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“THESE NARRATIVES OF RACIAL PASSING HAVE RISEN FROM THE DEAD”:  
REDEFINING RACIAL PASSING IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST  
CENTURY LITERARY IMAGINATION

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Cheryl A. Wall

And approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“These Narratives of Racial Passing Have Risen From the Dead”:

Redefining Racial Passing in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literary

Imagination

By DONAVAN L. RAMON

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Instead of concurring with most critics that racial passing literature reached its apex during the Harlem Renaissance, this project highlights its persistence, as evidenced in the texts examined from 1900 to 2014. Using psychoanalysis, this dissertation recovers non-canonical and white-authored narratives that critics overlook, thus reconceptualizing the genre of passing literature to forge a new genealogy for this tradition. This new genealogy includes novels, life writings, and short stories. In arguing for the genre's continued relevance and production, this project offers a rejoinder to critics who contend that racial passing literature is obsolete. Part one of this dissertation complicates the notion that characters pass only in response to witnessing a lynching or to improve their socioeconomic status, by asserting that racial passing begins in the classroom for male characters and at home for their female counterparts. It thus precedes the threat of violence or middle class aspirations. Whereas the first half of this project is preoccupied

with the gendered beginnings of racial passing, the second half examines its effects, on both writing and death.

This project explores racial passing in Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), Vera Caspary's *The White Girl* (1929), Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Stones of the Village* (1988), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1999), Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), Bliss Broyard's *One Drop* (2003) and Anita Reynolds' *American Cocktail* (2014).

## Acknowledgement & Dedication

Dedicated to Ofelia Austin (1968-2007)

There are many people who deserve credit for helping me get to this point. First off, thank you to my committee, Cheryl Wall, Carter Mathes, Michelle Stephens, and Sterling Bland, Jr., for allowing me to pursue this research project and for pushing me along the way. I also thank all the scholars I have worked with through the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, Social Sciences Research Council, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. I appreciate all the ways in which you have engaged my work, and your feedback has proven to be phenomenal. Winning the Mellon Mays Fellowship changed my life; without it, I do not know where I would be right now.

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## Introduction: “Can I Just Pretend I’m White?” Passing and Post-Race

On December 13 2014, Dana Canedy published a provocative article in the *New York Times* entitled “The Talk: After Ferguson, A Shaded Conversation about Race.” In the piece, an African-American woman describes a painful discussion she had recently with her eight year old son, Jordan, about the ways in which he should conduct himself in the presence of the police. The impetus for this discussion was the collective failure of the criminal justice system to understand black humanity, proven when grand juries failed to indict police officers for killing unarmed black men in Staten Island and Ferguson, Missouri. Canedy was especially taken aback when Jordan asked her “Can I just pretend I’m white?”

Jordan is a light-skinned African-American boy who believes that being white “is safer” because “they won’t hurt me.” When Jordan asks his mother if it is rare for police to hurt black people, she answers that it is not. To that, he declares “then I don’t want to be black anymore,” before asking again why he can’t “just pretend to be white.” Even at his young age of eight, he has perceived the benefits of passing as white, with the primary one being the ability to circumvent racism. It is a message that he may have learned first at school. Canedy relates a story about Jordan’s second grade teacher, who did not hang up his self-portrait in her classroom because “the brown crayon he had used to color in his face was several shades too dark, she thought, so she wanted him to ‘lighten it up’ to more accurately reflect his complexion.” In reflecting on her son’s desire to be white, Canedy concedes that passing is not the sole recourse because it would not fully protect him:

The internal damage from living that lie would surely be as painful as any blow from a police baton. To deny his blackness would be to deny me. It would be to deny our enslaved ancestors who were strong to endure that voyage. It would mean rejecting the reflection he sees every time he looks in a mirror. (Canedy)

At the end of the article, she expresses her hope that the conversation on race might get easier as her son grows up in a post-Obama America.

Canedy is careful to note the distinction between post-Obama and *post-race*. The newspaper she writes for marked the supposed end of racism with its cover story on Barack Obama's first election: "Obama: Racial Barrier Falls in Decisive Victory" read the front page of the *New York Times* on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2008. According to the article, Obama's ascendancy to the White House marked the end of racism in America. If true, then Jordan would not have inquired about being white, six years after Obama's election. Structural racism is now more prevalent, a point eloquently summarized by Charles Blow, among others. To be clear, a biracial man in the White House evidences an impressive historical shift in a country where he could have been enslaved just a few generations ago, but his election is not tantamount to the end of racism. The discrepancy between post-Obama and post-race is clear: Obama's time in office is finite, and will end in January 2017, while racism will not disappear anytime soon.

