recollections, Baltimore is a place that abhors bookishness. She remembers the shame she felt shopping with food stamps at the Super Fresh market a few blocks from her house, the cashiers sneering at her bookishness: “There she go reading. Don’t your eyes get tired?” (118). This world of embarrassment stands in sharp

contrast to the intellectual sanctuary that is Yale University, a community that celebrates intellectualism.

Baltimore is also an environment of familial misery and uncertainty. Of her parents, Dina says, “My father was a dick and my mother seemed to like him” (Packer 111). The relationship between her parents even appears to be abusive. Dina’s mother seemingly lives in a state of perpetual fear of her husband. One day, after Dina drops her grocery bags on the way home from the store and ruins their dinner, her mother panics: “‘Come on,’ Mama said, snuffing her tears, pulling my arm, trying to get me to join her and start yanking cushions off the couch. ‘We’ll find enough change here. We got to get something for dinner before your father gets back’” (120). Her mother’s desperation is unsettling, her frenzied motions an indication of her fear at displeasing Dina’s father. It is through the same lens of fear that Dina remembers her mother’s death: “My mother had died slowly. At the hospital, they’d said it was kidney failure, but I knew, in the end, it was my father. He made her so scared to live in her own home that she was finally driven away from it in an ambulance” (116). Her mother’s fear explains much of Dina’s own trepidation at developing intimate relationships with others. However, the loveless nature of her parents relationship stands in opposition to the loving, kindhearted nature of Dina and Heidi’s eventual friendship. The two care for one another in a way that Dina does not experience prior to meeting Heidi. She welcomes the solitude of her “suicide single” dorm room because she believes all relationships will be as emotionally barren as her parents’. In a way, Dina’s journey between these two disparate worlds parallels the

actions of the racial passer as she moves from the diminutive black social world in which she is born into a white social world replete with privilege and opportunity.

A central component to revealing the passing narrative embedded within Packer's short story lies in unpacking its opening line – "Orientation games began the day I arrived at Yale from Baltimore." The line, indicative of the complications Dina faces in making the transition from the black world she knows (Baltimore) to a foreign, primarily white world (Yale), is an implicit acknowledgement of her status as a racial outsider. As a black student, Dina is being orientated in this unfamiliar world of whiteness. Stepping onto the lush, vibrant Yale University campus from her urban, lower-class Baltimore neighborhood is a move between two distinct social and racial realities. The "passing" nature of the story is also intertwined in the sexual connotations of the term "orientation" that appears in the opening line. Literally, the orientation games the students play are intended to familiarize them with the campus and with one another. These "heady, frustrating games for smart people," as Dina terms them, include charades reinterpreted by existentialists, identifying as an inanimate object, and Trust, in which one student falls freely backward into the waiting arms of other students. However, the term "orientation" also functions as a metaphor for Dina's ambiguous sexual preference. The term invites us to consider whether her (physically unconsummated) love for another female defines her as a lesbian.

The multiple levels on which the term "orientation" operates parallel the multilayered, multidimensional aspects of racial performance at work in narratives of

racial passing. As is the case with “Recitatif,” Mar Gallego’s effective challenge to the common assumption that passing narratives are written merely as critiques of white/black racial binaries helps to explain the nature of passing at work in Packer’s short story. Gallego argues, you’ll recall, that the *mulatta is born black—becomes white—becomes black again* narrative structure of conventional passing narratives functions as a mask for the articulation of more subtle, more subversive narratives of difference and desire. As such, these narratives become metaphors of themselves, utilizing a prescribed format that, on its surface, reinforces the desire for heteronormative whiteness that makes passing narratives acceptable in the discourse on race and literature. These texts pass as passing narratives in order to reveal politically subversive narratives lying just beneath the surface of the text, as is reflected in Packer’s narrative. The subtext of Dina’s desire for Heidi is overwritten by racial tensions created through the white/black binary used to define race relations. This sub-narrative intends to deconstruct preconceived notions of sexual hegemony that are foundational to the maintenance of a specific hierarchy that privileges white, heteronormative lifestyles. It also presents unconventional pathways for the articulation and expression of black sexuality outside of the framework of (as Morrison terms them) “racially informed and determined chains” of the hegemonic racial order.

Judith Butler’s interpretation of the subversive nature of queerness in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* very closely parallels Gallego’s claim about the multiple layers of passing at work in narratives such as Packer’s. Considered by many the pinnacle of the

passing genre, Larsen's novel functions as an appropriate backdrop against which critics can assess the passing devices at work in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere." In her essay "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," Butler claims that Larsen's intent in crafting a story of racial passing is frequently misunderstood by casual readers. On its surface, the narrative, which chronicles the developing relationship of two mulatta protagonists, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, as they engage in various instances of racial passing, seems to be focused primarily on racial identity. The relationship between the two is an exploration of the consequences of crossing the color line. Irene, who passes only on occasion and for social convenience (the novel opens with her taking tea at a rooftop café above a segregated hotel in Chicago), is highly critical of the decision of her childhood friend Clare to marry a white husband and permanently pass as a member of the white world. So preoccupied is Irene with Clare's permanent passing lifestyle that she obsessively reminds her "Everything must be paid for." She goes on to tell her, "I'm beginning to believe ... that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or *safe*" (Larsen 67, emphasis mine). Irene's recurring, subtle reminders of the danger of permanently passing as white continually focus the attention of the reader onto Clare's racial ambiguity. Through Irene's perspective, Clare's racial identity takes center stage.

