



The (Dis)Ability of Color; or, That Middle World: Toward A New Understanding of 19th and 20th Century Passing Narratives

Item Type	Dissertation (Open Access)
Authors	Charles, Julia S.
DOI	10.7275/6956351.0
Download date	2025-08-24 18:23:14
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/19555

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UNDERSTANDING OF 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY PASSING NARRATIVES

A Dissertation Presentation Presented

by

JULIA S. CHARLES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

MAY 2015

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

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DEDICATION

For the countless unnamed and all the Black bodies slain in the struggle for freedom.
And, for my people who, for so many reasons, still cannot breathe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In this format, thank yous are often a challenge because I recognize the risk of absent-mindedly omitting someone who has widely contributed to the completion of this project. Nevertheless, I will give it a go. There are so many people to whom I owe gratitude for bringing this project to fruition. It is as much theirs as it is mine, even if only the errors are mine. First, I would like to thank Esther M.A. Terry whose unending encouragement has brought me here. I have been told that a large part of successfully completing a project like this one rests in choosing a committee that works well together and believes in your research. Now that I am here, I realize the truth in this, and so I must acknowledge the rest of my committee: James Smethurst for his direction and approach; Steve Tracy for his belief in my project from the beginning; and Britt Rusert for her resources and encouragement.

Ernest Gibson III, thank you for believing in this project from its infancy to now. You have taught me a great deal about what it means to be a friend and a scholar. Crystal Donkor, your encouragement and accountability have been invaluable. Julia Bernier and Johanna Ortner, thank you two for making this a memorable ride and for making Amherst feel more like home. I would also like to express my appreciation to the entire W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies for all of their support in one way or another. Linda Brown, thank you for your continued encouragement since my days as an undergraduate student at Bennett College. To my entire North Carolina family, including my friends at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, thank you for everything. Aggie Pride! Erica-Brittany Horhn, thank you for being my

friend in life first, and then the academy. India R. Smith, my sister and friend, thank you for absolutely everything, especially for the elephant memories. I'd like to extend a special note of thanks to my sister Takeya who is always there no matter what. I love you more (consider this the ultimate, I win!). And thank you, too, to my baby brother, Isaiah, who understood my absence but loved my presence even more; the feeling is mutual kid. Finally, and indeed most importantly, to my mother and very best friend, Lorraine Tutt, thank you for being my mom and for always believing. I am immensely grateful for your support, for your friendship, and for your love.

ABSTRACT

THE (DIS)ABILITY OF COLOR; OR, THAT MIDDLE WORLD: TOWARD A NEW
UNDERSTANDING OF 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY PASSING NARRATIVES

MAY 2015

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This dissertation mines the intersection of racial performance and the history of the so-called “tragic mulatto” figure in American fiction. I propose that while many white writers depicted the “mulatto” character as inherently flawed because of some tainted “black blood,” many black writers’ depictions of mixed-race characters imagine solutions to the race problem. Many black writers critiqued some of America’s most egregious sins by demonstrating linkages between major shifts in American history and the mixed-race figure. Landmark legislation such as, Fugitive Slave Act 1850 and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) are often plotlines in African American passing literature, thus demonstrating the failure of America to acknowledge its wrongdoings against people of color. While this project surveys passing narratives collectively, it pays careful consideration to those novelists whose presentations of the mixed-race figure challenge previously conceived

notions of the “tragic mulatto” figure. I investigate how the writers each illuminate elements of the history of slavery and its aftermath in order to remark on black disenfranchisement at the turn of the century. Ultimately, however, I argue for the importance of the mixed-race figure as a potent symbol for imagined resolution between the larger narrative of American freedom and enslavement of blacks in the United States.

I examine several works of African American racial passing literature: William Wells Brown’s *The Escape; Or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), the first published play by an African American writer. It explores the complexities of American culture at a time when tensions between North and South were about to explode into the Civil War. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860), tells the true story of the mixed-race Ellen Craft and her husband who escaped to freedom through various racial performances. Nella Larsen sets her novella *Passing* (1929) in Harlem in the 1920s. The story centers on two childhood friends reunited, but each dealing with their mixed-race ancestry in different ways. Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928) and *The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life* (1931) and Charles W. Chesnutt’s “The Wife of His Youth” and “A Matter of Principle” (1900). endeavors to depict a better class of blacks through her examination of the fair-skinned bourgeois-striver Angela Murray. Each of these stories address American legacies of racism and representation beginning with the Civil War.

I investigate how these authors use the mixed-race figure (mostly) following the Civil War to mark the continuing impact that its legacy has had on black Americans through the New Negro Harlem Renaissance, but also to gesture to the mythic moment of

freedom symbolized by successfully crossing the so-called color line. In addition to cataloguing an era of migration, the African American passing narrative represents the moment in which we shift from only seeing characters in terms of monoracial identities. These writers suggest that new performative modes of racial affiliation are necessary to achieve freedom. Reminding us that characters of mixed status *practiced* race in ways that enabled them to build shared identity despite an often disparate cultural heritage, these works suggest that identities like blackness are always constituted through performance. I argue that racial passing facilitated the “performance” of whiteness together with, an acknowledgment of what is accepted as blackness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
REDISCOVERING XARIFA; OR, REJECTING A TYPECAST: TOWARD A NEW GENRE OF PASSING LITERATURE.....	1
CHAPTER	
1. THAT MIDDLE WORLD: THE SOCIOCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF A BI-RACIAL SPHERE	19
2. TAKING THE STAGE: RACIAL PERFORMANCE AND THE PASSING NARRATIVE	49
3. THE VANISHING: TOWARD (IN)VISIBLILTy FOR THE MIXED-RACE FIGURE	84
4. THE BLACK ARISTOCRACY: STRATEGIES OF RESPECTABILITY AND THE RISE OF A BI-RACIAL MIDDLE CLASS	132
TOWARD SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION: THE CHALLENGE OF REJECTING MONORACIAL LABELS	178
BIBLIOGRAPHY	183

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Al G. Fields Minstrels	82
Sojourner Truth	82
Henry “Box” Brown	83
Ellen Craft	83

REDISCOVERING XARIFA; OR, REJECTING A TYPECAST: TOWARD A NEW GENRE OF PASSING LITERATURE

“Divided between conflicting attitudes, the poor mulatto finds added unhappiness in his interpreters.”¹

“She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed.
A person or the race.”²

When Sterling Brown writes “Divided between conflicting attitudes, the poor mulatto finds added unhappiness in his interpreters,” he is effectively summarizing the misconceptions about the mixed-race figure in American fiction. There had been, until relatively recent history, presumptions of misfortune that underscored discussions of “tragic mulatto” fiction.³ The mixed-race figure at the center of these narratives eventually became an identifiable stock character in within the American literary landscape. It became a useful tool through which authors could examine what Du Bois called the problem of the twentieth century—the color line. Initially, though, the character was viewed as one that would succumb to some inescapable horrific fate due to their “dark stain,” which limited the ways in which readers analyzed the dimensions of the character. As the mixed-race figure became a fixed presence in American literature, so too, did the notion of internal conflict within the bi-racial—often deemed Black—body. This made it easier for us to attach the character to certain origins, which are rooted in the “tragic mulatto” genre, thus limiting the functionality of character and its role in larger discussions of black identity formation and black citizenship rights, even in a nineteenth century American context. However, I suggest that the African American

¹ Sterling Brown Qtd. in Sollors, Werner. *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial*

² Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Penguin Classic, 2003), 98.

³ Hazel V. Carby. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

passing narrative was produced out of—and perhaps in reaction to—what the academy knows as “tragic mulatto/a” fiction and in this respect the former often opposes the conventions of the latter. These authors nuance the color line such that it should not be viewed as one rigid “line,” but rather as a space or an area which effectively, if brutally and unjustly, separates choice and opportunity from oppression and degradation.

As early as the antebellum period, black writers like William Wells Brown, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Pauline Hopkins expanded our expectations of outcomes for characters of mixed status. By the late twentieth century critics increasingly expanded their considerations of the role of the mixed-race character too. No longer was it solely viewed as a hopelessly disastrous figure that would ultimately meet its demise due to some intrinsically flawed blood, but rather the character became, in part, what critic Hazel Carby calls “a narrative device of mediation” (89). As racial difference was codified into law during the Reconstruction era, the “mulatto” character became more than the embodiment of variance. Whereas for many white writers it was an expression of the various ways in which American national identity was constructed, for some African American writers the bi-racial character developed into a mechanism to challenge the rigidity and absurdity of the so-called color line. More specifically, these new characters of mixed status illustrated their unique frustrations in ways that help us to see their intricacies in an entirely new way. Consider that one of Nella Larsen’s bi-racial character that feels this way: “She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race.” That one character could feel that the outcome

of the entire race rested squarely on how she chooses to identity tells us that these conflicts do not rest in the superficial—or in appearance only. But rather the characters' outward appearance is meant to make us investigate their inward objectives and concerns. Nevertheless, many still see any characters of mixed-status as either a nod to or a depiction of the “original” “tragic mulatto” figure. This dissertation is produced in response to that misreading. By shifting the lens through which we view the mixed-race figure in African American fiction, it becomes more reasonable for us to interpret the plots at which they are the center as narratives *about* the nation, especially concerning overall bend of race relations which drive American democracy.

This dissertation mines the intersection of racial performance and the history of the so-called “tragic mulatto” figure. I propose that while many white writers depicted the “mulatto” character as inherently flawed because of some tainted “black blood,” many black writers’ depictions of mixed-race characters imagine solutions to the race problem. Those writers critiqued some of America’s most egregious sins by demonstrating linkages between major shifts in American history and the mixed-race figure. Landmark legislation such as, Fugitive Slave Act 1850 and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) are often plotlines in African American passing literature, thus demonstrating the political culture that the mixed-race figure was forced to navigate. That these narratives are set against this backdrop also points to a failure of America to acknowledge its wrongdoings against people of color. While this project surveys racial crossing narratives collectively, it pays careful consideration to those writers whose presentations of the mixed-race figure challenge previously conceived notions of the “tragic mulatto” figure. I investigate how the authors each illuminate elements of the history of slavery and its aftermath in order to

remark on black disenfranchisement at the turn of the century. In addition to historicizing the scholarship surrounding the mixed-race figure, this project seeks to re-periodize the passing narrative to demonstrate its development alongside the “tragic mulatto” tradition. I argue that the passing narrative highlights the complexities of the color line in nuanced ways that challenge static representations of the mixed-race figure, and by extension, depictions of black and white figures in fiction. Moreover, this dissertation argues that the trope of racial passing/crossing allows the mixed-race character to strategically navigate the space between the black and white worlds that has been termed the color line. By demonstrating how scholarship on the mixed-race figure in fiction has changed from the Civil War to the early twentieth century, this project examines how the passing narrative destabilizes the customary dyadic relation between race and privilege. In particular, I analyze the (dis)ability of color⁴ and the distinctive consciousness present in the separate murky space that William Dean Howells calls, “That Middle World”⁵—which I define as the identifiable and permeable, yet intangible racialized space that mixed-race characters must navigate daily. Ultimately, however, I argue for the importance of the mixed-race figure as a potent symbol for imagined resolution between the larger narrative of American freedom and enslavement of blacks in the United States. I urge us to consider the making of the mixed-race fugitive body and the shaping of performative identities as early as the antebellum period. The goal of this dissertation is to reorient understandings of the social and cultural phenomenon of what the academy knows as racial passing in African American literature, and to explore certain

⁴ Charles Chesnutt mentions this phrase in his 1889 essay “What Is A White Man?” Though his essay is a tongue-in-cheek approach to the blacks laws, I use it as springboard to discuss what many considered to be the inherent flaws in mixed-race ancestry.

⁵ In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Sollors notes the following of Howells’s reception of Chesnutt’s work: “Howells was fascinated by Chesnutt’s portrayal of ‘that middle world’ and commended him for his acquainting ‘us’ presumably white readers” (12). He references Howells’s article in the *Atlantic Monthly* “Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt’s Stories” (1900), which as yet I have been unable to access.

performative identities that—through the mixed-race figure—move us toward new racial and gender epistemologies. In so doing, I move us away from the physiological toward the psychological makeup of the mixed-race figure—from the appearance toward the matter, from the front stage toward the back stage, and from the shadow toward the substance.

Rediscovering Xarifa: The Birth of Tragedy

Albeit true that changing epochs have seen the “tragic mulatto” figure analyzed as a negotiation between black and white races in America, this should not be viewed as the only way the “mulatto” character functions in literature. With respect to the trope of passing, the so-called “mulatto” figure should be seen as even more complex. The racial passing narrative uses the bi-racial figure and distinct iterations of racial crossing as devices to explore rarely examined aspects of black life in literature from the Civil War to the early twentieth century. As Carby suggests, “In response [to Jim Crow laws], the mulatto figure in literature became a more frequently used literary convention for an exploration and expression of what was increasingly proscribed” (89). However, it was not limited in this function during the post-Reconstruction period and beyond. Through practice and performance, the mixed-race character can strategically navigate the color line in order to: contest certain proscriptions of the black race, create a space in which a viable mixed-race community could exist, and/or explore the bonds of black family and black society. However, when we first meet the “tragic mulatto,” in early American literature the character displays a sense of loneliness and depression rather than empowerment and contentment. Indeed, the character possesses every miserable emotion, but what it does *not* possess is a bit more telling—a sense of belonging. It is almost as

if the character played some role in their own parentage—the same parentage that results in their bondage, fugitivity, and eventually their freedom. In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Werner Sollors argues “The shifts in focus from interracial (or mixed-status) founding couples to biracial descendants, from parents to their children, and from slavery to race, were central to the rise of the figures that have become known collectively as the ‘Tragic Mulatto’” (223). Notwithstanding Cora Munro—a quadroon who meets her untimely demise—in James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Xarifa, the ill-fated protagonist of Lydia Maria Child’s short story “The Quadroons” (1842), is widely considered to be among the first presentations of a “tragic mulatta” character, as we know it. She is emblematic of all that literature perceives about the mixed-race character in nineteenth century American fiction, from her becoming a “raving manic” (76), as she suffers various losses to her own sad and lonely end. Child makes it increasingly clear throughout the short story that Xarifa—and her mother Rosalie—“belonged to a proscribed race; and though the brown color on her soft cheek was scarcely deeper than the sunny side of a golden pear, yet was it sufficient to exclude her from virtuous society” (71). Perhaps more telling is the ineffable melancholy that Child bestows upon Xarifa. At times the reader is alerted that Xarifa has indeed “inherited her mother's poetic and impassioned temperament” (72). This suggestion that extreme emotion is a transferable trait develops throughout much of the “tragic mulatto/a” tradition and becomes the basis for many of the presumptions about the genre, particularly those that suggest the inescapability of misfortune, heartbreak, and/or death for the “mulatto” character.

If we see Xarifa as the genesis of the quintessential “tragic mulatta,” then our

exploration of her should take us back to the moment that the “tragic mulatto/a” tradition gives birth to another literary genre—passing literature. To be sure, passing literature differs from “tragic mulatto/a” fiction in that while it still centers on bi-racial character(s), it uses the trope of passing as a device to explore many aspects of black life. And, within this newer genre tragedy does not necessarily befall the mixed-race figure. In arguing that passing literature is substantially different from “tragic mulatto/a” literature, I bring us to the place at which I observe shifting paradigms. This moment of departure occurs with William Wells Brown’s 1853 publication of *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter*, which deviates from Child. Until this moment, and even after this moment insofar as some white writers are concerned, the “tragic mulatto/a” tradition saw many mixed-race characters as hopeless victims of their pedigree that live inevitably doomed lives. There are also significant gender implications within the genre as many of the bi-racial characters are inexplicably gloomy women, save for Chambers—later known as “Tom”—of Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). Chambers meets his inescapable fate as a slave despite having been switched as an infant with a white baby and growing up with all the privileges and pleasures of being white. In true Twain fashion, this novel challenges the conventions of the “tragic mulatto” plot through both gender and class status, and warrants tangential discussions of the how the intersections of race, class, and gender function within the genre. Still, by and large, the “tragic mulatto/a” narrative tends to focus on the tragedy of women, like Child’s Xarifa.

Or Rejecting a Typecast: The Development of the Mixed-race Figure

While Brown’s *Clotel* offers readers another mother-daughter pair in the titular character and her daughter Mary, he diverges from Child in that “Brown surrounds Mary

by circumstances in which it is not so much hereditary slavery as her interracial location that makes her vulnerable, and in which her skin color plays a central role” (Sollors 221). The reexamination of Xarifa as the origin of the “tragic mulatta” is significant to the ways in which African American authors who follow Brown often write in opposition to this figure similarly to the way he has offered us *Clotel*. Although these authors do not all explicitly resist notions of the stereotype, many do use the trope of racial passing as a way to interrogate American democracy and the continued failure of the nation to uphold the tenets of many of its founding documents as they relate to people whose makeup is more white than black. Narratives that center those who cross the color line give authors that opportunity.

Racial passing is possibly an aspect of African American lived experiences that was relatively well known, but rarely depicted by white writers. Not that there were not a few white writers who attempted the project of using the trope of passing to investigate greater American society. Arguably, buried well beneath the surface of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which though not ostensibly a race-centered novel is a racial passing plot that brings Jay Gatsby to his murderous end. In her analysis of the penultimate scene that she calls one of the “most important, yet least critically examined scenes”(126), Barbara Will contends the erasure of the obscene word from the white steps of Gatsby’s home is an allusion to Gatsby’s race or at minimum a white community response to speculations about it. She notes, “For Tom, it is Jay Gatsby in particular who represents a mode of racial indeterminacy or ‘vanishing’ that threatens to violate not only the immediate community of East Egg but also the very concept of Americanism itself” (Will 132). Nevertheless, whether we determine that Gatsby actually is a figure that is

passing is somewhat irrelevant; what is chiefly important is that through the trope of passing there now exists that possibility. Only a year after the publication of *The Great Gatsby* comes Carl Van Vechten's roman à clef *Nigger Heaven* (1926), which conceivably attempts this project to a degree as well. However, Van Vechten's presentations of the phenomenon of passing are limited to conversations among the characters about others who cross that "line." Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933) is a curious case though. Undoubtedly a novel that demonstrates how race and class impact the life of Peola, at times, the fair-skinned Peola is decentered and the lives of others around her are elevated likely proving the reach of impact that passing for white has on the black nuclear family. Certainly the author's presentation of the black characters is concerning; particularly her depiction of Delilah as a mammy figure with a "rambunctious capacity for devotion." It seems that Delilah's main source of discontentment comes from her fair-skinned daughter's unwillingness to accept and remain devoted to her black race. In an interesting move from tradition, Delilah dies in lieu of the mixed-race Peola. What then do we make of this world that Hurst has created in which the stereotypically devoted Delilah cannot survive? Perhaps this is partly why some luminaries of the New Negro Renaissance did not receive the novel well, chief among them was Sterling Brown who, coincidentally, is credited as being the first to call attention to the literary stereotype of the "Tragic Mulatto" (Sollors 223). In his review, "Imitation of Life: Once a Pancake," he condemned both the novel and film. Without a doubt, the ways in which white writers present the mixed-race figure in the early 20th century literature are strikingly dissimilar from black writers.

Many other authors do a similar thing and thus record racial politics from the

close of the Civil War to the turn of the century. Beyond Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), Julia C. Collins's originally serialized *Curse of Caste; Or the Slave Bride* (1865), Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shawdows Uplifted* (1892), and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), are all among such literature that examines the color problem through mixed-race figures without necessarily submitting to tragedy. All of these are before the turn of the century. By the time Pauline Hopkins publishes *Contending Forces* (1900), or the originally serialized *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* (1903), and James Weldon Johnson publishes *The Autobiography of the Ex-Colored Man* (1912), the model of passing literature was already changing; use of the "mulatto/a" figure not only allowed this, but also it demanded it to a degree. Passing literature was becoming further removed from "tragic mulatto/a" fiction and becoming more unapologetically critical of American race relations. The passing novel was becoming increasingly successful without a catastrophic end for the bi-racial character—the alternative endings offered of Collins's *Curse of Caste* notwithstanding. The literature created a space in which other aspects of black life could be surveyed. And, it is the genre's preoccupation with race privilege and the color line that provides the space for the psychological struggles of the bi-racial figure to be studied. This discussion is one that is germane to the passing narrative and is not likely even possible to this degree within the genre of "tragic mulatto/a" fiction because of the limitations placed of the character. However, black authors saw a space that is pregnant with possibilities afforded it by the use of both the mixed-race figure and the trope of passing—potentials which allow the reader to view the pass/cross (particularly where it is relatively successful) as a form of political and social objection. Certainly, not

every mixed-status character that traverses the color line is doing so as an act of formal protest; however, that is to say through black authors' introducing agency and self-determination into the conversation there exists that chance.

Previously many scholars made little to no allowances for the complexities that arise with the use of the character with respect to the trope of passing. They left little room to account for the development of the character over time. Consider, Chesnutt's Blue Vein Society in which "no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins" ("The Wife of His Youth" 5), and mixed-race characters, like Mr. Ryder, that neither pass for white nor associate with darker-skinned blacks? They are extensions of the traditional "mulatto/a" figure that desire to be identified as neither black nor white, but certainly not black. They have a keen and collective sense of how the world sees them: "The one doesn't want us yet, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step" ("The Wife of His Youth" 7). They have, according to author Obiagele Lake, created spaces in which their viable mixed-race communities could be established and thrive in a particularly insular way. They are affixed to "that middle world" (that I introduce in Chapter 1) in ways that problematize the expectations of tragedy that their earlier depictions—rooted in Xarifa—demanded and that oppose the limitations that white writer have assigned them. Indeed, their very existence in literature warrants lateral discussions of how color consciousness impacts larger black America even beyond the 20th century. Lake contends, in *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair*, that hierarchies of color exist in black America because of tensions that result from race mixing. To be sure, she argues, "The fact that blue-veinism was so widespread throughout the United States concerned many African Americans who

viewed color consciousness as a vector that separated African Americans at a time when solidarity was most needed” (Lake 52). Indeed, the “mulatto/a” figure simultaneously reflects a blemish on the face of black America and the hope of possibility for a racially unified America. Consequently, rediscovering Xarifa does this: relocates scholarship of the “mulatto/a” figure in American fiction to the place wherein it was transformed by African American writers into a tool for them to scrutinize American race relations, from the color line outside their communities to the most cherished of their relationships within their communities—their families. Although mixed-race characters will likely never be completely divorced from the Xarifas of American fiction, they offer significant ground upon which the academy can reject the ways in which they have been typecast.

The (Dis)ability of Color; Or, That Middle World: Toward a New Understanding of 19th and 20th Century Passing Narratives

The title of this project takes its name from two very different aspects of Chesnutt’s literary career—his nonfiction and his fiction. In much the same way that many passing novels offer alternate titles, so too does the trope of racial passing allow the bi-racial figure to view alternate realities. Consequently, the mixed-race character becomes a window into the other side of the color line; a space to which African American writers may have never been privy absent the earlier genre of “tragic mulatto” fiction. When we take the titles in isolation there is an incredible amount of meat on which we can chew; however, it is not until we consider both parts of the title that we are able to digest the total meal of the stories as the authors have served them. In this respect African American writers illustrated their hopes, fears, and perhaps even their assumptions about the white side of life. This dissertation follows that same impulse and thus it is named in that same energy in hopes that the reader will understand how the

former title —The (Dis)ability of Color—impacts and/or shapes the latter—That Middle World.

It could go without saying that Charles W. Chesnutt was a prolific fiction writer and essayist. In his essay that was published in the *Independent* in 1889, he proves that he is quite the comedian as well. In “What Is a White Man?” he uses sarcasm to unpack the confusing and ridiculous nature of the black laws: “The states vary slightly in regard to what constitutes a mulatto or a person of color, and as to what proportion of white blood should be sufficient to remove the *disability of color*” (emphasis mine 69)⁶ More specifically, he arrives at the conclusion that the “color-line is drawn at one-fourth of Negro blood, and persons with only one-eighth are white” (69). For Chesnutt, these numbers are significant in establishing that the black laws are arbitrary at best and therefore are modifiable to the needs of the ruling class. A major portion of this project discusses the disability of color that Chesnutt mentions in his essay. I use the term “disability” not only in the physical sense, but also in a more intangible sense. That is, the nature of this disability is reliant on something that has not manifested in the physical body—at least not visibly. Because skin color purports to speak for a person’s race and ethnicity, a person who is white in color is often assumed to be white and therefore privileged. This is true so long as outside observers are not aware of that person’s parentage. In cases where their ancestry is known or determined to hide some African descent, that mixed-race person is saddled with the *disability* of invisible color. That is not an indictment on the person of mixed status, but rather it speaks to the failures of the nation:

⁶ This version of the publication can be found in *Charles Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 68-72.

But is evident that where the intermingling of races has made such progress as it has in this country, the line which separates the races must in many instances have been practically obliterated. And there has arisen in the United States a very large class of the population who are certainly not Negroes in an ethnological sense, and whose children will be no nearer Negroes than themselves. (68)

Chesnutt does not focus on the making of such a large bi-racial population in the nation.

Indeed, it is understood how the races came to be intermingled, with a rampant rape culture in antebellum America. Rather, in his sarcastic-or perhaps more aptly, sardonic—nature he presents it as a sign of advancement. Indeed, he contends that the black laws will be “at best but landmarks by which to measure the progress of the nation” (69). Then he cleverly, if sarcastically, calls attention to what good government looks like. In this way, he both criticizes and affirms the power of Southern white leadership:

In view, therefore, of the very positive ground taken by the white leaders of the South, where most of these people reside, in becomes in the highest degree important to them to know what race they belong to. It ought to be also a matter of serious concern to the Southern white people; for their zeal for good government is so great that they contemplate the practical overthrow of the Constitution and laws of the United States to secure it, the ought at least to be sure that no man entitled to it by their own argument, is robbed of a right so precious as that of free citizenship; the ‘all-pervading, all conquering, Anglo-Saxon’ ought to set as high a value on American citizenship as the all conquering Roman placed upon the franchise of his state two thousand years ago. (68-69)

Perhaps among his most clever references is one to a court case which held: “The question whether persons are colored or white, where color or feature are doubtful, is for the jury to decide by reputation, reception into society, and by their exercise of the privileges of the white man, as well as by admixture of blood (70 -71). To which he fittingly asks why that state (South Carolina) has “a condition of public opinion” codified into its race laws. This suggests that the black laws are subjective, but perhaps more outrageously, this condition provides the space for mixed-race people to traverse the

color line “for rarely will a Southern community stop to figure on the pedigree of the contracting parties to a marriage where one is white and the other is known to have any strain of Negro blood” (71)—therefore they are theoretically and socially white. In his most direct statement he urges that “every good citizen ought to know the law, and, if possible, respect it; and if not worthy of respect, it ought to be changed by the authority which enacted it” (69). Naturally, he urges Southern white government to modify the law, but he also encourages mixed-race people to respect the law “where possible.” This language suggests that there are times in which the law must be subverted and those times are subject to individual experiences. This is, if may borrow from Anna Julia Cooper, “when and where I enter.”

This project is about that moment when the *disability* of color forces us to observe the *ability* of invisible color. That is to say, this project sees the racially indeterminate body as inherently and uniquely abled and that *ability* allows it to strategically navigate the space between the black and white worlds. That unfolds in various ways in the following four chapters. Chapter one, “That Middle World: The Sociocultural Development of a Bi-racial Sphere,” examines the leading assertions of this dissertation. In part, it reveals how the “disabled” mixed-race body within passing literature transforms black culture. In a way, this chapter partly argues that it is from the *ability* of color that “that middle world” and its consciousness are concretized. By exploring the shaping of “that middle world,” It demonstrates the distinctive differences in the black and white worlds with respect to the separate racialized space unique to mixed-race figures. It considers the permeability of this often politically charged space and how it resists the rigidity of the so-called color “line” through racial crossing, performance, and

even explicit (dis)identification where necessary. Overall, this chapter provides the reader with everything needed to understand and invest in the remainder of the dissertation project, as “that middle world” is a recurring subject throughout the project.

Chapter two, “Taking the Stage: Racial Performance and the Passing Narrative,” is chiefly concerned with the theatricality of racial passing. It considers how whiteness is imagined in and through performance in African American passing literature during the 19th century. It briefly examines the ubiquity of blackface minstrelsy in American popular culture and how that sets the proverbial stage for racial performance in the black passing narrative. “Taking the Stage” highlights the performative capacity of the mixed-race figure in the mid-to-late 19th century. In it I examine two works of African American racial passing literature that were produced at a time when tensions between North and South were about to explode into the Civil War. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860) tells the true story of the mixed-race Ellen Craft and her husband who escaped to freedom through various racial performances. William Wells Brown’s *The Escape; Or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), the first published play by an African American writer.

The penultimate chapter, “The Vanishing: Toward (In)visibility for the Mixed-Race Figure, is the defining chapter of the dissertation. At its core, it uncovers strategies of entrance into the (in)visible. Therefore, it addresses the strategic and deliberate nature of passing. By studying specific occurrences of racial passing in two New Negro Renaissance novels, this chapter is about appreciating the performance and determining its impact on the audience. Each of these stories address American legacies of racism and representation beginning with the Post-Reconstruction period. Nella Larsen sets her

novella *Passing* (1929) in Harlem in the 1920s. The story centers on two childhood friends reunited, but each dealing with their mixed-race ancestry in different ways. Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928) endeavors to depict a better class of blacks through her examination of the fair-skinned bourgeois-striver Angela Murray. Reminding us that characters of mixed status *practiced* race in ways that enabled them to build shared identity despite a disparate cultural heritage, these works suggest that identities like blackness are always constituted through strategies of performance. The chapter also introduces certain typologies of racial crossing that are original to this project in order for us to understand the characters' ultimate intentions and therefore consider their public versus private identities.

The final chapter, "The Black Aristocracy: Strategies of Respectability and The Rise of a Bi-Racial Middle Class," explores literary depictions of the rise of the black middle class as bourgeois-strivers. It examines that middle world as a distinctive space in which these characters employ strategies of respectability as a means to simultaneously distinguish themselves from larger black society and gain respect from white society. Here I study depictions the Blue Vein Society and their desires to be identified as neither black nor white—but certainly not black. This chapter examines a subset of the mixed-race world that embraces those who may not pass for white, but who remain deliberately disconnected from other blacks. Therefore, this chapter, like Michele Elam's *The Souls of Mixed-Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*, examines the "cultural invention" of the mixed race. Indeed, it uses it as a foundation to examine the Blue Veins' need to create a space in which a viable mixed-race community could exist. "The Black Aristocracy" analyzes four of Chesnutt's short stories: "The Wife of His Youth,"

“A Matter of Principle,” “The Sheriff’s Children,” and “The Web of Circumstance,” as well as Fauset’s *The Chinaberry Tree*. It examines other aspects of “that middle world” that can be easily overlooked. It highlights the social ramifications of those Blue Veins that “marry up” and have “respectable” lives by relentlessly pursuing esteemed social connections. This chapter, like the one before it, engages performance studies as a way of understanding the Blue Veins. The major objective of the dissertation is to modify certain conceptions of the mixed-race figure in African American literature and, toward that end, each of the chapters present a different facet of the figure.

CHAPTER 1

THAT MIDDLE WORLD: THE SOCIOCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF A BI-RACIAL SPHERE

“My skin is yellow. My hair is long. Between two worlds, I do belong. My father was rich and white. He forced my mother late one night. What do they call me? My name is Saffronia.”⁷

“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”⁸

In 2011, Black Girls Rock!⁹ invited renowned singers Kelly Price, Marsha Ambrosius¹⁰, Jill Scott, and Ledisi to perform a cover of Nina Simone’s song “Four Women.” The song tells the story of different African American women at various points throughout history. The audience loved it. Many music critics called it the best performance of the night. Here were these four women on stage reclaiming Simone’s genius and breathing new life into lyrics that had caused much backlash when the song was released amid the Civil Rights Movement in 1966. Simone’s characters are a reflection of the difficult lives that African American women have experienced. From Aunt Sarah and Sweet Thing—the mammy-like and jezebel-like figures in the song—to the bitter and resentful Peaches, Simone arguably tells an every-black-woman story. As a part of the narrative, Simone introduces Saffronia—a mixed-race woman who is the product of rape and sees herself and her race as belonging to a space that is “between two worlds.” Notably, Ambrosius who sang Saffronia’s life on BET’s stage is herself a fair-skinned black woman with long hair, making her a visual match to Saffronia; thus stimulating interesting discussion around how art often does representational work.

⁷ Excerpt from Nina Simone’s “Four Women”.

⁸ Erik Erikson quoted in

⁹ According to blackgirlsrockinc.com “BLACK GIRLS ROCK! Inc. is non-profit youth empowerment and mentoring organization established to promote the arts for young women of color, as well as to encourage dialogue and analysis of the ways women of color are portrayed in the media.” Since 2006, BLACK GIRLS ROCK! has partnered with Black Entertainment Television to present and award show dedicated to that same premise.

¹⁰ Marsha Ambrosius is an English singer, songwriter, and poet.

Saffronia's description of herself is one that evokes certain images of the so-called "mulatto" figure in American literature. Certainly, African American passing literature, too, does specific representational work that relies heavily upon visual codes in order to present legible social identities of the mixed-race figure. Although Saffronia is a 20th century artistic production, she embodies 19th century sensibilities about race and belonging. Moreover, she signifies the history of a particular people—mixed-race people whose physical bodies mask the complex narrative of a nation.

I open this project with this brief discussion of Saffronia because Simone's creative presentation offers significant ground upon which to encourage fruitful conversation about the mixed-race figure in passing literature. Indeed, Saffronia typifies the archetypal so-called "mulatto" character in American fiction. That she is presented alongside other iconic images of black women suggests a kinship that rests in commonality of experiences, even if her subjugation differs slightly from the others. That perceived disparity is situated in her physical body. Collectively, Simone's characters demonstrate the pervasiveness of the racial oppression of all black women throughout American history. Saffronia, however, experiences a racial conflict that is only intimately known and understood by the mixed-race population. That she sees herself as fitting between both the black and white worlds is reflective of the myopic nature of antebellum American culture. She sees someone who is fairer-skinned, closer in complexion to white than black. Nevertheless, she is treated as black. This same energy is reflected throughout literary history and becomes the impetus for an entire genre—passing literature.