The most visible signs of racism are now obsolete. For instance, Jim Crow Laws that once dictated the segregated spaces blacks and whites could enter are now illegal. However, structural racism continues, and is at the heart of Jordan's question. When grand juries failed to indict the police officers who killed unarmed black men last year, their actions again underscored the inherently racist legal structure in America.<sup>1</sup> As long

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the racism in the legal system, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012).



as the color line remains in any form, efforts to jump the color line will also persist, evidenced by Jordan's inquiry on passing.

While it may be jarring to read about an eight year old asking to be white, Jordan's story is hardly a unique one. Instead, it is a real-life and contemporary example of a black boy learning about race in America, who then wants to pass after seeing it as his only choice. There are abundant literary examples that resemble his story. Charles Chesnutt tells a similar tale in his novel *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) with the life of John Walden. When one of his peers ridicules him for being black, he fights the boy who makes the assertion (373). He then searches for racial validation in the mirror, which "proved that God...had made him white" (373). Similarly in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), the narrator learns about race in school, but his teacher initiates it instead of his peers. She tells him to sit back down after she asks the white students to stand; he follows up by looking at his own "reflection" at home, where he realizes that he is black for the very first time (400-401). Alice Dunbar-Nelson's short story, "The Stones of the Village," also features a protagonist who understands race in his youth. Victor suffers through "the taunts of little brutes, boys of his own age" because he is black (3). Canedy does not say that Jordan is ridiculed for being black, but she does note that despite his youth, he has already intuited that passing as white is a less dangerous endeavor than living as black.

As these examples make explicitly clear, American writers have told variations of Jordan's story for several decades. Literary critics have tried to situate the act of racial passing in a bygone era when racism was explicit and culturally accepted. Because of this inclination to historicize racial passing, they believe that passing narratives have been

enduring a decades-long death as well. In his review of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, W.E.B. DuBois paradoxically describes racial passing as a matter "of great moral import" and as "a petty, silly matter of no real importance which another generation will comprehend with great difficulty" (qtd. in Kroeger 37). Picking up where DuBois left off, in 1971 Hoyt Fuller disregarded Larsen's text for highlighting bourgeois life (13).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Nathan Huggins argued that the "insistence on racial identity, race consciousness, race pride, and race beauty" that defined the 1960s has rendered racial passing as moot (245). According to him, the love that black people have of their race means that disavowing blackness to live as white is no longer necessary.

By the 1990s, critics metaphorically "buried" this literary genre. Juda Bennett and Werner Sollors contend that it was a popular topic only from the late nineteenth through first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Equally culpable in this generic death is historian Nell Painter, who, in a blurb on the book's cover, situated the 1998 reissue of Walter White's *Flight* within "an extinct but historically crucial genre of African-American fiction: the passing novel." These accounts relegate passing literature to a previous era; an interesting notion considering we are supposedly in the "mulatto millennium" that situates mixed race people as a sign of post-racial progress (Senna, "The Mulatto Millennium" 12). According to Michele Elam's monograph, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011), critics could easily fool contemporary readers into thinking that racial passing as both a social phenomenon and a literary genre is at its nadir, and has "gone the way of gramophones, congolene, and flappers" (97). As my dissertation makes clear, this is far from the case.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Hoyt Fuller, Introduction to *Passing* (1929; rpr. New York, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> See Juda Bennett, *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997) and Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Several critical pieces on this specific genre have been published over the past several years that underscore the continued relevance of racial passing literature. Recent examples include Sinead Moynihan's *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* (2010), which examines the connection between the trope of passing and textuality because literary passing is now expansive enough to encompass questions of authorship. Moreover, Elam's *Souls* engages with cultural renderings of the mixed raced subject in contemporary literature, art, and television, to argue for a poetics of social justice during the "mulatto millennium." Another critical intervention is my own essay that juxtaposes Nella Larsen's *Passing* with Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* to highlight Larsen's unstated influence over Roth, as well as the trajectory of twentieth-century passing narratives with themes of education, writing and death (Ramon 45-61).<sup>4</sup>

Historians revisit the topic of racial passing frequently, by documenting the lives of real life passing subjects in order to understand the history of the color line in America. In 2009, Martha Sandweiss published *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line*. In it, the historian from Princeton University