As Butler astutely observes though, beneath the surface of Irene's trepidation at the racial implications of Clare's lifestyle is an erotic desire to consume Clare for her own gratification. "Clare," Butler writes, "embodies a certain kind of sexual daring that

Irene defends herself against [...] and Irene finds herself drawn by Clare, wanting to be her, but also wanting her” (Butler 268). According to Butler, Irene’s animosity toward Clare’s husband John Bellew, an incredibly racist businessman who professes to Clare and Irene “I don’t dislike [Negroes], I hate them,” is driven primarily by his possession of Clare as an object of sexual desire rather than by his overt racial bigotry. She does not wish to replace Clare in this situation and permanently assume a white identity, but rather to supplant Bellew and consume Clare’s white identity in the way he does. Too, her jealousy of her own (black) husband Brian’s possible desire for Clare stems from an anxiety that he might possess her as an object of desire, and not from fear of losing Brian to her. The erotically barren marriage between Brian and Clare is bereft of the type of attraction that Irene believes Clare ignites in Brian, since she feels that desire for Clare herself. Following a conversation the two have about Clare’s desirability to their mutual colleague Hugh, Irene gazes in the mirror: “For a long minute she sat in strained stiffness. The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind. Impossible for her to put it immediately into words or give it outline, for, prompted by some impulse of self-protection, she recoiled from exact expression” (Larsen 90). The unidentified “thing” Irene experiences and that blots out the image (of Clare, perhaps) in the mirror is her erotic desire for Clare. Her recoil is not from her desire for Clare, however, but rather from its “exact expression.” Clearly, Irene’s engrossment in Clare’s racial passing and the tensions inherent in crossing the color line are simply a narrative mask for her own erotic desire for Clare.

Therefore, the novel becomes a metaphor of itself, employing the structure of the conventional passing narrative to mask a tale of one female's sexual desire for another female.

Packer adopts this metaphorical passing framework to accomplish a similar purpose in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere." Her passing protagonist, Dina, uses racial tension and racial animosity to redirect attention away from her desire for Heidi in the same way Irene uses it to redirect attention away from her desire for Clare. This comes through in her trepidation at participating in the orientation games at Yale, especially

Trust:

The idea [behind Trust] was that if you had the faith to fall backward and wait for four scrawny former high school geniuses to catch you, just before your head cracked on the slate sidewalk, then you might learn to trust your fellow students. Russian roulette sounded like a better way to go. "No way," I said. The white boys were waiting for me to fall, holding their arms out for me, sincerely, gallantly. "No fucking way." (105).

Her description of the game is telling. Dina's skepticism – "No way. No fucking way," – is entirely understandable based on her initial description of the people waiting to catch her. She identifies her Trust-mates as "scrawny former high school geniuses" who offer no reassurance that they possess the physical ability to prevent her from falling. On the surface, we understand Dina's questioning of their physical prowess in relation to their intellectual deftness. Their bookishness (which accounts for their admission to Yale and for the types of orientation games the counselors organize), Dina assumes, has not prepared them for the physical exertion the game of Trust demands, and they will inevitably drop her for this reason. However, her skepticism also operates on a much

larger socio-political level premised on racial difference. In her second reference to her Trust-mates, Dina identifies the high school geniuses as “white boys [who] were waiting for me to fall,” (Packer 105). The mention of their whiteness shifts attention away from her concern about the physical prowess of the boys and places emphasis on their racial identities. Suddenly, Dina’s lack of trust in these young men is based on the fact that they are white and not that they are physically weak.

Their whiteness operates similarly on another level. Although readers know Dina is a black woman, her racial identity does not seem significant within the post-racial context of the story. Nobody treats her as a black woman who has penetrated the color line into a non-black space. There are no racially demarcated spaces in Packer’s text that define the populations that exist within them. Therefore, the racial identities of her white Trust-mates are expressed merely to illustrate the racial distinctions between them and her. Dina is highlighting the point that she is not white and that her non-whiteness matters in relation to what she is being asked to do during these orientation games. In juxtaposing her blackness against her Trust-mates’ whiteness in the context of a game called Trust, Dina characterizes their interracial interaction as rife with anxieties wedded to a long history of mistrust between blacks and whites over the course of centuries in the United States. Read through the perspective of a black woman, that mistrust involves perverse practices of vigilante justice, segregation, disenfranchisement, and sexual abuse and rape enacted through the demands of a hegemonic racial order. Dina’s reaction to the game and her Trust-mates, then, serves as a metaphor for the collective apprehension African-

Americans feel toward their white counterparts in a newly desegregated, post-racial environment following the Civil Rights era.

Dina's racial apprehension extends to the female counselor administering this particular game of Trust. The way in which she describes the counselor implicitly ascribes her physical attributes to a white racial identity:

“It’s all cool, it’s all cool,” the counselor said. Her hair was a shade of blond I’d seen only on *Playboy* covers, and she raised her hands as though backing away from a growling dog. “Sister,” she said, in an I’m-down-with-the-struggle voice, “you don’t have to play this game. As a person of color, you shouldn’t have to fit into any white patriarchal system” (106).

Dina's focus on the blond shade of the counselor's hair is suggestive of their racial difference. Blond hair, in this context, is representative of the whiteness and purity that define an ideal standard of American beauty, sharply contrasting against the fetishized exoticness of black women's hair.⁶⁹ It stands out to Dina precisely because it is something she seemingly has never witnessed in person. That Dina has only ever seen hair this shade through a carefully edited medium (i.e. a *Playboy* magazine cover) deifies it as an object of desire. It places emphasis on the distinction between the whiteness that shade of blond symbolizes and the blackness represented by hair that, like Dina's, is nothing like it. As such, the counselor exists for Dina as an emblem of whiteness and femininity that contrasts sharply with Dina's somewhat less feminine blackness.

⁶⁹ In *Killing Us Softly 4* (2011), Jean Kilbourne elaborates extensively on the advertising industry's creation and perpetuation of an ideal standard of American beauty for women. The standard is determined, in large part, as a measure of virginal whiteness set in contradistinction to the exoticism of black female sexuality.

The *Playboy* cover itself is important, functioning as a representation of Dina's possible homosexuality. In offering up women's bodies for visual consumption, *Playboy* magazine symbolizes the desire to possess women as objects of aesthetic and visceral pleasure. The magazine is typically considered a heterosexual enterprise that caters to the interests of an adult male audience, one that Dina, through the association she draws between the counselor and the magazine, gets identified with. This identification with heterosexual men suggests that Dina may share their desire to consume women as objects of sexual gratification. Her casual reference to the magazine, and the racial implications of her description of the counselor's blond hair, are constructed in a way that causes readers to easily dismiss or overlook the sexual desires the magazine represents.