Throughout American history our understandings of racial categories has evolved. The mixed-race figure in African American literature is partly responsible for that

development. The complicated character encourages us to see the mixed-race body as the fictive site of struggle for American race relations, which ultimately forces us to view those stories through a different lens. The burgeoning genre finds it home in the antebellum period. 19th century stories about mixed-race characters were often narratives about the nation. Those stories were frequently understood as microcosms of the larger American racial system. As the bi-racial character became a permanent presence in American literature, so too, did the perception of internal conflict within the bi-racial—often considered black—body. As we acknowledge that characters of mixed status conceal the complex nature and varied connections between race, spatiality, and the understanding of the body, we move forward in our thinking of the ways in which we have constructed these categories and how we continually make meaning through them. That is, mixed-race characters require us to question the previously unquestioned. A new dimension—a new world—now muddies what had historically been, quite literally, black and white. I distinguish that space as *that middle world*.

In 1900, William Dean Howells offered a critique of Charles W. Chesnutt's fiction.¹¹ In it he commended Chesnutt's portrayal(s), calling it "altogether a remarkable piece of work."¹² For Howells, it was not only Chesnutt's keen abilities that were impressive, but also something more:

The first was the novelty of the material; for the writer dealt not only with people who were not white, but with people who were not black enough to contrast grotesquely with white people—who in fact were of that near approach to the ordinary American in race and color which leaves, at the last degree, every one but the connoisseur in doubt whether they are Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-African.¹³

¹¹ William Dean Howells, "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories" *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1900).

¹² Howells, "Chesnutt's Stories," 1. (This review is now available in electronic format at www.theatlantic.com)

¹³ Howells, "Chesnutt's Stories," 1.

In his review, Howells, like all of America, was preoccupied with the idea that race was an imperfect measure of a person's humanity—her or his right to be treated as a person, no matter their skin color. To be sure, Chesnutt introduced Howells to the possibility that our bodies betray us in that our skin color is said to signify our racial identity, but often does not. Through his fiction, Chesnutt proves to a nation desperately concerned with race and privilege that, in fact, skin color was/is not the barometer for racial identity. For Howells though, there was something uniquely appealing about this colorless “black” character that Chesnutt fashions, leading Howells to grapple: “Now, however, it is known that the author of this story is of negro blood—diluted, indeed, in such measure that if he did not admit this descent few would imagine it, but still quite of *that middle world* which lies next, though wholly outside, our own”¹⁴ (emphasis mine). Consequently, just as Chesnutt theorizes race in both his fiction and nonfiction, Howells necessarily does the same. He had to. The fate of the his identity, his blood line, his social status, and indeed the entire Republic depended on it, for “In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”¹⁵ And so this chapter is born out of their theories on race, space, and the body that complicates them in American literary history.

As the theoretical basis for this entire project, this chapter charts the literary disruption/destruction of the black-white racial binary and the resulting sociocultural development of a separate and distinct hybrid space—that middle world. Part of the difficulty in communicating the conflicts uniquely facing mixed-race figures in fiction stems from the inability to construct the “truth” of race on the basis of visibility. As

¹⁴ Howells, “Chesnutt’s Stories,” 1.

¹⁵ Erik Erikson quoted in

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham puts it, “When we talk about the concept of race, most people believe that they know it when they see it but arrive at nothing short of confusion when pressed to define it” (251). This is especially true in the shaping of that middle world as we see it throughout passing literature. Drawing from Higginbotham’s articulation of the difficulty of defining race, the bi-racial sphere is strengthened by the shared experiences of its inhabitants. Whereas the black and white worlds come into existence at the same moment (with one being defined by what the other is not), that middle world is born out of necessity and is continually (re)shaped throughout history. And so, chapter is about interrogating and revising the constructed boundaries of race as they unfold in American literature, specifically African American racial passing literature

Bordering on Whiteness: The Mixed-Race Figure and the Construction of That Middle World

There is a growing recognition that we live in terms of margins. Indeed, it is a common idea now to think of identity in terms of borders or boundaries in which we find culture. The groups with which we identify mark our existence in the world. Borders are often viewed as restrictive rather than freeing. However, the mixed-race figure teaches us “the boundary is not that at which something stops but [. . .] the boundary is that from which one *something begins its presencing*”¹⁶ (emphasis not mine). This is especially true for characters of mixed status. They live in worlds that are governed by boundaries—be they legal or social. And those borders determine how they navigate the worlds around them. My understanding of the racialized space that mixed-race figures

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, ‘Building, dwelling, thinking’ qtd.in *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge Classics, 2010), 1.

have fashioned for themselves—that middle world—is heavily indebted Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the interstitial space as the location of identity:

The move away from singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions—race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives or originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and the displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)?¹⁷ (emphasis not mine)

Essentially, then, the bi-racial character in African American fiction often employs specific strategies of representation that help shape their identity and their sense of belonging to a world that is in-between the black and white worlds, unique even if connected.

That middle world has radically altered social interaction, and has developed vocabularies of identity and group membership. As early as the pre-Civil War period, the genre of African American passing literature demonstrates the literary possibility of constructing a separate hybrid space; albeit one in which outside pressure to identify causes inward conflict. The passing narrative is ripe with racial struggle that pushes us toward new understandings of how characters of mixed status (re)articulate their identities, negotiate existing racial hierarchies, and/or exercise greater control over their

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2010), 2.

expression of self, all of which are means to understanding their social interactions and how their abilities to self-identify impact and/or threaten previously constructed borders of identity. Despite shared (and, at times, disparate) histories, the mixed-race figure and those read as “wholly” white/black demonstrate similar social interests.

In antebellum practice, race—and citizenship—in the United States has been defined in terms of one rigid *line*, which separates black from white and opportunity from oppression; we have termed that the color line. The African American passing novel, however, dislocates this inadequate line by employing the trope of racial passing/crossing in ways that challenge its firmness. By navigating what Harriet Jacobs called interstices between the black and white worlds, bi-racial characters become the collective expression of both sameness and difference, as the complicated figure embodies both at once. To be sure, the bi-racial character is neither black, nor white, yet both and therefore through the praxis of identity it rejects the inflexibility of the so-called color *line*. In so doing, it compels us to modify our conceptions of the color line and instead view it in terms of an interstitial space that is in-between the black and white worlds—distinctly separate, yet linked and permeable. Consequently, bi-racial characters may (and often do) vacillate between all three worlds (the black world, the white world, and that middle world) at some point in a given passing narrative, making this project a theory of both space and race or a theory of the spatiality of race for mixed-race figures.

American literature often subscribes to borders that regulate vocabularies of identity. There is a certain set of expressions considered permissible when defining race in American literature. Anything outside those proposed boundaries must be “authenticated”—that is, everything not socially legible in terms of black and white

presents a problem for the white power structure. The trouble is, all of the limits of identity are proposed from the outside. Simply put, if a character has relatively dark skin she or he may be considered black—with a particularly United States location.

Conversely, if a character has no “evidence” of African ancestry, she or he is considered white, or at the very least, nonblack. Each of the narratives I examine in this project present these challenges of racial identification for the mixed-race figure in a curiously familiar way. Their bi-racial characters challenge the audience to reject certain racial designations, which attempt to affirm and police boundaries of both identity and community. Perhaps Fanon describes the drama of corporeality best as: “A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world.”¹⁸ The narratives I study here suggest that traditional boundaries of race and citizenship are insufficient with respect to the mixed-race figure in African American literature and perhaps even in life.

Considering the rise of passing literature throughout the mid-19th century, one could argue that the mixed-race figure challenges the legitimacy of racial categories in America altogether, which aims to marginalize all non-white people. Because black is the repository of difference, the Other is never as guarded as the Self. As Naomi Zack notes, “Americans of mixed race who acknowledge at least one black forbear are rarely permitted to identify themselves in any other way except black” (Zack 6). That is to say, one can be easily categorized as black without qualification, but one cannot too easily

¹⁸ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 111.

classify as white. Theoretically, the black and white worlds come into existence at the very same moment, or, at the very least, their acknowledgement of each other helps them to define themselves. They are mutually dependent on each other for racial, and, by extension, social classification and therefore have mutually assured destruction with the acknowledgment of a bi-racial world. Whereas the black and white worlds materialize concurrently and are jointly contingent upon the other for definition, the mixed-race world is necessarily constructed, therefore disrupting the longstanding false binary that divides black and white. At minimum, that middle world modifies the commonly known properties of both the black and white worlds. Therefore, the bi-racial character does not just embody the peculiar categories of difference; but also, perhaps more ironically, the terrifying relation of sameness. Consequently, the mixed-body necessarily becomes the literary sight of contestation for American race relations. That middle world, then, is the unspeakable *dash* in-between white-black.

Bi-racial characters in African American passing literature have created a unique bi-racial sphere that though not completely divorced from the black and white worlds is unique unto itself. This mixed-race territory is what William Dean Howells calls “that middle world,” which I define as the identifiable and porous, yet intangible racialized space formed and occupied exclusively by mixed-race characters. This bi-racial world is a metaphysical construction. It is a space they must navigate daily. With the emergence of this in-between space the mixed-race figure itself upsets customary American racial ideologies. Therefore, the bi-racial character—specifically from an African American author—ultimately rejects many, though not all, essentialist representations of difference. So, the interstitial space becomes a transformative and, at times, a performative space,

which authorizes interaction between otherwise contending cultures and ultimately results in cultural hybridities. As the racially indeterminate body negotiates the relationship between race and space in America, it results in the emergence of *crossroads* of identity, which are spaces that necessarily redefine nationhood. The bi-racial sphere uses the various identity politics of its people to challenge the static representations of mixed-race figures in the literature, particularly those presumptions of misfortune that underscored earlier discussions of so called tragic mulatto fiction. That middle world, then, is a space that subverts the expressed terms of American citizenship in the 19th century through its inherent critique of customary racial designations.

As 19th century African American passing literature begins to disturb earlier conventions of the so-called tragic mulatto tradition, the bi-racial figure itself also became a rejection of some essentialist notions of both black(ness) and white(ness). Moreover, by taking two seemingly irreconcilable worlds and merging them into one, African American passing literature resists the prevailing notions of antebellum American culture that prevent the possibility of a mixed race designation. Certainly, the black passing narrative is the perfect genre for such a revision. Indeed, as racial difference was codified into law during the Reconstruction era, the bi-racial character became a useful way to confront black and white racial borders through their formation of the separate more flexible space in-between the two. Additionally, the mixed-race figure challenges the social hierarchy that is based on a false yet defining racial structure. The character itself defies not only the social order, but also its larger more immovable foundation—race.

Whereas for many white writers the bi-racial figure was an example of innate black inferiority, black writers advanced it into an instrument to confront the absurdity of the color line. Since an individual's body intends to signify their race, characters occupying that middle world are only viewed as oddities when they claim to be or are "discovered" to be a race other than the one that is readily visible or readable. The notion of legible blackness or whiteness often creates a crisis that is necessarily burdened with questions of the fitting, albeit loaded, term 'authenticity.' E. Patrick Johnson argues, "Often it is during times of crisis (social, cultural, or political) when the authenticity of older versions of blackness is called in question. These crises set the *stage* for 'acting out' identity politics, occasions when those excluded from the parameters of blackness [and I would add, whiteness] invent their own (Johnson 2 emphasis mine). The still odder phenomenon of racial crossing, then, serves to disrupt the line of demarcation between who has the right to citizenship in 19th century America. Through the use of bi-racial figures and often employing the familiar racial passing trope, African American writers illustrated their concerns about race. While for many white authors a single definable "mulatto" character emerges in early American literature, the black passing narrative unsettles this linear representation, and furthermore disputes race as a basis for basic citizenship rights.

In addition to ways in which blacks presented mixed-race figures that negotiated the color line through racial crossing, they also depicted those bi-racial characters that chose not to or could not pass for white but still remained deliberately withdrawn from the black community. As the final chapter of this project demonstrates, Chesnut's "The Wife of His Youth" describes determination of this subset of mixed-race characters and

the Blue Vein Society: “to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement” (5). That is, the Blues Veins have created spaces in which their sustainable mixed-race populations could thrive, unbothered even if impacted by other outside worlds. Still, Chesnutt’s character Mr. Ryder suggests that Blue Veins have an underlying desire to fit into white America.

The authors take on the admittedly difficult task of considering the politicized notions of identity for bi-racial characters. Certainly any racial identity to which the character subscribes is simultaneously questionable and acceptable for the bi-racial figure. Black writers began using the trope of racial crossing and the mixed-race figure as an avenue of access rather than restriction. From William Wells Brown and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins, black writers have employed the bi-racial figure in new and exciting ways that challenge previously prevailing scholarship, which erroneously equated crossing the so-called color line with self-hatred. Certainly, these narratives do specific representational work, yet its suggestions at times are over reliant on essentialist depictions of race and class in the 19th century.

Along with any discussion of the literature one must also consider the relationship of the author to the work. The mid to late 20th century would see theorists such as Barthes and Foucault announce the “disappearance” or “death” of the author. And Derrida would claim that the author has a discursive relationship to the text that could only be deciphered through the process of reading. These theorist are of course writing within a tradition that believed readers must separate the literary work from its creator thereby rejecting elements of the author’s identity as a method to distill meaning from their

works. However, I have no intention of reading the storylines in this project in a way that fails to acknowledge the author's racial, social, and/or political identities. I find it particularly useful to account for the ways in which an author's biography contributes to how their characters are represented in a given story. Indeed, if ever the multiple grounds of an author's identity—particularly his or her racial and/or political identities—are useful to understanding a genre, African American passing literature is it; especially the passing literature produced in the 19th century. Therefore, while Barthes contends, "To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing" (5), I would argue it offers no more understanding of a work to read it outside its author. Actually, limitations abound with respect to either method. So, an acknowledgment of those limitations is paramount to highlighting certain gaps that may result from a given approach. Recognition of authorship proves particularly useful in the coming chapters of this project, as race is significant to the world within and outside of the works studied here. For instance, there is a marked difference along racial lines to the ways in which writers handle the bi-racial figure. White writers such as Childs and Cooper in the mid-19th century and even Mark Twain in the later 19th century tended to create mixed-race characters replete with doom and an inescapably tragic life—they were damned, to be sure. Black writers, on the other hand, who used the trope of racial passing/crossing steadily revised and/or augmented these accepted depictions of the mixed-race figure. For them, the bi-racial character suffers from within the body in a way that is altogether different from those within the earlier tradition. Black writers eventually moved away from the sad and catastrophic energy that their white counterparts bestowed upon their "tragic mulatto" figures. In so doing,

African American writers ultimately introduced a new literary genre—passing literature. This move from tragic mulatto fiction to black passing literature introduces elements of racial crossing and, perhaps most notably, within this newer genre tragedy does not necessarily befall the mixed-race figure, at least not until the character has demonstrated its agency noticeable way. Consequently, passing literature is able to catalog various tactics for entering into the visible and/or invisible for mixed-race figures.

Naturally, as the bi-racial character developed it became a way to illustrate the conflict of race that was facing the nation. As authors began to conceive of race in new and often controversial ways during the antebellum period, the mixed-race figure developed into way in which to assign blame for the debatable Negro problem, as well as a way to imagine how to handle it. For many black writers, the bi-racial character demonstrated more possibilities than those characters that were assigned one specific race.

For Chesnutt, the “disability of color” signifies a state of socioeconomic inequality, specifically for mixed-race characters. He makes an inspiring effort to urge the nation to “exalt humanity above race” (125). In so doing, he accepts that different races have separate stakes with the recognition of bi-racial people as something other than black; he recognizes the impact of race mixing on the country. Certainly, Chesnutt understood that the nation would not soon eradicate the black laws; however, he knew that white America would take necessary legal action to preserve the “purity” of its race by governing marriages that may result in miscegenation, thus blurring and eventually obliterating the lines of racial divide. The fear of this type of socializing was too great to be ignored. While he uses his nonfiction to point out the failing nature of these laws,

he—and other black writers—uses fiction to explore the possibilities of the mixed-race figure. Therefore, while his nonfiction addresses the racist ethos that characterized the nation, his fiction (and the fiction of his contemporaries) deals with a world that did not yet exist on a large scale, but certainly could.

Rather than sinking to the idea that a “disability of color” prevents upward mobility, black authors began acknowledging that their mixed-race characters’ skin color afforded many of them the ability to negotiate the color line in ways characters outside their world could not. Whereas the tragic mulatto figure can be seen as a socially “disabled” bi-racial body, the mixed-race figure within black passing literature transforms black culture. As the racially indeterminate body becomes the fictionalized location of racial struggle, it results in the mixed-race characters’ mental preoccupation with restriction versus access or disability versus ability. Their desire was simple, to navigate worlds outside their own. And as they do, they radically and forever change American culture. As Baldwin puts it, “I want to suggest, and it’s a very important suggestion, first of all this is not now, never has been, and, now, never can be a white country.”¹⁹

Frequently, in the African American passing narrative, characters who are mixed have already been socially assigned a race before they ever experience the psychological frustrations of being theoretically black yet physically white. They have been defined from outside themselves or their initial control or desire. Whether it is their parents and then their communities that initially define them, their right to identify themselves for themselves has been revoked even before their racial consciousness is concretized. This

¹⁹ Baldwin “Reflections of James Baldwin”

outside definition precipitates Johnson's aforementioned "crisis". To that point Zack asserts:

If white racist beliefs about blacks have been accepted before the designation is made, the early realized designation has the power to shame and frighten individuals, who then see themselves identified with the least attractive, most underprivileged, and most harshly punished designated black individuals, namely, those who fill the positions of stereotypes.
(Zack 22)

This is the case for every character, not just the mixed-race characters. However, for the bi-racial figure, the revocation of the right to self-identify is especially crippling, as their skin color—or lack thereof—affords them an ability that darker skin characters can never have, the ability to cross the color line. Within the white genre the suggestion that extreme emotion is a transferable trait develops throughout much of the "tragic mulatto" tradition and becomes the basis for many of the presumptions about the genre.

Conversely, the mixed-race character within the black passing stories tends to have agency that is not seen within Tragic Mulatto fiction. Within the black literary tradition those characters tended to be less satisfied with being automatically racialized as black. They began to avail themselves of their pedigree as their individual struggles necessitated it. Their relative racial indeterminacy is a useful tool to expand their worlds.

Consequently, black passing literature employs strategic essentialism in order to construct a self-constituting bi-racial world. Depictions of the bi-racial figure that come after the fixed images of the tragic mulatto necessarily submit to definitions of one race and reject accepted representations of the other. African American passing literature reveals that the success of racial crossing and the viability of that middle world are reliant on the essentialism of both races. Consequently, when mixed-race figures collectively establish a world in which they can challenge racial clichés in American culture, their

world becomes a space of resistance—a space that often presents (collective) identifiable political, social, and economic aims.

To be clear, I am not making the claim that this middle world exists outside the literature. Rather, I argue that this is a world that is solely imagined, constructed, and occupied by bi-racial characters within the literature, specifically the African American passing narrative. And, while it may be true that 19th century American race relations provided a space for unpacking the mixed-race world and its specific social and political energies outside the confines of the literature, the literature and/or its author is not always explicitly responding to their “real” world. Indeed, at times the literature anticipates and/or encourages major shifts in the world beyond the literature. Therefore, the black passing narrative can be viewed as the preeminent genre for theorizing race and privilege.

Brown, Wilson, Harper, Chesnutt, and Hopkins are among the earliest to demonstrate the possibilities of the bi-racial figure beyond the limited trajectory of the “tragic mulatto”. As early as 1853, Brown’s *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* used the mixed-race character to highlight the lasting impact of slavery and its destructiveness on black families in America. That he publishes it just following the Fugitive Slave Act while he himself was living in London to avoid recapture demonstrates the inherent urgency of the text. Child, a fellow abolitionist and woman’s rights activist, had published several stories about the impact of race on state of the nation well prior to her 1842 publication of *The Liberty Bell*, which included her short story “The Quadroons”. However, there is a marked difference to the ways in which mixed-race characters are portrayed in her work and Brown’s *Clotel* and all of its revisions. While Child actively campaigned for the abolishment of slavery in her political life, the bi-racial—black, as

she sees them—characters in her fiction ultimately succumb to their doomed fate due to their intrinsically flawed (“black”) blood. On the other hand, Brown’s characters experience different outcomes. It could be argued that because his title character dies that Brown is playing directly into the conventions of the “tragic mulatto” plot, which often requires the sad death of the “mulatto” character. However, *Clotel* is indeed different. She dies after having escaped twice. Her suicide is a result of her agency, her unwillingness to simply accept her fate as a slave. Her death demonstrates the freedom to choose. Other mixed-raced figures had not experienced this autonomy prior to *Clotel*. Indeed, many of them succumbed to their tortured existence well before their deaths. Therefore, Brown’s character demonstrates a paradigm shift in the overall trajectory of the bi-racial figure and how those characters see the nation itself. It is not *Clotel*’s presidential pedigree that affords her agency, but rather her mixed-race heritage that gives her the ability to move. That is, *Clotel* and her sister could have been the daughters of any white man and still they would have had relative mobility. *Clotel; or The President’s Daughter* marks a significant change in the mixed-race figure’s potential outcomes—it represents the difference between accepted disability and insisted ability. Or, it marks the move from a socially disabled to a differently abled mixed-race figure.

By the turn of the century, the black scare—the fear whites had of sharing any measure of kinship with or bearing any likeness to blacks— had become so real for white America that their science, art, and literature began to reflect it in ways that hoped to reveal a larger genetic gap between the two races. It is this post-Reconstruction mentality that causes black writers to relentlessly interrogate the boundaries of race and refuse to submit to standard designations. Thus, black writers continued to publish works that

proved that blacks and whites were, indeed, as Hopkins's biblical allusion puts it, "of one blood." With the steady rise of African American passing literature in the post-Civil War period, the literary depictions of the hybrid space became a fixed element of the genre. But they also had the challenge to produce characters that were also palatable to white America. As they continually illustrated the hybridity of that middle world, they persistently created bi-racial characters that affirmed their humanity. Many mixed-race figures displayed characteristics that were commonly associated with being human rather than savage—that is, white rather than black. In order for white America to understand and accept this trend, they had to attribute those human qualities to the bi-racial figures' white blood; thus, making white the intrinsic savior and keeping with the master narrative of the salvific power of whiteness. Implicit in this recognition is an acknowledgment of the existence of a bi-racial sphere and the potential for the mixed-race figure to be human. That is a small victory to be certain, but a victory nevertheless. Where the white characters observe the possibility of humanity, they are also acknowledging a degree of sameness with a character that is not completely white. This was a slippery slope, sure. Indeed, it would eventually set in motion events that transformed the literary depictions of race in America. While the white characters still overwhelmingly rejected a kinship with the black characters, they were forced to accept the physical similarities they shared with the mixed-race character. Yet, while the bi-racial figure is granted relative access to white America, there was generally a foil that brought about their discontentment, disillusionment, and/or ejection from white America. However, this end never struck prior to some acknowledgment of likeness with the bi-racial figure from white characters.

Black authors of early African American passing literature made such great strides with the mixed-race figure that those who came after them could use the character to broach topics that would have before seemed implausible at first. Early 20th century passing narratives grappled with the bi-racial figure and racial crossing in ways that led to the rise of literary depictions of the black middle class. In much of the same way that illustrations of that middle world were not always reflective of the world outside the literature, neither were depictions of the black middle class. To be sure, while early 20th century African American authors like Walter White, Larsen, and Fauset were a part of black bourgeois society during the New Negro Renaissance, their literary depictions of a black aristocracy were in an effort to challenge static representations of the black America(ns). Those writers of the genre employed strategies of respectability with respect to the bi-racial figure.

The Crossroads Identity: Hybridity, Intersectionality, and the Mixed-Race Figure

The overall conflict within the mixed-race psyche as we see it in the literature stems from what it means to be *almost*. To be *almost*, is to be the potentiality of a thing rather than the fulfillment of a thing. It is a state of being in which a character is certainly not the Other (altogether nonwhite), but also not quite the Self (altogether white). If what William James notes is true, that “one possesses as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him,”²⁰ then the incessant self-questioning that mixed-race characters experience within passing literature can only result in attempts to negotiate the relationship between race and space. Therefore, for some bi-racial characters, to pass/cross out of blackness no longer equals automatically passing/crossing into

²⁰ William James, “The Principles of Psychology” (New York, Cosimo, Inc., 2007) 294.

whiteness. Rather, it can mean the discovery of a second or new(er) Self—perhaps even better, a relatively truer identity—within the interstitial space. What the 19th and 20th century authors of the genre have in common is they use black passing novel as a way to challenge prevailing philosophies of race and to confront the terms through which race and/or visibility can be read. That is to say, traditionally in America every person who has at least one black forbearer is automatically viewed as black, thus eliminating the need for further racial qualification. This is an oversimplification for African American passing literature. The ways in which the mixed-race body complicates American black and white racial identities demands that we recognize the intense coexistence of the Self and the Other within the same body.

While the hybrid space can be one of emotional and social alienation, 20th century authors demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case for all mixed-race characters. Indeed, black passing literature often sees its bi-racial characters transition from a state of objecthood to personhood and from existing to living. Thus, making that middle world a transitional and/or performative space for some. And for others it is a transformative space wherein the white and the black are both eclipsed by a new bi-racial consciousness (consider Chesnutt's depictions of the Blue Vein Society). This new and, in some instances, final self within the novelistic realm allows the bi-racial figure to consciously be. Certainly, then, the bi-racial sphere as it exists within the literature is an existentialist critique of American black and white racial identity itself. Consequently, that middle world can fittingly be considered the functional permeable fold that separates yet connects the black and white worlds.

The ability to (dis)identify or (mis)identify with a particular race (for however long the character chooses) is a skill that is unique to the mixed-race figure. So, while that middle world is one that is markedly independent from the black and/or white worlds, it provokes a tense relationship with its Others. The identity politics associated with the bi-racial sphere, much like the black and white worlds, are identifiable and diverse. While many mixed-race figures choose to disidentify²¹ with one race in favor of the other, there are some who choose to perform a particular race for a host of reasons, both personal and political. E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness* argues in part that much of passing literature uses mixed-race characters to "foreground and engage identity and cultural performance using different occurrences of racial performance" (3). Consequently, the burgeoning field of performance studies offers fertile ground for discussions of how the intersections of race, class, and gender operate within the passing novel.

Race and class are equally important in the building of identity, and, where bi-racial women are considered, race, class, and gender readily intersect. The Saffronias of American fiction—those characters that were aware of the complications that their existence created for them and for the worlds around them—are appropriate tools to "account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1242). This study is particularly attentive to the ways in which political and representational intersectionality²² factor into the structure of the bi-racial sphere. By disturbing otherwise carefully delineated racial categories, the mixed-race figure, which is partly defined by mobility and/or transformability, begins to use its body

²¹ Siobhan B. Somerville *Queering the Color Line* (Durham: Duke University Press 2000) 272.

²² Crenshaw "Mapping the Margins," 1250.

to upset other categories of difference, specifically gender. As we will see in chapter two, Ellen Craft uses her racially indeterminate body in order to cross both racial and gender barriers, thus encouraging further dialogue on intersecting identities and the freedom struggle and the mixed-race body is the perfect vehicle for subverting other categories in their border lives. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says it this way:

I am angry, gender as it functions today is a grave injustice; we should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change. But in addition to being angry, I am also hopeful because I believed deeply in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for the better. Gender matters everywhere in the world. [. . .] And, I would like today to ask that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world, a better world.²³

Intersectionality provides a use for way for us to conceive of a fictionalized world in which overlapping identities contribute to a freer character.

In examining that middle world as an interstitial space of confrontation, I must recognize that the experiences of mixed-race characters are frequently the result of intersecting patterns of racism, classism, and sexism. Generally, many critical race and literary theorists have failed to adequately consider intersectional identities of bi-racial characters without, however inadvertently, assigning them to a particular racial class. However, because of their overlapping identities as “neither black nor white yet both,” bi-racial characters become somewhat marginalized in the other worlds. So, rather than readily accept their positions as black and therefore regulated to the lowest echelon, some of mixed-race characters attempt to eschew all racial categories—which is, to be sure, a political move of its own. Sure, in any conversation of identity politics there is always a concern that one “frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (Crenshaw

²³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists” (TED. April 2013)

1241-99). Because American racial categories are interdependent, the term *intragroup* is an admittedly insufficient way of describing the social, cultural, and political undercurrents of that middle world. Thus, racial identification necessarily fails for all, but particularly for the mixed race population. The aim here is not to view intersectionality as an all-encompassing theory of identity. Rather, the objective is to appreciate how intersectionality advances our understanding of the literary representations of cultural hybridity we see in racial passing literature.

White Man's Burden: The "Black" Body, the Skin that Betrayed It, and the America that Created It

The body. Companion and collaborator yet also traitor and adversary. Throughout our lives it is perhaps our one truly unavoidable relationship—ourselves to our body. Whatever it encounters, we encounter. Whatever it survives, we survive. It grows with us; it endures with us. It is inescapable. Even as mobile subjects, we cannot out run our body. It is what makes our everyday experiences tangible. What the phenomenon of racial passing/crossing and the mixed-race figure teach us is that our bodies can betray us. Our bodies can tell us that we are visually one person—white—and racially and socially another person—black. Ontologically speaking, this awareness reshapes the mixed-race figure's concepts on what it means to be black or white. Indeed, characters of mixed-status find new ways to feel alive, even if that means disassociating from those who make them feel the most alive—their families. In the wake of the multicultural turn in contemporary race ideology, we have come to appreciate the existence of mixed-race peoples. Frankly, however, the fact that they have theoretically black yet visually white bodies critically impacts their literary depictions.

By the mid-19th century, tragic mulatto fiction became an interesting way for some white writers like James Fennimore Cooper and Lydia Maria Child to build and reaffirm American nationhood. The mixed-race figure was a vehicle for exploring and establishing a particularly white American identity. While the black emancipatory tradition in the United States has definitely recognized the weakness of the concept of physical race, the genre reflected disparities in basic social privilege and citizenship rights for all non-white people, particularly in 19th century America. It demonstrated in what way white America bestowed opportunity on its own while restricting other populations. Cooper and Child each offered traditionally “tragic mulatto” characters. However, Child’s Xarifa, the mixed-race protagonist of her short story “The Quadroons” (1842) demonstrates a noticeable difference from Cooper’s mixed-race figure, Cora Munro of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). While Xarifa is representative of all that literature understands about the mixed-race character in 19th century American fiction, Cora arguably represents a commonality between the subjugated people of Native American and African American populations. Cassandra Jackson argues in *Barriers Between Us*, “African-American slaves become the additional foreign entity against which the American identity must be defined” (11). Author and activist James Baldwin made the suggestion a similar irrefutable connection when he said, “the intentions of this melancholy country—and anyone who doubts me can ask any Indian—have always been genocidal.”²⁴ That is, for many white writers the mixed-race character became an expression of the various ways in which American national identity was formed. Because of the Xarifas and Coras of white American fiction, it became increasingly clear that

²⁴ James Baldwin “Reflections of James Baldwin” speech delivered UC Berkeley January 1979. (C-SPAN3 History)

white was a protected category of difference. So, the bi-racial figure should be assigned any classification other than white. The inaccessibility of whiteness adds value that cannot be compromised by any complicated racial body. Adding exclusivity to whiteness ultimately attempted to confirm white superiority. The different ways that Cooper and Child employ their bi-racial characters attests to the stretch and usefulness of the mixed-race figure for capturing and unpacking the race problems facing the nation during the antebellum period. Indeed, African American writers would note the usefulness of the mixed-race figure and stretch it even further.

While concepts of race hardened into fixed categories over the last two centuries, bi-racial characters' mobility also pushed them through numerous impositions of racial identity. To be sure, the mixed-race body as we see it in American literature is a product of an American slave past and therefore, as Chesnutt tells us in the late 19th century, it is the white man's burden. Later scholars acknowledge this too:

Dealing with problems of the color line later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chesnutt's novels and short stories are permeated with the provocative and psychologically electrifying notion that through miscegenation white American created a continuing "civil war." Although miscegenation was systematically denied and, ironically illegal, the result of the union between blacks and whites was obvious, and its negative effects could pit blood relatives against each other. The veiling effect of Chesnutt's fictionalization of miscegenation allowed readers to ignore the ocular proof of the practice while being forced to scrutinize closely the heartache and violence it perpetuated.²⁵

The mixed-race figure is the manifestation of America's most deplorable offenses—chattel slavery and later Jim Crow. However, black writers turn it away from its previous course of unavoidable tragedy. They transform the character into a formidable and

²⁵ Susan Porthro Wright and Ernestine Pickens Glass "Preface" *Passing in the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2010), xi.

sociopolitical force. Consequently, this project covers instances of the mixed-race figure taking agency over the “black” body by transforming it into something else, and defying the historical trajectory of misfortune.