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<sup>4</sup> Other examples of the recent scholarship on racial passing include Steven J. Belluscio's *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006) which expands the definition of passing to not only include black-white passing, but also Jewish and Italian American texts that employ passing, as he develops the links between literary passing and literary realism. Randall Kennedy's *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity and Adoption* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003) includes a thorough gloss of the history of racial passing (281-338). Maria Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg edited *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: NYU Press, 2001) which reveals the ways in which many types of passing—gender, racial, and religious, complicates long held notions of the visual and of identity. Gayle Wald's monograph, *Crossing The Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) juxtaposes novelistic and cinematic representations of passing to uncover the various ways in which race defines and frustrates representations of identity. Finally, Elaine Ginsberg's *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) is an essay collection that assesses a wide range of texts to consider the broad categories of power and privilege alongside the ways in which passing challenges the often rigid structures of identity politics.

narrates the story of Clarence King, a white nineteenth century geologist who passed as black in order to marry a black woman. Vanderbilt University law professor Daniel Sharfstein published *The Invisible Line* (2011), which is a sweeping history of three families who have been jumping the color line from the eighteenth century until now: the Gibsons, the Walls, and the Spencers. Most recently, Allyson Hobbs, a historian at Stanford University, published *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (2014), which focuses on the lives of those who passed as white from the 1800s through the 1950s. She highlights the points of convergence and divergence across the decades, but the theme that unites the passing subjects in her study is that of loss. Most historians are interested in all that is gained by passing, but as Danzy Senna reminds us in her *New York Times Review* of this monograph, Hobbs is more interested in narratives of loss that passing subjects face. For instance, “we hear from the black family left behind” which is caused by “the reductive culture” into which passing subjects are born.

Within literary representations of passing subjects, this sense of loss is apparent in tangible and intangible ways—the texts are peppered with the loss of a voice, loss of the past, loss of blackness, and the literal and metaphorical loss of loved ones. My dissertation explores these themes across twentieth and twenty-first century passing narratives, beginning with Charles Chesnutt’s novel *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and ending with Anita Reynolds’ memoir, *American Cocktail* (2014). Using psychoanalysis, I explore both trauma and loss in this specific literary genre, to create a new genealogy for the passing literary tradition.

My project, “*These Narratives of Racial Passing Have Risen From the Dead*”: *Redefining Racial Passing in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literary*

*Imagination*, resurrects the presumably “dead” genre by arguing that racial passing literature is not from a lost era. In fact, it has persisted throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as evidenced by the texts I study which were published between 1900 and 2014. I redefine the time frame and scope of racial passing narratives, to counter the notion that we live in a post-race era. Moreover, scholarship on racial passing literature centers primarily on canonical novels, but I explore canonical and non-canonical texts, including novels, short stories and life writings, to create a new multi-generic taxonomy of racial passing literature.

I begin the first half of my dissertation by exploring the ways in which some light-skinned characters discover their race, which provides the impetus to pass. The intricacies of this discovery are different for male and female characters. In school, teachers and students often inform light-skinned black boys that they are black, which is a traumatic experience for them. As a result of discovering their race belatedly, coupled with their desire to avoid racism, these boys grow up to be men who racially pass. Literary critics have not considered education, either literal or symbolic, as the formative site for the passing genre. However, school is where male passers first learn about their race, as I argue in chapter one by closely reading three passing protagonists: John Walden in Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), the Ex-Colored Man in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and Coleman Silk in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000).

Building on both Marxist and psychoanalytic theories of subject formation as put forth by Louis Althusser, Franz Fanon and Jacques Lacan, I argue that a long-term result of “race-learning” is that light-skinned black boys begin passing as white. Althusser

believes that the role of school is to teach the ways in which students must be productive employees and subjects to the ruling class. He also notes that in a capitalist education system, school must teach the rules of good behavior that will lead to employment. Frantz Fanon's take on school, however, reads trauma in the classroom for raced subjects. As he argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the classroom is a space of trauma for black students because they learn about their history for the first time and realize that they have a more comprehensive history than they were previously taught. Moreover, black students are unaware how to act when interacting with white students for the first time. My intervention speculates that boys want to pass as a response to enduring the trauma of encountering race in the classroom. Chapter one contradicts the notion that racial passing begins only after characters see physical violence towards African-Americans or because they maintain middle-class aspirations. The impulse to pass is the epistemic violence that they endure at school. In short, education for these phenotypically ambiguous black boys entails the *four R's*: reading, writing, arithmetic, and race.