Dina's interpretation of the counselor's conversation with her further magnifies the racial tensions involved in the orientation games. In response to Dina's refusal to participate in Trust, the counselor verbally identifies her "[a]s a person of color," making Dina's racial identity a significant factor in whether she feels included or excluded. Predicating her exclusion from the "white patriarchal system," one that the counselor herself seems to fit into rather comfortably, on her black racial identity reinforces the alienation Dina experiences from her peers. Even though the counselor is correct in what she tells Dina (she *should not* have to fit into any white patriarchal system), the truth is that Dina (and every other Yale student for that matter) does have to conform to a certain degree of cultural hegemony to succeed at Yale, hence the "heady, frustrating" orientation games. In their conversation, the counselor has not only indirectly

acknowledged the existence and operation of white patriarchy within the campus community, but Dina attributes being labeled as an outsider by the counselor to her own black racial identity. Dina considers this labeling through a specific lens that closely relates to a historically rooted racial binary. People who fit in at Yale are white, and those who do not are black. Intentionally, she ignores the possibility that her social class (represented by the food stamps with which she shops for food) may be equally as responsible for her misanthropy.⁷⁰ She treats the counselor's claims about participation and exclusion in relation to the orientation games as a variation on the white/black racial dynamic that framed the dialogue on race prior to the emergence of post-racial social sentiment.

Too, the counselor's tonal resonance as she interacts with Dina is suggestive of white/black distinctions that further divide her and Dina racially. Dina describes her tone as an "I'm-down-with-the-struggle voice," an unquestionable attempt to establish ethical credibility with someone (Dina) she perceives to be racially different from herself. The "struggle" in question is most likely a reference to the efforts of civil rights proponents of the 1950s and 1960s to achieve social equality for the underrepresented, particularly greater access to institutions of higher learning.⁷¹ The image of Dina as a "growling dog" reminds us of the attack dogs unleashed on civil rights protestors during the freedom

⁷⁰ During the orientation games, Dina notices another black student who she feels no particular connection with. The student's "Exeter T-shirt" suggests a private school education funded by upper-middle class parents, an experience completely detached from Dina's own lower socioeconomic upbringing.

⁷¹ In his introduction to a collection of essays titled *Higher Education and the Civil Rights Movement* (2008), Peter Wallerstein revises exaggerations in the popular national narrative surrounding the desegregation of higher education institutions, but reemphasizes the centrality of access to higher education to the movement.

marches for equal rights.⁷² The counselor's colloquial utterance – “It’s all cool. It’s all cool,” – takes this ethical appeal one step further. It is a form of code switching intended to make her voice sound black and give her racial credibility. Mimicking the language of “persons of color,” she is attempting to bridge the gap between hers and Dina’s racial worlds. David Holmes⁷³ reminds us that “[black] voice can be a fervent yet elusive attempt to capture the collective consciousness of a people, or it can refer to an individual’s or community’s right to speak” (Holmes 106). The counselor sounds “fervent” and genuine in sentiment, focusing specifically on acknowledging Dina’s right to speak, yet her “voice” is elusively inauthentic. Dina interprets her utterance as rhetorically awkward coming from someone whose degree permits them to be employed at a prestigious, predominately white, Ivy League university. Too, the counselor fails to see how as an organizer and facilitator of orientation games premised on a need to acclimate to a new environment, she actually highlights Dina’s otherness from the system of white patriarchy symbolized by Yale. It further magnifies the (indirectly racial) differences between her and Dina. It also situates Dina historically with a movement for equality that was based largely on race.

Dina’s fixation on the racial identities of her Trust-mates and counselor during the orientation games focuses the attention of readers around traditional white/black racial divisions. Her fixation preoccupies readers in the same manner as it does the people she

⁷² Diane McWhorter’s *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, and the Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (2001) paints vivid illustrations of the day-to-day challenges faced by freedom marchers in “Bombingham,” including Ku Klux Klan sponsored shootings and bombings, the stinging spray of fire hoses, and the vicious bite of attack dogs, to name a few.

⁷³See *Revisiting Racialized Voice: African American Ethos in Language and Literature* (2004).

interacts with. She positions race as the foremost factor in understanding her desire to remain alienated from others. It parallels Irene's fixation on race and the racial passing practices of Clare Kendry in *Passing*. Both Larsen and Packer create black female protagonists who bring race to the forefront of their respective texts to encourage us to read each narrative through a lens of race.

Although Dina's racial anxieties parallel those of Larsen's protagonist Irene, there are important distinctions to be drawn between the way Dina and Irene use them to mask their more subversive desires. Situated in the decade of the 1920's, the social world in *Passing* has clearly defined racial boundaries established through racially informed educational, business, and legal practices commonly characterized as Jim Crow laws. Irene's preoccupation with racial identity is, in part, a response to, despite their abstractness, distinct white and black social worlds based on the (presumably) tangible markers of racial difference between their inhabitants. Irene faces the reality of a white/black color line, that metaphorical boundary of social division so thoroughly described by W.E.B. DuBois. This reality of racial segregation defines the form of passing employed in Larsen's novel. In Larsen's fiction, to "pass" is to cross this color line and penetrate the white social world from which blacks are excluded. For Larsen's protagonists, then, passing is a practice premised on a desire for heteronormative whiteness. The three passers in the text, at various moments, each desire to have whiteness read on their body, Clare and her friend Gertrude permanently, Irene occasionally and only for convenience. Although Irene's passing is metaphorically

masking her erotic desire for Clare, it is still a form of passing based on the desirable aspects of white livelihood, such as taking tea at a segregated rooftop cafe. Through it, she extols the virtue of whiteness and undermines the desirability of blackness.

Dina, on the other hand, exists in a post-racial, post-Civil Rights era when institutionally sanctioned, Jim Crow tensions between blacks and whites are virtually impalpable. There is no proverbial white/black color-line to speak of dividing public spaces and services based on racial lines. Her presence as a black woman on the Yale campus is never explicitly questioned or challenged (as would have been the case for Irene or Clare during their era), even though it informs Dina's own understanding of her relationship to her peers. Nor does she feel inclined to try to racially pass as a white woman to enter this new social world. In fact, the opening to Packer's story seems to suggest that Dina is being invited to participate as a member of the Yale community. The school counselors administering the orientation games and her fellow students make genuine attempts to connect with her, even in spite of their racial difference from her.