The puzzling phenomena racial passing/crossing allows the mixed-race figure to occupy otherwise restricted spaces. It conflates reality and performance, thus upsetting concepts of “real,” “authentic,” “genuine,” and other languages that force it to identify in monoracial terms. Characters of mixed status profoundly impact the worlds around them in ways that engender continual controversy surrounding racial categories within the American landscape. And as we see productive intersections between racial performance and the history of the so-called “tragic mulatto” figure, we progress in terms of understanding the psychology of the mixed-race figure, which, to be sure, is the ultimate goal here. The characters have a great deal to teach us about conspicuous racial identities. While this project surveys African American passing narratives collectively, I acknowledge the dearth of scholarship on the mixed-race figure (as something other than tragic), and the interstitial space they create in-between the black and white worlds. The following chapters take giant leaps forward in extending the study of what the academy knows as “tragic mulatto” fiction into what I am certain will be a broader landscape. I highlight elements of the genre that have been previously overlooked or understudied. I introduce a framework for the study of the mixed-race figure and the trope of racial passing, and that includes expanding the lexicon as it relates to the literary construction of “black” identities. Our previous approach had a tendency to construct inflexible boundaries or borders, which limit racial designations. However, this project sees borders as a place from which something begins rather than ends. Indeed, that middle world is the

beginning of a bi-racial consciousness. It is also a space that has been configured by mixed-race characters, though contested by those characters that subscribe to monoracial identities. That middle world demands that we consider new racial taxonomies. In the coming chapters I explore the histories, the laws, and the culture of mobility within the black passing narrative in order to develop understandings of how the mixed-race figure has transformed conceptions of race. I consider, too, the ways mobility has played a role in the characters resisting pressures to choose one racial group over the others. Indeed, the interstitial space rightfully tells them that they can have access to either racial group. I propose that these mobile subjects reconfigure ideas on race and citizenship in an early American context. Therefore, this project explores the changing dimensions of race and space, as well as the connectedness that characters of mixed status have to other racial groups, specifically where their families are concerned. Racial passing literature's entire philosophy is built on the premise of re-asserting agency and control over the body's legibility. As the character evolves it transforms and as it transforms the literature it has the power to transform life. And yet, I do not make the claim of that middle world existing beyond the literature. Rather, I welcome the possibility. And I encourage the appreciation of African American passing literature as a genre all its own, with identifiable elements that are worthy of exploration. Ultimately, however, I argue for the importance of the mixed-race figure as a compelling symbol for fictional resolution to the race problem in the United States. Paradoxically though, the mixed-race figure cannot entirely escape the black world—not that escape is even the goal—for, as Baldwin brilliantly surmises, “When the Americans talk about progress, they mean how fast I become white. That is a trick bag because they know perfectly well I can never be white.

I have drunk my share of dry martinis. I have proven myself civilized in every way I can, but there in an *irreducible difficulty*. Something doesn't work." (emphasis added)²⁶

A Note on Terms

In what follows, I would like to develop a critical vocabulary for analyzing racial passing narratives. In charting this new territory, I intend to provoke new and exciting discourses on African American literature that centers a bi-racial character. And so, I find it necessary to explicitly define certain terms as they appear in this text in order to move us forward in revising our conceptions of characters of mixed status. While this is not an all-encompassing lexicon, it does initiate newer conceptions of a previously fixed genre. Moreover, it is just a starting point; it welcomes and encourages additions that continually expand our conversation. The goal is to construct theoretical maps that lead to our accepting how, why, and with whom those characters self-identify.

Passing – In the broad sense, is the ability of a person to be viewed as a member of social groups other than the one she or he was born into, especially her or his ability to be viewed as a different race, ethnicity, caste, social class, and/or gender status, generally with the purpose of gaining social acceptance or to cope with disparities associated with difference. Within this genre, *passing* is generally shorthand for racial passing—usually a fair-skinned person (socially considered black or African American) attempting to be accepted as white. Historically, it is inextricably linked to the term *deception*. It inherently implies acknowledgement or adherence to racial designations as they have been outlined. That is, the term suggests submission to dominate definitions of these groups.

Crossing - The strategy of traversing various boundaries of identity, especially concerning race or gender. The term *crossing* as I use it, is mostly shorthand for the strategy of racial crossing. It appreciates the temporary nature of a character's adventures and it acknowledges that a character has chosen a particular group with which they have ultimately chosen to identify; however, they sporadically temporarily seek acceptance among other groups. Crossing is a means to an end and usually does not occur without prior knowledge or consent of others from the bi-racial character's home group.

²⁶ Baldwin "Reflections of James Baldwin"

Crossing v. Passing – Crossing is temporary, whereas passing is generally permanent, except in passing where the character returns to their home group for whatever reason. Once that happens, a character may be considered crossing, if the others in her or his home group are aware of what the bi-racial character is doing. The two terms each depend on the proximity and/or relationship a bi-racial character has to her or his home group. Usually, the closer the proximity or relationship the more strategic a character becomes.

Tragic Mulatto Figure - a stereotypical fictional character that appeared in American literature mostly during the 19th and 20th centuries, since the 1840s. It is an archetypal mixed-race person (historically called "mulatto"), who is presented as sad, miserable, or even suicidal, because they fail to completely fit in the "white world" or the "black world". As such, the character is depicted as the victim of in a society divided by race, where there is no place for one who is neither completely "black" nor "white". Often in early American literature the character is presented in a way that suggests that their "black blood" is the cause of their misfortune. They generally succumb to their ill-fated end, as the tragedy is almost always inescapable. While I understand the problematic nature of the term "mulatto," the term as I use it here it not meant offensive. Rather, it is meant to indicate a certain character and/or genre in American literature.

Mixed-Race Figure – This character is a more philosophically advanced and socially empowered figure. It is mostly seen in literature from African American writers. The term is essentially meant to connote empowerment and agency for bi-racial characters, rather than submission to "bad blood" ideology. While some of these characters, too, meet an untimely demise, they differ from so-called tragic mulatto figures in that they only die after the reader observes a measure of empowerment in them. The mixed-race figure also includes those Blue Veins who may or may not be fair-skinned enough to traverse racial boundaries.

Tragic Mulatto Figure v. Mixed-Race Figure – Both characters are of mixed racial status. Whereas the *TMF* lacks agency, the *MRF* is endowed with it. The former is limited in function, whereas the latter is less restricted. The *MRF* is a useful vehicle for interrogating race and citizenship. Also, in the 20th century the *MRF* rejects class boundaries as well as racial ones. Whereas the *TMF* could not escape its disastrous fate in the earlier genre, within the newer genre tragedy does not necessarily befall the *MRF*.

That Middle World – The interstitial space that *MRFs* navigate daily. It is a recognizable space that separates, yet connects the black and white worlds. For the *MRF*, that middle world allows them to construct racial ideologies of their own. This metaphysical space allows the character to see nuances of black and white and to hone their skillset by employing strategic essentialism. This abstract world is signified by the characters thoughts and behaviors concerning incongruity of race and skin color. Moreover, it seeks to unsettle the dyadic relation between race and privilege. Because the mixed-race figure is a mobile subject, it is able to vacillate between all three worlds as their needs, desires, and plans require.

CHAPTER 2

TAKING THE STAGE: RACIAL PERFORMANCE AND THE PASSING NARRATIVE

“It’s not whether you really cry. It’s whether the audience thinks you are crying.”²⁷

“I used to have a certain dislike of the audience, not as individual people, but as a giant body who was judging me. Of course, it wasn’t really them judging me. It was me judging me. Once I got past that fear, it freed me up, not just when I was performing, but in other parts of my life.”²⁸

In 1947 the American Theatre Wing established an awards program to celebrate excellence in theatre. The Tony Awards debuted Sunday, April 6th of that year. Named for noted actress, director, and co-founder of the Wing, Antoinette Perry, the award praises the most notable performances in American theatre. The Broadway community embraced the Tonys from their start. It has proven to be a climax of the New York theatre season. In the early years, there was no official Tony Award. The winners received a scroll and, in addition, such mementos as a gold money clip (for the men) and a compact (for the women). In 1949 the designers' union, United Scenic Artists, sponsored a contest for a suitable model for the award. The winning entry, a disk-shaped medallion designed by Herman Rosse, depicted the masks of comedy and tragedy on one side and the profile of Antoinette Perry on the other. The medallion was initiated that year at the third annual dinner.²⁹ It continues to be the official Tony Award. The design certainly captures the nature of theatre. The masks of comedy and tragedy are universal symbols for theatre. More specifically, “wearing a mask pays homage to Dionysus, the god of carnivals and masquerades, by allowing one to free oneself from secret desires and buried regrets.

²⁷ Ingrid Bergman qtd. in *Halliwell's Filmgoer's and Video Viewers Companion*.

²⁸ Julie Andrews qtd. in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Feb. 2000).

²⁹ Adapted, in part, from *The Tony® Award: A complete listing with a history of the American Theatre Wing*, edited by Isabelle Stevenson. ©1989, 1994 by the American Theatre Wing. Heinemann, a division of Reed Elsevier, Inc.

Dionysus is the god who regularly conceals both his identity and his power, as we all must do, in the course of polite everyday interaction with others.”³⁰ It is this concealing—and often, by extension, the revealing (which, in-turn, might be an act of concealment or elision)—of identity that is at the center of every racial passing narrative. In contemporary theatre, in order to receive the masks—the Tony Award—the larger body must consider an actor’s performance worthy of recognition. Essentially, then, recognition depends on how well the audience has received and believed the performance. Ingrid Bergman who, coincidentally, was one of the first ever recipients of the Tony Award in its inaugural year said, “It’s not whether you really cry. It’s whether the audience thinks you are crying.” That is, it is not whether the actor is “authentically” a thing or not that measures the success of the performance, but rather it is the audience’s perceptions or impressions that determines the success. For the mixed-race³¹ figure in African American passing literature who crosses the so-called color line, racial acceptance, then, becomes the equivalent of the Tony Award on Broadway—it is the acknowledgment (explicit or otherwise) of a part well performed.

The audience is an odd congregation. It is a gathering of spectators that has the power to validate a performance/performer. It is no wonder the relationship between the audience and the actor can often be a contentious one. Acclaimed actress Julie Andrews sums up this sentiment when she laments, “I used to have a certain dislike of the audience, not as individual people, but as a giant body who was judging me. Of course, it

³⁰ “Roots of Greco-Roman Bacchanalia” *The Birth of the Masks of Comedy and Tragedy*. (Carnaval.com). 2014.

³¹ The term ‘race’ as I use it, is nearly always used with the qualification that although I understand that race is not biological; it is one of the major accepted forms of human classification and therefore a marker of belonging. The term as it is use throughout should not be considered a subscription to the hegemonic notions of race and/or identity.

wasn't really them judging me. It was me judging me. Once I got past that fear, it freed me up, not just when I was performing, but in other parts of my life." A part of her conflict is what every performer feels: the need for validation, which involves a sort of misrecognition. There is an endorsement that the audience can provide that is unparalleled. Many players spend countless hours getting into character. They research, rehearse, revise and rehearse again. Then, on opening night, they find that there are simply some things that cannot be rehearsed and that the stage requires the skill of improvisation. That this entity has the authority to approve and disapprove of the performer and his/her performance suggests that the audience's expectations are set before they ever actually view the play. They are concerned with plausibility more than they are with the amount of work that has gone into the performance. Their predictions are based on previous experiences—the presentation must match precedent. When the audience's expectations are met, then the performance is a success. This is relatively manageable when the stage is fixed; however, when there is a movable stage—like in the case of mixed-race fugitive bodies—there are other factors that immediately impact the performance³². Indeed, it is not until the show is over that the audience acknowledges its approval of the show. For the mixed-race character in African American passing literature, a stellar performance can often lead to access to white America, especially for fugitive bodies negotiating citizenship rights in a mid-nineteenth century American context. The performer's ability to present a legible whiteness is paramount to their acceptance in certain racialized spaces, for, to paraphrase Bergman, "It's not whether you

³² Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* serves as the impulse for my definition of the term performance. He notes, "I have been using the term 'performance' to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (22).

really [are white]. It's whether the audience thinks you are [white]." This is the challenge of the mixed-race figure in African American life and literature.

This chapter is primarily concerned with the theatricality of racial passing. It considers how whiteness is imagined in and through performance in African American passing literature during the 19th century. It briefly examines the pervasiveness of blackface minstrelsy in American popular culture and how that sets the proverbial stage for racial performance in the black passing narrative and how we construct contemporary black identities. By acknowledging that the notion of race as performance is hardline into antebellum American culture, this chapter seeks to highlight the performative capacity of the mixed-race figure in the mid-to-late 19th century. I consider William and Ellen Crafts freedom narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860) and William Wells Brown's *The Escape; or, a Leap for Freedom* (1858) within the emancipatory tradition in order to unpack the use of visual and rhetorical codes concerning national and racial identity and belonging. Later, in the section titled "Curtain Call: The Assumption of Identity and the Acknowledgment of Performance," I consider the role of the print sphere in self-representation and as a challenge to U.S. democracy, particularly for those in the antebellum black public sphere who experience the liminal space of being neither slaves nor full citizens. Grounded in black performance theory, this chapter observes the trajectory of racial performance from blackface minstrelsy and the so-called tragic mulatta figure to the empowered mixed-race figure that emerges by the post-Reconstruction period. Often in the passing novel, the reader is urged to condemn the bi-racial figure for his or her willingness to skirt the law.

This chapter, however, makes no such request. Rather it is particularly attentive to the ways in which the racially indeterminate body crafts new forms of bodily representation through performance, specifically racial and drag performances. By viewing race and gender as both political and performative layers of identity, this chapter argues that the mixed-race figure illuminates the paradoxes of black identity formation. I begin with contextualizing the politics of racial performance and landmark United States legislation, which led to the making of the fugitive body, particularly the mythically rendered black body of the mixed-race figure.

Playbills and Principal Actors: The Legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy and the Origin of Racial Performance in the United States

Racial performance is not a twentieth century phenomenon. Certainly, the twentieth century racial passing narrative is replete with identity performance. However, American racial performance finds its origins in the antebellum period with the blackface minstrel shows of the 1840s and 1850s, and earlier. The theatrical performances became so iconic that President Lincoln even held shows at the White House.³³ “Minstrelsy was a commercial venture created for a mass market at a time when the United States lacked definable *national* culture”—especially not a definable national popular culture (emphasis not mine Mahar 9). While William J. Mahar contends that “The minstrel show became a formidable rival to other forms of American popular theatre because blackface comedy was more than a racist masquerade, more than a ‘canivalization of race,’ and more than a form of entertainment to ridicule African Americans” (11), the fact remains that no matter its intention the genesis of racial performance is blackface minstrelsy and

³³ R.L. Barnes, “The Birth of Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rose of Steven Foster” *US History Scene* (USHistoryScene.com 24 Sept. 2011), 1.

thus it is woven into the American fabric from the antebellum period. It originated with white depicting and impersonating black before an audience. The blackface—which was achieved by burned bottle corks mixed with grease paint or shoe polish—was designed to conceal any hint of whiteness. Naturally, others began to use popularity of racial performance in American culture as a springboard for conversations about the state of the nation. Often during William Wells Browns readings of *The Escape*, which is enmeshed in minstrel tradition, the fair-skinned and well-spoken Brown would,

After a soliloquy full of malapropisms and dialect, break into an antislavery song set to the minstrel standard “Dandy Jim” [. . .] As one contemporary viewer put it, at such moments “you lose sight of the speaker” and in place of the educated Brown see the caricatured Cato. This moment epitomizes Brown’s performance of blackness—essentially a putting on of blackface—and is emblematic of how black abolitionists like Brown were necessarily engaged with blackface minstrelsy, the most popular entertainment form of the time”³⁴

The popularity of minstrel performances made “blackness” intelligible to a white audience.

By the time the mixed-race figure begins to specifically perform white(ness) it is clear that the aims of the performance differ *dramatically* from the mocking racial performance of blackface minstrelsy. And, although the minstrel depictions “differed so much from the actual or imagined African American experience that the ‘nonplantation’ elements of the show are often of greater consequence for understanding minstrelsy than is for exclusive investigation of potential borrowings from African American culture,”³⁵ the widely popular performances certainly impacted larger understandings and expectations that whites had when encountering blacks in certain spaces. It is not until

³⁴ Paul Gilmore, “De Genewine Artekil”: William Wells Brown, Blackface Minstrelsy, and Abolitionism,” (Durham: Duke UP) *American Literature*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Dec., 1997), 743-44.

³⁵ William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 12.

“black”—that is, the mixed-race figure—performs white(ness) that there is a clear threat to constructed American national identity. Because the law and social custom dictated that the relationship between a person’s racial identity and his or her physical body be visually congruent, any punishment that occurred as a direct result of the usurpation of racial laws constitutes what scholar Saidiya Hartman might call blameworthiness.³⁶ There was a revolutionary undertone to the identity performance from mixed-race people (and/or characters). Mixed-race people who crossed the so-called color line via racial performance did so in an effort to establish their individual freedoms and acquire full citizenship rights even prior to the passing of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. Though the irony is that mixed race people who “passed” as “white” were often more visually congruent with “white” than their “true” identity of “Negro”—a result of the peculiar legal and social definitions of race in the United States. This brief record is meant to historicize and contextualize performance within 19th century U.S. political culture. Indeed, this chronicle is limited, but it is no less crucial in grasping the origins of racial performance in an antebellum milieu.

Even absent an identifiable stage, racial performance existed in all aspects of American life in the 19th century and beyond. Indeed, it is the absence of the fixed stage that proves to be the problem. Certainly, when an audience buys tickets to a show—minstrel or otherwise—they are explicitly consenting and expecting to view a performance; they are hoping to be entertained. However, once the show has ended and the audience leaves the entertainment venue—the theatre, they have rescinded their

³⁶ In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), Hartman associates black agency with blameworthiness. She argues that the personhood of the enslaved was recognized in the sense that they could be charged and found criminally responsible and blameworthy for wrongdoing.

agreement for being entertained. Therefore, whomever they encounter outside an identified performance space, they are accepting as *true* and the situation as *reality*. Whatever presentations they view outside what has been explicitly acknowledged as a stage, are not viewed as performance. But, if what Shakespeare says is true that, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,”³⁷ then it stands to reason that any encounter in life (on an immovable stage or otherwise) has a performative quality to it. The paradox greater yet: whenever an individual enters the presence of others, especially if unacquainted, their behaviors taken in tandem with the observers expectations—which are based on the observers previous experiences—helps the observer to define the situation.³⁸ More specifically:

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.³⁹

In theatrical productions everyone, save for members of the cast and those associated with the production, has consented to being in the audience upon their arrival to the show. While it is unlikely that the observer in life recognizes her or his role as audience member, she or he certainly has a set of expectations for any social encounter. Translation: for the performer—that is, the mixed-race figure—when the observer’s expectations are met in everyday encounters, the performance is a success and therefore the observer is/was their audience, thus the actor has consciously blurred the line between *reality* and *performance*. The performative bi-racial figure, then, should be examined

³⁷ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*. (Arden Shakespeare, 2006), Ed. by Juliet Dusinberre (2006) Act II, Scene VII.

³⁸ Erving Goffman *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

³⁹ Goffman *The Presentation of Self*, 17.

from two angles: appearance and manner.⁴⁰ The former is often taken for the whole of who the figure is—that is synecdoche. This synecdochic approach to racial identity provides the space for the success of racial crossing.

The inversion of the racial performance tradition gives rise to depictions of the mixed-race figure in African American passing literature. That is to say, rather than whites performing in blackface and/or the so-called tragic mulatto figure in American fiction that we see from white authors like James Fennimore Cooper and Lydia Maria Child (which tend to succumb to calamity because of the inescapable “dark stain”) bi-racial—often-deemed black—bodies begin to use their (lack of) color as performative devices to gain access to the benefits of white America. They understand that their racial indeterminacy allowed them to traverse both legal and cultural boundaries. Their identities presented America with an intriguing duality: from one perspective, their identities are “performative but they are bound by social and legal constraints.”⁴¹ Their fair skin (along with other aspects of rehearsed identity formations) came with the assumption that they were both white and free. Racial performance in the black passing narrative calls attention to the hegemony of identity classifications. As Daphne Brooks puts it, “we consider these historical figures as critically de-familiarizing their own bodies [or families or birth communities] by way of performance in order to yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies.”⁴² Notably, African American passing narratives are set against the backdrop of chattel slavery and, later, Jim Crow and the genre uses landmark legislation in America as plotlines, thus requiring us to interrogate

⁴⁰ Goffman *The Presentation of Self*, 24.

⁴¹ Elaine Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

⁴² Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

the making and meaning of black citizenship within the context of the emancipatory tradition. A barkeeper in Brown's *The Escape* becomes the representative voice of Southern white male ideology toward the United States Constitution when he matter-of-factly proclaims, "We don't care for Constitutions or nothin' else. We made the Constitution and we'll break it" (38). While Brown presents a world in which we can easily differentiate between white Northerners and white Southerners depending on where their sensibilities lie within the anti-slavery/pro-slavery argument, bi-racial characters prove that those positions are quite a bit more nuanced. On the eve of the Fugitive Slave Law, blacks were merely in the shadows of citizenship⁴³. And where there physical appearance made them indistinguishable from whites, there was an opportunity to resist social categories that were inadequate for discussing race in America anyway and thus equally inadequate for establishing citizenship rights.

Crafting and Crossing: William and Ellen Craft, Landmark Legislation, and the Rise of the Bi-racial Figure

Scene 1. –A small shack eight days before their escape.

WILLIAM CRAFT, *remarking to his wife, Ellen—a fair skinned woman—how they can indeed run away toward freedom.*

The year was 1848. It was nearly Christmas. While people all about the Georgia plantation were preparing to celebrate the holiday, an enslaved newlywed couple was planning a journey that would involve the performance of a lifetime—one that if effective would offer them a new life and if unsuccessful would certainly cause their deaths. For

⁴³ In *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.*, Ivy G. Wilson examines what she called the "shadow." She explains:

I use the concept of 'shadow' to conceptualize the residues and outlines of black subjectivity in political spaces where they are ostensibly fractional entities or nonentities. My readings urge that we view the shadow not simply as the figurative trace of the differential between the normative and its antithesis but as a spectacle and visual demarcation, as the very illustration of the vexed national sensibilities that have understood blackness as a kind of phantasmagoria—as something that the question of U.S. identity telescopes through the registers of citizen and the nonhuman. (5)

The ways in which I understand race and democracy, especially in the 19th century U.S. follows this impulse.

the young couple it was not so much their everyday living conditions that inspired their journey. Rather it was something larger:

It is true, our condition as slaves was not by any means the worst; but the mere idea that we were held as chattels, and deprived of all legal rights—the thought that we had to give up our hard earnings to a tyrant, to enable him to live in idleness and luxury—the thought that we could not call the bones and sinews that God gave us our own: but above all, the fact that another man had the power to tear from our cradle the new-born babe and sell it in the shambles like a brute, and then scourge us if we dared to lift a finger to save it from such a fate, haunted us for years.⁴⁴

For the Crafts it seemed there was only one logical way to ensure their freedom and freedom for their posterity. Escape. It is such a simple word it seems: escape.

However, the circumstances under which theirs would take place were anything but simple. Their plan, formed and perfected in secret, required that they assume roles with which they were somewhat familiar. Their stage spanned one thousand miles—from Macon to Boston. The social and political climate they were forced to navigate was fraught with racial inequity and unrelenting violence. No doubt, they were aware of the risks and the elaborate preparation that would come along with their attempt. Even in their imaginations and rehearsals they rightly anticipated many forms of domination. They feared incessant questioning. They knew, too, the handsome reward they could expect if their escape was successful—freedom. So, they *crafted a cross*—a strategy of performance for navigating the space that separates the black and white worlds that has been termed the color line.

In the days leading up to their escape, the Crafts embarked upon an ambitious journey of self-making complete with disguises they purchased or created in their homes.

⁴⁴ William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.

Though Ellen Craft was reluctant at first, she eventually grew more confident in her ability to successfully perform whiteness, maleness, and even disability at the same moment. A failure in their performance of gender, race, disability, and respectability would surely result in inescapable violence. The former identities—gender, race, and disability—were visible and therefore can be reasonably managed. While her gender and disability statuses could be manipulated through costuming and practice, her racial identity took care of itself—so long as her performance tactics were scripted in accordance with dominant paradigms. It was the latter, the intangible (but socially real) white respectability, that added another layer to the roles they would play. To be sure, each of their covers required manipulation of various codes of identity, but the latter did not lend itself to a material costume. Because Ellen Craft’s skin color was “nearly white,” her husband decided he “might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be [his] master, while [he] could attend as . . . slave,” and in that way they “might effect [their] escape.”⁴⁵ Their performances required knowledge of their audiences’ expectations and the Craft’s willingness to improvise. Ultimately, the Craft’s rehearsed identity formations resulted in their successful escape to freedom.

The politics and performance of public identity are central to racial crossing narratives such as this one. These narratives, with their distinct iterations of racial crossing, demand that we consider the public versus the private self. Ellen Craft’s performance is distinctly different from her husband’s in a major way. She transmogrifies her abled, enslaved, “black,” female body into one signifying all of its opposites—at least opposite within the U.S. context. In much the same way that Cato does in Brown’s *The*

⁴⁵ William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles*, 26.

Escape, her costuming signifies her “into ruminative and resistant runaway [and] manifests the sociopolitical commentary”⁴⁶ at the center of the narrative. The narrative illustrates how pivotal moments of self-making⁴⁷ are to the Craft’s—or, indeed, anyone’s—journey to other sides of the color line. The costume, then, serves as more than a means of presenting legible whiteness. Rather, it represents a shift in persona for the characters—a conversion from black to white, from woman to man, and, no doubt most importantly, from enslaved to free. The mixed-race figure’s subversive bodily acts, which make one identity visible and readable, while simultaneously obscuring the other identities, suggest: “It would be wrong to think that the discussion of ‘identity’ ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.”⁴⁸ The performance is a means of physical and metaphysical transformation, which is heavily reliant upon essentialist notions of identities. Perhaps better still is Esther Newton’s assertion that “at the most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, ‘appearance is an illusion.’ Drag says, ‘my outside’ appearance is [one race or gender], but my essence ‘inside’ . . . [is another race or gender].”⁴⁹ This claim strengthens Judith Butler’s argument: “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that gender can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.”⁵⁰ And, if what renowned

⁴⁶ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 3.

⁴⁷ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 3.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22.

⁴⁹ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 103.

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1990), 103.

performance artist RuPaul has to say is true (and I suspect that it is) that “whatever you proclaim as your identity here in the material realm is also your drag,” then it stands to reason that the costume the Crafts’ fashioned for Ellen and that Cato dons in *The Escape* are but additional layers to a character/person who is already in drag, making one identity no “realer” than the next. And so, in much the same way that sociologist Erving Goffman does, let us label as “front” any presentation that a bi-racial figure performs before others; everything else that would constitute a “sincerer” self could be labeled as “back.” Consequently, the front stage is only significant insofar as it creates a freer and more comfortable backstage—or private life. Therefore, a character or person’s ability to traverse the color line effectively disrupts customary binaries of identity—whether racial or gender. And, of course, the performance of race intersects with that of gender, among other things, since the horizon of expectations for “white” women are quite different from those of “black” women.

Many scholars and sociologists have long considered the impact of racial passing on both the black and white communities. In his essay “The World and the Jug,” Ralph Ellison claims “although sociologists tell us that thousands of light-skinned Negroes become white each year undetected, most Negroes can spot a paper-thin ‘white-Negro’ every time.”⁵¹ His assertion of an instinctive faculty of recognition is undoubtedly predicated upon a longstanding mythology within the black community that suggests black(ness) is always readable by those among the in-group. The in-group is a designation many use to denote the racial group from which one passes/crosses and I would add, where one is relatively known to some degree. It is the pre-passing or pre-

⁵¹ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1953), 124.

crossing identity that causes much of the threat of detection throughout passing/crossing narratives. The Craft's journey demonstrates that the moment of self-making often anticipates encounters with the Other, thus the subject(s) are always adapting—improvising. Ellen Craft had two disabilities to deal with during their escape—illiteracy and the one of her own making to compensate for it. Because of their previous experiences with white people in white spaces, they were able to foresee moments in which they would be expected to display skills that they did not possess and they were able to craft identities accordingly. Ellen Craft becomes necessarily disabled in order to circumvent the disability of illiteracy. What often goes unsaid is the fact that much of the success of encounters such as theirs is overly dependent on the visible. The success of those encounters not only depends on how well the subject has rehearsed his/her identity creations, but also on being a racially indeterminate body. As Amy Robinson suggests, there is a significant need to connect “a study of passing to the ‘problem’ of identity, a problem to which passing owes the very possibility of its practice”.⁵² This connection is one that is germane to understanding the passing/crossing narrative. Because much of the design of passing/crossing literature is dependent upon the relative success of the pass/cross and/or a conscious effort on the part of the mixed-race character to define certain racial allegiances, this genre is chiefly reliant on mixed-raced characters presenting a (mis)readable identity when navigating a space that is decidedly of a particular race. Moreover, much of the genre ultimately confronts the terms through which visibility can be signified, thus the racially indeterminate body is often simply misread. And, where the pass/cross is successful, the mythology is upset. Consequently,

⁵² Amy Robinson, *To Pass//In Drag: Strategies of Entrance into the Visible* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1993), vii.

passing literature unsettles the established “blacks can always tell” mythology to which Ellison subscribes. The Crafts are evidence of this disruption as early as the mid-19th century. Perhaps more crucial than some instinctive capacity of recognition is how well crafted one’s transitional identity is and whether *that* identity is “readable.” William and Ellen Craft prove the value of understanding and creating legible social identities well before the mixed-race figure finds its home in African American fiction, which arguably originates with William Wells Brown’s publication of *Clotel, or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) or his release of *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858). Therefore, while the 19th century passing narrative records racial politics in America from the close of the Civil War to the turn of the century, it is reasonable to conclude that it uses public historical narratives of bi-racial people’s negotiations of the color line. It, in effect, becomes an archive of American racial politics and challenges the element of history wherein markers of identity are too often presented as definitive.

Less than two years after William and Ellen Craft’s successful escape, the United States passed a package of five bills in September of 1850, which endeavored to defuse the longstanding fight between the slave states of the South and the free states of the North. Among the statutes that were collectively known as the Compromise of 1850 was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which heavily favored slaveholding interests in the South. It declared that all runaway slaves were to be returned to their masters upon capture. It threatened the newfound freedom of many runaway slaves, as well as the previously undisputed freedom of free people of color. The Crafts were not exempt from the danger that the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 promised, making their project of self-making not only important to their initial escape, but also in their mission to remain free.

While they were ultimately successful, more than fifty other fugitive slaves were captured and returned in 1851.

In both history and fiction, the trope of racial passing employs the mixed race figure as a vehicle to interrogate America's most heinous race laws. The bi-racial characters, though burdened with what Frances Harper and Charles Chesnutt call the "disability of color,"⁵³ also represents the *ability* of color, as it were. For instance, Brown's *The Escape*⁵⁴ sees the Quaker Mrs. Neal tell the mixed-race fugitive bodies that have made it all the way from the South to her breakfast table in Ohio that, "Yes, a few miles further, and you'll be safe beyond the reach of the Fugitive-Slave Law" (45). Here we see that landmark legislation played more than a peripheral role in the shaping of "black" fugitivity in the antebellum U.S. Initially, Cato claims to have traveled North "wid ole massa" to uphold the Fugitive Slave Law; he is touted as nothing more than the dutiful slave. Later he makes the decision to "hunt Canada" and the success of that choice necessarily begins with his moment of self-making in which he declares, "I dress myself in his bess clothes."⁵⁵(44). However, his transformation, though ostensibly marked with a change in costume, does not begin at that moment. Rather, the reader is privy to the shaping of his fugitivity well before he ever leaves the South.

Both the freedom narrative and the play capture the historical moment in which

⁵³ In his essay "What is a White Man?" Chesnutt notes: "The states vary slightly in regard to what constitutes a mulatto or person of color, and as to what proportion of white blood should be sufficient to remove the disability of color. As a general rule, less than one-fourth of Negro blood left the individual white-in theory; race questions being, however, regulated very differently in practice." The aim of his essay, in which he takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to dissecting the black laws, was to determine how "black" a person could have in her/his lineage and still be considered white. He also aimed to address the inherent fallacy in the black laws as they related to mixed-race people. And, because the rise of the bi-racial figure was a direct result of America's wrongdoing, the black laws were an obvious way for America to disregard the rape and degradation of women of color. For Chesnutt, any visual presence of color constituted a social and economic disability.

⁵⁴ The 1857 original copy of the play is available in the collection at the American Antiquarian Society.

⁵⁵ William Wells Brown, *The Escape; Or, A Leap for Freedom*. (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1858) 44. Available courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

the American government supported slaveholding interests with the Compromise of 1850, which further established conditions necessary for black people to challenge forces of domination particularly as it relates to the making of the mixed-race fugitive body. Less than a decade later racial difference would be codified into law with the Supreme Court's infamous *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) ruling in which Chief Justice Roger Taney declared with abjectly racist language:

[African Americans] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.

The *Dred Scott Decision* would later be remembered as dividing the nation and arguably precipitating the Civil War.

As Reconstruction failed, it was not until the landmark US Supreme Court *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision (1896) that we get a greater understanding of the codifiability of race in the legal structure Or at least the validation of such codification in the face of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and its impact on the American social landscape. *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the flawed “separate but equal” doctrine. This was a decision that came nearly fifty years after the Crafts escaped. It was also one that would not be overturned for almost sixty years, until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. It stands to reason that certain racial laws that determined the proscriptions of the black race would be better contested by bi-racial people. In an effort to challenge the Separate Car Act Homer A. Plessy boarded a train in Louisiana—a state with a hierarchical racial structure partially different even from the rest of the nation. The plan seemed simple

enough and its journey through the tiers of the legal system were not only welcomed, but also intended. It seemed that someone who looked—in physical appearance—similar to the Court that constructed the very racial categories on whose behalf its law claim to act, would be best to confront some of the nation’s most egregious race laws. Of course, when Plessy lost the case, the effects reverberated throughout the nation and segregation was institutionalized,⁵⁶ or at least given a definitive legal imprimatur. Nevertheless, this calculated approach to dismantling dominant racial categories demands that we consider political identities, especially for bi-racial people. Together, the multiple grounds of a person’s identity, the racially indeterminate body, and the backdrop of the rural South create the perfect storm for the development of the mixed-race figure in American literature as a go-to vehicle for negotiating racialized spaces and for the passing narrative to be viewed as narratives *about* the nation.

Disappearing Acts: Fugitivity and the *Ability* of Color

William and Ellen Craft’s freedom struggle occurred fifteen years prior to the enactment of Lincoln’s wartime measure that would free the slaves held in rebel territory. Ultimately, the Emancipation Proclamation only confirmed what many African Americans had already declared through their actions—that the war would bring them freedom. Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, many African American authors began to publish novels with an Ellen Craft-like character at their centers. Brown’s *Clotel; Or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) marks the genesis of a shift in tradition for the mixed-race figure in American fiction. African American racial crossing novels reflected the contest between slavery and freedom and between restriction and access.

⁵⁶ Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*, 55.