Female characters, by contrast, learn about race at home. In my second chapter, I situate Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1999) within a literary genealogy that categorizes passing as a generational inheritance for female passers. The protagonists of each text—Fauset's Angela Murray and Senna's Birdie Lee—learn about their race from their mothers, before beginning their formal education. *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia* both revise upon the conventional bildungsroman, but with an important difference: they focus on racial and gender development since maturity for black characters is both raced and gendered.

To prove this point in my second chapter, I uncover the systematic four-step process by which some female characters pass and then return to their black families, by applying Harry Stack Sullivan's "good me, bad me" paradigm. Part one of this development begins at home, where mothers teach their daughters to pretend to be other races, and part two occurs in school, where each protagonist encounters classmates who question her blackness. In part three, these passers move to new locations to live as white and forget that they are black. Part four marks the turning point when protagonists communicate with African-Americans and then return to their lives as African-Americans. By closely reading these texts, I argue that for many female characters, the confluence of the private domain (home) and the public sphere (school) forces them to pass.

Whereas the first half of my project discusses the causes of passing, part two explores the effects. In chapter three, I examine real-life passers who left behind excerpts of their life stories when they died. I explore Anita Reynolds' autobiography *American Cocktail: A Colored Girl in the World* (2014) and Bliss Broyard's *One Drop* (2003), a biography of her father Anatole. Anita Reynolds was an African-American actress, dancer, and model, who passed in the first half of the twentieth century. She travelled throughout Europe and northern Africa, in part because she believed that changing her locations might help her to write her autobiography. When she completed it in 1979, publishers were not interested. In winter 2014, literary critic George Hutchinson published her rediscovered memoirs. Anatole Broyard passed as white to be a *New York Times* book critic, and he left behind an incomplete autobiography when he died. His daughter, Bliss, narrates his story in *One Drop*. Like Reynolds, he blamed his problem on

a lack of ideas, yet I argue that the real impediment to their writer's block is that they disassociated themselves from their black pasts in order to circumvent race. The act of writing threatened to bring them dangerously close to the very truth they sought to hide. I make this assertion by applying psychoanalytical theories about writing—Jacques Derrida's *Limited Inc* and Jacques Lacan's "The Purloined Letter"—to the passers. Passing is a type of *racial* inscription that is powerful enough to complicate writing as a process of inscription itself. In other words, these racial passers could not write over the racial codes that society imprinted on their skins. Reynolds and Broyard would have had to confront their racialized ancestry to complete their memoirs, but since this admission was dangerous and unfeasible, they completed only portions of their work.

Chapter three examines the lived experience that passing subjects sought to present to the public, while chapter four examines the selves that passers attempt to kill off. In doing so, they complicate the image of the "tragic mulatto/a," which I reconceptualize in chapter four. This term refers to mixed-race characters within a raced society, who die because they cannot fit in either the black or white world. I define this death as "passive death" in nineteenth-century literature. However, twentieth-century writers revise the tragic mulatto image by depicting racial passers who *want* to die, thereby diverging from many of their nineteenth-century predecessors who succumbed to the pressure of being raced. For instance, in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's short story, "The Stones of the Village" (1910), Victor Grabert waves away those who try to help him as he chokes to death. In Vera Caspary's novel *The White Girl* (1929), Solaria kills herself by drinking poison. In Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), Coleman Silk crashes his car after ingesting Viagra and alcohol.



For these protagonists, desire for death trumps the humiliation of being revealed as black. They each predict that death would prevent others from discovering their racial transgression. In chapter four, I assert that the tragic mulatto is not relevant in twentieth-century passing literature, by applying Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive to my sources. Passers are inherently uncomfortable because they are forced to evade the issue of race, and hastening death is an easier option than living in a raced society. While passive deaths mark the demise of nineteenth-century passing characters, I believe that active deaths define the demise of twentieth-century racial passers.

#### "Analogous Pursuits": Passing, Writing and the Alternative Archive

Undergirding my dissertation is the notion that as long as the color line persists, the experience of traversing the color line will also continue. Racial passing narratives are not fixed in the past because race remains unfixed. In my conclusion, I discuss examples of contemporary passing subjects, thereby allowing me to extend the periodization of passing literature and contrast historical passing with its contemporary iterations. Though the types of passing that occur today differ from historical ones because racism is less explicit and more structural, racial passing still occurs. Today, people can transgress myriad boundaries, such as those of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and any other subject position. They do so not for the mere thrill of deceit, but in order to participate in mainstream society without scrutiny, derision or violence.