It is the disappearance of a proverbial color line in a post-racial world that makes Dina a black-passer. In order for Dina to mask her sexual orientation through racial anxiety, to play her orientation game, she must establish herself as a racial other. To do so requires highlighting the racial differences between her and her peers in a post-racial world that is not clearly demarcated. She accomplishes this feat by magnifying their whiteness as a contrast to her blackness, a contrast that would be assumed in a pre-Civil Rights social context. Packer's characterization of race in the text as a relational attribute

is central to understanding Dina's performance of blackness in its post-racial setting. Butler's insights clarify this characterization. Of *Passing*, she writes, "Blackness is not primarily a visual mark in Larsen's story, not only because Irene and Clare are both light-skinned, but because what can be seen, what qualifies as a visible marking, is a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked bodies" (Butler 269). Larsen's racially unmarked mulatta characters can define themselves as either white or black in relation to marked bodies. Irene's unmarked body, for instance, is read as white in the domestic space of Bellew's and Clare's home, even though her attitude and internal dialogue while in this setting is indicative of her blackness. Finding herself appalled at Bellew's racist statements and worrying about him discovering her true identity signify a blackness that is not visually oriented. Inversely, in the domestic space of her own home, her body is marked as black in relation to her husband's black body. That blackness is questioned, however, in Irene's refusal to discuss with him issues pertaining to race. In fact, in this context, her refusal to openly discuss blackness and the social turmoil surrounding race is an indication of her whiteness. Her racial identity is determined by her connection to figures such as Bellew and Brian, both of whom have racially marked bodies that serve as extensions of the color line against which she defines.

Blackness is not primarily a visual mark in Packer's story either, so highlighting the relational aspect of race is integral to understanding Dina's passing performance. Dina does not have the same luxury of an unmarked, racially ambiguous body. She is clearly a black woman, and has blackness explicitly read on her body by the school

counselor in the opening pages of the story. But her blackness has not been predetermined. Her participation as a black woman in a white social world does not prompt consideration of the Negro problem, as is the case in much pre-Civil Rights era African American fiction. The absence of a racial signpost such as the color line makes her blackness more fluid, less determined. It also makes it less visually spectacular. Therefore, to give predetermined meaning to her blackness, she must contrast it with a predetermined whiteness. Imagining the ill intentions of white individuals because of their racial identity is simply to imagine a relational form of racial otherness. Her blackness becomes predetermined through predetermined whiteness, and in turn, racial tensions ensue.

The implied maliciousness of white people her comments hint at assists her in establishing a relational contrast between herself and her Trust-mates. This contrast is an intentional mischaracterization meant to solidify the existence of a racially contentious relationship between them. She describes them waiting with their arms out for her “sincerely, gallantly,” indicating their genuine resoluteness to catch her as she falls. The two terms connote honesty and bravery, qualities that should reassure her of their intentions, not cause her to question their willingness to prevent her head from cracking on the slate sidewalk. These boys are not racist bigots looking to make her a victim of some perverse racial fantasy, and Dina knows it. But she knows too, that differentiating herself from them is necessary for maintaining an illusion that covers over her deeper feelings for Heidi. To remain isolated and avoid questions about her sexuality she must

necessarily insulate herself as a racial outcast, a difficult challenge in a non-demarcated, post-racial world. The most convenient method at her disposal is to assume the role of racial other in a traditional, pre-Civil Rights sense. The absence of overt signs to divide racial groups and elevate whites over blacks in the post-racial context of Packer's text requires Dina to racially self-imagine. Since neither the Yale educational institution, nor her peers seem preoccupied with her racial identity (none of them claim to be "nigger haters" as does Bellew), she must perform the role of a racial other through a self-imagining of blackness that recalls the racial tensions inherent in a Jim Crow society. In invoking the long history of racial animosity and mistrust between blacks and whites that culminates in the social and political movements of the Civil Rights era, Dina situates her blackness as a traditionally antithetical identity to their whiteness. Fixing on their racial identities is a tool she uses to play on the stereotypical associations assumed when white men interact with black women under the shadow of Jim Crow segregation. They are untrustworthy because they are white. She is skeptical of them because she is black. In other words, she performs blackness (and in turn, their whiteness) in a way that racially situates her within a racial regime of looking, but that liberates her from (or at least distracts others from) a regime of looking focused on her sexual orientation.

"Coming Out Day:" Black-Passing versus Pretending

Dina's satirical responses to her peers during the orientation games – when asked by her counselor to identify as an inanimate object, she claims she would be “a revolver” and wipe out humankind – eventually land her one year's worth of regular sessions with the psychiatrist Dr. Raeburn. He spends their sessions attempting to get Dina to discuss aspects of her personal life that may explain her self-imposed alienation. Dina concedes little. According to Dina, her assigned psychiatrist appears to be a caricature of clinical therapy: “He had the gray hair and whiskers of a Civil War general. He was also a chain smoker with beige teeth and a navy wool jacket smeared with ash” (Packer 110). This stereotypical depiction of Dr. Raeburn as fashionably outdated and absent-minded recalls images of the out-of-touch, hypocritical (he is a health professional who smokes so much it has colored his teeth), academic professional. Through this characterization, Dina treats him not as an authentic psychiatrist but rather as a man pretending to be a psychiatrist. As a result, she frequently mocks his opinions and intentionally redirects their conversation away from herself and onto Dr. Raeburn. This idea of pretense overshadows all of their sessions.