The goal of the black racial crossing novel was to (re)define freedom through the mixed-race figure and the familiar trope of what the academy knows as racial passing. The 19th century crossing narrative is possibly among the best present the moments of self-making alongside instances of improvisation—which might aptly be considered a process of continually becoming. Chief among these depictions was Brown’s *The Escape*.

Performing on a stage wherein space is relatively fixed is one thing, but performance on the run is completely different, requiring skillful inventiveness and clever ad-libbing, like Ellen Craft’s and even Brown’s Cato. To be sure, the mixed-race character, through successful performance can navigate either the black or white world, as long as they keep moving. Through social performance the otherwise racially indeterminate body provides the reader double sight—a view of the other world, so to speak. Inasmuch as performing race requires a bi-racial character to present a legible whiteness, it also challenges static descriptions of blackness; leading slaveholder’s to describe bi-racial characters in seemingly oxymoronic terms such as “white slaves” or “white niggers.”⁵⁷ Therefore, to perform race is to simultaneously agree to definitions of one race (usually white) and reject accepted representations of the other (usually black).

For his part, noted author, playwright, and abolitionist William Wells Brown gives us *The Escape: Or, A Leap for Freedom*. As John Ernest notes, “it is particularly surprising that Brown has received little critical attention”⁵⁸ Erza Greenspan’s newly published biography, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (2014) offers us a roaring reintroduction to “the most prolific black writer of his century” (5). According to

⁵⁷ Wells Brown, *The Escape*, 35.

⁵⁸ John Ernest, “The Reconstruction of Whiteness: William Wells Brown’s *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*,” *PMLA*, 113.5 (October 1998) 1109.

Greenspan, Brown was more than the average writer. He was a lecturer for the antislavery movement under William Lloyd Garrison. He spent five years as a fugitive slave in England. He exhibited a “pioneering African American antislavery panorama across the British Isles.” He authored the earliest African American travelogue (*Three Years in Europe*, 1852); he recruited for the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment; and he “wrote a pioneering history of African Americans (*The Black Man*, 1863).”⁵⁹ Somewhere during that time, he managed to author two of the earliest known plays⁶⁰ by an African American, one of which he performed before audiences as a one-man show across the Northern states up to the Civil War. And while Brown contends, “this play was written for my own amusement,” he goes to great lengths to catalog slavery, race, and American culture—a culture fraught with racial violence, and rape—before the Civil War and right on the verge of the Fugitive Slave Act. Centering characters of mixed status described as “a smart one” with “straight hair, blue eyes, prominent features, and is almost white,” Brown stresses incestuous rape culture and mistress violence that beautiful “black” women suffered during slavery in this conversation between Dr. Gaines and Mr. Walker, two Southern slaveholders:

⁵⁹ Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2014) 4, 5.

⁶⁰ Scholars identify William Wells Brown’s *The Escape or a Leap for Freedom* (1858) as the earliest printed play by an African American because his earlier play is now lost according to biographer Ezra Greenspan. In his 1997 article “DeGenewine Aertekil”: William Wells Brown, Blackface Minstrelsy and, Abolitionism,” Paul Gilmore identifies that play:

His first play—the first play known to have been written by an African American—was entitled either *The Dough Face* (a common epithet for “Yankees”) or *Experience; or, How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone* and provided a satirical reply to Boston clergyman Nehemiah Adams’s proslavery *A South-Side View of Slavery* (1854). There is no extant text of this play, but two years later Brown published *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, another dramatic piece he often delivered to antislavery audiences.

In the Introduction to a 2001 publication of *The Escape*, John Ernest notes that Brown’s *Experience* was never published “though many reviews appeared in the antislavery press, and an overview of the play appeared in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*” (x).

“Then she was your own raising, was she?”

“Oh yes; she was raised on my place, and if I could have kept her three or four years longer and taken her to the market myself, I am sure I could have sold her for three thousand dollars. But you see, Mr. Walker, my wife got a little jealous, and you know jealousy sets the women’s heads a teetering, so I had to sell the gal [. . .].”

“Why, Squire, was she that pretty little gal that I saw on your knee when your wife was gone, when I was at your place three years ago?”

“Yes, the same.”

“Well, now, Squire, I thought that was your daughter; she looked mightily like you. She was your daughter, wasn’t she? You need not be ashamed to own it to me, for I am mum on such matters.”

“You know, Mr. Walker, that people will talk, and when they talk, they say a great deal; and people did talk, and many said that gal was my daughter; and you know we can’t help people’s talking.”⁶¹

The casual tone here is perhaps as revealing as the content of the conversation. Brown demonstrates the ruthless nature of the slaveholding class; a portrayal would be woefully retold throughout African American emancipation literature through the turn of the century. For instance, in her 1861 freedom narrative Harriet Jacobs laments, “If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave.”⁶² In this familiar passage we are alerted to what a beautiful (read: especially bi-racial) woman experiences in slavery. When Jacobs’s narrative was authenticated, so too were the life experiences of women of color at the hands of the men and women in power. What could have been dismissed as artistic flourish in *The Escape* must be interrogated and taken seriously in our analysis of slave life in the South, particularly for bi-racial women.

Brown’s character Melinda, who is described by her mistress as a “mulatto wench” (18),

⁶¹ Wells Brown, *The Escape*, 16-17.

⁶² Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor Publishing, 2008), 33.

has a candid conversation with her owner, Dr. Gaines, in which she acknowledges “I am your slave; you can do as you please with the avails of my labor, but you shall never tempt me to swerve from path virtue.” Her show of resistance demonstrates that inherent in the freedom struggle was also the struggle to simply survive. However, Dr. Gaines’s sobering reply, “Now Melinda, [. . .] I’ll let you know that you are my property and I’ll do as I please with you. I’ll teach you that there is no limit to my power” (29), reveals that Melinda’s identities as spouse and woman are typically subject to her owner’s approval. That she urges him not to “commit a double crime” against her highlights the fact that her desire to remain pure for her husband, Glen, is subordinate to Dr. Gaines’s wants, which invalidate her statuses as both woman and wife. Rather, he sees her as property under his ownership, even if he is attracted to her and wishes to keep her for himself. On one level, their relationship reflected the corruption of gender identities within a slave system. Brown’s mixed-race character “emphasizes the extent to which concepts of gender in antebellum American culture were linked to concepts of race and shaped by the legal and social demands of the system of slavery.”⁶³ Indeed, resistance for Melinda (and later Jacobs) was an essential quality in asserting her humanity and agency. Within the slave system, however, there were no “men” and “women” in the sense that once enslaved in the chattel system, they were stripped of all markers of identity and individuality that did not serve their owner’s interests. Consequently, many bi-racial slaves, like Melinda, had to use their illegible blackness to their advantage in order to escape.

In *The Escape*, we are introduced to Cato, a mixed-race “faithful servant” (14)

⁶³ John Ernest, “Introduction,” *The Escape*, xx.

that uses his *ability* of color to escape to Canada along with two other former slaves.

From the start of the play Cato is concerned with how others view his front stage persona. He is determined to have others view him as “suspectable”—that is respectable and he behaves with this thought in mind as the drama unfolds. While another slave wonders, “why I was born with a wish to be free, and still be a slave” (28), Cato is concerned with self-preservation. Certainly, he has a desire to be free; however, he presents himself on the front stage as a dutiful slave who “allers dose what you and massa tells me, an’ axes nobody” (25), even if that means being forced to marry another slave who does not love him. To be sure, the forced marriage does not upset Cato, rather other aspects of his enslaved life make him so angry that “nobody can do nuffin’ wid me” (11). It is his backstage persona—the Cato he hides from everyone else, including other slaves until the very last moment—that tells us who he would rather be: “Now ef I could only jess run away from ole massa, and get to Canada wid Hannah, den I’d show ‘em who I was” (23).

While “performance is [mainly] on the run”⁶⁴ in *The Escape*, we do see glimpses of performance prior to any character’s attempt to escape. The moment that Cato makes himself into doctor early in the play teaches us that performance without preparation or practice can often lead to catastrophic ends. When Dr. Gaines leaves Cato in charge of the welfare of his patients who are also slaves, Cato wants the respect that doctors receive, but he determines that he must dress the part: “I allers knowed I was a doctor, an’ now de ole boss has put me at it, I muss change my coat. Ef any niggers come in, I wants to look suspectable. Dis jacket don’t suit a doctor; I’ll change it” (7). However, the black patients naturally overlook and as “Whar is de doctor” (7), to which Cato responds.

⁶⁴ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 1.

“Here I is; don’t you see me?” (7). Cato’s coat was a major part of his costume. When he stands before the mirror to “see ef I looks right”(8), he is asking himself if the coat is in keeping with what the audience will expect of a doctor. He used it make himself visible as a doctor and simultaneously invisible as a slave. In a small triumph and premature validation of his overall performance one patient—Mr. Parker’s Bill—exclaims, “You look like a doctor!” (8). However, when Cato, in the tradition of slapstick comedy and minstrelsy, pulls the wrong tooth out of the patient’s mouth and a fight ensues, we see that performance is as reliant upon rehearsal as it is upon costuming. The fight results in damage to Cato’s costume: Oh, dear me! My coat—my coat is tore! Dat nigger has tore my coat” (9). The damaged costume signifies a disruption and/or an end to that performance—it indicates a failure of performance in the show in which Cato is a physician. That he does not recognize the tear in his coat until he is before a mirror indicates that the mirror is a signifier too. It represents the oppositional gaze,⁶⁵ it shows the reader how observers view Cato. He is no longer a doctor. When Cato is yanked back to the *reality* that he is no different that the patients he attempted to service, we see him once again as the submissive slave. To be sure, the dutiful slave is but another layer to a different performance—his drag or his “front” for Dr. and Mrs. Gaines. We only get glimpses of his *truer* self, when no one else is around. There are moments when Cato is alone and has the freedom to tell the reader who he is or who he endeavors to become. And better still, there are moments in which the reader is privy to a peculiar crisis within him—one that tells us of a larger fracture within antebellum American culture. As

⁶⁵ The term as I use it here does not take its meaning from bell hooks’s groundbreaking work, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” in which she argues that Black women have been forced to resist and be critical in order to achieve some identity. Rather, the term here is meant to connote interrogation and deconstruction of this particular performative identity.

another slave Glen puts it, “Oh! There is a volcano pent up in the hearts of slaves in these Southern states that will burst forth ere long. When that day comes, wo to those whose unpitying fury may devour!” (31). The clothes seem frivolous as a part of the costume that Cato has stolen from his sleeping master. However, in his monologue we see that the costume has allowed him to reveal an existential crisis:

I wonder if dis is me? By golly, I is free as a frog. But maybe I is mistaken; maybe dis ain’t me. Cato, is dis you? Yes seer. Well, now it is me, an’ I em a free man. But, stop! I muss change my name, kase ole massa might foller me, and somebody might tell em dat dey see Cato; so I’ll change my name, and den he won’t know me ef he sees me. Now, what shall I call myself? ⁶⁶

When his performances collide, Cato allows us a brief glimpse into his unique existence. Despite Cato’s slapstick nature in the first act, the reader sees a bit of growth in him before the close of the play. That he moves from “a slave characterized in the first two acts as a comic buffoon who toadies to his master and spies on his fellow slaves”⁶⁷ to one who uses the ability of his color to escape to freedom, suggests that freedom is always the goal. Moreover, it further establishes the fact that the glances we get of his backstage persona orient us toward his ultimate agenda in performance.

Scene 2. –A DINNING ROOM IN THE HOME OF QUAKERS FROM OHIO.

*Enter CATO, in disguise.*⁶⁸

While Cato’s escape seems a bit impromptu, it demonstrates that racial crossing is chiefly contingent upon the moment of self-making, whether it is planned out over time or it occurs in an instant at an opportune moment. He explains: Ah, chile, I come wid ole massa to hunt you; an’ you see I get tired huntin’ you, an’ I am now huntin’ for Canada. I leff de ole boss in de bed at de hotel; an’ you see I thought afore I left massa, I’d jess

⁶⁶ Brown, *The Escape*, 44.

⁶⁷ Paul Gilmore, “DeGenewine Aertekil,” 743.

⁶⁸ Brown, *The Escape*, 45.

change clothes wid him; so you see, I is fixed up,—ha, ha, ha. Ah, chillen! I is gwine wid you” (44). Cato has, in effect, laid down one role in order to take up another. His declaration that “you see I get tired huntin’ you, an’ I am now huntin’ for Canada,” might be appropriately interpreted to mean that he grew tired of his role as slave to Dr. Gaines. Later Cato forewarns that he would become violent if anyone attempts to take him back to Dr. Gaines—a statement he held true to when he and the others fight slave catchers in a scene that ends in a literal leap for freedom.

As the mixed-race body seeks to shift its position in the world, performance offers the opportunity to see that change come to fruition. The passing narrative reveals that the relative success of crossing the color line is largely dependent on the essentialism of both races. When black-identified subjects perform white signifiers they are always already entangled in conversations of otherness. Much of the performance of race—particularly black performing white—recognizes, “the historical weight of white skin privilege necessarily engenders a tense relationship with its Others”⁶⁹ or, as bell hooks put it:

Whether or not desire for contact with the Other, for connection rooted in the longing for pleasure, can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance, is an unrealized political possibility. Exploring how desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different is a critical terrain that can indicate whether these potentially revolutionary longings are ever fulfilled.⁷⁰

Notions of otherness necessarily see the body, particularly the mixed-race body, as the site of contestation for American race relations. And, where that is true, particularly as it relates to transitional racial identities, the politics of readable blackness/whiteness come

⁶⁹ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 4.

⁷⁰ bell hooks, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 22.

into question. In 1947, Walter White estimated “Every year approximately 12,000 white-skinned Negroes disappear across the color line undetected.”⁷¹ He does not quantify this data in any detail; there is no indication of whether these people cross only temporarily and/or strategically or if they are resolutely white. What he makes abundantly clear is that his choice to identify as black is one of which he is unapologetically proud. Certainly the phenomenon of racial crossing is always burdened with questions of the fitting, albeit loaded, term ‘authenticity.’ That is, the black crosser must be present a legible white(ness) in order to successfully enter into the white world. What passing/crossing literature of the late 19th and early 20th century attempts to do is depict occurrences in which black and white take on a material nature within the racially indeterminate body. That is, a person’s physical make-up tends to be viewed as the whole of who they are. The same is true for gender. As the mixed-race character became a fixed presence in American literature, so too did the notion of internal conflict within the mythically rendered black body of the bi-racial figure. The genre, then, addresses “the enigma of a black [wo]man occupying a white body” (White 13), employing strategies of performance to enter decidedly white spaces (racial crossing).

Much of the literature on the mixed-race figure erroneously creates a rigid dichotomy between two races. As White describes it, “White is the rejection of all color; black is the absorption of every shade. There is magic in a white skin; there is tragedy, loneliness, [and] exile, in a black skin” (13). Therefore, in large part, the mixed-race character necessarily unsettles the white-black binary in African American passing/crossing literature and introduces new ways in which to complicate discussions

⁷¹ Walter White, “Why I remain a Negro (*Saturday Review of Literature*, October 11, 1947), p. 13.

of monoracial versus multiracial identities, even in an antebellum context. Through examining the relative successes of performing “race” with respect to literary depictions of the social and cultural phenomenon of racial passing/crossing during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we are able to explore rarely examined aspects of the bi-racial character, including: the politics of passing, the cleverness of crossing, and the strategy of silence that each contribute to the mobility and (in)visibility—the disappearing acts—of the mixed-race figure.

Curtain Call: The Assumption of Identity and the Acknowledgment of Racial Performance

At the close of any theatrical performance there comes a moment when the principal actors reappear on stage after a performance to acknowledge the audience's applause, usually signified with a bow at the waist. Often, this is the moment in which the performers will reemerge from backstage wearing a modified version of their costume, but not quite in full drag. The announcer will reveal their given names and the name of the character they played in the show. This is when the audience “meets” the characters and recognizes that beyond the façade of makeup and costuming lies a person who is different from the character. Implicit in the bow is an announcement that the performance is over. That moment is termed the curtain call or the final bow. In short, the final bow is the moment when the audience recognizes the actors for a great performance. This moment is significant within the racial performance tradition. However, it manifests itself differently in the minstrel performances and racial performance from a bi-racial figure.

Many performance stars in antebellum America found fame in the minstrel shows of the 1840s and 1850s. For many Irish men who immigrated, the minstrel stage became

a way to assert their whiteness in an American context: “Blackface minstrel shows before and during the Civil War were masculine affairs where newly immigrated Irish men (especially after the wave of migration in the 1840s with the potato famine) tried to assert their whiteness and virility.”⁷² Often the playbills and show advertisements would depict the actors in blackface and above or below their blackface portraits, they would also show pictures of the men out of costume (See figure 1).

In part, this helped the audience to know see the actors as themselves before the show. Because minstrel shows were a platform for white American performers, whenever Irish actors took the stage and purported themselves as white, they were, in effect, passing. They understood that acting in this arena meant that they would be seen as both white and American. They did so in attempt to be accepted as a part of the privileged class. Their playbills and printed announcements helped them to control the ways in which they were represented. Much in this same way, those blacks who escaped slavery and joined the antislavery movement, particularly on the lecture circuit, struggled to control the ways in which they were represented to the public. Many of them present themselves in images that helped the audience to see them as a fugitive body (See figures 3 & 4). For instance, Henry “Box” Brown was known to perform his escape on antislavery circuit. After having escaped from slavery by mailing himself from Richmond to Philadelphia, Henry “Box” Brown’s lectures often included the box in which he shipped himself. “In England he had himself confined in the box and traveled in it from Bradford to Leeds, where he was taken out in the presence of spectators”⁷³ Through this dramatized spectacle Brown used his body as political propaganda. The box that had once

⁷² Barnes, “The Birth of Blackface Minstrelsy,” 1.

⁷³ Ernest, *The Escape*, xxxix.

represented both the horrors of slavery and his escape from it later represented a new type of bondage, particularly as it relates to the expectations of those in England who were fascinated with fugitive slave celebrities. While Brown did capitalize on his celebrity, “the box that had initially set Brown free would in fact play a central role in his continuing efforts to publicize his own metamorphosis from ‘slave to man’”⁷⁴ He was also known to include pictures of life in the South⁷⁵ as a part of his lectures because artifacts tell stories.

Many of those in the public sphere often used their public (new front stage) personas as a challenge to U.S. political culture. African Americans in the antebellum black public sphere, including Wells Brown, Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins, and others leveled critiques against the Constitution of the United States, noting in no uncertain terms that they, as black people, were not granted rights as American citizens and therefore fell in the shadows. With his deliberate announcement as the preface to *The Escape* that “I now present it in printed form to the public”(3), Brown’s highlights the role of the print sphere in self-representation and representations of slave life in the South. Moreover, his printed work, along with the prints of many other black public figures captures their new liminal identities—as neither slave nor full citizens; neither in bondage nor fully free; and particularly for those of mixed status, neither black nor white, yet both. Ellen Craft was known to show pictures of herself in her a modified version of her costume to audiences (See figure 3). In her photographs we are able to see her in drag; however, the sling is not worn around her arm in the picture. Rather it is placed around her neck. This way, she is depicted in a way that gives the audience a glimpse of

⁷⁴ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 118.

⁷⁵ Ernest, *The Escape*, xxxix.

her crossing identity without disrupting their view of her post-crossing identity. Perhaps among the most powerful self-representations before abolitionist audiences was Sojourner Truth. The *cartes-de-visite* that she sold to earn her living carried the caption, "I sell the shadow to support the substance." With that clever description she captures her liminality in a way that reveals the culture of slave resistance. That she sells the front stage to support the backstage extends that message. Scholar Ivy Wilson analyzes her dissemination of the *cartes-de-visite*, noting that her audience often "constituted a counterpublic where African Americans created both ethereal and material forms of political agency to contest the meanings of citizenship and democracy."⁷⁶ Wilson further argues:

Truth's concern with self-representation exemplifies two important ways that mid-nineteenth-century African Americans challenged the forms of U.S. liberal democracy by engaging the art forms of rhetorical visibility. On the one hand her speeches represent the vernacular practices vocal enunciation—from high diction to rude dialect—that African Americans used to develop discourse within the larger national rhetoric about democracy. On the other hand her *cartes-de-visite* illustrate the efforts by African Americans to exercise control over the meanings of visual representations regarding their own self-fashioning and the image of the citizen. (3)

In short, there was performative quality to African Americans within the black public sphere and the goals of the those performances were to interrogate the fallacy of U.S. democracy and to control their front stage personas in an effort to support their backstage or private lives.

And so, the lecture circuit, then, became the curtain call or final bow in performances that these principal actors—or fugitive bodies—experienced. Often at the Tony Awards, major actors will re-perform major pieces from their shows. Being on the stage at the awards show is considered a high honor. The audience hopes and even expects to see the actor demonstrate the success of their role. The same is true of

⁷⁶ Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*, 3.

antislavery audiences—they anticipated seeing what has made this fugitive actor's escape unique. Indeed, the lecture circuit was the stage before which the audience could meet the performers in a manner that was mostly out-of-character. The moments in which the actors re-performed or presented prints of themselves in various costumes were also the instances that they took the stage to receive acknowledgment from the audience of a show well performed, in much the same sentiment of the curtain call in theatre. For a mixed-race fugitive performer to make it to the final bow, he or she must have successfully crossed the so-called color line. That is, somewhere on their journey they, no doubt, encountered white people who have to read them as white. Often racial acceptance and the attention of the abolitionist audiences were the highest honors a black fugitive performer would receive—their Tony award, so to speak. It was the audiences' acknowledgement that their performances were worthy of recognition.

THE END.

Figure 1: Al G. Fields Minstrels.

An advertisement for the Al G. Fields Minstrels c.1907, one of the major blackface troupes in the nineteenth century.

Created/Published: Buffalo : Courier Co., c1907.

Medium: 1 print : color lithograph ; sheet 55 x 35 cm. (poster format)

Call Number: POS - MIN - .F54, no. 13 (B size) [P&P]

Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division
Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>



Figure 2: Sojourner Truth.

Unknown photographer, *Sojourner Truth*, 1864, albumen print, 3 1/4 x 2 1/4 in. (8.1 x 5.7 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Taken from the cartes-de-visite that she sold to earn her living, saying, "I sell the shadow to support the substance."



I SELL THE SHADOW TO SUPPORT THE
SUBSTANCE.
SOJOURNER TRUTH.



Figure 3: Henry “Box” Brown

The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.



Figure 4: Ellen Craft.

Stock Image: Ellen Craft dressed as a white man to escape from slavery.

CHAPTER 3

THE VANISHING: TOWARD (IN)VISIBILITY FOR THE MIXED-RACE FIGURE

“It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time we 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.”⁷⁷

“While all deception requires secrecy, all secrecy is not meant to deceive.”⁷⁸

Passing is a peculiar phenomenon. It has a complicated history and an extended reach. It has a way of making us question what is real or what is true. It is magic. It performs acts of transformation. It uses a sleight-of-hand and, at times, deceptive devices to create illusions. It allows us to both see and not see at the same time. The best illusionists are able to use their tools and talents to distract the audience. The goal is to make them see what only the illusionist wishes to reveal. Illusionists have a way of forcing us to look at the one thing and not look at the other. They must mystify even the most aware of audiences, the audiences that anticipate and expect the disappearing act. And, even when we think we know the trick, the proverbial rabbit in the hat, we are still left befuddled at the fact that no matter what we think we see we remain among the blind. By illusionists’ standards, making an object disappear is either a simple case of deception, illusion, sleight-of-hand or misdirection. This is relatively unexciting for a small object like, a card, or a piece of jewelry, but what of something bigger? Siegfried and Roy were made famous in Vegas for their vanishing elephant illusion. David Copperfield thought he would take it a step further and make the Statue of Liberty in New York City disappear. Both are jaw-dropping tricks, certainly. With any undertaking as mystifying as theirs, the audience plays a major part in the success of the illusion. The

⁷⁷ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 146.

⁷⁸ Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989)

audience is not even necessarily asked to believe the trick as much as they are asked to appreciate the performance. The fact is, we find it difficult to disbelieve what we have seen with our eyes, even when we know it all to be pretend—because to see is to believe. The same is true for passing. Passing involves the concealing and the revealing, the visible and the invisible, and the audible and the silent. This is the nature of passing. It is a negotiation of who the performer claims to be versus what the audience can see. When the magician is skilled those things are the same. And, where the performer has made the audience believe the illusion the pass (performance) is a success.

The trouble with the term *passing*, which is often shorthand for racial passing, is that it has always been historically inextricably linked to the term *deception*. This is, no doubt, because of the secrecy inherent in the pass. Indeed, for any pass to be effective, there must be a measure of secrecy, a distraction, or a sleight-of-hand present. However, as author Sissela Bok so brilliantly notes, not all secrecy is necessarily meant to deceive. Therefore, while nearly every passer creates an illusion for the audience(s), not every passer is attempting to misinform, especially not long term. There are moments when the passer simultaneously depends heavily upon, yet vehemently rejects, certain essentialist notions of identity in order to better navigate racialized spaces. Translation: passing demands that we think about politicized notions of identity and the public versus the private self. It requires that we pay attention, not to the sleight-of-hand or the illusionist, but rather to how we (the audience) respond to it. Our careful attention to passing can only reveal our collective expectations and our conditioned biases. And, if we consider a passer's ultimate intentions, then it can expose the fact that it is not necessarily the illusionist who deceives, but rather it is our (the audiences') conditioning

and our language that ultimately betrays us. Indeed, the ways in which the audience has been trained to see contributes to the success or failure of the trick. Therefore, the illusionist is often only as good as the audience will allow. Passing, then, is prestidigitation.

“The Vanishing: Toward (In)Visiblty” is about identifying the various strategies of entrance into visible for the mixed race figure in the African American passing novel, mostly by studying specific occurrences of racial passing. It is about appreciating the performance and determining its impact on the audience. It is also concerned with determining the particular circumstances under which *passing* is an appropriate term to use when referring to a person or character’s actions when negotiating race and space—or the spatiality of race. And, where that term ultimately fails us or is, at best, inadequate, this chapter introduces the term *crossing*, which is mostly shorthand for the strategy of racial crossing. This dissent from the traditional employment of passing is significant to the ways in which we understand the function of the African American passing novel and, by extension, the mixed-race figure at its center. Passing and crossing each rely on two things: the absence of reliable evidence of difference (i.e. racially indeterminate bodies); and, the construction of essentialist identities, which ultimately determine the performer’s (in)visibility in particular racialized spaces (i.e. being successfully viewed as white in a white space, black in a black space, bi-racial in a hybrid space, and/or white in any space). While both passing and crossing require contact between the performer(s) and the audience(s), there is a distinctive difference in the two terms. The difference lies in *deception*. The ways in which scholars determine the function of the mixed-race figure throughout literary history has been, at times, compulsive and limited. That is to say, we

have long restricted the role of the bi-racial character in American fiction to one that is, in a word, tragic. In an effort to expand our conceptions of the mixed-race figure, this chapter introduces several typologies of passing/crossing that characters of mixed status may employ in an effort to become more or less (in)visible in certain racialized spaces. It recognizes that not every bi-racial character negotiates the color line the same way and the ways in which the characters navigate racialized spaces provide insight into the character's (and perhaps the author's) higher agenda. Many have attempted to limit the function of the bi-racial character in American fiction in ways that also restrict readers' expectations of the character's end. It has become an identifiable stock character in American fiction such that when we encounter a mixed-race figure, we automatically assume certain origins and/or outcomes. That is, when a reader is introduced to a character of mixed status there are often assumptions of misfortune and tragedy attached to the character before the story is complete. However, critic Hazel Carby begins to extend our understanding of the character, offering new room for exploration and interpretation. In *Reconstructing Womanhood* she writes:

The figure of the mulatto should be understood and analyzed as a narrative device of mediation. After the failure of Reconstruction, social conventions dictated an increasing and more absolute distance between black and white as institutionalized in the Jim Crow laws. In response, the mulatto figure in literature became a more frequently used literary convention for an exploration and expression of what was increasingly proscribed.⁷⁹

Undoubtedly, the mixed-race figure and the passing novel lend themselves to interrogating larger systems of oppression. Scholar Gayle Wald views "the enterprise of

⁷⁹ Hazel V. Carby *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 89.

‘crossing the line’ as a strategic appropriation of race’s power.”⁸⁰ As a part of her overall project Wald is “emphasizing the stakes of such appropriation for racially defined subjects” (9). While she notes that her interest in passing narratives rests in their “ability to demonstrate the failure of race to impose stable definitions of identity or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner” (9), she stops well short of acknowledging other possible agendas of passing novels. Certainly, the possibility exists that authors within this genre are using their characters in specific social, cultural, and political ways so as to reject identities proposed from the outside and to create a self that is reflective of their unique essences. Other times, characters employ specific strategies of performance in order to be visible in specific spaces. The African American passing novel also attempts to engage both black and white communities in discussions of race, power, and oppression steaming from what bell hooks calls “eating the other”—the process by which whites exoticize or fetishize blackness. It is this “eating the other” that provides a space for crossing into different racial spaces. It is where the racially indeterminate character performs best; it is where he or she becomes a master illusionist. Therefore, rather than merely reinforcing traditional racial hierarchies, which are based on monoracial identities, the passing novel represents both ambiguity and mobility for African Americans. Cassandra Jackson effectively argues:

While some writers’ depiction of mixed-race characters sought to imagine resolution between the larger narrative of American freedom and the enslavement of Africans in the United States, for others, mulatto figures operated as signs of America’s most egregious sins, posing a counterargument to the mythical representations of America as a new Eden.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 9.

⁸¹ Cassandra Jackson, *Barriers between Us: Interracial Sex in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 4-5.

Moreover, the mixed-race figure, which itself necessarily becomes the fictional location of contestation for American race relations in the post-Civil War period, is also representative of the literal and figurative blackening of the nation. While Houston Baker accuses Black writers who employ the mixed-race figure of “an implicit approval of white patriarchy inscribed in the very features of the mulatto character’s face,”⁸² other scholars note the many uses of the mixed-race figure in African American fiction. For instance, Deborah McDowell and Anne Du Cille attribute some authors’ uses of nearly white characters as attempts to satisfy a white audience. What remains reasonably true is the bi-racial character in African American fiction cannot be limited in function much of the way it has been throughout history. If nothing else, as Reconstruction failed, the mixed-race figure revealed new dimensions to the so-called Negro Question in America.

Characters of mixed status are always engaging in identity politics no matter how they choose to identify. Indeed, the mixed-race body often engages in resistance politics that reject certain prevailing racial discourses, which police boundaries of both identity and community. Much of African American passing/crossing literature demonstrates that through the skillfully invented self, bi-racial characters are arguably always becoming. Still, there is a proclivity toward viewing the mixed-race figure as restricted rather than permitted, as tragic rather than triumphant, and as peripheral rather than indispensable to how we understand black literary perspectives on the construction of American national identity. Jackson explains: Mixed-race figures have “long provoked consideration of the ways in which racial ideology shaped national policy and social and political

⁸² Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 25.

relationships.”⁸³ This chapter hopes to breathe fresh air into discourses of passing, identity, and the so-called ‘Other’. In devising a specific set of descriptions of its key terms—*passing* and *crossing*—this chapter also examines how identity tropes impact social situations in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). This distinction unsettles the traditional definition of passing: the phenomenon in which a person gains acceptance as a member of social groups other than his or her own, usually in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, citizenship, or disability status.⁸⁴ Rather, I urge us to examine aspects of the mixed-race figure and passing/crossing that have rarely been investigated in context of African American literature.

Throughout the chapter I emphasize the importance of strategy as it relates to the mixed-race figure in African American passing/crossing literature. I consider the development of the bi-racial character over time and what we have come to expect of it and how we understand it. In presenting a basic phenomenology of passing/crossing, this chapter hopes to move scholarship on the mixed-race figure away from the physiological toward the psychological. While it is not the goal of this chapter to present an all-inclusive psychology of the mixed-race character, the chapter does wish to address the characters’ outlook in order to determine the purpose and effectiveness of strategy in the African American passing/crossing novel. The key terms I employ are significant to exploring and extending the parameters of identity rather than policing them. The work of the passing novel and the mixed-race figure, in part, is to reject the idea that all characters and/or people must assume monoracial identities. The genre works to use the complicated

⁸³ Jackson, *Barriers between Us*, 4.

⁸⁴ Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), xii.

bi-racial figure to highlight the connections between performance and the construction of racial identities. “It is through this matrix of similarity of bodies and difference in characterization and narrative that writers of mulatto fiction make meaning.”⁸⁵ The recognizable representations of characters of mixed pedigree are often static. However, the character actually functions as a complex medium for discussions of racial difference. Indeed, the mixed-race figure at times assumes whatever identity better serves him or her at a given moment and this practice is rooted not just in American antebellum literature, but also in American antebellum life and history.

The Race of Gender: Mandy Oxendine, Rena Walden, and the Male Gaze

As an author, essayist, and political activist, Charles W. Chesnutt used his literary career to highlight issues that greatly affected his personal life. His writing is informed by a distinctively historical perspective that “explicitly saw ‘caste’ in the sense of racial difference as the American novelist’s equivalent to the European tradition of caste in the sense of social class.”⁸⁶ Chesnutt noted the historical significance of racial status in his essay “Post-bellum-pre-Harlem:”

Caste, a principle motive of fiction from Richardson down through the Victorian epoch, has pretty well vanished among white Americans. Between the whites and the Negroes it is acute, and is bound to develop and increasingly difficult complexity, while among the colored people themselves it is just beginning to appear. (*Stories, Novels, and Essays*, 912)

Perhaps it is not at all surprising that Chesnutt’s prediction is coming to fruition, given his propensity toward using the mixed race figure to provide more radical insight into the categories of identity. His stories were often considered more intricate than those

⁸⁵ Jackson, *Barriers between Us*, 5.