Brooke Kroeger elaborates on this point, by asserting that "wherever there is prejudice and preconception, there is passing, and of prejudice and preconception we as yet have no lack" (4). She makes this claim in the introduction to her book *Passing*:

*When People Can't Be Who They Are* (2003). This text is a collection of narratives on passing subjects in the twenty-first century. In collecting the stories, Kroeger admits to learning that “there are myriad kinds” of passing today, precisely because the passers hope “to bypass being excluded unjustly in their attempts” to lead lives on their terms (2). Passing occurs “when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be” (Kroeger 7). With this expansive definition, Kroeger lays the groundwork for her study of all the types of contemporary passing, of which race is just one category.

Her definition might be new to a contemporary readership, but it is not entirely unique. As Werner Sollors reminds us, the term itself can “refer to the crossing of any line that divides social groups” (247). Though it was not included in the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, it is present in the current edition, and refers to a wide variety of boundaries that one can transgress. In another list of words, the “Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases” that appears in Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926), the entry for passing is more specific: “*passing*: i.e. passing for white” (286). Given the history of slavery, Jim Crow and racism, Americans equate “passing” strictly with “racial passing.”

Sollors makes this point succinctly, when he states that the term is “an Americanism” (247). He adduces a range of evidence to prove it, including ads for runaway slaves. According to him, the word “passing” first appeared in these ads in the 1830s, when slaveowners were anxious that their runaway slaves might try to pass for white to aid their escape (255). Juda Bennett also believes that the history of the

American usage of the term comes from slavery, but locates it in another form of paperwork:

[The] pass given to slaves so that they might travel without being mistaken for runaways. The ‘pass’ is a slip of paper that allows for free movement, but white skin is itself a ‘pass’ that allowed for some light-skinned slaves to escape their masters. (36)

Marcia Alesan Dawkins sees passing as a “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” (xii). In order for passing to occur, it relies on “a series of rhetorical intersections” (xi). Her monograph, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (2012) examines passing as a series of rhetorical strategies, which she pithily calls “passing passwords.” Exploring contemporary writers, Sinead Moynihan’s *Passing into the Present* (2010) argues that “racial passing and writing emerge as analogous pursuits” (22). At the heart of the definitions of passing as put forth by Sollors, Bennett, Dawkins, and Moynihan, is the literariness of passing: passing is as much about communication, both verbal and written, as it is about transgressing boundaries.

The tethering of passing and writing is evident by almost all of the subjects in this dissertation through their relationships with books. John Walden, the Ex-Colored Man, and Coleman Silk all decide to read books after they learn about their blackness for the first time. Additionally, Anita Reynolds, Anatole Broyard, and Coleman Silk attempt to write their own books while passing, but they struggle with this endeavor. Since they want to write memoirs—a literary genre that is predicated on honesty—writing is a difficult task because it would entail discussing their lives as formerly black subjects.

Instead of outing themselves, they just blame “writer’s block” as the culprit to their lack of productivity.

One speculation for their struggle is that writing reminds racial passers of the academic setting, which is a site they seek to avoid due to the academic trauma endured during their hasty racialization. Though I have now revised this theory to argue that trauma in the classroom is gendered, it provided the initial impetus for using psychoanalysis in this project. There has been a great deal of scholarship on race and psychoanalysis over the past several years, yet the specific field of passing and psychoanalysis still remains undeveloped.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is due to the history of psychoanalysis, which was created by Europeans and has mostly been applied to white people and their literary traditions. Moreover, scholars have a difficult time uncovering the lives of real life racial passers, because “those who passed worked hard to cover their tracks, leaving little trace in the historical record” (Sloan). Thus, applying psychoanalysis to passing subjects could prove to be a speculative endeavor since they

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<sup>5</sup> For more on race and psychoanalysis, see Neil Altman, *The Analyst in the Inner City: Race, Class, and Culture Through A Psychoanalytic Lens* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, Helene Moglen, eds. *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997); Gwen Bergner, *Taboo Subjects: Race, Sex and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Anne Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Margo Crawford, *Dilution Anxiety and the Black Phallus* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008); Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis & Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Christopher Lane, *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Abdul Jan Mohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power and Sexuality in the African-American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Kelpa Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London: Routledge, 2000); Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis & Black Novels: Desire & the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mikko Tuhkanen, *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009); Antonio Viegas, *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jean Walton, *Fair Sex, Savage Dreams: Race, Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

avoided leaving a paper trail that could lead to their racial discovery. This dissertation is an attempt to uncover the nature of racial passing through a psychoanalytic perspective. In applying this theory to real and fictional passers, I hope to contribute to the emerging field of passing and psychoanalysis and make gestures to future areas of research.