Dr. Raeburn turns his lack of success in getting Dina to furnish anything other than canned responses into one of his greatest successes – he exposes Dina as a “pretender.” After Dina informs Dr. Raeburn that Heidi's mother is ill and that she doesn't think it is a big deal, he retorts, “You're pretending [...] What I mean is that you construct stories about yourself and dish them out – one for you, one for you –” (Packer 127-128). His assessment is accurate, as is evidenced by Dina's response to his

accusation. Shocked at his revelation, Dina reverts to her usual mockery and misdirection: "Pretending. I believe the professional name for it might be denial. Are you calling me gay?" Her defensiveness is not unusual considering her frequently snide responses to his remarks. She is rather well practiced at deriding any attempt to uncover aspects of her personality. This particular response is unique, however, in that she connects his accusation of pretense to her sexual orientation, the second such time in which she does so. Dr. Raeburn makes no such implication in his accusation. It is Dina who is reading into her own pretense. Dr. Raeburn actually treats her act of pretending as corollary to her racial identity. He tells her, "Who knows? Maybe it's your survival mechanism. Black living in a white world" (128). His crediting her stories of "insignificant nonsense" as a tactic for navigating the tensions produced by a racially contentious, white social world, feeds into Dina's black-passing project to cover over her sexual anxieties. The racial anxiety he supposes she faces perpetuates the farce through which she disguises her desire for Heidi. A more accurate description of this survival mechanism might read "sexually non-oriented living in a sexually oriented world." The disguise is her performance of predetermined blackness, best explained through a black-passing framework. Even after hearing his claim about racial anxiety, Dina reflects, "I heard him, but only vaguely. I'd hooked on to that one word, pretending. Dr. Raeburn would never realize that 'pretending' was what had got me this far" (128). The vagueness with which she processes Raeburn's claim symbolizes the vagueness of the connection between her anxiety and her racial identity. Her (perhaps unconscious) disregard for the

racial elements of Raeburn's statement are an implicit acknowledgment that race does not factor as prominently in her life as Dina suggests. In this rare moment of genuineness and clarity she is focusing on something (i.e. her sexual orientation) that produces even greater trepidation and lies just beneath the surface of the racial association invoked.

This particular psychiatric session occurs in the wake of one of the most pivotal moments in the story – “Coming Out Day” – which alters the way readers understand Dina's “pretending.” This public event hosted by a group of Yale students provides individuals a forum to openly express their sexual orientation. Heidi, who has fallen in love with Dina (as Dina has with her – “I think I began to love Heidi that night in the dish room”) chooses to publicly profess her love for women during the event. Dina witnesses Heidi's confession from her dorm room window:

And then there was Heidi. She was proud that she liked girls, she said when she reached the microphone. She loved them, wanted to sleep with them. She was a dyke, she said repeatedly, stabbing her finger to her chest in case anyone was unsure to whom she was referring. She could not have seen me. I was across the street, three stories up. And yet, when everyone clapped for her, she seemed to be looking straight at me (126).

Dr. Raeburn's “pretending” accusation takes on new meaning in light of Heidi's public proclamation. Her open identification as a homosexual is an empowering act of self-affirmation, but it also thwarts Dina's efforts to mask her sexuality. The relational framework Dina has used to perform her own racial identity (They are white, therefore I am black) and disassociate from her white counterparts may now be used to associate her with the homosexual community. Her peers are likely to assume that because Heidi openly desires other women, and because Dina has fostered an intimate relationship with

Heidi, she must also desire women. Any interaction between the two might potentially result in Dina being labeled “lesbian,” a marker she invests great effort in avoiding. This is why she does not join Heidi during Coming Out Day. Dina’s feeling that Heidi is staring directly at her as she publicly declares her homosexuality represents her fear of having her sexuality made conspicuous to the public.

In the aftermath of Coming Out Day, Dina pretends to no longer care for Heidi. So ardently does she desire avoiding having her sexuality questioned that she is willing to destroy her only substantive human connection – her friendship with Heidi – to maintain the guise. After avoiding Heidi for a period of two months, Dina finally decides to confront her in her apartment, but her actions are stereotypically mocking and misdirecting. She resorts to identifying Heidi and her friends according to the same stereotypes and labels she fears will be imposed on her:

“So I packed my suitcase and walked from my suicide single dorm to Heidi’s room. A thin wispy girl in ragged cutoffs and a shirt that read ‘LSBN!’ answered the door. A group of short-haired girls in thick black leather jackets, bundled up despite the heat, encircled Heidi in a protective fairy ring. They looked at me critically, clearly wondering if Heidi was too fragile for my company” (Packer 129).

The unflattering description is reminiscent of Dina’s initial identification of Heidi as a lesbian – “Short hair, hard, roach-stomping shoes. Dressed like an aspiring plumber” (109). The stereotypes she uses in her characterization put distance between Heidi’s group and herself. She essentially inverts the relational framework that would be used to label her as a lesbian to disassociate with them; they are lesbian stereotypes and I am not, therefore I am not homosexual. Sadly and ironically, Dina’s stereotypical characterization

of Heidi and her friends is an exercise of power that operates as an extension of the hegemonic order she despises. She is using the master's tools⁷⁴ to escape a regime of looking, never realizing that she becomes the very instrument of social condemnation she fears will be levied against her. She performs as a cog in the machinery of the white patriarchal system she struggles so hard to defy.

In assessing Dina's actions, it is important not to conflate the act of pretending with the act of passing. Although there are certainly overlaps between each practice, the differences reveal important ideas concerning the relationship to power each act assumes. Pretending to an identity is purely an act of self-imagining, as a child might imagine herself a doctor or an astronaut. In this sense, the pretender is fully at liberty to self-identify and controls representations of the self. Passing, on the other hand, is a type of self-imagining, but one that, trapped in a regime of looking, relies on a social validation of identity. In Dina's case, she pretends all the time: that her blackness and her peers' whiteness are more politically impactful than post-racial sensibilities warrant; that she is not attracted to Heidi; that she is a misanthrope repulsed at the thought of interacting with others; that she knows what it is like to kiss someone. Pretending is definitely her primary survival mechanism. It allows her to engage the unfamiliar, white world of Yale University. So, too, does her black-passing. The social validation of her performance of blackness is a functional mask for all the attitudes she adopts as a pretender, particularly

⁷⁴ In "The Master's Tools Never Dismantle the Master's House" Audre Lorde argues that the project of white feminism will never succeed in its mission for equal rights if it persists in ignoring and devaluing the perspectives of underrepresented groups of women. To do so, she claims, is simply to assume control over the "master's tools" of discrimination without destabilizing the institutional structure of the power hierarchy behind the discrimination.

her desire for Heidi. One of the only ways she survives life at Yale is in maintaining her relationship with Heidi. While with her, Dina experiences the world outside of her dorm room, even as she complains about it. The two eat together, work together, take classes together, and read books of poetry together. They have formed a special bond across lines of race that give them a sense of shared identity. They even share the experience of losing their mothers. Dina flourishes in this relationship until Heidi publicly declares her homosexuality, at which point Dina ceases any interaction with her. Dina believes Heidi's declaration is an invitation for the primarily white campus community to further castigate her as a lesbian. Once their relationship is terminated, Dina withdraws from that social world, eventually leaving Yale to return to Baltimore. Metaphorically, she cannot survive this foreign world without Heidi.