⁸⁶ Werner Sollors. “Charles W. Chesnutt’s Historical Imagination.” *Passing in the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 8.

of many of his contemporaries. His characters tend to manage racial identity versus racial reality in ways that destabilized otherwise fixed identities. For his bi-racial characters, this is often represented by a (physical and social) move from an interracial position to a monoracial position, thus Chesnutt reveals how (re)location impacts one's station in life. In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Werner Sollors maintains "The shifts in focus from interracial (or mixed-status) founding couples to biracial descendants, from parents to their children, and from slavery to race, were central to the rise of the figures that have become known collectively as the 'Tragic Mulatto'" (223). Although his stories are ostensibly about social status, Chesnutt makes it clear with each of his presentations of the mixed-race figure that the actual issue is race, and more precisely, which characters have the privilege of being defined as white. Although these concerns were not unique to any mixed-race person in Reconstruction or Post-Reconstruction America, they were especially pressing given the racist cancer that plagued America at the turn of the century. Questions of how one should identify were also significant given the allure of how whites lived compared to the Black condition. This often resulted in a preoccupation with racial definition for the mixed-race figure in American literature. For Chesnutt and many other Black writers, publishing stories that centered on characters of mixed status offered fertile ground for discussions of how the intersections of race, class, and gender operate within the racial passing novel. E. Patrick Johnson argues, "Often it is during times of crisis (social, cultural, or political) when the authenticity of older versions of blackness is called in question. These crises set the *stage* for 'acting out' identity politics, occasions when those excluded from the parameters of blackness [and I would add, whiteness] invent their own (Johnson 2 emphasis mine). Often in passing literature these

crises are precipitated by mental obsessions with race on the part of the bi-racial character. To be fair, these preoccupations are understandable given the insurmountable obstacles facing Black America following the Civil War.

Many of Chesnutt's stories that focus on the bi-racial figure employ the familiar theme of bondage versus freedom—i.e. Black versus white. That Chesnutt writes several works of fiction that center the mixed-race figure including: "The Web of Circumstance," "The Sheriff's Children," "The Wife of His Youth," "A Matter of Principle," "Her Virginia Mammy," *Paul Marchand*, *F.M.C.* and *The House Behind the Cedars*, to name a few, suggests that his fixation serves a larger sociopolitical purpose. In "The Absent Man," scholar Henry Wonham calls these similarities "clusters" (487). He contends that the clusters of stories allow the reader to "pursue thematic developments among significant" (487) works, in this case themes of bondage and freedom and the fallacy of race. Given the prevalent racial attitudes following the failure of Reconstruction, Paul Petrie claims that Chesnutt "persistently sought to alter the prevailing white cultural myths of race, deploying fiction as a tool against the intensifying Post-Reconstruction trend toward civil re-enslavement of black freedom" (183). Petrie argues that Chesnutt "set himself a task of using fiction to transform the hearts and minds of a politically powerful, elite white readership, upon whose conceptions of African Americans every possibility of civil and social reform depended" (187). To be precise, it is Chesnutt's ultimate aim to demonstrate the futility and arbitrary nature of race. These stories examine Chesnutt's philosophies on the subject, as well as his view on the role of the South in race relations, which he shared in "Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Its Cure":

The southern states in attempting to perpetuate the color line, are trying to do the impossible, and I for one do not wish to encourage them for one

moment by accepting their views any further than they can compel their acceptance by force. Race prejudice will not perhaps entirely disappear until the difference of color shall have disappeared, or at least until all of us, white and Colored, shall have resolutely shut our eyes to those differences and shall have learned to judge men by other standards. (92)

Certainly, the attitudes surrounding white privilege and black restriction have been examined throughout African American literature, particularly in pre-Harlem Renaissance Black literature. Perhaps no one has done so quite as subversively as did Chesnutt. He uses his characters to examine the full spectrum of the color line. Throughout *his fiction*, he continually unveils the nation's double standards in claiming social impartiality among the races while steadily embracing the vicious system of segregation that characterized the North and the South at that time. His bi-racial figures provide a sort of double sight by becoming an interpretive instrument for understanding the unique African Americanness of the literature while negotiating the print sphere and white audiences. Given Chesnutt's strategic publication of *The House Behind the Cedars* and the earlier shelving of *Mandy Oxendine*, one could responsibly argue that he also had to negotiate the woman question in his presentation to white audiences. That is to say, it is likely that audiences would question Chesnutt presentation of a woman protagonist who upsets the conventions of womanhood and sentimentalism, which were particularly important during the 19th century. Perhaps, as Charles Hackenberry suggests in the introduction to the 1997 publication of the novel, Mandy's strong-willed nature is the reason the novel was initially rejected for publication. Richard Broadhead argues that Chesnutt's work should also be considered alongside his need to please his publishers too. Chesnutt himself seemed somewhat forgiving of the politics of the print sphere:

“Publishers are human, and of course influenced by the opinions of their public.”⁸⁷ Still, Chesnutt’s America could not fathom or, perhaps more aptly, stomach a Mandy-like character. Yet, he uses the stock character to introduce the world to the possibility—or rather inevitability—of Mandy. When we are introduced to Mandy Oxendine and Rena Walden of *House*, Chesnutt confronts the matters of both race and gender—or possibly more fittingly the race of gender: “Beneath the surface of the sentimental novel lies the framing of gender difference that penetrates more deeply into the problem of race that Chesnutt seeks to interrogate.”⁸⁸

When Chesnutt first catalogs *Mandy Oxendine* in the late nineteenth century, he used the trope of racial passing to not only contest the “tragic mulatto” tradition, but also to reject assertions that race, class, and gender, automatically define one’s place in society. Readers may simultaneously question their understandings of the morality of racial passing, as well as how and why gender, at times, disrupts the color line. That he destabilizes these concepts in a turn-of-the-century work suggests that the mixed-race figure authorizes these types of considerations. Rather than detangling race and gender, Chesnutt muddies these layering identities by centering the gender question alongside race in the novel. Mandy differs from many of the other women characters that Chesnutt offers in that she lacks a sense of obligation to the black race; she is by no means a loyalist. Through a mixed-race female protagonist who shamelessly chooses to classify as white and even goes so far as to reject love for status, Chesnutt even confronts fixed designs of the sentimental novel. He is more concerned with Mandy overcoming the

⁸⁷ Charles W. Chesnutt, “Post-Bellum – Pre-Harlem.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Selected Writings*, SallyAnn Ferguson, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001) 102.

⁸⁸ Melissa Ryan, Rena’s Two Bodies- Gender and Whiteness in Charles Chesnutt’s “House Behind the Cedars” *Studies in the Novel* (University of North Texas, Spring 2011), 40.

social “disability”⁸⁹ of her race than anything else. With Mandy’s firm declaration to her former love Tom Lowrey that “A person has got to be black or white in this worl’, an’ I ain’t goin’ be black. An’ black folks an’ white folks don’t go together” (22), Chesnutt resists the romantic tendencies of many nineteenth century writers to depict womanhood in terms of maternity, femininity, and domesticity. Rather Chesnutt’s Mandy is more driven toward social upward mobility than anything. Her simple explanation of how one is expected to identify in monoracial terms creates anxiety for both she and Tom. While Tom has elected to identify as Black and Mandy has elected to identify as white, they make their choices fully cognizant that it means they become instantly out of reach for each other in love. While one could read Tom’s persistence as the ability of love to triumph above anything, there is more to be said of the fact that Chesnutt invites us to speculate about the novel’s ending. He did not have us consider whether love would be the ultimate end for Tom and Mandy. Rather he leaves us to question whether they will pass for white: “Whether they went to the North [. . .] or whether they chose to sink their past in a gulf of oblivion, and sought in the great white world such a place as their talents and virtues merited, is not for this chronicle to relate” (112). While we are left to speculate, Chesnutt does offer gentle nudges throughout the novel that lead some scholars to contend “The novel is, at its center, a cautionary tale that strongly warns of the pitfalls and dangers of passing.”⁹⁰ Certainly, Chesnutt tale is cautionary. However, the warning is not limited to those who were able to pass for white. Indeed, the caution is also to white America. If he chose to only warn the mixed-race population not to pass for white, he would also be, essentially, telling them that they are in fact Black, and therefore he would

⁸⁹ The term here is an allusion to Chesnutt’s “What Is A White Man,” which I referenced earlier.

⁹⁰ Donald B. Gibson. “A Question of Passing of a Question of Conscience: Toward Resolving the Ending of *Mandy Oxendine*” *Passing in the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 93.

be taking away their ability and right to identify as they chose. That has never been Chesnutt's position. Many of his characters make the argument that they are more white than Black and therefore should have the privileges of being white. It is a topic he explores more explicitly in his 1889 essay "What Is A White Man?" in which he takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to his argument:

But it is evident that where the intermingling of the races has made such progress as it has in this country, the line which separates the races must in many instances have been practically obliterated. And there has arisen in the United States a very large class of the population who are certainly not Negroes in an ethnological sense, and whose children will be no nearer Negroes than themselves. In view, therefore, of the very positive ground taken by the white leaders of the South, where most of these people reside, it becomes in the highest degree important to them to know what race they belong to. It ought to be also a matter of serious concern to the Southern white people; for if their zeal for good government is so great that they contemplate the practical overthrow of the Constitution and laws of the United States to secure it, they ought at least to be sure that no man entitled to it by their own argument, is robbed of a right so precious as that of free citizenship; the "all-pervading, all conquering Anglo-Saxon" ought to set as high a value on American citizenship as the all-conquering Roman placed upon the franchise of his State two thousand years ago. This discussion would of course be of little interest to the genuine Negro, who is entirely outside of the charmed circle, and must content himself with the acquisition of wealth, the pursuit of learning and such other privileges as his "best friends" may find it consistent with the welfare of the nation to allow him; but to every other good citizen the inquiry ought to be a momentous one. What is a white man?

While Chesnutt contends that the argument would be of little concern to those who were not fair-skinned enough to pass for white, he makes it clear that a bi-racial population of people is not an eventuality, but rather they existed then and he rightly argued that the question of how they identify is one that the nation would be forced to address. His essay is certainly in support of persons of mixed status being able to identify as white. That he publishes this essay around the same time he catalogs his fictive tale about Mandy Oxendine—a story that was

never published during his lifetime, but rather some one hundred years after it was written—and that his essay finds an audience ten years before he tells readers the “other stories of the color line” with his publication of *The Wife of His Youth*, suggests that his work—both fiction and nonfiction—often anticipated changes in the American racial fabric.

Chesnutt’s opposition to dominant literary paradigms suggests that he is concerned with a larger matter. In his revision of the so-called mulatta figure, he, ironically, writes the bi-racial character into the visible—we are able to see the characters of mixed status in ways that had previously been limited and those complications allow us to rightly oppose the racial categories that the nation demanded. He likewise corrects the previous sense of inescapable tragedy associated with the mixed-race figure. While many of his bi-racial characters do die, thus arguably playing into reader’s expectations of the tragic mulatto/a figure, they do not do so as a result of some “tainted strain” of “Black blood.” Rather, Chesnutt’s characters die in order to provide a space for dialogue about their right to exist. Prior to their deaths, they are often more mobile than the earlier tradition allowed and they only expire after gaining insights through repeated encounters with white society. They adopt certain attitudes while in direct contact with whites in white spaces and are permanently changed after such encounters, making their reunification with Black America transitory at best. Their deaths then become paramount to understanding and magnifying the race problem in America. In moving the character toward visibility, death of the bi-racial figure often remains necessary in order to leave the reader with a certain set of questions

that challenge the otherwise fixed racial designations. Rather than viewing the act of racial passing as a moral failure, Chesnutt drives his readers toward interrogating how a nation that was verbally committed to freedom could be so bent on restricting the very byproducts of its own horrific wrongdoings. In short, the death of the mixed race figure for Chesnutt opens a space for thought/philosophy on race and nation. He engages the impact of racism on both blacks and whites; this is a striking divergence from the protocols of “tragic mulatto/a” fiction. Just as Wells Brown before him with *Clotel* (and all of its revisions) and the originally serialized *Miralda, or The Beautiful Quadroon* and even Frances Harper with *Iola Leroy*, Chesnutt uses the passing narrative as an instrument for interrogating and rejecting proposed monoracial identities. In the case of Mandy Oxendine, he challenges readers to think beyond questions of race loyalty—or the lack thereof. Indeed, to indict a person who passes because of his or her choice to disidentify⁹¹ with a particular race is to tacitly consent to the chimerical and arbitrary nature of race and, by extension, the color line. Moreover, Chesnutt scrutinizes gender norms. That his male character in *Mandy Oxendine* is more sentimental at times than his female protagonist suggests that Chesnutt’s novel is, as William Andrews puts it, “more resistant to popular notions of femininity and less willing to accommodate itself to the protocols of ‘tragic mulatta’ fiction than is *The House Behind the Cedars*” (ix-x). In this way

⁹¹ In *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality In American Culture*, Siobhan B. Somerville uses the term *disidentification* to discuss Jean Toomer’s rejection of or opposition to being identified as black, or a Negro writer. While her discussion attempts to understand how some black luminaries view Toomer’s *disidentification* as a rejection and/or transgression, for the purposes of this project, I use the term *disidentify* as a way to discuss a bi-racial person who is fair-skinned enough to pass for white and who makes a conscious decision to do so, understanding most or all of the implications of his or her choice. The term, as I use it, should not be considered an indictment.

Mandy perhaps prefigures Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry of her novella *Passing* and conceivably Jessie Redmon Fauset's Angela Murray of *Plum Bun*.

In sharp contrast to *Mandy Oxendine* is Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). It is arguably among his most provocative evaluations of racial passing. In a letter thirty years following its publication, Chesnutt referred to *House* as his "favorite child." Originally titled "Rena Walden," Chesnutt likely intended for the reader to pay close attention to the development of the extremely sentimental protagonist's character given her choice (after encouragement from her brother) to identify as white as it suited her (and her brother's) needs. Chesnutt himself called Rena Walden one of 'mine own people," alluding to his mixed-race pedigree. With some reluctance, yet eager to experience the opportunities denied African Americans after the war, Rena follows John to South Carolina. Once she is there she (now known as "Rowena Warwick") quickly wins the affection of aristocrat George Tryon, who later accidentally discovers her "true"⁹² identity and repudiates her. As a result, Rena collapses in shock and takes seriously ill. During her recovery she decides to devote herself to African American uplift, which is her "imperative duty." She accepts a position as a rural schoolteacher only to die a short time later. Chesnutt has arguably played directly into the "tragic mulatto/a" convention here, particularly with the way he has authored Rena's demise. However, this novel, too, deviates from the tradition in many ways. Because the novel itself does not criticize the siblings decisions to pass, but rather is somewhat sympathetic of it, indicates that

⁹² The word "true" here presupposes that race as historically defined by the white ruling class is accurate, acceptable, and/or fair to a degree. While it is not my personal position that this is factual or even proper, for the purposes of this project the racial designations that these authors are challenging will be understood within terms of the following: any person who lacks a preponderance of white blood or who has features and/or characteristics of African ancestry will be designated as Negro/Black/African American/Nonwhite. Any other person shall be deemed white for the purposes of this project. This is also an acknowledgment that these classifications are at times arbitrary and/or amendable to the needs of the white ruling class.

Chesnutt is attempting to critique the limitations others have assigned to the narrative of passing and the bi-racial figure. Moreover, he is likely criticizing the racist ethos that characterized American politics in general, which provide space for the possibility of passing/crossing. With the question of his race often at the forefront of his mind and the mind of his readers, Chesnutt writes about characters of mixed status with a twinge of personal pain. His experiences from both sides of the color line tell a story that is unique to the mixed-race figure. In “Post-bellum, pre-Harlem” he recalls what African Americans expected of him as a writer:

My colored friends, with a very natural and laudable zeal for the race, with which I found no fault,, saw to it that the fact was not overlooked, and I have before me a copy of a letter written by one of them to the editor of the *Atlantic Constitution*, which had published a favorable copy of my book, accompanied by my portrait, chiding him because the reviewer had not referred to my color.⁹³

This begs the question of whether the portrait published alongside the review led his friend the reprimand the reviewer. Was the reviewer strategic in not mentioning race? Because race purports to refer to an individual’s body, no doubt the audience would assume Chesnutt was white because his fair skin color, his clothing, and even the way the story was written. This was not new for Chesnutt. Whether it was those who identified as Black pushing him to publically identify the same way or it was those with a sphere of influence like William Dean Howells who was so fascinated by Chesnutt’s portrayal of “that middle world” (the mixed-race population) that he commended him for his acquainting ‘us’ (presumably white readers)” with them,⁹⁴ Chesnutt was used to the social fallacy of race. Although Howells would contend, “As far as his race is concerned,

⁹³ Chesnutt, “Post-Bellum – Pre-Harlem,” 103.

⁹⁴ In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Sollors notes the following of Howells’s reception of Chesnutt’s work: “Howells was fascinated by Chesnutt’s portrayal of ‘that middle world’ and commended him for his acquainting ‘us’ presumably white readers” (12).

or his sixteenth part of a race, it does not greatly matter whether Mr. Chesnutt invented their motives, or found them [. . .],⁹⁵ what remains true is that Chesnutt's race was important enough to mention and how he understands and represents the mixed-race figure comes under the weight of that.

Certainly, much of African American racial passing literature attempts to depict occurrences in of black/white corporeal representation within the racially indeterminate body. For Chesnutt, the experiences of those characters of mixed status at times become tantamount to his experiences. For example, when we meet Rena Walden, we meet her body first—she is her body. We see her walk and we understand her beauty and that she is “strikingly handsome” (5). To the best of his ability, Chesnutt gives us no racial signals about Rena. We are left to our own assumptions as to her race. Naturally, given that the story is about postwar life in the South and the ways in which she and John are described in the opening scene, the audience would likely assume that they are both white. As we shadow the beautiful female body to the house behind the cedars, we experience the objectifying male gaze, as John admires that her “angles of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence” (5). This is how gender disrupts the color line: “John and Rena present two ways of thinking about identity and the assertion of whiteness: Rena is her body, while John is his name.”⁹⁶ Because Rena is stripped of her racial identity and classified by her body, she recognizes the restrictions of both identities. She notes the privilege that a mixed-race male may have above a mixed-race woman: a “man may make a new place for himself—a woman is born and bound to hers”

⁹⁵ William Dean Howells Qtd. in “Post-Bellum – Pre-Harlem,” 103.

⁹⁶ Melissa Ryan. “Rena’s Two Bodies: Gender and Whiteness in Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*” *Studies in the Novel* (Denton: University of North Texas, 2011), 41.

(121). Therefore, in this opening scene Chesnutt has demonstrated two things: 1. In Chesnutt's *House*, (re)location is as important as is skin color. 2. While one can transcend race, gender is altogether different. The novel opens with the poignant caution that "Time touches all things with a destroying hand; and if he seem now and then to bestow the bloom of youth, the sap of spring, it is but a brief mockery, to be surely and swiftly followed by the wrinkles of old age" (1). The warning here is not so much about the aging in the physical sense. Rather the caution is for America. It is a warning the racial ideologies that the nation had become accustomed to and reliant on, would not and could not last forever—that time would move the country forward whether it wanted to or not. Indeed, Chesnutt, who dedicated his life and career to healing the racial divide in America, argued in his fiction and nonfiction alike that race would likely disappear altogether over time, if only society would allow it: "The Negro element remains, then, the only one which seems likely to present any difficulty of assimilation"⁹⁷. The main obstacle that retards the absorption of the Negro into the general population is the apparently intense prejudice against color which prevails in the United States."⁹⁸ He demonstrates this in his fiction through experiments in his fiction. In his essay "Performing Race: Mixed-Race Characters in the Novels of Chesnutt,"⁹⁹ Keith Byerman discusses, in part, the "social disability" Chesnutt's characters experience in *House*. He suggests that Chesnutt was interested in the "reasoned arbitrariness" of the "stipulation of identity." Much of Byerman's argument is predicated upon the assertion that "the two novels [*House* and *Paul Marchand*] might be considered as thought experiments by

⁹⁷ Chesnutt's use of the term here should be considered more scientific rather than social.

⁹⁸ Charles W. Chesnutt. "The Future American: A Complete Race-Amalgamation Likely to Occur" *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 132.

⁹⁹ Keith Byerman. "Performing Race: Mixed-Race Characters in the Novels of Chesnutt" *Passing in the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 84.

Chesnutt that track the meaning of such arbitrariness” (85). Byerman later concludes that Chesnutt does not see the disappearance of race as a social reality. He asserts that Chesnutt understood that race “could only be maintained by ridiculous (and violent) contrivances. His project in such a situation is not just to contend politically and socially, but, as an artist, to point to the racial absurdity through his art.”¹⁰⁰ In this way, Chesnutt’s mixed-race literature, then, is without a doubt among the most subtly subversive race literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His bi-racial characters embody mobility and agency, which is telling of a new trend for mixed-race figures. The layers of identity for characters of mixed status gave visibility to several crucial issues facing the nation during the Reconstruction. In *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*, scholar M. Giulia Fabi argues:

The trope of passing provided African American novelists with a means to pioneer a counterhegemonic discussion of blackness as a historically an ideologically changing construct. The passer embodies the reality of cultural difference by containing racial dichotomies: Although his or her liminality is contingent on the existence of recognizably distinct groups, it also turns what was conceived as natural opposition into a societal one. (5)

The desire to be seen is the root of a passer or crosser’s journey toward self-discovery and self-identification. Indeed, Chesnutt knew all too well, “The awareness that personal identities are constructed was the starting point of the passer’s adventures, not the end result” (Fabi 5). Consequently, Chesnutt, and other early Black writers, used this understanding to discredit white misbeliefs of the “naturalness and legibility of race, but the also moved on to a deeper and more complex discussion of “the ‘praxis’ of identities”” (Wald 372). As African American literary movements shifted, so too did the use of the mixed-race figure, particularly between the pre and post Harlem/New Negro

¹⁰⁰ Byerman. “Performing Race,” 91.

Renaissance periods. What remained relatively constant was writing characters of mixed status into visibility through the “praxis of identities”—a practice that relied heavily upon essentialist notions of racial identity. Therefore, as we move into the New Negro Renaissance, authors like Larsen and Fauset present characters that expand our conceptions of both Black and white through the use of the mixed-race figure and the trope of racial passing/crossing.

The Substance of Silence: the Typologies of Passing/Crossing, and the 20th Century Passing Novel

The post-Reconstruction South was an interestingly complicated place for Black Americans, particularly for those bi-racial persons who were light-skinned enough to pass for white. Naturally, American racial discourse began to deconstruct those complications and the literature—Black literature specifically—began to reflect the phenomenon of racial passing. With the publication of her 1929 novel *Passing*, Nella Larsen offers an appraisal of these conflicts with two different presentations of the mixed-race figure. She uses a protagonist that is able to, but chooses not to assume a white identity; yet, the character chooses maintain a relationship with a dear friend that chooses a different path. The conflicts that emerge are as frustrating as they are rewarding at times; such is the nature of the color line. Larsen’s character sums of the conflict: “It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time we 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” (*Passing* 146). With this one assessment we are able to see the challenge of mixed-race characters that have divided commitments: to race and family, to opportunity and community, and to family and friendship. Authors like Frances E. W. Harper and Charles W. Chesnutt, who were writing (mostly) during the post-

Reconstruction period and others, such as Larsen and Jessie Fauset, who were writing during the New Negro Renaissance, deal with these unique racial struggles in their fiction and subsequently become responsible for this burgeoning genre of what has come to be known as passing literature. As a literary movement, the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance engages specific social and political energies concerning the move of Blacks from an overtly racist and segregated South to a seemingly free(r) and integrated north. For those persons who were fair-skinned enough to pass themselves off as white this move offers a set of opportunities that, though on the surface were not altogether different from those Chesnutt called the “genuine Negro,” could, under the right circumstances, allow for a social and economic upward mobility otherwise unattainable. As more authors began to engage the cultural phenomenon of racial passing, audiences were introduced to different layers of the mixed-race figure. What had been once viewed one-dimensional, began to be understood in different terms. There were those who contended that because they were, according to their parentage, more white than Black, they should be afforded the pleasures and privileges of white America—this was the case for many of Chesnutt’s characters, especially given his argument on what the future American would like. Granted, his argument is firmly situated within nineteenth-century racial politics and is undergirded in large part by common race theories of the time. Chesnutt’s racial passing literature is without a doubt among the most dissident race literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Then there were those darker-skinned Blacks who felt that any form of passing for whatever reason represented race treason. This is often reflected in the 20th century racial passing novel. Therefore, the literature begins to present these unique struggles of bi-racial Americans, consequently adding a new dimension to the so-called

Negro Question. Authors like Larsen and Fauset continue a conversation that the 19th century African American author started.

Much of the scholarship on passing literature has become quite limited in the ways in which passing literature and the bi-racial figure have been understood. Much of the genre employs bi-racial characters in specific social, cultural, and political ways so as to reject certain racial discourses and to engage both Black and white communities in discussions of what Chesnutt terms the “disability of color.” During the New Negro Renaissance, Black authors presented strategies of racial passing, rather than sweeping generalizations of passing. Through the 20th century passing novel, we recognize that there is substance in the silence—there is a demand that we consider the public versus the private life of the character. In so doing, we are able to understand the mixed-race characters’ ultimate aim through the strategies they employ in order to become (in)visible in certain spaces. Although many authors of this genre do not explicitly call for a specific or collective response to definitions of race, they do acknowledge that mixed-race characters must make clear certain definitions and allegiances of their own accord. Moreover, Black authors explore the potential dangers when characters of mixed status do assume white identities—dangers that extend beyond the individual to his or her family and/or community. Larsen and Fauset continue the discourse on bi-racial African characters that find themselves ever on the verge of the social, ethical, and political dilemmas uniquely facing mixed-race characters. In an effort to reorient understandings of the social and cultural phenomenon of passing; to explore the performance of race and the notions of blameworthiness¹⁰¹ that accompany it; to destabilize the customary dyadic

¹⁰¹ See Hartman *Scenes of Subjection*

relation between race and privilege; and to displace the presumption of tragedy that underscores many discussions of passing literature, 20th century Black writers investigate the strategy of quiet.

African American writers' exploration of passing puts a finger directly on the pulse of America's preoccupation with race. This inquiry sits at center stage in many passing novels and becomes the impetus for the changing trajectory of much of passing literature of the early 20th century. *Plum Bun* situates the racial struggles of bi-racial people against a backdrop that reflects the fragmentation of post-Reconstruction America, particularly the fragmentation found in urban communities. One of the novel's original reviewers, Gwendolyn Bennett, contends that while it is "true, that the author is concerned with the same ordinary well-bred Negro of intelligence and education . . . [she] seems to grapple with a larger, more potent element in Negro life—passing for white" (Bennett 211). Bennett's question—"Why not [Fauset's] pen that dips so choicely into the lives of black folk who go to school and come home to simple niceties of living 'just like all the white folks do?'" (Bennett 211)—is telling of the social and cultural space Fauset attempts to engage—a space in which her character could "beg[i]n to wonder which was more important, a patent insistence on the fact of colour or an acceptance of the good things of life which could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known" (Fauset 30). It is the latter—the long-term concealment of one's race—that establishes much of the conflicts throughout many racial passing novels. By the late 1920's, the New Negro Renaissance was in full swing and Black literature began to reflect passing in ways that challenged the notion of the so-called tragic mulatto, often presenting these characters in ways that were

ultimately anything but tragic. Consider Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), which each force the audience to accept female protagonists who, though confused and selfish at times, are unrelenting in their pursuits of autonomy and opportunity. Fauset's 1924 novel *There is Confusion* adds yet another element to this genre—the strategy of respectability. To be sure, by the early 20th century passing literature had begun to reflect the social and political realities of light-skinned Blacks; it demonstrated the creativeness and the firmness with which these authors decided to address the color line. When Fauset publishes *Plum Bun* in 1928, Chesnutt is her elder. Her approach to the conventional passing novel, though not altogether different from Chesnutt and her other predecessors, demonstrates a significant shift in the ways in which Blacks sought to portray themselves, particularly those bourgeois-strivers who endeavored to depict a better class of Blacks.

The social prescriptions of race that create disparities between the Black and white characters are, in Chesnutt's view, extremely different from those created between the bi-racial characters and every other race. However, many scholars who engage passing literature do so in ways that suggest that all passing—and, by extension, all characters that pass are the same. Much of the professional scholarship on *Plum Bun* is appropriately situated in discussions of Black identity and specifically negotiating race and space. In her article, "The Limits of Identity in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*," Kathleen Pfeiffer sums up the sentiment, of scholars on Fauset's handling of the complexities of race. She writes, "Angela's sense of liberty is continually limited because she has accepted the restrictive classifications that govern society. Thus while her passing rejects narrow categories for herself; she easily and unselfconsciously places taxonomic restrictions on others" (89). Pfeiffer demonstrates how the narrow traditions ultimately

give way to rebellion and loss of racial identity. Pfeiffer posits that a larger part of Fauset's project is to challenge certain traditions (e.g. conventional definitions of womanhood—piety, parenting, and domesticity). Many fittingly approach *Plum Bun* as the classic *bildungsroman*. In so doing, there is a propensity to elevate the journey of the protagonist at the expense of the other characters. That is not to suggest in any way that Pfeiffer does not offer anything of depth in her analysis of the characters. Indeed, she does; especially where she argues that through the trope of passing Fauset examines the shifts in America “from Victorian morals to modernist ethos, from family to city, from community to individuality, [and] from tradition of self-generation” (Pfeiffer 79). She suggests that the use of transition as a motif figures into Fauset's characters and manifests itself in various ways. The major transition for Pfeiffer is the one from the traditional to modernity. She demonstrates this point with Angela Murray's disillusionment with the “small, closed, rigidly restrictive domestic sphere, which represented just one generation earlier the epitome of comfort and success” (Pfeiffer 81). Although I disagree with her reading of Virginia's wish to marry a man *like* her father as incestuous in tone and her assertions that Virginia “accepts” her Black identity (this presupposes choice), I enthusiastically agree that Fauset uses the “trope of passing for white to interrogate the illusion of racial progress and the limits of segregation” (92). That said, there is still a dearth of scholarship on *Plum Bun* that extends or deepens the discourse of Black racial categorization, especially concerning passing.

Among the available scholarship that attempts to do this is Teresa Zackodnik's “Passing Transgressions and Authentic Identity in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*.” Whereas Bennett argues that Fauset “does not seem too concerned

with the inner workings of her characters” and “It is better for the story that Miss Fauset avoided too much of the metaphysical” (Bennett 287), Zackodonik argues the contrary. Zackodonik, conversely, supports author Sandra Richards’s assertion that “race—or, more properly stated, visible difference skin color—remains tied to a metaphysics of substance” (Richards Qtd. in “Passing Transgressions” 45). She uses Richards’s assertions to underscore her own argument regarding race as simultaneously performative and political. Zackodonik acknowledges the “chaotic ambiguity” of race as performance; however, she is comfortable asserting that while there remains resistance to conceiving of race as performative there are social conditions, which necessitate an understanding of politicized notions of identity. Zackodonik’s chief arguments are: 1. While Fauset and Larsen engage in political critiques of race, that is not their chief objective and 2. “Rather than enacting and either/or of communal versus individualist politics and practice, of identity as fixed or fluid and understood through essentialist or constructionist paradigms, I would argue that Fauset and Larsen’s novels instead expose the tensions, ambiguities, and interactions of such oppositions as they in a debate over black identity” (Zackodonik 47). She aptly recognizes and challenges essentialist discourse of “authentic” Blackness. To that end, she pits “the folk,” against “Talented Tenth” politics in order to suggest that there is a broad spectrum of Black experiences which can, and should, center “the folk” as much as Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” in discussions of Black identity. It is only natural that she would have this conversation in which “the folk” are centered alongside the “Talented Tenth.” It is arguably from among “the folk”—the everyday people/characters—that scholars make meaning about the life and culture of a people.

This is as true of the phenomenon of racial passing as it is for nearly any other cultural phenomenon.

Zackodnik's argument that race is simultaneously performative and political offers much opportunity for further explication. Because not every character that passes is doing so as a form of formal protest, it becomes imperative to understand the various circumstances under which a character passes/crosses. That is to say, definitions of passing/crossing help the reader to determine a character's motives, and perhaps even an author's ultimate aim. Rather than a sweeping generalization of passing, this project divides it into three distinctive categories: *Situational Crossing*¹⁰², *Conventional Passing*, and *Crossing in Différance*.¹⁰³ Each of these designations encompasses distinguishing behaviors that qualify it.¹⁰⁴ For my purposes here, where I use the term *situational crossing* it pertains only to crossing that occurs after an agreement between any character that (by appearance) can and chooses to traverse the color line—henceforth the crosser—“recreationally” or as opportunities allow and others that are either unable to (by appearance) or choose not to identify as white—henceforth the non-crosser. For the

¹⁰² Certain categories use the term “crossing” rather than “passing” so as to indicate strategy—i.e. a temporary state. This is significant as it suggests that those characters of mixed status that strategically navigate the color line temporarily, have no intention of committing to a white identity long term. They have families that identify as Black and when they are in Black spaces with Black people (among their in-group), they identify as Black. And so, the term “crossing” implies both strategy and temporary—ultimately identifying as Black.

¹⁰³ *Crossing in Différance* is a re-appropriation of Jacques Derrida's *Différance* in which Derrida approaches all texts as constructed around elemental oppositions which all speech has to articulate if it intends to make any sense whatsoever. This is so because identity is viewed in non-essentialist terms as a construct, and because constructs only produce meaning through the interplay of differences inside a “system of distinct signs”. Derrida's concern is with language and the indiscernible differences in spoken language—i.e. pronunciation of certain words—and noting that certain differences can only be observed when words are written. That is, words become text and then their differences and intended meanings can be understood. This category of crossing seeks to view the Black body as text. It implicitly argues that when a white character encounters a “Black” character that appears to be white in an otherwise white space, the white character will “read” the Black body as white; therefore, and allowing the Black body to reap the benefits of its perceived whiteness. In these specific cases, it is not until the Black body is either encountered in a Black space or otherwise exposed that the white character is able to understand the differences.