Additionally, this work expands the conventional definition of passing. Through psychoanalytic theory, readers are able to comprehend fully the trauma that passing subjects endured in their youth. For example, the impetus to pass is rooted in childhood and not in witnessing a racial trauma (such as a lynching). Being raced is a traumatic experience, as jumping the color line attests. Redefining passing also entails situating non-canonical narratives within this tradition. This project is very deliberate in exploring passing narratives that do not receive much critical attention, for the purpose of creating a new genealogy for this literary genre. Canonical racial passing literature include William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1852), William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929). While I read closely Johnson's and Fauset's narratives, I balance them out with non-canonical works such as Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1999) respectively. Contrary to what this list suggests, racial passing is hardly a phenomenon that is explored only in novels. To support this idea and further redefine the literary tradition, I include Alice Dunbar-Nelson's short story, a biography of Anatole Broyard, and Anita Reynolds' autobiography.

Arguably, the two texts that are the least canonical receive the deepest analyses: Vera Caspary's *The White Girl* (1929) and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). As I discuss in chapter four, the criticism on the former book is scant, perhaps because Caspary was the sole white woman writing about racial passing during the Harlem Renaissance or because critics believe that *Laura* (her detective novel from 1942) is better written. In contrast, Roth's passing novel continues to intrigue critics—including myself, which explains why it appears in two chapters. Conventional thinking is that racial passing literature is only written by black authors, since black people passing as white is the most common form of passing. Indeed, African-American Literature as a field of study arguably has its origins in racial passing literature, since the first published novel by an African-American man was Brown's *Clotel* (1852). The most canonized work in this tradition is now Larsen's *Passing* (1929). However, I eschew Larsen in favor of Caspary and Roth, to suggest that the white literary imagination is as interested in exploring passing subjects as is the black literary imagination. Since racial passing is distinctly an American phenomenon, racial passing *literature* is an American literary phenomenon, which includes both white authors and black authors. To only see this genre of literature as produced by black writers overlooks the ways in which their white counterparts fictionalize racial passing—an action they themselves cannot participate in by virtue of their whiteness.

Though my project explicitly explores the lives of real and fictional passing subjects, in some respects, it is hardly about them at all. The question that hovers over this entire work is *why does passing remain a feasible option in American society?* After slavery, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement, the subjects of this study all pose a

variation of Jordan's intuitive question, "Can I just pretend I'm white?" Uncovering the psychoanalytic reasons why this option has remained relevant throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, *These Narratives of Racial Passing Have Risen From the Dead* will begin to answer this question.

## “All the Black Boys Raise Their Hands”: Race-Learning and the Trauma of Passing

### Althusser, Fanon and a Theory of Classroom Trauma

African-Americans have endured a long and fraught history with academic settings. Frederick Douglass highlights the illegality of slave literacy when Mr. Auld forbids his wife from continuing Douglass' reading lessons (40). He learns that slavery is “injurious” to both the slaves and their masters, prompting him to resume reading in stealth (43-44). W.E.B. DuBois remembers learning of his blackness in school: after a girl refuses to accept his card, he realizes “with a certain suddenness that [he] was different from the others [...] shut out from their world by a vast veil” (214). After Malcolm X's English teacher tells him that being a lawyer is “no realistic goal for a nigger,” he distances himself from his white classmates and baffles everyone who could not determine “what had come over” him (43-44). In Gloria Naylor's essay “The Meanings of a Word,” she remembers hearing “nigger” for the first time in the third grade, and uses it to reflect on the multitudinous ways this word has been employed in various contexts (344-46). Writer and artist Adrian Piper recalls an elementary school teacher who verified her blackness with her parents before demoting her to remedial classes “in anticipation of low achievement” (258). Even Barack Obama, whose ascendancy is held up as symbolic of a utopian America without racism, had to endure equally humiliating race lessons: on his first day of school in Hawaii, he fielded questions about his hair and his father's putative tribal cannibalism (59-60). As these examples that span the late nineteenth to the twentieth centuries suggest, school for black subjects is where they learn the *four* R's: reading, writing, arithmetic, and race.