Imagining Ourselves Drinking Coffee Elsewhere

At the end of the story, we find Dina pretending once again as she dreams of Heidi after she leaves school to attend her mother's funeral. Dina's dream is vague and nondescript: "And every day I imagined Heidi's house in Vancouver [...] I'd be visiting her in some vague time in the future, deliberately vague, for people like me, who realign past events to suit themselves. In that future time, you always have a chance to catch the groceries before they fall; your words can always be rewound and erased, rewritten and revised" (Packer 131). Her musing reveals a number of things. They signal Dina's admission that she has realigned past events for her own benefit. Specifically, she plays

up historically situated racial anxieties between blacks and whites that distract from her sexual orientation. Her emphasis on mistrusting white people may be historically rooted, but there is no evidence in the text that she has been personally victimized by white men and women because of her race. She may battle subtle forms of post-racial discrimination, but certainly not the overt racial maliciousness she claims warrants her mistrust of all white people. Too, that Dina desires to live in a time where her words can be “rewound and erased, rewritten and revised” suggests that much of what she says in the narrative is not an accurate reflection of how she actually feels. In other words, it is an acknowledgment of her pretending. Dr. Raeburn cautions Dina against pretending, warning her that, “constantly saying what one doesn’t mean accustoms the mouth to meaningless phrases. Maybe you’ll understand that when you finally need to express something truly significant your mouth will revert to the insignificant nonsense it knows so well” (128). In imagining herself and Heidi in Vancouver, Dina is finally beginning to realize the consequences of pretending Dr. Raeburn describes. She reveals them in a way that exposes her pretense as a deliberate masking of her true feelings. She recognizes her own words as the “insignificant nonsense” incapable of expressing how she truly feels, particularly about Heidi.

Most importantly, her musings are an acknowledgment of her genuine love for Heidi. Whether she is a lesbian does not matter. It is enough to know that she cares for her. Heidi prompts only the second instance of Dina’s imagining in the narrative. The first instance in which Dina imagines herself elsewhere is during a flashback in the wake

of her own mother's funeral. Dina recalls, "I'd been given milk to settle my stomach; I'd pretended it was coffee. I imagined I was drinking coffee elsewhere. Some Arabic-speaking country where the thick coffee served in little cups was so strong it could keep you awake for days" (Packer 128). These two flashbacks symbolize one mechanism of Dina's survival. During her most vulnerable moments, she imagines temporally and geographically vague fantasies in order to escape confronting the truth of the reality she faces. In the former instance, she wants to avoid the sense of isolation and loneliness caused by her mother's death. When she imagines herself in with Heidi, she is trying to overcome a similar sense of loneliness resulting from her loss of Heidi, who provides her the only real, substantive human relationship she has.

It is important to clarify that I am not making the case that Dina is homosexual. Dina's desire for Heidi that I have been describing in this chapter is possibly, but not necessarily, sexual. There is strong enough evidence for and against claims concerning Dina's sexual orientation that Packer's readers can come to their own conclusions on the issue. Rather, I am suggesting that her sexual orientation, regardless of its location on a spectrum of sexuality, is something Dina does not want to confront and that Packer does not want her readers to be able to easily label. Her sexual orientation, like the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta, defies categorization. Any interpretation of her sexual orientation made by readers will rely on them filling in narrative holes based on their own understanding of categories of sexuality. And in the same way that judgments about Twyla's and Roberta's race operate in "Recitatif," judgments about Dina's sexuality in

“Drinking Coffee Elsewhere” expose the sexual biases of its readers. Debating Dina’s sexuality is an irrelevant enterprise. Her ambiguous sexuality uncovers the intersections between categories of race, gender, and sexuality. The terms of sexuality (“homo” and “hetero”) are merely labels used to classify individuals within specific systems of power. Some, like Heidi, co-opt such labels and find empowerment through them. Others, like Dina, find themselves restricted and marginalized through their application. But it is in the relations between systems of power that we begin to understand the importance of Dina’s sexuality to the narrative. Regardless of her orientation, Dina’s sexuality informs us that many of the conventional feelings and experiences we assume are attached to racial labels are often representative of other forms of self-identification and self-affirmation. In Dina’s case, sexuality is that other form. This is what she hides from the Yale community, and to a certain degree from herself. It is Packer’s subtext, easily missed by the casual critic.

“Recitatif” and “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere” share an investment in black-passing. For Dina, her self-affirmation in a post-racial world involves disguising her sexual orientation by imagining racial identities into existence. The absence of a racial signpost against which to measure race necessitates that she situates racial categories relationally; her blackness set against the whiteness of her college peers. Her performance of a predetermined blackness in a post-racial world is not intended to achieve the heteronormative whiteness her peers represent. In fact, it virtually assures that she will be labeled and regarded as the black antagonist to their white subjectivity –

“Black living in a white world.” The female protagonists of Morrison’s story exist as post-racial figures whose anxiety also derives from the absence of a concrete division between racial worlds. For Twyla and Roberta, this anxiety is alleviated by self-affirming as raceless individuals in contrast to the race-laden body of Maggie. She is the tabula rasa on which the two protagonists impose specific forms of racial identification and against which they can define themselves. They maintain not only their friendship, but also a collective *not-Maggie* identity through their mutually imagined disassociation from her, despite the fact that they both closely connect to her in various ways. The performance of this raceless identity is another form of black-passing. The two aspire to an identity that transcends their white/black racial division and is not founded on a desire for white heteronormativity.

**CONCLUSION: RACIAL PASSING LITERATURE AND AN AMERICAN
USEABLE PAST**

This is not a story to pass on

- *Beloved*

The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?

- Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past"

The refrain – “This is not a story to pass on” – that ends Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) is not often thought of in relationship to racial passing. In a graduate seminar I took on American romanticism, the refrain was interpreted two ways by two different groups. One group read this as an instruction by Morrison not to pass the story (presumably of slavery) on to future generations. They argued that knowledge of the severity of the situations Morrison’s characters faced would perpetuate cycles of trauma from which their children and grandchildren might never escape. They cited Sethe’s attempt to murder her children upon the arrival of slave catchers at her home on Bluestone Road as evidence of its consequences. The other group argued against that position, claiming that Morrison was instructing readers not to pass on the opportunity the story presented to educate future generations about the consequences of human enslavement. They maintained that Morrison was giving voice to the voiceless “60 million and more” by letting her characters tell an untold version of their life story, especially in scenes like

Baby Suggs' woodland sermon. It is imperative as readers, they claimed, not to pass over our duty to retell this story.

As the only scholar of African American literature in the seminar (and the only African American in the room), it was left up to me to supply the definitive reading of the refrain. Which group's reading was I going to validate? Both seemed plausible and each group supplied evidence for their points, but I was bothered by the either/or option I had been presented with. Having no idea what Morrison truly intended in crafting the refrain, I suggested that perhaps both were correct in some ways and both incorrect in others. I challenged the assumption that the narrative voice in this section of the novel was Morrison's. I questioned the notion that the "story" being referenced was the story of slaves or of slavery. I disputed the claim that the story belonged to Sethe, Morrison, or even the reader. But they were most intrigued by my assertion that the word "pass" was what was tripping all of us up, and that perhaps "pass" was best understood in relation to performance. I read into the refrain a command for readers not to mischaracterize and misuse this complex narrative of American history as a mechanism for performing an identity (i.e. nonracist, pro-abolition, etc.). It is not intended to validate the desired identities of its audience. We should not signify ourselves based on what we cull from the narrative. Any attempt to utilize this history in the performance of some prescribed identity is simply an appropriation of the master's tools.

Any fair assessment of the significance of racial passing narratives makes similar considerations. So much is at stake on an individual and social level in any act of racial

passing that it often leads critics into the pitfall of either mischaracterizing or misusing these narratives for personal gain. In some instances, critics attempt to supply definitive readings of race and the culture of race through passing narratives. While many of their points are convincing, they often tell us more about the critic's self-perception than about the meaningfulness and complexity of the body of literature they are assessing. The racial passing subgenre in American literature is at best and at worst complicated. The radical transformation of "race" across more than three centuries of American history speaks to our collectively unresolved definition of the concept. Is race biological? Is it a social construct? Is it, perhaps, nonexistent? Even more puzzling, is it something else entirely, something we have yet to realize or discover? All we seem to know about race is that it is continually changing. Our social and cultural lack of clarity fuels our fascination of the concept. Race motivates our politics, informs our educational practices, and redirects the focus of the critical discourse on American identity. Equally as important, it continues to permeate our national literature in ways that revolutionize our understanding of the concept. Definitive readings of race and the culture of race through this corpus of texts are reductive. They shackle the subversive potential of the subgenre to an individual's limited view of these concepts. Assessments of race and race culture are always relative to the geographic, temporal, and sociopolitical contexts in which these concepts operate. Whether fluid, fixed, artificial, or otherwise, literature, specifically passing narratives, has colorfully illustrated the significance of the changing nature of race in the social world. Literature teaches us that now more than ever race influences and is acted upon by the

cultural milieu around which our everyday lives are organized, even if we are told by critics, scholars, politicians, and parents that it is without meaning. The racial passing subgenre, which necessarily places race at its forefront, is so difficult to analyze because of the complexity of its organizing principle within various contexts and the degree to which it has permeated an increasingly global culture unrestricted by traditional boundaries of nation and ethnicity. Shedding light on this complexity is precisely what makes the racial passing subgenre a worthy scholarly enterprise.

The analytical difficulty in assessing the subgenre is manifest in the conversation on the agency passing protagonists achieve in their racial performances. It is often presumed by proponents of racial passing that the passer secures the agency to control representations of his or her racial identity. In the latter stages of Ralph Ellison's landmark novel *Invisible Man* (1952) however, we see the limitations of this agency. In this portion of the novel, Ellison's unnamed protagonist is trying to flee from Ras the Destroyer, a quasi-Black Nationalist revolutionary, and his followers as they violently protest in the streets of New York. Eventually the narrator enters a store, grabs a hat and sunglasses off a rack to disguise himself from his pursuers and reenters the tumultuous streets. Once he reemerges in public, a radical transformation takes place. Everywhere he goes, he is mistaken by others to be a man named Rinehart. The way others respond to this character they interpret as Rinehart is revealing. For them, he is a pimp, womanizer, reverend, lover, husband, gambler, and numbers runner. He is anything to anyone, a virtual floating signifier. But he is also a passer. In the situations in which he is

misinterpreted as some variation of Rinehart, he uses language and gestures to perform an identity he believes will be legitimized by those he encounters. The particular Rinehart identity he assumes is determined by whomever he interacts with in a given moment. Unfortunately for the narrator this means he has no control over how he gets interpreted. Each specific interpretation is governed entirely by the “place and circumstance” in which he finds himself (Ellison 489). Because readers never see the “real” Rinehart in the text, he becomes a blank slate upon which others can invest him with meaning based on their individual desires. However, there is never a place or a circumstance in which Ellison’s narrator gets to invest Rinehart with meaning based on his own desire. Donning the disguise allows him to evade Ras the Destroyer and his zealots but he never achieves the agency to control identity how his identity is interpreted while he is passing. Like all racial passers, his identity is subject to the regime of looking that validates socially predetermined identity formations. It restricts his freedom to self-affirm.