¹⁰⁴ In so doing, it extends the typologies of passing found in Werner Sollors's *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. In the chapter “Passing; or Sacrificing a Parvenu,” Sollors explores the different typologies of passing that were scrutinized by sociologists and other scholars. Whereas Sollors stops just shy of naming the categories that he defines, I have attached a name and a definition to these categories based on the question of intentionality of the characters.

purposes of this designation, there is a racial contract¹⁰⁵ between the crosser(s) and the non-crosser(s) to protect the crosser(s) “true” racial identity even at the expense of the non-crosser if necessary. This agreement whether tacit or explicit, often supersedes a social contract,¹⁰⁶ which, in general, demands loyalty to the crosser’s home—i.e. Black—community. The racial contract here is what allows the crosser to revisit and/or return altogether to the Black population that he/she left as the crosser has not severed all ties with that community. *Conventional passing* refers to a more traditional and broad definition of racial passing in which a character that passes “voluntarily (or by ‘conscious’ and ‘deliberate’ decision)” (Sollors 250), chooses to sever all ties with the home community and seek complete acceptance in the another race or community for the remainder of the passer’s life or an extended period of time (See John in Chesnutt’s *House* or Johnson’s protagonist in *Autobiography*). Should an occurrence arise in which a *conventional passer* returns to his or her home community, even in brief, their designation would change depending on their ultimate goal after such time. *Crossing in Différance* refers to those occurrences in which the crosser submits to the public’s perception of his or her race without protest. Within this category there is no contract between crosser(s) and non-crosser(s) as the crosser is only one in brief; it is not his or

¹⁰⁵ Although this “racial contract” is not equal to Charles Mills’s definition in *The Racial Contract*, it is largely a reaction to it and/or a result of it. Therefore Mills’s terms become key. For Mills “The Racial Contract is a set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements [. . .] between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting) “racial”[...] as ‘white,’ and coextensive [. . .] with the class of full persons, to categorize the remaining subset of humans as ‘nonwhite’ and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities the whites either already inhabit or establish.” “The general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of whites as a group with respect to nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract, though some whites are not *signatories* to it.” “. . . therefore, The Racial Contract is not a contract to which the nonwhite subset of humans can be a genuinely consenting party (though, depending again on the circumstances, it may sometimes be politic to pretend that this is the case). Rather the contract is between those categorized as white *over* the nonwhites, who are thus the objects rather than the subjects of the agreement” (Mills 11-12, Emphasis not mine).

¹⁰⁶ According to Mills, social contracts are generally among citizens who are “bound by justice and self-prescribed laws.”

her ultimate goal to totally assimilate to the white community. Therefore, within this category there is still no complete severance of ties between the crosser and his/her home community. I find each of these categories at play in many racial passing novels, and in some novels multiple categories are at play at once (Chesnutt's *House*, Larsen's *Passing*, Fauset's *Plum Bun*).

The reason for establishing categorical definitions of passing is to address the question of intentionality. That is, what is the passer/crosser's ultimate aim? If his or her intention were to completely assimilate to the white community for any type of personal gain long-term, then he or she would be more appropriately situated in the category of *conventional passing*. However, there are complications that arise with characters whose intentions are unclear or who vacillate between two or more categories. Indeed, a passer/crosser's intentions may change given his or her specific stage in life. As the passer/crosser's intentions change so, too, should the category assigned. As a result of these distinctions, I argue that these new classifications of passing/crossing challenge the static definitions of Black(ness) and, by extension, white(ness). Given these designations, understanding Fauset's presentation of passing in *Plum Bun*, it becomes clear that not every character who negotiates the color line is participating in *conventional passing*. Fauset's characters demonstrate the complications of *situational passing*—including those “Saturday excursions and their adventures in ‘passing’, so harmless, yet so far-reaching.” (Fauset 167)—on the nuclear family and the subsequent tensions that arise due to breeches of racial and/or social contracts between the characters.

Fauset unapologetically broaches the complexities of race, passing, racial identity, and the barrier of the space between Black and white that has come to be identified as the

color line and to that end, the discourse that surrounds her work can, as Zackodonic demonstrates, be as knotty. Chesnutt's "What Is a White Man?" stresses the distinctive struggles of mixed-raced Black people. Fauset's fiction demonstrates that while these conflicts can be reduced to conversations of race and class, its fate is ultimately governed by more complicated designations within passing. Therefore, *Plum Bun* necessitates consideration of passing in tandem with Chesnutt's "disability of color." While Chesnutt and Fauset are typically and appropriately examined separately, their synergy allows for more complicated discussions of the relationship between race, power, and oppression.

Plum Bun proves the sensitive nature of the racial and social agreements inherent in *situational passing* through the relationship between Angela Murray and the remainder of her nuclear family, particularly her brown-skinned sister Virginia. Initially, the racial contract was established between Mattie and Junius when they discuss the nature of Mattie's passing. Mattie explains:

And if I'm hungry or tired and I'm near a place where they don't want coloured people, why should I observe their silly old rules, rules that are unnatural and unjust,—because the world was made for everybody, wasn't it, Junius? . . . I've only done it for fun but I won't do it anymore if it displeases you. I would rather live in the smallest house in the world with you, Junius, than to be wondering around as I have so often, lonely and unknown in hotels and restaurants (22).

As Junius is softened by her sentiment that she loves him more than the possibilities of the white world he rationalizes, "There was no reason in the world why she should give up harmless pleasure unless, he added rather sternly, some genuine principle were involved" (22). Once he has agreed to allow his wife to pass, the two are under contract with each other. That is to say, Junius has now consented to protect Mattie's identity even at the expense of himself where necessary. Now Mattie has become a *situational passer*.

Later, once Junius becomes privy to Mattie allowing their daughter Angela to pass the terms of his contract have been amended to include Angela. However conflicts arise as the only member of the immediate family who is not yet under contract with any other member is Virginia. When the day comes that Mattie and Angela are racially passing in store and Junius and Virginia walk by, Mattie begins to understand the weight of her choice as a *situational passer*. Although Junius demonstrates that he is not bothered by her choice not to speak to him reminding her, “I told you long ago that where no principle was involved, your passing means nothing to me. It’s just a little joke” (14), she helps him to understand the true measure of what she has done. “It isn’t you, dear, who makes me feel guilty. I am really ashamed to think that I let Virginia pass by without a word. I think I should feel very badly if she were to know it. I don’t believe I will ever let myself be quite as silly as that again” (14). Mattie’s conversation here answers the question of intentionality. It is not Mattie’s goal to totally assimilate to the white majority. Indeed, her passing is recreational at best; however, the implications are far-reaching. Those non-passers who are under contract with a *situational passer* are often times a causality of circumstance. Consider Junius. When Mattie falls ill and Angela takes her to a white hospital, Junius must pretend to be their chauffeur in order to be certain that his wife and daughter are not mistreated or dismissed from the hospital before Mattie can receive proper healthcare. The contract between Mattie and Junius is extended to include Angela without any discussion between the new signatories. There are three contracts at play now, where there had only been one. There are contracts between Junius and Mattie, Mattie and Angela—and by extension, between Junius and Angela. Such is the nature of these types of contracts. To be sure, these contracts are generally only amendable to the

needs and experiences of the passer. Therefore, as “Junius was equal to the moment’s demands” (38), he becomes a signatory to the contract that was originally between Mattie and Angela. He demonstrates the savvy of non-passer who has a vested interest in a passers well being. Angela, on the other hand, represents the multi-layered complications of passing. The sense of loyalty to collective identity—nationhood if you will—that is fundamental to the Black community and family comes secondary to the personal and differing standards of the passer.

While Angela’s *situational passing* requires the elevation of the self above the family and the community, it simultaneously relies heavily upon them. Thus *situational passing* requires discussions of race, as well as tangential discussions of family and community. There is a tendency for a *situational passer*, especially Angela, to only consider their ultimate social, economic, and/or material gain in their decision to pass. Indeed, “Colour or rather the lack of it seemed to the child to be the absolute prerequisite to the life which she was always dreaming” (10). Angela continuously questions, “Was there something inherently wrong with passing?” (46). Throughout passing literature many of these types are passers do so with the expectation that their home communities will remain faithful to them despite the passers infidelity. Consider John Warwick’s return home in *House Behind the Cedars*. As John reencounters his home community at the start of the novel, he is careful not to engage too many people who know his “true” identity. That he only visits his family under the cover of night suggests the magnitude of his consideration of his constructed whiteness. Indeed, it is so paramount to his constructed identity that Chesnutt demonstrates a distinctive difference between Warwick’s dialect and the other Black characters. His attire and overall demeanor also

conveyed higher social quality. That Rena has to attend John's school of appropriate whiteness before she can join him in South Carolina suggests that perceived whiteness is not only critical to John's livelihood, but also to his personal perceptions of selfhood. Chesnutt couches questions of racial identity in the larger society's acceptability of a given character. Perhaps this suggests that race is somewhat arbitrary. To be sure, if a Black character is accepted by the larger white community as exhibiting and/or performing whiteness to a plausible degree, Chesnutt could be suggesting that the social prescriptions of race—particularly the public's perception of the white race—supersedes the law to a degree (at least until there is some discovery or acknowledgment of a different race). Whenever a person or character traverses the color line it is nearly always at great cost to the passer as well as the community they leave behind—albeit a temporary leave in some cases. Indeed, passers—*situational passers* in particular—often burden the home community to a degree, especially where the passer (re)encounters the home community for whatever reason as seen in *House*. The moment that John returns home and his family accepts him, he has established an implicit (and at times, explicit) agreement with his family and Judge Straight. The terms of this agreement are often at the discretion of the passer and rely heavily upon a loyalty that was established well prior to the passers' decision to pass. While nostalgia often plays a role in a passer deliberately seeking his or her home community, it is not without great risk. Indeed, any attempt at communication, although many times "successful," is risky. Perhaps Chesnutt, Fauset, and even Larsen recognize this subtle but important fact in hopes that readers will begin to unpack some of these complications. Ironically, the expectation of loyalty that the passer possesses was likely instilled in him or her by the community from which they are

seeking to temporarily sever ties. Though Chesnutt acknowledges nearly forty years prior to Fauset's publication that, "The Negro is *not* contented; and while he has made great progress during the twenty-five years of his freedom, he is not prospering in that degree which the enjoyment of the full measure of citizenship would have made possible to him" (An Inside View of the Negro Question 57), he does not deal with the psychological effects of being a person of mixed blood the way Fauset does. The relationship between parents and children are fundamentally different from the one between siblings. In her article "Sister Bonds: Intersections of family and race in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy*," Eva Rueschmann posits that "the sister relationship has a more complex role to play in the larger context of female identity formation" (Rueschmann 120). This is evident in the simultaneously difficult and devoted—at least on Virginia's part—relationship between Angela and her younger sister. Indeed, "It is the interactions among sisters that instigate the heroine's journey toward self, toward psyche Our sisterly relationships challenge and nurture us, even as we sometimes disappoint and betray one another" (Christine Downing Qtd. in Sister Bonds 120).

Angela and Virginia's relationship mutually contributes to the other's development of the sense of self. From the moment that Angela tells her sister that she is moving to New York to live as a white woman their relationship is forever changed. These sisters never had a contract with each other. Outside of her contracts with her parents, Angela negotiated the color line without consideration to others. During the times that Angela was in school and still living with her parents, she was *Passing in Différance*. That is to say that while Angela was in school as a child and her peers read her as white, she simply deferred to their opinions of her race without protest. As with

most people who pass this way, Angela never offered any information contrary to the public's perception of her identity. Although there is often some minor benefit to this type of passing, there is no racial contract as the passer is only one in brief. Angela intends to go home to her family after such time as her school day is over. Although she maintains a friendship with a girl who believes her to be white she is not under contract with her friend. Contracts are only established between a passer and a non-passer who is aware of the passer's background. In this case, Angela's friend is unaware of the racial differences between them and therefore Angela is a *Passing in Différance*. This same behavior is demonstrated in Larsen's novella *Passing*. An opportunity arises after Irene faints on a hot day and is subsequently helped to a cab where the cab driver suggests a trip to the Drayton. Irene accepts, submitting to his opinion of her race absent objection. This encounter does not require a contract of any sort as this passing only affects Irene and she has every intention of returning to her (Negro) family once her day's events are over. Immediately though the reader sees the discomfort and ill-feelings Irene has toward white people's perceptions of race and class. After wondering whether the woman on the rooftop—later revealed to be her childhood friend Clare—realizes she is a Negro, Irene dismisses the thought reasoning, "Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they could tell." (116). This instance of *deferential passing* is particularly appealing because it leads to the reader's understanding of some of Irene's major concerns with race and class. That Irene's consciousness is centered on such matters begs questions of Larsen's objectives. As George Hutchinson aptly notes: "Larsen's makes Irene's defense against the psychic disturbance Clare generates inseparable from our own understanding" (Hutchinson 295).

It seems that Irene endeavors to remove Clare from her everyday life just as much as Clare hopes to resituate herself within the Black community again. Thus questions of the relationship of the Black middle class to the white upper/upper middle class are inevitable. While Clare's boldness may be shocking to the reader, Irene expects nothing less. Upon her submission to the more dominating Clare, the reader feels a bit of sympathy for Irene. Inasmuch as Clare is content with her life as a *conventional passer*, so, too, is Irene content with her life in which she sporadically passes *in Différance*. The women inadvertently demonstrate—although they do not explicitly share—Chesnutt's character from *The Wife of His Youth*, Mr. Ryder's sentiment: "but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black." Larsen uses Clare's actions throughout the story in order to engage the psychological effects on Irene. That is to say, the reader is only exposed to the Irene's psyche through Clare's actions. From her mild annoyance at the memory of her childhood friendship with the Clare to the constant judgment she demonstrates toward Clare's choice to pass, Irene is clearly simultaneously in opposition to Clare's choice and envious of it to a degree, leading her to lament, "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time we 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" (*Passing* 146).

It is not until the women encounter each other on the rooftop that their circumstances change and a nonverbal agreement is established. Because each woman knows the other's past and therefore her "true" identity and neither chooses to leave, but rather they both stay and continue passing together, they have each tacitly consented to a

racial contract. The terms of the contract though the same in this moment will ultimately be challenged to the extent that the women remain involved in each other's daily lives beyond this moment. Irene's larger objective is clear to the reader. Her feelings are apparent: "It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the *polite and tactful* way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her" (116 emphasis mine). That the agreement cannot be nullified upon the close of conversation speaks to yet another difficulty with passing. Many non-passers are often forced (more or less) into racial contracts with passers regardless of their feeling about it. Inasmuch as we learn of Irene's curiosity, we also see her reluctance to continue a friendship beyond the rooftop. That Irene "wished to find out about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly (123)" does not equal an aspiration to pass. Her curiosity was more practical as she wondered about everyday occurrences in the lives of passers, such as "What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes" (123). Even as Irene's interest is peaked regarding passing she would later wholeheartedly regret her continued association with Clare: "Irene Redfield wished for the first time in her life that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. . . . It was a brutality and undeserved" (178)—It was, in Chesnutian terms, "the disability of color." This sentiment highlights the intricacies of the mind of a non-passer who is under contract with a *situational passer*.

Like *Plum Bun*, *Passing* demonstrates the vulnerable quality of the racial and social agreements inherent in *situational passing* through the relationship between Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. In his “different” kind of biography, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, Hutchinson argues that “the two are not exactly alter egos, but Larsen clearly develops them as complex doubles” (294). While this may be true, more than merely a self-reflective project as Hutchinson contends at times, *Passing* highlights the complexities of the color line in nuanced ways that Chesnutt would acknowledge are necessary “preserve the *purity* of the white race” (“What Is a White Man?” 70, emphasis mine). Chesnutt explains: “the term Negro was used in its ethnological sense, and needed no definition, but the term ‘mulatto’ was held by legislative enactment to embrace all persons of color not Negroes” (“What Is a White Man?” 69). Therefore, the static representations of Black(ness) and other complexities of color line beg for revision. In an effort to destabilize the customary dyadic relation between race and privilege one must challenge racial distinctions and an America that requires such distinctions as they become paramount for those who naturally desire the opportunity to inhabit the space that affords them a higher degree of autonomy—like Larsen’s Clare Kendry, Johnsons’ *Ex-Colored Man*, Chesnutt’s John Warwick, Fauset’s Angela Murray and countless other characters who demonstrate this conflict.

Angela is a curious case though. Where Irene fluctuates between being a *situational crosser* and *crossing in différance*, Angela inhabits all three categories at some point throughout the novel. From *crossing in différance* at her childhood school to a *situational crosser* with her mother; to a *conventional passer* when she is living alone in New York, and again a *situational crosser* when her sister joins her in New York, Angela

is by far the most revealing of the complexities of negotiating race and space. Both Angela and Clare Kendry reveal that their agenda's are the most important regardless of the characters that become their causalities of circumstance. Certainly, "It was from her mother that Angela learned the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness" (11). It was the possibilities that compelled Angela/Angele. She was driven by her own reasoning that, "One might break loose from a too hampering sense of duty; poverty could be overcome; physicians conquered weakness; but colour, the mere possession of a black or a white skin, that was clearly one of those fortuitous endowments of the gods" (10). Notwithstanding the arbitrary nature of race, *situational crossing* presents another measure loyalty—a loyalty that would allow a non-crosser to submit to a crosser's agenda even at the expense of the non-crosser's basic right to dignity, while for the crosser this is simply another casualty of condition. Angela Murray—now Angele Mory—demonstrates this as she allows her white classmates to, in effect, dismiss her Black classmate's talent on the basis of race. And again when Angele—a *conventional passer* before this moment and living New York at the time—dismisses her sister Virginia as a stranger in the train station in order protect Angele's personal agenda. Clare shows this as she subjects her old friends to her husband's scathing racism, considering it laughable.

Both Angele and Clare, and even the unnamed protagonist in Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* demonstrate the desire that a passer/crosser feels when he or she chooses to live outside their home community. Though Angela declares, "I'm sick of this business of always being below or above a certain norm. Doesn't anyone think that we have the right to be happy, simply, naturally?" (Fauset 35), she, after

abandoning her sister in favor of the white world that once oppressed her, later misses the musings of Sunday mornings with Virginia singing in their family home. Clare expresses, “You don’t know, you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them, to hear them laugh” (159). Johnson’s unnamed protagonist expresses the feeling of there being a void, something missing in this white world. While one could identify him as *crossing in différance* due to his declaration that he will allow the world to judge him as it encounters him, he is more aptly placed in the realm of *conventional passing* by novel’s end. As the unnamed protagonist takes his stance on race, he certainly knows (and likely embraces) that the public will perceive him to be white. What is the ultimate cost-benefit analysis here for him and other passers for that matter? They prove time and time again that their personal agendas as passers are of the highest importance. Although Angela/Angele is a passer who vacillates between all three categories (though she spends much of the novel as a *situational crosser*), she maintains the same expectations of loyalty just as Clare Kendry does. It is not until Angele reconciles within herself that she cannot live as both a white woman and a Black woman in the same city that she chooses to make a distinctive choice. Albeit one that takes her outside of the country in order to find fulfillment—this of itself could be Fauset’s articulation that American society as it was then did not provide a safe space in which fair-skinned Blacks could be successful or wholly fulfilled. When the *conventional passers* choose to return to their home communities, they tend to do so with the expectation of the open arms. If there is resistance and/or resentment initially on the part of the community, as far as I can tell, the community often concedes and allows the passer home again.

That need for connection and fulfillment that Angela feels created a rift in what was left of “the whole united Murray family” (13). The rupture was so great in fact, that it caused Virginia to create a life outside her sister—one that protected Angela even as she sought to disrupt and/or amend their current contract. Upon seeing each other at an event Angela remarks,

You might as well speak,” she told Jinny petulantly, remembering uncomfortably the occasion when she herself had cut her sister, an absolute stranger in New York. “Plenty of white and coloured people are getting to know each other and they always acknowledge the acquaintanceship. Why shouldn’t we? No harm could come of it.” But in Virginia’s cool opinion no good could come of it either. Usually the younger girl preserved a discreet silence; whatever resolves she might have with regard to the rupture between herself and her sister, she was certainly able to keep her own counsel. (125)

As *situational crossers* go, one could reasonably maintain that they are self-seeking and that they lack loyalty to their race. If one takes this position as fact, it still does not absolve the non-passer of his or her obligation to the racial contract as this agreement is based on a set norms and practices inherent in the Black community—loyalty, especially to family and friends. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, this argument reifies white hegemonic racial discourse of racial superiority. Given the history of the relationship between Angela and her family and the fact that, “Certainly Mrs. [Mattie] Murray did not attribute what she considered her happy, busy, sheltered life on Opal Street to the accident of her colour; she attributed it to her black husband whom she had been glad and proud to marry” (11), the overall impact of Angela’s passing is at times alarming. Virginia, though younger, often became to voice of reason, challenging:

We’ve all of us got to make up our minds to the sacrifice of something. I mean something more than just the ordinary sacrifices in life, not so much for the sake of the next generation as for the sake of some principle, for the sake of some immaterial quality life pride or intense self-respect or

even a saving complacency; a spiritual tonic which the race needs perhaps just as much as the body might need iron or whatever it does need to give the proper kind of resistance. There are some things which an individual might want, but which he'd just have to give up forever for the sake of the more important whole. (44)

Whether we consider Angela's relationship with Roger as a genuine love relationship or the fact that "it was partly on account of his colour that she loved him; in her eyes his colour meant safety" (21), the fact remains that Angela's choice to pass disrupted her relationship with her sister in a way that required Virginia to consider Angela's feelings daily and far more than Angela considered hers. One could argue that, in life, people do these things for the people they love and while I would concur, I would also argue that people who genuinely love each other should not ask such things of each other. Family bonds, especially sibling ones, ought to be tested by outside forces rather than internal factors. Though I understand that such is not likely in literature or in life, it certainly would be ideal. For each passer that has a racial contract with a non-passer someone will inevitably be taken to the extent of that agreement. Take Irene and Clare and the fact that "Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness" (151), Irene's struggle, though not at all unique in this type of contractual relationship, is understandably maddening. Irene's reasoning: "

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever, more completely sardonic. (178)

The narrator explains Irene's feelings: "That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn't she get free of it? Why should it include Clare? Clare, who'd shown little enough

consideration for her and hers. What she felt was not so much resentment as a dull despair because she could not change herself in this respect, could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry” (179).

Given my examination of passing/crossing as being split into three distinct types, it would be a worthy project to extend to all racial passing literature. How might these new conventions further complicate the discussions surrounding racial identity and the pervasive nature of oppression? Certainly, this question is a momentous one. It is vital because of the way in which racial passing and the layering of identities (particularly race, class, and gender) have been historically engaged within African American literature. Arguably, the bi-racial American may have to contend with the problems of the color line more creatively than will those who are wholly part of a particular race; however, the Black community at large is left to deal with the ramifications of the race problem. Therefore the question of passing really becomes the question of a system that demands so insistently for the distinctions of race that passing becomes more of inevitability than an option for some. Questions like, “I am both white and Negro and look white. Why shouldn’t I declare for the one that will bring me the greatest happiness, prosperity and respect?” (Fauset 50), are indeed valid and though their treatment in literature have been one-sided at best. These “ideals and inevitable sacrifices for the race; the burnt-offering of individualism for some dimly glimpsed racial whole” (Fauset 71), are unavoidable for bi-racial Americans within the passing narrative. Certainly there has been progress between the 1889 publication of Chesnut’s “What Is a White Man?” and Fauset’s 1928 publication of *Plum Bun*. However, from the antebellum period through Post-Reconstruction life had not changed so much that racial passing/crossing was

obsolete. Indeed, the opposite is true and the state of the nation unquestionably left those mixed-race Americans who were fair-skinned enough to cross the color line with a tough choice to make. Even as Angela struggled to reconcile herself to her to the race, “And again she let herself dwell of the fallaciousness of a social system which stretched appearance so far beyond being” (38), her relationship with her sister proves the unique complexities of mixed-race Black people, and the casualties of circumstance that often accompany a passer, particularly those who remain in relatively close proximity to their home community. Indeed, “This was a curious business, this colour. It was the one god apparently to whom you could sacrifice everything” (Fauset 29). When the bi-racial figure negotiates the color line, temporarily or otherwise, a few things remain vital: 1. The performance. 2. The Audience and 3. The Trick.

In order to understand the ways in which mixed-race characters that pass/cross negotiate Black life and their transition to white America, one must consider it, in effect, a performance. Their transition, without exception, brings with it the need to convincingly perform whiteness. This, consequently, triggers the burden of performance (how persuasive is the actor and how plausible is the backstory) and notions of blameworthiness¹⁰⁷. To be exact, passing/crossing requires that one execute and achieve the likeness of white(ness) such that there is an indiscernible degree of difference between the character of mixed status and the white characters—it must be a visible/legible white(ness). The performance encumbers one’s family, livelihood, community, and one’s physical person. To that end, should a character that is “caught” passing/crossing lose everything the blame would arguably rest squarely on his or her

¹⁰⁷ See Hartman *Scenes of Subjection*.

shoulders, as this was a personal endeavor. This also raises the question of criminality, specifically black criminality in American literature. Obviously, there is quite a bit to consider before the bi-racial figure takes the stage.

And so, passers and/or crossers are much like prestidigitators—they are performers and the ways in which they negotiate the color line often indicate their long-term intentions. The levels of ingenuity they produce could easily be viewed as deceptive; however, they are more magically political than anything. There are various types of magic, which are categorized by their effects or their intentions. There is magic that produces something from nothing (Production Magic); there is magic that destroys then restores objects (Restoration Magic). The passing prestidigitator is concerned with Vanishing Magic and Transformation Magic—the former makes a thing (dis)appear, while the latter transforms a thing from one state to another. The passer and/or the crosser knows the value in performance. They understand, as all magicians do, the value and importance of secrecy. The best illusionist never disclose the secrets to the trick, for they know that to expose the secret is to destroy magic as an art form. Many illusionists believe that once secrets have been revealed, it compromises audiences' ability to truly appreciate the performance. Consequently, to be a magician is to join a secret society—it is to take an oath to never offer the secrets of the trick to non-magicians. Inherent in conversation any conversation of lies and secrecy, are revelations of what is true or real. For the passer/crosser, there is truth in constructed identities and the trick is to reveal only enough to the audience to make oneself visible—it is disappearing act. The ability to make the audience see and accept white and not see the Black (or vice versa) is all a part of the performance. It is necessary part of the show. And indeed, as Chief Inspector Uhl

said to Crown Prince Leopold in 2006 film *The Illusionist* after Leopold exclaims, “He has tricked you, it is all an illusion!” The chief poignantly responds, “Perhaps there is truth in this illusion.

CHAPTER 4

THE BLACK ARISTOCRACY: STRATEGIES OF RESPECTABILITY AND THE RISE OF A BI-RACIAL MIDDLE CLASS

“It comes to every colored man and every colored woman, too, who has any ambition [. . .]But every colored man feels it sooner or later. It gets in the way of his dreams, of his education, of his marriage, of the rearing of his children.”¹⁰⁸

“And so the puzzling, tangling, nerve-wracking consciousness of color envelops and swathes us. Some of us, it smothers.”¹⁰⁹

“I have no race prejudice [. . .] but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn't want us yet, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step.”¹¹⁰

In February 2015 a group of Howard University students released a short film about what they called the civil war in black America. The piece, “50 Shades of Black,” takes a satirical approach to colorism in the black community. It opens on two groups of black men in a playground setting. One group of men is all darker-skinned and the other lighter-skinned. They are each in their separate areas only communicating with those who are similar in hue to themselves. When the group of darker-skinned men attempts to communicate with those from the other group, one of the lighter-skinned men informs him that this is unacceptable saying, “We don’t affiliate with your kind; no blackness allowed.”¹¹¹ This alarming yet poignant declaration highlights the color dynamics that impact black intraracial relations in America. Ironically, the students who produced the film are from one of the nation’s most respected HBCUs (Historically Black College or University)—Howard University. Many of the nation’s HBCUs were founded throughout the South during the Reconstruction period and played a major role in educating blacks

¹⁰⁸ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *There is Confusion* (Northeastern Library of Black Literature, 1989), 179.

¹⁰⁹ Jessie Redmon Fauset, “Some Notes on Color,” *The World Tomorrow* (March 1922), 76-77.

¹¹⁰ Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth” (Teddington, Eng.: Echo Library, 2007), 7.

¹¹¹ Tevin Scott and Rome Miller, “50 Shades of Black,” (Washington, D.C.: Raise the Stakes Entertainment, 2015), Short Film.

following the failure of Reconstruction. However, many of these institutions have their own complicated and painful social histories with complexion discrimination related to the Brown Paper Bag Test for admission. According to founding editor of the HBCUDigest.com:

Historically black colleges and universities have been experts at distancing themselves from painful elements of their cultural past. One of those elements—the brown paper bag admissions test.

Propagated as urban legend but a real practice for some of our most reputable HBCU campuses, light complexion was once an admission qualification for college enrollment, and fraternity and sorority membership. The best candidates were as light as or lighter than the hue of a brown paper bag, ruler, or other inanimate object brought to life with the task of adjudicating ethnic acceptance.¹¹²

While many reject records of this type of discrimination as complexion-lore, the fact is these histories, whether myth or otherwise, have a powerful and far-reaching impact on the African American intraracial climate. Rather than focusing on the origin of the Brown Paper Bag tests or their meaning, which in essence is to provide a color marker for social exclusion or inclusion, I am more concerned with the function of those tests and how they manifest in the lives of mixed-race figures in African American literature from Post-Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance. That is, I am chiefly concerned with the ways in which these types of complexion-lore have helped establish black American standards of beauty and created a culture of social elitism for lighter-skinned blacks since the Post-Reconstruction period. Much of the literature represented in this chapter exposes complexion-lore and uses it as a basis for mixed-race characters to exploit the hierarchical nature of race in American history and thus giving rise to a bi-racial middle class in African American fiction. No doubt, that exploitation has had a lasting impact on

¹¹² Jarrett L. Carter “Bringing Back the Brown Paper Bag Test to HBCUs” *The Huffington Post* (Posted: 04/11/2013 1:03 pm EDT Updated: 06/11/2013 5:12 am EDT).

intra-racial race relations in the black community. Still, African American authors have had much success in bringing this color problem to our attention through their literary depictions of the Blue Vein Society and those who endeavored to depict a better class of black people than literature has previously allowed. Zona Gayle notes the significance of these illustrations in the introduction to Jessie Redmon Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree*:

For a long time American readers have wondered why so little attention has been given to one particular class of Americans. Group after group has entered fiction—the New Englander, educated and uneducated, the Southerner, the Middle Westerner, the Canadian, developed or primitive; yet wherever the American Negro has appeared in fiction, only the uneducated Negro has been pictured.¹¹³

Here, I respond to that sentiment by exploring the literary depictions of the black aristocracy—that class of “black” people that are considered inherently better because of their education, employment, and economic statuses, all of which they have access to because of their fairer skin color. In an earlier novel when Fauset writes, “This was a curious business, this colour. It was the one god apparently to whom you could sacrifice everything.” She effectively summarizes the impact of color on American life. Many authors, including those who did not write traditional passing novels, dedicated themselves to understanding and criticizing race relations in America, often using a bi-racial figure in order to upset essentialist representations of “black” and white in American literature.

This final chapter echoes the primary premise of the dissertation in that it explores a subgroup of “that middle world” in order to capture a fuller picture of characters of mixed status across the 19th and 20th centuries. It explores literary depictions of the rise of the “black”—or perhaps more accurately, the mixed-race—middle class as bourgeois-

¹¹³ Zona Gayle, “Introduction” *The Chinaberry Tree* (New York: Dover Publications, 2013), vii.

strivers. It studies “that middle world” as a distinctive space in which these characters employ strategies of respectability as a means to simultaneously distinguish themselves from larger black society and to gain respect from white society. To be sure, this chapter examines a subset of the mixed-race world that embraces those who may not pass for white, but who remain deliberately disconnected from other blacks. Therefore, this chapter, like Michele Elam’s *The Souls of Mixed-Folk*, examines the “cultural invention” of the mixed race in African American literature. Indeed, it uses it as a foundation to examine the Blue Veins’ need to create a space in which a viable mixed-race community could exist. Around the turn of the century author, essayist, and political activist, Chesnutt published a collection of short stories (*The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, 1899) that centered bi-racial characters in a struggle over definition and representation of their mixed race heritage. Similarly, between the early 1920s and the early 1930s, writer and literary editor, Fauset published four novels with that same focus. Their stories captured what social scientists would now call *pigmentocracy*—which describes societies in which wealth and social status are determined by skin color. More specifically, it describes a system of privilege under which lighter-skinned people have higher social and economic statuses than do their darker-skinned counterparts. Much of Chesnutt and Fauset’s fiction highlights such a system. These stories in particular are firmly rooted in complexion legends and attempts to offer ways in which these characters could employ strategies of white respectability in order to be valued and accepted by white America. These stories underscored “the belief that there is intrinsic value in the ability to blur the boundaries that signify blackness.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Audrey Elisa Kerr “The Brown Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism, *The Journal of*

In this chapter I consider Chesnutt's short stories "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle" in the late 19th century and Fauset's New Negro Renaissance publication *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) in an effort to explore the social complications facing those we might call the black elite. This chapter is dedicated to understanding the authors' exploration of the politics of skin color and color consciousness. Consequently, I hope to drastically alter how the academy appreciates the development of the passing narrative and how African American writers have transformed the mixed-race figure over time. The goal here is to prove the lasting impression of skin color politics on social classes even well after chattel slavery ended in America, or as Harriet Wilson so poignantly puts it, "Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There."¹¹⁵

Pencils and Brown Paper Bags: Schooling, Skin Privilege, and the Mixed-Race Figure

There are some aspects of social life that even the legacies of the brown paper bag tests cannot overcome. Jessie Fauset lived this truth from a young age. Born in 1882, Fauset was the youngest of seven children. As a child she attended an integrated school in Philadelphia. Because the city has abolished racial segregation in 1881, Fauset was in the unique position to learn alongside her white counterparts, winning admission to the prestigious Philadelphia Girl's High School. She was the only African American in her class. Later, she enrolled in an all-white high school, where her classmates largely ignored her. Nevertheless, Fauset graduated valedictorian from her high school. Customarily, the person who achieved this honor was awarded a scholarship to Bryn Mawr College. However, the college did everything to discourage her application and

American Folklore (University of Illinois Press: Vol. 118, No. 469, Summer 2005), 271.