In the nineteenth century, black enslavement also entailed mental enslavement, thereby leading masters to keep their slaves in ignorance by denying education. As the late playwright August Wilson articulated, African-Americans have not had a long history of writing as Europeans have; instead, they are “relatively new to this...because at one time, it was a crime to teach blacks how to read and write” (Shannon 7). By the time DuBois enters school, he is far from the plantation on which Douglass begins his education, yet they share a heightened awareness of their blackness in an academic environment. The girl’s refusal to accept DuBois’ card prompts him to ruminate on his racialized selfhood, which leads him to create the metaphor of the veil for his prescient theory on double consciousness. Despite her ignorance, at least the two children can share a classroom together: DuBois’ bucolic New England town contrasts sharply with the southern part of the United States, where Reconstruction was in full effect and Jim Crow laws kept African-Americans in an economic and social chokehold. The term that encapsulates the legal segregation of this era is the “separate but equal” doctrine that came out of the *Plessy V. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court case. As a result, African-Americans were systematically denied access to basic privileges that white Americans took for granted.

The site in which racial disparities became most explicit was the classroom. At the start of the century, school emerged as a contested space for racial progress, due in part to Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, two influential thinkers who advocated for conflicting views of education. The former believed that schools should teach African-Americans vocational skills, while the latter challenged educators to offer liberal arts curricula that would work to create the black elite. DuBois also noted that

African-Americans needed a liberal arts education to rise above the impediments of racism; he felt the most proud of himself—or as he euphemizes, “the sky was bluest”—when his intellect surpassed that of his peers (214). Moreover, he argued that the only way to prevent a regression into slavery would be to develop better schools that were more academically rigorous for African-Americans (220). According to this logic, smarter black people could prove the futility of racism.

What they both agreed on was that the educational system did not adequately serve black students as it should have, in part because of its highly racialized nature. This might explain why Gloria Naylor, Malcolm X., and Adrian Piper all endured similar classroom experiences at different points of the twentieth century, where they faced constant reminders of their blackness in various classrooms. In the case of the latter two, teachers could not fathom the thought of high-achieving black pupils and thus worked to keep them separate from their white counterparts. For Malcolm X, his teacher made it clear that he should only look into menial professions dominated by African-Americans, while Piper’s instructor actively separated her from everyone else. Even after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) ruling ended legal segregation, black and white students were still forced into separate spaces while stereotypes against black students remained. For example, it might seem strange now to equate Barack Obama with monkeys, considering he is the Ivy League educated United States president, but this is precisely the type of racism that the future president faced on his first day in an American school in 1971. After his teacher forces him to reveal his father’s tribe, one of his classmates makes “a loud hoot, like the sound of a monkey” (60) in a scene that prompts Robert Stepto to argue that “even at a young age, these children know intuitively that racism’s project is to

primitivize the other” (42). This instance is significant not only because it shows the bigotry clearly afflicting these children from a very young age, but also, because Obama’s introduction to the American school system entailed an introduction to racism. School and race emerge as intricately tethered.

According to Toni Morrison, school “implicitly and explicitly introduces expectations of normalcy, of standard cultural practices, and of aesthetic valuation...tacit instructions for social and political relations, naturalizing racism, too, in all its subtle forms” (qtd. in Elam 28). Robert Stepto further asserts that the black subject is “made aware for the *first time* that he or she is colored” while in school, particularly since “the schoolhouse episode is a staple event in African-American narratives no doubt because it is remembered or imagined as a *formative first scene* of racial self-awareness” (27 emphasis added). This chapter examines a specific subcategory of literature—the passing narrative—wherein this “racial self-awareness” is made explicitly evident in and around the classroom, but to a special effect: school becomes the space that initiates racial transgression in light-skinned men. As evidenced in passing narratives, it emerges as the first site where these men endure a trauma as a result of being rendered black. This leads them to eventually jump the color line and live as whites.

A discussion of the primacy of the classroom begins with the question of what makes it fundamental to racial passing. School is often the first place where children from many backgrounds are thrown into forced interactions with each other, thereby complicating rigid racial boundaries. A broad range of scholarly material exists that hones in on the classroom as a critical space for subject formation. One of the most cited essays is Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards

an Investigation)” which argues that subject formation develops within myriad social structures. He categorizes these structures under two broad headings, the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatus. The Repressive State Apparatus includes heads of state, government, police, courts, and the military, designed to intervene in favor of the ruling class by using all types of violence to repress the ruled class. The Ideological State Apparatus however, refers to “distinct and specialized institutions” that are mostly private and function predominantly via ideology (143).

According to Althusser, children endure “a capitalist education system” specifically designed to teach “the rules of good behaviour” that will directly lead to employment (132). He summarizes the utility of school in capitalist society as the place that teaches not only “know how,” but also “*subjection to the ruling ideology*” as a way to ensure a productive labor force (133, emphasis in original). Absent from this entire formulation though, is a discussion of race.<sup>6</sup> He elucidates the stakes of a capitalist argument but it is difficult from our modern day perspective to avoid the intersection of class and race as the two have a direct effect on each other. This is especially clear when addressing the topic of the ruling ideology: if this is what school teaches deference to, then in the American context, a part of this ideology includes being socialized into race. For the light-skinned men analyzed in this chapter, being socialized into race in the classroom is the first step in their decision to racially pass.