The difficulty in analyzing the passing discourse in American literature has also led critics to reduce the complexity of the subgenre. The discourse is restricted by its almost exclusive focus on black-to-white, traditional passing narratives that focus on protagonists who, for all intents and purposes, are socially black. The limited scope of these examinations of passing narratives within a conventional white/black binary framework minimizes the complexity of the subgenre and the way it is able to complicate the idea of racial performance. All too frequently, racial passing gets treated simply as something black people do to become white. In other words, black people want to live in

the white world as white people, end of story. The dangers of this position are obvious. Associating racial passing only with the desires of black men and women implies that blackness is undesirable and whiteness is desirable. Blackness in this sense, regardless of the degree of one's skin pigmentation, is always read as never white enough. Even if the motivations of the racial passer are, as Valerie Smith contends, primarily economic and educational, they are racially framed. The desire of blacks to achieve economic and educational success becomes conflated with a desire to achieve whiteness. The association between blackness and passing also lets white individuals off the hook by removing whiteness from the discourse on race and racial normativity. It is not something they will ever have to confront or that will be called into question whenever they aspire for something better. They are never perceived as people trying to fit within a white/black racial framework since they signify the master signifier Whiteness against which all racial categories are measured.

Yet, despite these limitations, racial passing in American literature has had a profound impact on our understanding of the culture of race in the United States. It has opened up new ways of thinking of the category of race and the culture that surrounds it outside of the conventional white/black framework that considers race a natural, God-given part of hegemonic racial ideologies. Passing narratives are read differently according to each reader's understanding of the culture of race at a given moment, but it always prompts us to contemplate the assumptions we make in arriving at that understanding. For some, racial passing narratives highlight race as a social construct and

thereby liberate us from historically-rooted racial ideologies. For others, the performance of racial norms further immerses us within those ideologies. For some, passing is understood as a literal move between racial worlds. For others, passing signifies on different racial identities on a symbolic level. Proponents of these seemingly contradictory stances often neglect to account for the way that the slipperiness of race allows for all stances to be valid at the same time without being mutually exclusive. A racial passing protagonist might be liberating him or herself from restrictive racial ideologies through acts of passing while reinforcing other racial ideologies at the same time. That protagonist might literally move between racial worlds at the same time that s/he signifies on racial categories symbolically. The way that an individual reads into racial passing will depend heavily on their understanding of the concept of race. The complexity of race so entirely confounds the precise effectiveness of racial passing narratives in subverting white hegemonic norms that it requires a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the subgenre and a revised definition of what it means to “pass.”

In his essay “On Creating a Usable Past” (1918), Van Wyck Brooks offers up an explanation of American culture that helps frame the complexity of passing narratives. He certainly is not explicitly critiquing the concept of race or the racial passing subgenre. However, his thoughts on the cultural vacuity of American literature and scholarship are relevant to both. More than a decade into the twenty-first century, race remains so impossibly elusive that it is effectively a “void” in the American national conscious similar to the void outlined by Brooks in the epigraph. This is not to suggest that race is

without meaning. Quite the contrary, the concept of “race” that survives in the “common mind of the present” is so imbued with relativistic value that its meaning is overdetermined. Race has mattered and continues to matter so greatly to so many different groups, individuals, and institutions because of its potential to fill the American historical and cultural vacuum in which they exist. Yet, nearly all groups, individuals, and institutions collectively disregard the centrality of race to their existence. Regarding literature, Toni Morrison eloquently articulates this idea in *Playing in the Dark* (1992).

She writes:

For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as “knowledge.” This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred year old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the writing and development of that culture’s literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular “Americanness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence (5).

The racial passing subgenre is not at liberty to share in this collective amnesia. Grappling with the looseness of race is its defining characteristic, coincidentally locating it at the center of Brooks’ void. But critics must be careful not to confuse “race” in this instance with blackness. Each is part of the other, but neither can, nor should, wholly substitute for the other. Conflating blackness and race when it comes to the racial passing subgenre is to invert the framework of Morrison’s argument. Within this framework, it is presumed that racial passing literature is “free of, uninformed and unshaped by” the presence of all other non-black races, providing a convenient mask behind which the anxieties of whites and of whiteness might remain unexamined. Just as Morrison calls for our profound

appreciation of the centrality of blackness⁷⁵ to American literature, it is pertinent to acknowledge the centrality of all racial categories to racial passing literature.

Racial passing shows us how meaningful race is not just to the individual passer, but also to the societies in which the passer engages. Even though racial passing narratives typically focus on a single protagonist, passing is a social phenomenon. Its reliance on the collective validation of the passer's identity is an indication that entire social worlds are equally as invested in the implications of racial norms and performances of race as is the passer. Passing may be conducted primarily by an assortment of random individuals, but they are all tied to social worlds that thrive on racial legibility. The passer's performance of racial norms is conducted in response to the restrictive apparatuses of racial legibility (i.e. regime of looking) that mediate her or his life conditions. The type of passing performed, its potential to subvert oppressive hegemonic ideologies, and what it tells us about the culture of race is dependent on the "place and circumstance" in which the passing takes place. The complexity of racial passing can only begin to be explained through analytical tools flexible enough to account for its conventional and unconventional permutations.

I opened this project with the commonly held proposition that individual texts operate as the cornerstones of the passing subgenre. What my examinations of the literary projects of Melville, Ovington, Morrison, and Packer make obvious is the need to revise

⁷⁵ Morrison uses the specific term "American Africanism" to describe this blackness as "a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona [that] was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence serve[s]."

this proposition. Certainly those texts I listed (a list that nearly all scholars of the passing genre agree on) comprise a single cornerstone but not do suffice as the foundation for the entire passing subgenre. The conversation on passing needs to continue analyzing how passing narratives inform our understanding of race and racial performance within a traditional white/black framework while becoming broad enough to account for the greater complexity of these concepts. Black-passing is simply a lens through which we can analyze another cornerstone of the subgenre. It reveals for us a nexus of texts invested in racial performance that is free of the desirability of heteronormative whiteness. More work remains to be done in establishing and more fully exploring texts that comprise the other cornerstones of the subgenre.

Just as it is obvious that the group of texts constituting the traditional passing narrative tradition is an inadequate representation of all racial passing, it is equally clear that one umbrella definition of passing will never fully explain the various types of racial performance depicted in American literature. Race is constantly shifting, which means that the ways it can be represented in literature are shifting in parallel. It is unlikely that any one theory about race and racial identity will ever supply a full explanation for racial passing. Some prove more adequate than others, but none are entirely comprehensive. All, however, need to treat racial passing as a social phenomenon that is racially-informed. It has never been and will never be just a “black thing.”

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