¹¹⁵ Harriet E. Wilson. *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (Penguin Classics, 2010).

enrollment. Fauset received a scholarship to attend Cornell University where she was prohibited from living in on-campus housing. Despite this, Fauset excelled in the rigorous academic setting and ultimately earning a bachelor's degree from Cornell with high honors, becoming arguably the first African American woman to be elected to the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Upon completion of her degree, Fauset returned to the place where her academic journey began—Philadelphia. She had hope to become a teacher there; however, she was denied a position, leading one reporter to write, “A Negro girl wins high honors in our high school, wins scholarship to Cornell, graduates with honors and returns to her native city, but finds the door to our high school shut. This is the Negro Problem.”¹¹⁶

Many who read Fauset's work have but a partial view of her objectives, often reading her as someone who is completely removed from black America. The only full-length biography on Fauset acknowledges and attempts to correct this shortsightedness:

Her work has been said to reflect respectable, proper, educated, imitation-white values and goals of the elite Black American, divorced from the Black masses and from the wealth of folk art which is nourished by and nourishes those masses. These commonly held views of Fauset's life and work are selective, incomplete, and unfair.¹¹⁷

Indeed, Sylvander's project is a bit of a rescue mission, as she attempts the large project of revising the academy's readings of the woman who Langston Hughes called one of “three people who midwived the so-called New Negro Literature into being.” Certainly, she is no stranger to being ostracized, even if she was responsible for launching the careers of many black writers whose name are much better known than hers. Her journey toward the black elite status, which was rooted in education, was not without hardship.

¹¹⁶ The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, No. 37 (Autumn, 2002), p. 1

¹¹⁷ Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980).

Absolutely, education is often the marker of difference—it is a signifier of elevated social/class status. For Fauset, her education was both a signifier of both exclusion and inclusion, thus much of her fiction examines the difficulties of black middle class life. Contrary to what many scholars believed, Fauset grew up poor—the daughter of minister who taught her and her nine siblings to aspire to achieve a cultured life through education. “That Fauset chose to write novels about the difficulties of black middle class women is attributed to her attempts to establish a unity between writing and living.”¹¹⁸ She was not the first to attempt this project of exploring the black middle class in literature, or what she called “the complex of color.” Perhaps most notably, her elder, Charles W. Chesnutt, illustrates these unique struggles throughout much of his fiction. Indeed, his literary career begins when Fauset is still in grade school and spans across the historical periods and well into the twentieth century.

As an author, essayist, and political activist, Charles W. Chesnutt chose to defend issues that greatly affected his personal life. Chesnutt's stories were often considered more intricate than those of many of his contemporaries. However, he was often criticized for his portrayal of class differences between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned characters. Chesnutt producing works within a different political landscape that Fauset, of course. His characters tend to cope with difficult issues, surrounding racial identity and often made more complex by the black laws, such as of miscegenation or race mixing, "passing," and illegitimacy. The specific ways in which his bi-racial characters chose to identify became the avenue through which his characters could help

¹¹⁸ Nellie McKay, Review of *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer* by Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, *African American Review* (Indiana State University: Black American Literature Forum), Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer, 1981), 76-77.

determine their social statuses. Although the struggle for upward mobility was not unique to any person of color in Reconstruction or Post-Reconstruction America, certain issues concerning class status were especially pressing in the social unpredictability of the post Civil War environment, as whites in the South tried to drive all people with any African ancestry into one lower caste. For his part, Chesnutt addressed this and other issues of racial discrimination head-on. In a speech delivered in 1905 to the Boston Historical and Literary Association and later published as an essay entitled "Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Its Cure," Chesnutt imagined a "stone by stone" dismantling of race animosity as the black middle class grew and prospered:

These were the causes of race antagonism. Where lies the remedy? It lies in the removal of the antagonisms by the removal of the causes which gave rise to them. The instinct of antagonism will disappear as the characteristics that called it into play are modified; in other words, as the structure was built up beam by beam, stone by stone, so it must be torn down stone by stone, beam by beam. There is no magic wand which can be waved to make it vanish. (86)

Toward that end, he made it his social and literary mission to remedy the so-called Negro Problem, and his mixed-race figures were the perfect vehicle through which he could imagine resolutions. In several of his short stories from *The Wife of His Youth*, Chesnutt allows his characters to experience the various extremes of being persons of color.

Through his diverse representations of black whether that be the mixed-race character or what he termed the "genuine Negro," Chesnutt examines hardships that come along with being socially assigned a race (especially a race that has been relegated to the bottom of the racial order) and the questions that accompany said assignment. Indeed, the bi-racial character could contend with the problems of the so-called color line differently than could those who are considered wholly part of a particular race. That is, characters of

mixed status employed certain strategies in order to be read in a socially respectable way. Chesnutt's representations of the Blue Vein Societies are indeed responses "to the real question, how does it feel to be a problem?"¹¹⁹

Historically, there has often been a question as to whether inherent inferiority or superiority exists across racial lines. It can be rather easily argued that the idea of white superiority has existed in North America since its "founding." Not only is that notion vital to maintaining constructed national identity, but also it is historically viewed among many whites as necessary to preserve the "purity" of the white race. To that end, it has been key to the history of America and its future that the lines, which divide freedom and possibility from confinement and degradation—that is, white from black—be clearly drawn and adhered to. And, where there is a threat to maintaining white superiority, so too is there a threat to the Republic itself. The bi-racial figure, in many ways, represents that threat.

As the mixed-race figure became a stock character in American fiction it introduced white audiences to the possibility that race mixing—a direct result of the rampant rape culture that chattel slavery permitted and, at times, seemed to encourage—was no longer controllable by the white ruling class. Rather, it was a consequence that was born out of slavery and reared in Reconstruction. Naturally, the literature begins to depict such occurrences, but rather than focusing on interracial couples¹²⁰ the way the law and literature has previously done, there was a shift in focus toward the bi-racial descendants of those interracial couples. With the rise of these literary depictions authors presented various extremes of the mixed-race figure's attempts to navigate race and space

¹¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bartleby, 1999), 5.

¹²⁰ My use of the term "couples" here is not necessarily meant to denote two adults consenting to a relationship.

in America, from racial crossing/passing to the establishment of bi-racial communities that emerged with illustrations of the Blue Vein Society and other middle class “black” characters. These depictions became the springboard for conversations surrounding the politics of skin color in black America.

**The Few, The Proud, and The New:
Black Writers, Blue Veins, and a New South**

The political climate in which Chesnutt is publishing is ripe with racial conflict. Therefore, he knew all too well what it meant to be an African American thinker and writer in an America fraught with racial disharmony—a tension that was never too far from his reach. In understanding the conceptual framework of Chesnutt’s various depictions of black(ness), specifically characters or mixed status in America during Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction, one must consider the role of the Southern white male as a thematic element in his works. With political leaders proclaiming, “There is a New South, not through protest against the Old, but because of new conditions, new adjustments and, if you please, new ideas and aspirations,”¹²¹ Chesnutt is convinced that the South is the perfect backdrop for his fiction, as it provides ample space for experiments on the advancement of people of color. In centering the mixed-race figure, his fiction exposes the idea of intraracial advantage systems, which cast a deep shadow on the so-called Negro Problem. By revealing the color problem within the black community, Chesnutt also exposes the southern white male consciousness that created this dynamic. It is this Post-Reconstruction mentality that demands for the distinctions of race and therefore for the marginalization of all nonwhite members of society. Chesnutt’s

¹²¹ Henry W. Grady, “In Plain Black and White.” *Century Magazine* Apr. 1885. Rpt. *History of Ideas*. U of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 2006.

turn-of-the-century collection of short stories examines his ideas on race; while the speech he delivers six years later reveals his view on the role of the South in race relations:

The southern states in attempting to perpetuate the color line, are trying to do the impossible, and I for one do not wish to encourage them for one moment by accepting their views any further than they can compel their acceptance by force. Race prejudice will not perhaps entirely disappear until the difference of color shall have disappeared, or at least until all of us, white and Colored, shall have resolutely shut our eyes to those differences and shall have learned to judge men by other standards.¹²²

Chesnutt believed that the problem of the color and, by extension the color line, could fix itself over time if only people would allow it. That is, it was his belief that policing the boundaries of race was unnatural because as the intermingling of races continued to occur a new race would emerge—one that was neither black nor white, thus eliminating the color line and, hopefully, race prejudice. It was an idea that he expressed time and time again in his many essays on “The Future American.” This was an idea that the South feared and rejected.

In many respects, given its history, the South is considered a land apart from the nation, although it is indeed very much a part of America, especially economically. In “The Ideology of White Supremacy,” James W. Zanden asserts:

Perhaps no American region possesses greater internal diversity than the South in historical background, geography, cultural composition, economic outlook and political and social structure. Still pervading the whole, there has been an inner cohesiveness which has given the Southland its distinctive way of life. And central to this way of life in one way or another has always been the Negro (385).

This picture is reminiscent of renowned orator, journalist, and “Spokesman of the New

¹²² Charles W. Chesnutt, “Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Its Cure.” *Alexander’s Magazine* July 15, 1905. Rpt. in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Selected Writings*. Ed. SallyAnn H. Ferguson. (Boston: Houghton, 2001), 92.

South,” Henry Grady’s vision of the changing southern landscape. Perhaps of all his roles, none was more influential than his position as editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*. The *Atlanta Constitution* had been the voice of the South, even in recent history. As of 2001, the *Atlanta Constitution*, first published on June 16, 1868, and the *Atlanta Journal*, which debuted on February 24, 1883, combined and are currently published daily under a joint masthead. According to its website, The *Journal-Constitution* is the largest daily newspaper in the Southeast, with an average daily circulation of 640,000. As the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Grady was the leading proponent of a “New South;” therefore, his ideas regarding the situation were undoubtedly widely endorsed across the region. Given his tremendous influence, he was in a position to convey his ideas surrounding the New South in areas of the North as well. One of his speeches, given in New York in 1886, conveyed his fierce regional pride and his general position on racial issues, as well as the message of industrialization as a panacea. Grady believed his philosophies surrounding the New South were ideal for establishing “a fuller independence for the South than that which our fathers sought to win in the forum by their eloquence or compel on the field by their swords.” (“The New South” 15). In the speech, Grady expresses the benefits to everyone in the South and then questions, “But what of the Negro? Have we solved the problem he presents or progressed in honor and equity towards the solution?” (16). Here he reveals the southern white male attitudes and concerns precipitate racial stratification, which still impacts people of color in America today. It has marked employment, housing, education, and government since Grady’s New South:

Let the record speak to the point. No section shows a more prosperous laboring population than the Negroes of the South, none in fuller

sympathy with the employing and land-owning class. He shares our school fund, has the fullest protection of our laws and the friendship of our people. Self-interest, as well as honor, demand that he should have this. Our future, our very existence depend upon our working out this problem in full and exact justice. (16)

Indeed, although formal racial discrimination was largely banned in the mid-20th century, it has reinvented itself in the form of institutional racism, which birthed affirmative action. While, by and large, it is considered socially unacceptable and/or morally repugnant, the effects are lasting, and racial politics remains a major spectacle. For his part, Grady was determined to present a picture of blacks in the South that suggested blacks were content with their jobs and were eager laborers, even if relegated to a lower caste.

Grady, a staunch believer in white supremacy, was hell-bent on establishing a new South that exploited blacks in order to secure northern investment in Atlanta industry. He shifted his focus toward promoting the city's economic development, which was overly reliant on the black working class. So, when he was invited to speak at the 1886 meeting of the New England Society in New York City, Grady introduced the promises of a New South. When he returned Atlanta he published several articles in the *Constitution* declaring Atlanta's superiority because of its diversified small industry and "willing" labor force. His philosophies were not universally accepted though. He was criticized for apparently acquiescing Georgia to northern interests and oppressing farmers. Consequently, farmers ignored Grady's advice to raise other crops alongside cotton for additional revenue. Perhaps just as damaging, Grady also struggled to portray a benign racial climate for northerners interested in southern industrial investment but disturbed by the region's oppressive racial system. In numerous *Constitution* editorials

Grady claimed that African Americans enjoyed "fair treatment" in Georgia and throughout the South. In his speech to the north he declared:

The relations of the Southern people with the negro are close and cordial. We remember with what fidelity for four years he guarded our defenseless women and children, whose mothers and fathers were fighting against his freedom. To his eternal credit be it said that whenever he struck a blow for his own liberty he fought in open battle, and when at last he raised his black and humble hands that the shackles may be struck off, those hands were innocent of wrong against his helpless charges, and worthy to be taken in loving grasp by every man who honors loyalty and devotion. Ruffians have maltreated him, rascals have misled him, philanthropists established a bank for him, but the South, with the North, protects against injustice to this simple and sincere people. To liberty and enfranchisement is as far as the law can carry the negro. The rest must be left to the conscience and common sense. It must be left to those among whom his lot is cast, with whom he is indissolubly connected, and whose prosperity depends upon their possessing his intelligent sympathy and confidence.
(17)

While this rhetoric pleased white southern readers, few northern reformers could overlook the region's record of black disenfranchisement, exploitation, and violence.

Chesnutt's fiction highlights the impact of political platforms such as Grady's, which encouraged the disparagement of blacks in the South. His stories present the complicated mixed-race body as the manifestation of America's wrongdoings against people of color, as well as a solution to America's race problem. Much of it demonstrates that a person of color who was concerned with the acquisition of power, wealth, and the pursuit of learning—or as Fauset would later describe it, a person "who has any ambition"—must have been deemed a "“good citizen”" with a preponderance of "white blood" thus constituting a person white and therefore giving her or him all of the privileges of being white. Because a person who is deemed a "genuine Negro," and those socially described as white had clearly defined places in society, arguably persons of mixed status were the targets for certain laws. However, bi-racial characters in Chesnutt's

fiction demonstrate that their opportunities for advancement greatly depended on their willingness to adopt or employ a white value system, as well as on their willingness to dissociate from other blacks. He examines the pernicious effects of slavery and Reconstruction and the role of Southern white male consciousness in the relegation of blacks in “The Web of Circumstance” and the effects that that consciousness has on characters of mixed-status in “The Sheriff’s Children.” These are stories in which Chesnutt brilliantly exposes America’s complex racial climate, while still maintaining his allegiance to the ideas of the possibility of the upward mobility of “blacks” if they had not been confined by the disabilities of their color—that is, if they were fair-skinned.

In “The Web of Circumstance,” Chesnutt tells the story of Ben Davis, a “colored” blacksmith—with “his good-looking yellow wife” (150)—that has aspirations of owning property for in his estimation, “I tell yer dere ain’ nothin’ like propputy ter make a pusson feel like a man” (150). Davis’ dreams of owning land were accompanied by a hard work ethic, an excellent character and a sense of responsibility to educate his fellow blacks. He cautions them, “‘An’ ef you niggers would stop wastin’ yo’ money on ‘scursions to put money in w’ite folks’ pockets, an’ stop buildin’ fine chu’ches, an’ buil’ houses fer yo’selves, you ‘d git along much faster’” (150). His white counterparts agree, “‘You ‘re talkin’ sense, Ben,’” said one of the white men. “‘Yo’r people will never be respected till they ‘ve got property’” (150). This comment solidifies Davis’ goals. He has children, “a slender, shapely boy, yellow like his mother, a girl several years younger, dark like her father: both bright-looking children and neatly dressed” (150), for whom he works tirelessly to offer a life wherein their father owns his property. He is respected—as respected as a black man could be during Reconstruction in America—by his white counterparts, all of

whom would vouch for the goodness of his character. However, true to Chesnutt fashion, Davis would be rebuffed as a web of circumstances lands him in the penitentiary for a crime he did not commit as “*Men might lie, but circumstances cannot*” (Emphasis mine; 150).

Davis’s dreams are modest by current standards, but lofty during Reconstruction. Yet the ideas that his dreams represent transcend time. Where Davis begins as a man with high ambitions and works hard to ensure the likelihood of realizing them, he is transformed. Initially, he is a man on a mission for stability:

I 've got a monst'us good appetite ter-day. I feels good, too. I paid Majah Ransom de intrus' on de mortgage dis mawnin' an' a hund'ed dollahs besides, an' I spec's ter hab de balance ready by de fust of nex' Jiniwary; an' den we won't owe nobody a cent.

Davis is driven to self-sufficiency in a way that is laudable, if atypical of many other blacks as they are typically presented in American literature. His goals of financial independence are always on his mind and he disciplines himself accordingly, often challenging others to take similar steps and criticizing them when they do not. However, he is quickly warped by life and the declaration of a judge aptly named Judge Hart.

Ben Davis, you have been convicted of larceny, after a fair trial before twelve *good* men of this county. Under the testimony, there can be no doubt of your guilt. The case is an aggravated one. You are not an ignorant, shiftless fellow, but a man of more than ordinary intelligence among your people, and one who ought to know better. You have not even the poor excuse of having stolen to satisfy hunger or a physical appetite. Your conduct is wholly without excuse, and I can only regard your crime as the result of a tendency to offenses of this nature, a tendency which is only too common among your people; a tendency which is a menace to civilization, a menace to society itself, *for society rests upon the sacred right of property* [. . .] The law, largely, I think, in view of the peculiar circumstances of your unfortunate race, has vested a large discretion in courts as to the extent of the punishment for offenses of this kind. Taking your case as a whole, I am convinced that it is one which, for the sake of the example, deserves a severe punishment. Nevertheless, I do not feel

disposed to give you the full extent of the law, which would be twenty years in the penitentiary,¹²³ but, considering the fact that you have a family, and have heretofore borne a good reputation in the community, I will impose upon you the light sentence of imprisonment for five years in the penitentiary at hard labor. And I hope that this will be a warning to you and others who may be similarly disposed, and that after your sentence has expired you may lead the life of a law-abiding citizen. (Emphasis mine 152)

That Judge Hart exposes in open court what white men think of black men is telling of the racial climate that the characters are facing. No doubt, Chesnutt is revealing and enshrining the world outside the literature in the minds of readers. Hart's paradoxical declaration that "society rests upon the sacred right of property" is an irony that Chesnutt dares us to interrogate. On the one hand, Hart's statement here is true. Indeed, it is Davis's pursuit too, as he understands this to be reality. However, Davis does not necessarily view property in the same way that Hart and the other white characters do. He went from desiring to own property to becoming the "property" of the government as a prisoner. In this way, Chesnutt introduces us to the making of the black "criminal" in American fiction. Even Hart's name presents readers with a double entendre: he attempts to display his heart in claiming to have spared Davis from a harsher sentence; however, the reader sees that he has no heart in that he is punishing a man for a crime that he did not commit. Chesnutt is careful here to mention the fact that before the verdict was announced, "the business of the court seemed to have halted by tacit consent" (151). The subtlety with which Chesnutt reveals the notions of "tacit consent" is ingenious, for he demonstrates how the spectacle of black punishment is all too contingent upon the

¹²³ Chesnutt's footnote here is "There *Tradition* are no degrees of larceny in North Carolina, and the penalty for any offense lies in the discretion of the judge, to the limit of twenty years."

endorsement of the spectators. Only when that consent is abandoned for expressed rejection will there be a shift in the ways in which we perceive black criminality; then African Americans will be able to begin to rebound from the social repercussions of the so-called color line. Chesnutt reminds the reader:

Human character is a compound of tendencies inherited and habits acquired. In the anxiety, the fear of disgrace, spoke the nineteenth century civilization with which Ben Davis had been more or less closely in touch during twenty years of slavery and fifteen years of freedom. In the stolidity with which he received this sentence for a crime which he had not committed, spoke who knows what trait of inherited savagery? For stoicism is a savage virtue. (152)

Chesnutt's caution that "stoicism is a savage virtue" lets us know that it is everyone's duty to modify our perceptions of blacks in America. Those who remain quiet are tacitly consenting to those stereotypes that marginalize people of color in America. Arguably, given the ways in which race matters have been handled in America, the larger black community could echo Davis's feelings after his conviction and during his sentencing—those are feelings of dissipated hope:

When hope took flight, its place was not long vacant. Despair followed, and black hatred of all mankind, hatred especially of the man to whom he attributed all his misfortunes. One who is suffering unjustly is not apt to indulge in fine abstractions, nor to balance probabilities. By long brooding over his wrongs, his mind became, if not unsettled, at least warped, and he imagined that Colonel Thornton had deliberately set a trap into which he had fallen. (152)

Davis would eventually reason "himself into the belief that he represented in his person the accumulated wrongs of a whole race, and Colonel Thornton the race who had oppressed them" (152). This misrepresentation causes a "burning desire for revenge which sprang up in him, and he nursed it until his sentence expired and he was set at

liberty. What he had learned since reaching home had changed his desire into a deadly purpose” (152). This is a somewhat conventional response to oppression.

Chesnutt’s commentary on southern white male consciousness is forthright in both his fiction and his nonfiction. In a letter dated February 10, 1932, to Walter F. White, Chesnutt states, “I freely admit that I am prejudiced against Southerners in all matters involving questions of race. Their attitude toward the inviolability of their race, in spite of visible and increasing evidence to the contrary, is like that of a devout Catholic to the infallibility of the pope” (*Exemplary* 294). He writes with overwhelming conviction about the race relations and in particular the culture of the southern white male. His open debates with the oppressing class are informative and concerning considering his depictions of the white race in his short stories. For instance, he openly criticizes Grady’s attitude toward blacks, yet his depiction of darker-skinned black characters can be grossly misinterpreted as inferior to those of mixed-status—those closer in hue (and, in his estimation, bloodline) to white.

Grady, who for all intents and purposes was the spokesperson for southern white America, was the strongest proponent of the New South, and, therefore he was very direct in his discussions of the blacks in the South. In his article “In Plain Black and White: A Reply to Mr. Cable,” Grady provides a complete justification of the Jim Crow system. In fact, Grady felt it the duty of the South to decide the fate of blacks. In his article that was published in *The Century Magazine* Grady proclaims, “The South has something to say which she can say with confidence. There is no longer impropriety in her speaking or lack of weight in her words. The people of the United States have, by

their suffrages, remitted to the Southern people, temporarily at least, control of the race question.” The lessons that follow are but Grady’s way of declaring white supremacy:

Let it be understood in the beginning, then, that the South will never adopt Mr. Cable's suggestion of the social intermingling of the races. It can never be driven into accepting it. So far from there being a growing sentiment in the South in favor of the indiscriminate mixing of the races, the intelligence of both races is moving farther from that proposition day by day. It is more impossible (if I may shade a superlative) now than it was ten years ago; it will be less possible ten years hence. Neither race wants it. The interest, as the inclination, of both races is against it. Here the issue with Mr. Cable is made up. He denounces any assortment of the races as unjust and demands that white and black shall intermingle everywhere. The South replies that the assortment of the races is wise and proper, and stands on the platform of equal accommodation for each race, but separate. The difference is an essential one. Deplore or defend it as we may, an antagonism is bred between the races when they are forced into mixed assemblages. This sinks out of sight, if not out of existence, when each race moves in its own sphere. Mr. Cable admits this feeling, but doubts that it is instinctive. In my opinion it is instinctive—deeper than prejudice or pride, and bred in the bone and blood. It would make itself felt even in sections where popular prejudice runs counter to its manifestation.

That Grady offers this “separate but equal” language in his publication more than ten years before it was codified into law with the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, suggests what Chesnutt already knew to be true: social custom dictates, influences, anticipates, and at times, supersedes the law. It is this type of southern white male ideology that Chesnutt addresses in his depictions of white characters. For Davis, this philosophy, which, to be sure, advocates white supremacy that saw him wrongly imprisoned. When a person has been persecuted and she or he has to struggle back to consciousness there is likelihood of confrontational reaction in the meantime. Such an idea is not uncommon in stories such as these. Indeed, Chesnutt likely wants readers to white readers to consider their role in that conflict. Take, for example, the social implications in “The Sheriff’s Children.”

“The Sheriff’s Children” is the story of “a strange mulatto man” (28) being charged with the murder of a local hero. It implies, in Chesnutian terms, that no measure of “white blood” is sufficient to remove this man’s burden of proof. Although the town would contend that “Other circumstances seemed to connect the stranger to the crime” (28), the fact is that there was a need to solve a crime and a black man (although bi-racial viewed as black nonetheless) presented an opportunity for conviction. Conviction in this case would serve a dual purpose; it would reassure the community of the town’s safety and concretize the community’s preconceptions of black peoples’ propensity toward crime. When the sheriff, a white man, discovers that the alleged killer is actually his biological son, the sheriff feels a sense of responsibility to him. He wonders to himself if the young man’s life would have produced better outcomes had he been an involved parent. Here Chesnut presents an interesting dynamic. Although, the sheriff honorably attempts to save his son’s life, the sad fact is that had the sheriff taken care of his son; there would not likely have been any change in the community’s attitudes toward people of color. However, Chesnut does wish for the reader to investigate the responsibilities that white parents have to their “black” children. He suggests in an 1889 essay that most bi-racial children should be legally and socially defined as a white. Throughout *The Wife of His Youth*, Chesnut repeatedly unveils the nation’s hypocrisy in claiming social equality among the races while continually embracing the fierce system of segregation that characterized nation at that time. His fiction, essays, and speeches all have a common theme—the idea that mixed-race people are the future American, and they would likely be the ones to help white America realize the fallacy inherent in race laws.

The Great White Hope: Strategies of Respectability and the Rise of a Black Middle Class in African American Fiction

By the turn of the century and into the early 1920s and 1930s many black writers began to use the bi-racial figure capture questions of racial identity against the backdrop of a tranquil suburban life. Much of the fiction on the topic unearths the great white hope that rumbles beneath the calm façade—the hope that the characters of mixed-status could achieve certain levels of respectability. What they found is that their relatively dark skin came with a set of expectations that white America was not willing to overlook. Their pain of being darker-skinned is rooted in American slavery and intensified with Reconstruction. Their response was to create a space in which a viable mixed race community could exist. Mary Beth Rogers sums up the history of this community:

The preferential treatment of lighter-skinned, mixed-race African Americans by whites had ‘laid the groundwork for a pattern of color classism in black America.’ It was the lighter-skinned African Americans who had the first opportunities for education and the benefits of freedom in post-Reconstruction America. Certain churches, neighborhoods, colleges, sororities and fraternities, social clubs, even political clubs, harbored a light-colored elite. At one time African Americans had their own "Blue Vein Society"; admission to this Nashville group depended on skin color. An applicant had to be fair enough for the spidery network of purplish veins at the wrist to be visible to a panel of expert judges.¹²⁴

Perhaps better than many of writers, Chesnutt demonstrates the development of these communities with his depictions of the Blue Vein Society and subsequent rise of a bi-racial middle class in American fiction. His characters reflect the full spectrum of the color line. Each of the stories here represents the challenges of race in a different yet familiar way. Throughout *The Wife of His Youth*, Chesnutt repeatedly unveils the nation's double standards in claiming social impartiality among the races while steadily

¹²⁴ Mary Beth Rogers, *Barbara Jordan: American Hero* (New York: Bantam Books

embracing the vicious system of segregation that characterized the North and the South at that time, which ultimately encourages the development of a distinctly separate mixed-race world. He illustrates the failure of race laws and the resulting social customs in his short stories “The Wife of His Youth” and “A Matter of Principle.” As he explores social injustices facing people of color, he magnifies the intraracial color classism through his depictions of the disparities in the dress, speech, class, and physical attributes between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.

Chesnutt’s short fiction employs all of the stereotypes associated with black America from dialect to dress and beyond. Indeed, he uses these elements in particular to establish a connection between skin color and respectability—the lighter a character’s skin, the more respect he should be due. To be sure, this ideology had already seen success in America with white-over-black energies that were reflected in social customs and codified in race laws. While his ultimate aim is different—he wanted racial equality—he understood what whites expected and decided to combat their expectations by presenting characters that looked like the very people who made the laws that were designed to restrict them. Some readers find his use of dialect both tough and upsetting. To his credit, his use of stylized vernacular is purposeful, if at times problematic. Despite the critiques, his works continue to enlighten and encourage, occupying a critical place in the American literary canon. Although some would consider the themes of racial passing and racial identity somewhat banal, Chesnutt uses these real-life stressors to create literature that transcends the pages. The weaving of these themes in particular has left an undeniable pattern on the fabric of America. One cannot read his short fiction without considering the role of the Blue Vein Society in contemporary American race relations,

particularly as the various problems of the color line in the black community and the birth of colorism, which gave way to infighting. So, Chesnutt contributes to expanding the boundaries of race in America through his depictions of the Blue Vein Society.

Chesnutt's portrayal of the Blue Vein Society in "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle" provide a shocking truth into the way in which characters of mixed-status felt they must assert themselves in society in Post-reconstruction America. These are among Chesnutt's most famous stories. Like many others, they tackle a major issue facing the black community—racial identity. And, these stories magnify an underlying concern in the African American community—colorism. Colorism, or discrimination that is based on the principle that a person's worth is directly related to skin color, valuing lighter hues over darker, has been a defining aspect of the black community since slavery in America. Certainly, it has survived. His representation of African Americans in "The Wife of His Youth" is a telling image of the impact of race on everyday life. The purpose of the Blue Vein Society is set forth at the outset of the story—"to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement" (5). The "condition" here is what this project calls the ability of color. That is, a character whose color does not betray her or him has limitless opportunities, if other aspects of their lives are deemed respectable according to white standards.

For those characters that did not cross the color line, the Blue Vein Society was a useful way in which to climb the social ladder. In so doing, it established distinction between separate groups of blacks: "Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins" (5). The

formation of the Blue Vein Society as a black elitist organization arguably perpetuates the issues of colorism in the African American community at large. But better still, literature that focuses on the black elites in a post Civil War milieu forces whites to continually reevaluate their criteria for establishing wealth and power. Obiagele Lake contends hierarchies of color exist in black America because of tensions that result from race mixing. To be sure, she argues, “The fact that blue-veinism was so widespread throughout the United States concerned many African Americans who viewed color consciousness as a vector that separated African Americans at a time when solidarity was most needed” (Lake 52). The mixed-race figure, then, provides a space for, among many other things, darker-skinned African Americans to challenge the legacy of economic advantage that creates a particular kind of divisiveness in the African American community. Indeed, these characters simultaneously reflect a blemish on the face of black America and the hope of possibility for a racially unified America.

The Blue Veins established this entity for themselves and to avoid the marginalization apparent among darker-skinned blacks. The Blue Vein Society itself serves as merely a magnifying glass for the issues surrounding the colorism. In “The Wife of His Youth,” Chesnutt tells the story of Mr. Ryder, who “might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins” (5), and his position in the community that was afforded him because of the color of his skin. When he was young, however, he had been married. Because ““she [was] much older than he; that he was light, and she was black; that their marriage was a slave marriage, and legally binding only if they chose to make it so after the war,”” (5) he decided to avail himself of the benefit of his skin color. Some Blue Veins are aware that their skin color affords them greater possibility. Although Mr. Ryder

cannot control his skin color, he definitely benefits as a result of it. He is clear in his motive for moving to the North. He describes his reasons during the banquet hoping to gain sympathy from his audience: “[He] made his way to the North, as some of us have done, and there, where he had larger opportunities, had improved them, and had in the course of all these years grown to be as different from the ignorant boy who ran away from fear of slavery as the day is from the night” (6). Mr. Ryder ‘improved’ himself with his relocation, demonstrating that success depends as much on skin as it does on location. Certainly, no one would fault him for having ambition; however, Chesnutt’s word choice here is as striking as the events themselves. If not for the presuppositions of the Blue Veins as it relates to darker-skinned blacks, there would be no need to seek their sympathy or approval for his decision to choose the darker-skinned wife of his youth, ‘Liza Jane.

Chesnutt reveals the complexities of color with the interactions of the characters, specifically Mr. Ryder and ‘Liza Jane. The Blue Veins—“the society consisted of individuals who were, generally speaking, more white than black” (5)—tend to presuppose only a small measure of ability among darker-skinned blacks. The narrator’s description of ‘Liza Jane gives insight into to the way darker skinned blacks are viewed by the Blue Veins:

She was a little woman, not five feet tall, and proportioned to her height. Although she stood erect, and looked around her with very bright and restless eyes, she seemed quite old; for her face was crossed and recrossed with a hundred wrinkles, and around the edges of her bonnet could be seen protruding here and there a tuft of short gray wool. She wore a blue calico gown of ancient cut, a little red shawl fastened around her shoulders with an old-fashioned brass brooch, and a large bonnet profusely ornamented with faded red and yellow artificial flowers. And she was very black—so black that her toothless gums, revealed when she opened her mouth to speak, were not red, but blue. She looked like a bit of the old plantation

life, summoned up from the past by the wave of a magician's wand, as the poet's fancy had called into being the gracious shapes of which Mr. Ryder had just been reading. (6)

The depiction of 'Liza Jane reflects the way darker-skinned African Americans have been viewed since slavery and why there was a push for whites to view lighter-skinned blacks differently. While one could argue that the description does not necessarily reflect Mr. Ryder's personal feelings, the language itself is most significant. Why is Mrs. Dixon, the widow, still referred to as "Mrs." while 'Liza Jane is neither given the respect of a prefix nor her surname? This distinction may reflect racist aspects of naming occurring in slavery, also. Moreover, the fact that 'Liza Jane speaks in dialect can be viewed as yet another example of white America's view of the lowest of the lower class. The disparity between the speech of 'Liza Jane and Mr. Ryder sends a clear message of the Blue Veins considering themselves a black aristocracy of sorts. That 'Liza speaks in dialect when approaching a relative stranger rather than speaking Standard American English—that is indicative of a particular class status—suggests that she, perhaps because of her hue, is unable to do so. While one could reasonably argue that Mr. Ryder's dignified response may have simply been Chesnutt's attempt to create contrast, the dramatic distinction suggests an even more sociopolitical objective. It suggests that white America is expecting a particular type of black person and anything other than a belittling of the darker-skinned blacks would not likely be plausible, or perhaps more to the point, successful in the print sphere. It might have resulted in rejection for publication, in much the same way that Chesnutt experienced with his 1890s attempt to publish a novel about an assertive mixed-race woman protagonist in *Mandy Oxendine*. Consequently, that novel was rejected, likely because America could not imagine a bi-

racial woman protagonist that was not at all sentimental in Post-Reconstruction America. Indeed, it was not until Chesnutt gave readers a similar male protagonist in *House Behind the Cedars* that he would see literary success. The former novel was not made available in print until the late 20th century. So, Chesnutt knew all too well the politics of the print sphere. That ‘Liza Jane cannot employ the basic grammatical rules of speech likely appeases the print sphere while creating a clear distinction between blacks of different color extremes:

He rose from his chair and came over to where she stood.

“Good-afternoon, madam,” he said.

“Good-evenin', suh,” she answered, ducking suddenly with a quaint curtsy. Her voice was shrill and piping, but softened somewhat by age. “Is dis yere whar Mistuh Ryduh lib, suh?” she asked, looking around her doubtfully [. . .] .

"Yes," he replied, with an air of kindly patronage, unconsciously flattered by her manner, "I am Mr. Ryder. Did you want to see me?"

“Yas, sah, ef I ain’t ‘sturbin of you too much [. . .].” (7)

Although the Blue Veins contend that they “have no race prejudice,” the truth is there is a prejudice that they acknowledge within the society. Mr. Ryder, the “custodian of its standards” (6), maintains a barrier socially between himself and certain African Americans based on “complexions and callings in life” (8). He defends this position, expressing, “We people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black.” Mr. Ryder’s wish to describe Blue Veins as neither black nor white—but certainly not black—reflects a blemish on the face of black America. His assertion that ““the one doesn't want us yet, but may take us in time”” is wishful thinking at best. Nevertheless, it

does reveal that road toward cross white America. The author recognizes the limitations that are placed on darker-skinned blacks and the character hope to avoid the traps at all cost:

The other [dark-skinned blacks] would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step. With malice towards none, with charity for all, we must do the best we can for ourselves and those who are to follow us. Self-preservation is the first law of nature. (7)

If, in fact, self-preservation is the motivation, the black community at large is destined for extinction. “The Wife of His Youth,” arguably propagates colorism in the black community. However Chesnutt’s goal here is to encourage conversation among both races and he uses the mixed-race to do so, especially those character that are bi-racial. He illustrates many of the characteristics distinguishing the separate Blue Veins as positive qualities. For the reader, this method could, at first glance, subtly reinforce color divisions within the African American community. Despite ‘Liza Jane’s high moral character, the Blue Veins’ behaviors and mannerisms signify respectability while ‘Liza Jane’s do not. The narrator describes Mr. Ryder:

While he was not as white as some of the Blue Veins, his appearance was such as to confer distinction upon them. His features were of a refined type, his hair was almost straight; he was always neatly dressed; his manners were irreproachable, and his morals above suspicion. He had come to Groveland a young man [. . .]. (6)

Chesnutt’s description of Mr. Ryder suggests that the Blue Veins have a natural affinity toward success. Beyond the description of his features, Chesnutt specifically includes the fact that Mr. Ryder had procured “employment in the office of a railroad company as messenger had in time worked himself up” (6). Furthermore, Chesnutt points out the fact that “Although the lack of early training had hindered the orderly development of a naturally fine mind, it had not prevented him from doing a great deal of reading or from forming decidedly literary tastes” (6). For Chesnutt, these characteristics of the Blue

Veins are laudable and set them apart from other black characters. Chesnutt's belief that those of mixed status should be regarded in high esteem and are the manifestation of a new America extend beyond his fiction into his personal life. For example, on July 30, 1919, he writes to his married daughter Ethel Chesnutt Williams praising her for "displaying excellent judgment in buying yourself a home." He continues: "With all of [your] family earning money, you ought to get ahead rapidly and soon assume the rank of substantial citizens; not only intellectually and socially, but materially" (*Exemplary* 137).

In his essay "What Is a White Man?" Chesnutt fixates on the benefits the mulatto race should have according to Southern white law, he never dedicates time to unpacking the advantages the "genuine negro" should have. Also, in his short stories whenever a mixed-race character associates with a darker-skinned black character, there is some qualification for why this is and there is also an immediate "positive" impact on the darker-skinned character by association. For instance, 'Liza Jane goes from being described as wearing "a large bonnet profusely ornamented with faded red and yellow artificial flowers" (6), to being "neatly dressed in gray" (13). Perhaps it could be argued that 'Liza Jane's change of dress was in keeping with the events; however, in the essay "The White and the Black" (1901), Chesnutt advocates measures supporting development of "the Negro intellect, character, and capacity for development," finding "progress [. . .] on every hand—in culture, in character, in accumulation of property, and in the power of organization" (*Charles W. Chesnutt: Selected Writings*, ed. Ferguson 58). This provides further evidence that Chesnutt views Blue Veins as an avenue for advancement of people of color. Michael Parenti offers an appraisal of these types of American ideologies: "We [Americans] entertain notions about class, race, and gender relations, and about the

democratic distribution of power in a pluralistic society” (11). That is, modern American society represents the condition in which minority groups participate fully in the dominant society, yet attempt to maintain their cultural differences. In narratives that center bi-racial characters, this is an even greater experience in the black community as the minority group (fairer-skinned blacks) within the larger minority group (all of black America) attempts to become a part of the majority culture (white America) by defining themselves as anything other than black. Parenti argues that culture is more than just “the customs, values and accumulated practices of a society, including its language, art, laws, and religion. Such a definition has a nice neutral sound to it, but culture is anything but neutral. It is more than just our common heritage, the social glue of society” (11). His argument is appropriate for the central conflicts of “The Wife of His Youth” as the Blue Veins created a culture apart from black traditions in an effort to employ strategies of respectability for access to a white American way of life. Further, Parenti suggests, “Many customary standards operate to benefit particular people and disadvantage others. In other words, culture is often a cloak for privilege and inequity” (11). Indeed, the culture of the black aristocracy as Chesnutt employs it is but a vehicle for greater opportunity and that starts with mixed-race characters; this in part is what Parenti refers to as the “culture struggle.” Perhaps the most inspired of Parenti’s arguments, which can be so easily identified in many of Chesnutt’s short stories, deals with what Antonio Gramsci calls “*cultural hegemony*” and how society at large is indoctrinated into believing that the social rules which govern society are without flaw: “Much of what we call our “common culture” is really the selective transmission of elite-dominated values. A society built upon slave labor, for instance, swiftly develops a self-justifying

slaveholder culture with its own racist laws, science, mythology and religious preachments” (Parenti 16). The real matter at hand—the problematic categories of race—is not explicitly engaged. Chesnutt himself argued that the laws that define America’s racially mixed persons as black rendered white purity an arbitrary construct. His central message in “What Is a White Man?” urges one to “exalt humanity above race” (68), yet his mixed-race characters delight in defining themselves as anything of other than black. In *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, Walter Benn Michaels presents an ingenious assault on the human fixation with race, among other idiotic notions. Michaels assigns the problems of race to two central designations: race as defined biologically and race as defined socially. For him, the trouble with race is the distinction of race itself. He argues that the subject of the existence of race has shifted from biological to social—to be exact, “race has turned from a biological [fact] into a social fact” (Michaels 24). Michaels dismantles the biological and social constructs of race to find that each is both scientifically and socially non-existent. Among his chief concerns is the fact that the social perceptions that denote race are completely arbitrary. Michaels poses several questions that guide his ideas on the subject of “race.” “What is race if you get to belong to one without looking like you do, without feeling like you do, and without even knowing that you do?” (Michaels 23). For Chesnutt, it is this arbitrary distinction of race that causes his characters readily to define themselves as non-black, which Michaels contends is asinine. *The Trouble with Diversity* picks up where Chesnutt’s fiction requires it. It highlights the social repercussions for those fixated on racial matters, such as the Blue Veins. And, while Michaels is not engaging literary analysis here, his social and economic commentary is no less valuable

to understanding the scope of Chesnutt's *Blue Veins* in an America that feared their existence. Michaels insists "as it turns out we can't really distinguish between black people and white people (black blood and white blood) by invoking a genetic association" (Michaels 28). Chesnutt's characters, Mr. Ryder in "The Wife of His Youth" and Mr. Clayton in "A Matter of Principle," are attempting to do just that—use physical attributes to distinguish between black blood and white blood. Because blood is an organic factor in the establishment of "race," one cannot readily tell if a person is "black" without him or her otherwise indicating this. Otherwise, a person must be (socially) assigned a race either by behavior (Michaels calls this "racial instincts") or physical features (skin color and/or hair texture). Chesnutt's *Blue Veins* overlook the fact that what the American scientific and legal structure would later call the "One-drop Rule," "divides America into two groups—black and non-black" (Michaels 27). Among the chief concerns of the *Blue Veins* is the acquisition of power and wealth. Ironically, as Michaels notes, "But if blacks were at the bottom of the racial scale, their blood was in its own way the most powerful" (Michaels 27). The distinction or definition of race becomes even more important as race is what limits (darker) blacks. It is this relegation that Chesnutt's *Blue Veins* are attempting to avoid. We an even more distinct desire to avoid hindering associations with dark-skin blacks in "A Matter of Principle."

"A Matter of Principle" shares common themes with "The Wife of His Youth." In "The Absent Man," scholar Henry Wonham calls these similarities "clusters" (487). He contends that the clusters of stories allow the reader to "pursue thematic developments among significant" (487) works, in this case the theme of colorism. Given the prevailing racial attitudes of the time, Paul Petrie claims that Chesnutt "persistently

sought to alter the prevailing white cultural myths of race, deploying fiction as a tool against the intensifying Post-Reconstruction trend toward civil re-enslavement of black freedom” (183). He further argues that Chesnutt “set himself a task of using fiction to transform the hearts and minds of a politically powerful, elite white readership, upon whose conceptions of African Americans every possibility of civil and social reform depended” (187). Nonetheless, the fact remains that the shades of blackness that Chesnutt represents still concerned much of white America. While Chesnutt’s commentary on race is certainly based on personal experience—both of his grandfathers were white—he uses his fiction as a guidebook or collection of thought experiments concerning resolutions to the race problem. America’s preoccupation with defining race is not new, but rather long-standing. Since chattel slavery thread of discord has been sewn into the black community, a thread not unlike those woven throughout many of Chesnutt’s short stories. With each story, Chesnutt tugs at the threads of racial inequality in hopes of creating a new and more beautiful patchwork. In “A Matter of Principle” he boldly reveals how the mixed-race community’s aversion to blacks of darker complexions can be costly.

Chesnutt insightfully and often satirically reveals not only the difficulties racially mixed characters face, but also their intense prejudices against darkly shaded African Americans. “A Matter of Principle” tells the story of another Blue Vein, Mr. Clayton. Chesnutt feels the need to make a clear distinction upfront in this by defining Mr. Clayton as non-black before the story unfolds, “The fundamental article of Mr. Clayton's social creed was that he himself was not a Negro” (95). If we consider Chesnutt’s devotion to established full “American citizenship” for mixed-race people, then we can reasonably

suggest that he has a larger sociopolitical agenda here as well. The complex pedigree of some of his characters is understandable. Mr. Clayton is the epitome of this effort to redefine racial categories, or rather, to have none at all:

"I know [. . .] that the white people lump us all together as Negroes, and condemn us all to the same social ostracism. But I don't accept this classification, for my part, and I imagine that, as the chief party in interest, I have a right to my opinion. People who belong by half or more of their blood to the most virile and progressive race of modern times have as much right to call themselves white as others have to call them negroes." (95)

Mr. Clayton's presuppositions about dark-skinned blacks shape his thinking. His desire to define himself and others like him as something other than black transcends both time and literature. In a cry for self-definition and perhaps to avoid the social suicide or, more aptly, social homicide, Mr. Clayton attempts to determine his own racial category, despite how society might object: "If we are not accepted as white, we can at any rate make it clear that we object to being called black" (99). William L. Andrews aptly refers to this as "colorphobia" (113). Poignantly, Chesnutt's commiserates with his character. In a letter to Carl Van Vechten dated September 7, 1926, Chesnutt notes, "I sympathized even with the snobbery of my friend Mr. Clayton, which was based on sound reasoning, though it turned out unfortunately in the particular instance" (*Exemplary* 217). Some critics seem to understand his attempts to heal the racial divide, even if they did not appreciate all of his fiction. William Dean Howells contends that Chesnutt "does not paint the blacks all good, or the whites all bad. He paints them as slavery made them on both sides [. . .] in the very end he gives the moral victory to the blacks" (Howells

872)¹²⁵. The tangible yet still elusive victory (of power and wealth), however, is awarded to whites. However, as Mr. Clayton attempts to make this distinction between races, he places a measure of faith in whites maintaining, “Our protest cannot fail in time to impress itself upon the better class of white people; for the Anglo-Saxon race loves justice, and will eventually do it, where it does not conflict with their own interests” (99). This confidence in white justice in Post-Reconstruction America is laughable and certainly born from the same fanciful place that nurtures the idea that “all men are created equal.” Mr. Clayton represents the very heavy weight of colorism that burdens the African American society for “in person he was of olive complexion, with slightly curly hair. His features approached the Cuban or Latin-American type rather than the familiar broad characteristics of the mulatto” (99). That he “declined to associate to any considerable extent with black people”(99) suggests that he has a particular understanding of whites hoped for and what strategies he needed to employ in order to achieve that great white hope. In his Journals Chesnutt indeed reveals the weight of his struggles for social equality:

I will live down the prejudice, I will crush it out. I will show to the world that a man may spring from a race of slaves, and yet far excel many of the boasted ruling race. If I can exalt my race, if I can gain the applause of the good, and the approbation of God, the thoughts of the ignorant and prejudiced will not concern me. If a man be too proud, too selfconceited [*sic*], or so blinded by prejudice as not to recognize and honor true merit wherever discovered, I want not his good opinion. Let him reserve it for those whom it will please or displease!

He uses the descriptions of his characters as a crucial aspect of respectability, or the lack thereof. The narrator describes the man Mr. Clayton thought to be a senator as “palpably,

¹²⁵ W.D. Howells, “A Psychological Counter Current in Recent Fiction” criticizes Chesnutt’s novel *The Marrow of*. His commentary here is useful for Chesnutt’s short fiction as well.

aggressively black, with pronounced African features and woolly hair, without apparently a single drop of redeeming white blood” (99). This alarms Mr. Clayton because he anticipated entertaining “a light-colored man,—a white man by his theory, an acceptable guest. If the Congressman had turned out to be brown, even dark brown, with fairly good hair, though he might not have desired him as a son-in-law, yet he could have welcomed him as a guest” (99). Upon hearing the story, Mrs. Clayton vents,

It 's an awful shame [. . .] Just think of the trouble and expense we have gone to! And poor Alice 'll never get over it, for everybody knows he came to see her and that he's smitten with her. But you've done just right; we never would have been able to hold up our heads again if we had introduced a black man, even a Congressman, to the people that are invited here to-morrow night, as a sweetheart of Alice. Why, she wouldn't marry him if he was President of the United States and plated with gold an inch thick. The very idea! (50)

These depictions of African Americans (mixed-race or otherwise) have left such a deep impact black American consciousness that they govern everyday interactions for some. The portrayals affect every aspect of black life from the cosmetic—the way blacks wear their hair—to the physiological—the way blacks change their physical appearance. Alice Clayton is described as, “queen of her social set. She was young, she was handsome. She was nearly white; she frankly confessed her sorrow that she was not entirely so” (98). The polarity in these images presents an interesting paradox. To describe the fairer-skinned woman as “handsome” and the darker-skinned male as “aggressively black” implies certain complexion values. Proud of his membership in prestigious organizations in Cleveland, Chesnutt wrote of his “friends and acquaintances at the [Cleveland] Chamber of Commerce, the City Club and elsewhere” and he makes interesting notes in terms of color saying, “that colored men, even black men, are received as guests at some of the best hotels in Cleveland, that eight or ten of them are members of the city Club and

eat in its dining room, and I have seen brown men eating in the sacred precincts of the Union Club, and at the University Club” (185). Perhaps his hope was for racial progress and the mixed-race character presented the most reasonable way to think about ways in which to achieve that. While they differed in approach, his goal was no different than W.E.B. Du Bois who declared in 1897, “We believe it the duty of the Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity until this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility” (Du Bois 298). To embrace such a stance is to be dedicated to the premise of one for all, a principle that arguably has evaded the collective black spirit since the post-bellum period in American history. Notably, there was a resurgence of the former collective slavery-to-freedom mentality in the we-shall-overcome days of the 1960s; perhaps black America is experiencing yet another resurgence in this Black Lives Matter moment of what some scholars have labeled the New Nadir period of the 21st century. For a time though, there was a shift in the collective black consciousness from oneness to *one*-ness, which is still a damaging effect left from the torrential downpour that was racial segregation. The ways in which African Americans are represented in many of Chesnutt’s short stories makes the disaster relief efforts seem nearly impossible at times. Many “white scientists, politicians, and writers argued vigorously that outside of slavery blacks were headed for moral and physical decline, and mostly likely (they hoped) evolutionary extinction” (Gunning 279). However, “Chesnutt suggested that evolutionary development in human existence in fact dictated the disappearance of American Caucasians as a racial group” (Gunning 279). While that has as yet to occur, the result has been more multiculturalism than white extinction.

Within “The Wife of His Youth,” “A Matter of Principle,” “The Web of Circumstance” and “The Sheriff’s Children,” Chesnutt creates a contrast between his theories and his practices concerning race relations because the literature allowed him to practice theories on race that life would not. He creates ingenious stories in which the collective black consciousness is fractured by the perceptions of white America. The social implications are clear; in order to redefine what is socially acceptable for a given people, the black and mixed-race characters must be willing to establish a world all their own outside the influence of white America. When stories such as “The Wife of His Youth” and “A Matter of Principle” are passed down, each generation experiences them differently although the themes may be the same. For “The Wife of His Youth,” the code of loyalty is clear and definitely transcends time; however, what about the code of ethics? In its most fundamental definition, situational ethics are acts that are judged within their contexts rather than by categorical principles because given situations change. The social implications of stories such as “The Wife of His Youth” cannot be determined for the future, as time dictates that. When the next generation reads “A Matter of Principle,” indeed, it will understand the weight of upholding moral standards, but will it note the importance of changing one’s philosophies when situations unmistakably call for change? For Chesnutt declares, “As man sows, so shall he reap. In works of fiction, such men are sometimes converted. More often, in real life, they do not change their natures until they are converted into dust.”¹²⁶ Here Chesnutt touches on two important facts. Firstly, while social change is sometimes inevitable, personal change is not likely or, perhaps more accurately, times change but people do not. Secondly, Chesnutt uncovers the complex heart of a writer who has a three-pronged commitment—to his art, his audience, and his beliefs. And though not ostensibly in conflict with one another, often times those

¹²⁶ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 304.

commitments are difficult to maintain without forsaking one at some point. In his judgment, because fiction allows for optimism, often characters of flawed reasoning are transformed whereas humans are not. Therefore, the fact that Chesnutt is a man of “complex double-vision”¹²⁷ is worthy of consideration and perhaps commiseration rather than absolute criticism. For all of his hoping it so, it is not likely that when Chesnutt put pen to paper he knew he would inform all of America and its posterity—the great ones never do—but his collective works do continually enlighten, most immediately on his younger writers of the 20th century. Indeed, Chesnutt’s intentions are laudable and have served as a call to arms for the few black writers, the proud Blue Veins and not-so “new” South. By the early 20th century, authors like James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen and Fauset depict the great white hope—the possibility of achieving a higher class status, despite their skin color.

The Complex of Color: Jessie Fauset and the Bi-Racial Middle Class

Chesnutt published the bulk of his fiction by the turn of the century and so he captures the failure of Reconstruction and a promising newer Negro. He shows, too, the overwhelming role of the southern white male in the ostracizing people of color. Much of his work depicts a southern landscape. Conversely, as the black cultural, social, and artistic explosion began in urban areas in the nineteen teens, it encouraged a mass black exodus from the South, which seemed, at times, to be Chesnutt’s muse. Writers, visual and performing artists, musicians, poets, and photographers flocked to Harlem and it became the center of cultural production for black art. For the first time in the nation’s history, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. By the end of the decade black

¹²⁷ In the introduction Matthew Wilson’s *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt*, Wilson is quoting Ralph Ellison (xviii). In “The World and the Jug,” Ellison asserts that being black in the United States “imposes the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision, a fluid, ambivalent response to men and events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized to the cost of being human in a modern world” (*Shadow and Act*. New York: Random, 1964. 131-32).

writers began to depict elements of black life and culture that were new to literary audiences. Indeed, the 1920s did roar and there was a renaissance happening in Harlem.

Whereas Chesnutt had captured rural southern life, younger black writers were illustrating urban life, the New Negro, and what Fauset called, “the complex of color.” A core group of those writers depicted fair-skinned African Americans in ways that countered the established ideas that white America had of blacks. Fauset notes, “A number of us started writing at that time. Nella Larsen and Walter White, for instance, were affected just as I was.”¹²⁸ They each wrote about the praxis of identity for mixed-race characters. In so doing, Fauset also joins a strong band of black women writers who novelized the experiences of fair-skinned “black” women who could, very often did, “pass” for white. Harriet Wilson, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset, represent a cluster of black experiences about class and culture. And, together with Larsen, Fauset becomes the most prolific black writer of the middle class, leading William Stanley Braithwaite to remark in a 1934 publication of *Opportunity* that “Fauset was ‘the potential Jane Austen of Negro Literature,’ a comment that encapsulated both the praise and the criticisms.”¹²⁹ Because Fauset was the literary editor of the NAACP magazine the *Crisis* from 1919 to 1926, her sphere of influence on the New Negro Renaissance is virtually unmatched by a woman. She is arguably second only to her mentor Du Bois (and perhaps Alain Locke) in launching the careers of several literary giants, including: Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, to name a few. As editor and chief writer of the short-lived black children’s magazine *Brownie’s Book*, which Du Bois supervised, she lived her truth: “All of us are

¹²⁸ *Harlem Renaissance: A Gale Critical Companion* Vol. 2. 372.

¹²⁹ *Harlem Renaissance: A Gale Critical Companion* Vol. 2. 364.

passionately interested in the education of our children, our younger brothers and sisters. And just as deliberately, as earnestly as white people discuss tuition, relative ability of professors, expenses, etc., so we in addition discuss the question of prejudice.”¹³⁰ And so she did.

The author of stories about black—or more accurately, mixed-race—middle-class life, contemporary scholars remember her best for her four novel more than anything. Indeed, despite her vast contributions to the New Negro Renaissance as editor and tutor, her novels are the chief contributions upon which her reputation is based. In her essay “Some Notes on Color,” she explains why the content of her writings is so important to the literary landscape:

I have hesitated more than once about writing this article because my life has been spent in the localities which are considered favorable to colored people and in the class which least meets the grossest forms of prejudice. And yet—I do not say I would if I could—but I must say I cannot if I will forget the fact of color in almost everything I do or say in the sense in which I forget the shape of my face or the size of my hands and feet.¹³¹

She focuses her writing on young women and their middle-class families. They are often light-skinned women who struggle with racial identity and whether they should cross the color line. Her first novel, *There Is Confusion*, tells the story of Joanna Marshall, who comes from a relatively wealthy family but struggles with the reality that her race may hinder her from achieving her ambition of being a dancer. In it she delivers perhaps the most straightforward and honest appraisal of the woes of the bi-racial middle class:

The complex of color [. . .] It comes to every colored man and every colored woman, too, who has any ambition. [. . .] every colored man feels it sooner or later. It gets in the way of his dreams, of his education, of his marriage, of the rearing of his children. The time comes when he thinks, “I

¹³⁰ Fauset, “Some Notes on Color,” *The World Tomorrow* (March 1922), 77.

¹³¹ Fauset, “Some Notes on Color,” *The World Tomorrow* (March 1922), 77.

might just as well fall back; there's no use pushing on. A colored man just can't make any headway in this awful country." Of course, it's a fallacy. And if a fellow sticks it out he finally gets past it, but not before it has worked considerable confusion in his life. To have the ordinary job of living is bad enough, but to add to it all the thousand and one difficulties which follow simply in the train of being colored—well, all I've got to say, Sylvia, is we're some wonderful people to live through it all and keep our sanity.¹³²

Of all of her novels, critics argue that *There Is Confusion* is the most like a straightforward romance, as the lovers finally overcoming their hindrances and live happy lives. Her other novels are more intricate, particularly the most studied of them, *Plum Bun* (1928). Here she depicts a young fair-skinned woman character that dreams of becoming an artist, too. But the layers of relationships in novel add a dimension that is hard to overlook—family, sibling connections in particular. The protagonist, Angela Murray announces one day that she will leave Philadelphia to live in New York as a white woman in order to achieve her goals. Fauset's illustration of familial connections is striking; before her, 19th century writer tended to represent characters whose ultimate aim was racial uplift. Angela Murray represents a shift, albeit ever so slight—one from writing about "The Misery within Us" toward discussions of how it phenomenology of how it feels to be a problem. She recounts: "A distinguished novelist said to me not long ago: 'I think you colored people make a great mistake in dragging the race problem into your books and novels. It isn't art.' 'But good heavens,' I told him, 'it's life, it's colored life. Being colored is being a problem.'¹³³ The goal, however, for these black women writers remained somewhat the same across the centuries—to raise the stigma of

¹³² Jessie Redmon Fauset, *There is Confusion* (Northeastern Library of Black Literature, 1989), 179.

¹³³ Fauset, "Some Notes on Color." *The World Tomorrow* (March 1922), 76.

degradation from [the Black] race.¹³⁴ The energy and weight that these novels represent has led some scholars to revisit their place in American literary history, particularly as it relates to the rediscovery of their works by black feminist scholars. Robert Bone, in *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), had described her as conservative and “Old Guard,” but Fauset’s novels were generally well received initially. People lauded her for portraying “blacks” as educated, cultured, and even economically successful. In this way, she contributed significantly to the discourse about race, by upsetting the customary depictions of black life, especially as it relates to the depictions of a distinct bi-racial middle class.

By the time she published her third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), The Depression was changing the landscape of black society in Harlem and elsewhere. In the novel that is preoccupied with the issue “bad blood,” she faces the condition of being of mixed race and poor head-on. Still, at its core, it is about a desire to “marry up” and escaping the pitfalls that darker-skinned blacks face—an energy she magnifies in her final novel, *Comedy, American Style*. Because of all of her representations of mixed-race, middle class characters some critics felt that her characters were not “black” enough. To her credit, her hope was to expand the public’s perceptions and expectations of blacks:

That attitude and the sort of attitude instanced by a journalist the other day who thought colored people ought to be willing to permit the term “nigger” because it carries with it so much picturesqueness defines pretty well, I think, our position in the eyes of the white world. Either we are inartistic or we are picturesque and always the inference is implied that we live objectively with one eye on the attitude of the white world as though it were the audience and we the players whose hope and design is to please.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Pauline Hopkins. *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life in the North and South* (Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969), 13.

¹³⁵ Fauset, “Some Notes on Color.” *The World Tomorrow* (March 1922), 76.

In the decades following Carolyn Wedin Sylvander's publication of *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer* (1981) and Deborah McDowell's essay "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset" (1985), there has been renewed interest in Fauset. Although she has still not been given her due as a literary giant in her own right. As scholars begin to reevaluate the common themes in her works, they acknowledge that she provided sharper analyses of the color-consciousness and white American values than others previously recognized. Sure, she, much like the elder Chesnutt, was no radical. Yet, what they share is thoughtful use of the mixed-race figure in order to levy profound critiques of color-consciousness and the position of blacks in America. Their desire, moreover, was to reject the limitations that had been placed on black life; the mixed-race figure offered a reasonable way in which to achieve the desired outcomes. Fauset's essay on color tells us something that her fiction may not, if taken in isolation and that is that she was a champion for the black race. She, Larsen, White, and even those who wrote of the color problem before her, such as: Brown, Wilson, Harper, Chesnutt and Hopkins, all have much in common, even if some are responding to vastly different political moments. They knew the complex of color, and they knew how the mixed-race figure could help in the representations of black people in mass market. It was a tall task, sure. But those writers were shrouded in a cloud of hope, despite their realities. They hoped to capture the possibility of creating viable mixed-race communities that confronted the color line. Indeed, their very existence in literature warrants consideration the enduring effect of color-consciousness on the American racial structure, even beyond the 20th century.

Between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of The Depression, there were two generations of black writers who devoted their lives and art to portraying the

adversities and the injustices against their race; for some of them, using characters of mixed-status to do so only made sense. Taken together, these writers advanced conversations about race and expanded the standard boundaries of fiction with their contributions to race the catalog of race literature. They broached the delicate topics and fears of race mixing and became responsible for rewriting memorable “tragic mulatto” figures, and thus subverted white literary traditions. They had to. Race was everywhere. Color was a looming and inescapable factor in black life. Fauset said is best this way: “And so the puzzling, tangling, nerve-wracking consciousness of color envelops and swathes us. Some of us, it smothers.”¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Jessie Redmon Fauset, “Some Notes on Color,” *The World Tomorrow* (March 1922), 77.

TOWARD SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION: THE CHALLENGE OF REJECTING MONORACIAL LABELS

“The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness.”¹³⁷

“I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”¹³⁸

“However painful it may be for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white”¹³⁹

Many scholars have tackled the unending debate over sameness/difference as it relates to people of theoretically opposing categories: black vs. white, men vs. women. For Fanon tells us in his study of the psychology of racism “The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness.” Indeed, observation has such merit that the American racial structure has rarely in its history permitted reclassification for those who obviously do not fit in one given category. While racial and gender categories remain mostly fixed in the American social order, much of this project attempts to reject the rigidity of these classifications. A part of the goal here has been to move beyond this debate, as America’s people have long ago upset the notion that racial designations are accurate and/or fair. If what Fanon tells us is true that “However painful it may be for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white,” then it stands to reason that both physically and socially, while the lightening of America is the white man’s fear, it should also be his expectation.

Let me say, too, that despite my best efforts to only deal with the literary, a major

¹³⁷ Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 9.

¹³⁸ Zora Neale Hurston “How It Feels to be Colored Me” (New York: *The World Tomorrow*, 1928).

¹³⁹ Fanon *Black Skin*, 10.

part of the analysis I have undertaken here is psychological—indeed the literature dictates this. True enough, the architecture of this work is rooted in the reality of the racial crossing narrative. That is to say, the literature provides a space for viewing a world that through fiction is no less *real* and very much *true*. Whether through probability or the imaginings of the author, the literature serves as both a caution and a hope for tomorrow's world beyond its confines. This project is a thought experiment moving bi-racial characters toward self-identification and self-representation. In part, the analysis unearths the literary possibilities of acknowledging multiracial designation as early as the antebellum period, and we see these possibilities in the African American passing narrative.

This project is structured in a way that hopes to introduce a critical vocabulary for discussing the mixed-race figure and racial crossing literature. It also unpacks the various elements of African American passing literature, making it a distinct genre all its own. While the genre is not completely divorced from the American literary landscape, it is important to note that its characteristic features make it worth studying in ways that we have become accustomed to examining other genres. Therefore, each of the chapters I present here are designed to introduce a new element of the African American passing narrative, many of which translate across the 19th and 20th centuries. Each of the chapters here teaches us something different, yet equally vital to our understanding of racial passing/crossing literature, especially the way we *read* the mixed-race figure.

The introduction to this project, while brief, demonstrates the legacy of the so-called tragic mulatto figure, one that black writers have long since revised and expanded through their genre. If nothing else, the intro tells us that the state of the nation plays a

significant role in how these mixed-race characters have been read and othered in order to keep with the master narrative of salvific whiteness. “That Middle World,” introduces the racially indeterminate body as fundamentally and exceptionally abled in a way that allows it to tactically navigate the space between the black and white worlds. Seeing the ability to traverse the so-called color line as skill rather than a transgression makes the mixed-race figure both triumphant and threatening concerning American national identity—triumphant in that it unearths the possibilities of destroying the color line; threatening for that very same reason. This chapter alone takes to task the sameness/difference debate.

Rooted firmly in the 19th century, chapter two, “Taking the Stage: Racial Performance and the Passing Narrative,” demonstrates performative capacity of mixed-race figures in an antebellum milieu. This chapter is significant to reconsidering the ways that the social and cultural phenomenon of racial passing is often considered an exclusively 20th century occurrence. In making the small but necessary revision, this chapter teaches us the role of landmark United States legislation in the making and shaping of the mixed-race figure as fugitive, especially with the impending Civil War. This is a striking difference from the racial crossing narratives that are being published in the 20th century.

The 20th century did bring us new attitudes about black life and culture. Although this new energy may or may not have been in the form of a racial passing/crossing narrative, it did represent a shift in the ways in which black people sought to represent themselves in literature and politics. Indeed, by 1928 luminaries of the New Negro Renaissance were telling us:

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Declarations such as this one were a part of a larger project of black empowerment. The New Negro Renaissance reached its peak in the 1920s, so did the publication of African American racial crossing narratives and chapter three is representative of that. “The Vanishing: Toward (In)visibility for the Mixed-Race Figure, is perhaps the most crucial chapter of the project. As its title suggests, it uncovers the various strategies that characters of mixed status use to become more or less visible in certain racialized spaces. This chapter demonstrates to us that characters of mixed status *practiced* race in unique ways, and it suggests that racial identities are always constituted through strategies of performance. The final chapter, however, views performance in an entirely different, and perhaps less obvious sort of way.

“The Black Aristocracy: Strategies of Respectability and The Rise of a Bi-Racial Middle Class,” explores literary depictions of the rise of the black middle class as bourgeois-strivers. While it is viewed as a negative when “black” characters employ the politics of respectability, this chapter merely acknowledges that certain aspects of that performance are present in the narratives. It does not indict the characters or their authors for examining this element. But rather it interrogates an American racial and social order that provides the space for—and perhaps even somewhat demands—these types of performance.

There is move here in this project and it is toward self-identification. While the

narratives surveyed in this study do not explicitly state this as an objective, our reconsideration of them can only push us toward that end. It is my sincerest hope that theories and vocabularies I employ and/or introduce here will also stimulate careful observation and revision of the mixed-race character in African American fiction. What that middle world gives us is a space in which black and white can and does co-exist, and that is indeed worthy of exploration.

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