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<sup>6</sup> Race is secondary to Althusser’s theory because of his Marxist focus on class. Stuart Hall’s “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance” is an important intervention on the connections between Althusserian theory and race. More specifically, he argues that there are two major trajectories that arise from the study of race, economic and sociological, and neither one can explain race exclusively. Instead, he uses a Structuralist Marxist perspective to examine the confluence of all these categories. Also building upon Althusser is *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. This essay collection argues that, as a result of contemporary iterations of capitalism, racism is inherently essential in discussions of nationalist ideologies. By implication, racism will not end as long as capitalist systems continue.

Where Althusser and his interlocutors leave off, Frantz Fanon picks up, featuring education prominently in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. According to Fanon, blacks who are educated have higher chances of acquiring status symbols to imitate white norms. The classroom is critical to racialized subject formation because “if there is a traumatism, it occurs here [in school]” (127).<sup>7</sup> This is due to the type of education black students receive, one which erases their history in favor of highlighting a whitewashed history that equates blackness with negativity and malice. Another reason lies in the fact that the classroom is the first space where black and white children interact with each other. When these children first make contact with each other, black children become “abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world” (122).

Fanon does not write from an African-American standpoint, yet his psychoanalytic background makes him a critical theorist for this analysis of racial passing. To highlight the oppression of blacks across the world, his text applies psychoanalytic reasoning to the feelings of dependency and inadequacy that afflict blacks who must navigate a world dominated by whites. He argues that, as a result of colonization, black subjectivity is predicated on an inferiority complex, thereby leading to a perpetual desire to imitate white colonizers. Chapter six, entitled “The Black Man and Psychopathology,” is an often cited section from this text because of its exemplary application of psychoanalysis to black subjectivity. The reason that blacks are unable to completely function in society is due to an unconscious training of black people to

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<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison uses this language of trauma as well. According to her, “everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That’s a trauma. It’s as though I told you that your left hand is not part of your body.” For more on Morrison’s remarks on school and race, see Bonnie Angelo, “The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison” (1989), in Danielle Guthrie-Taylor, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 258.

believe all things rendered “black” – including skin color—are inherently wrong. His discussion assumes that black people have divided selves, a psychoanalytic extension of DuBois’ notion of “double consciousness.” The division that Fanon articulates is precisely what afflicts African-American subjects who pass: they are socialized into thinking that nothing good can result from being black, which motivates them to pretend to be white. School is a site of trauma for black children who must confront their blackness in this setting, as the opening examples attest.

In light of these arguments, what happens to those who are at the intersection of black and white, especially black children who think they are white but who get disabused of this notion in the classroom? Do they suffer the same type of “traumatism” as those black students who already know that they are black before entering school, or does their subject formation follow an alternate trajectory? How does gender influence the different types of engagement with race in school? Both theorists agree that education is more than learning the usual reading, writing and arithmetic: for Althusser, the classroom becomes a socializing and ideological space, while Fanon argues that it is also a traumatizing space for black subjects. Althusser and Fanon are thus essential for racial passing narratives, where black boys in particular often engage in “race-learning” in school, which leads them to disavow their blackness if their light skin color allows for it.

The firsthand accounts of the African-Americans who open this chapter suggest the inevitability of learning of their race at school, thereby supporting Althusser’s and Fanon’s assertions. Yet, in twentieth-century narratives of racial passing, often light-skinned black boys engage in a long-term protest of their racialization. This chapter argues that Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon

Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), depict black boys who pass only after they are called out for being black in school.<sup>8</sup> This location is pivotal because it is where these boys learn about race for the first time; their parents avoided this topic and thus they do not know how to proceed when thrown into interracial settings. The preconditions for passing traditionally include light skin color, silence, stealth from the passer's peers, and a desire for middle class respectability. This chapter adds education—both literal and symbolic—as the formative and traumatic site for the male passing narrative genre.

In the novels of Chesnutt, Johnson, and Roth, none of the respective protagonists—John Walden, the Ex-Colored Man, and Coleman Silk—learn about race at home.<sup>9</sup> Their blackness is thus rendered hypervisible in academic settings when hailed by instructors and students alike. By “hypervisible,” I mean that skin color is not only highlighted, but it is done so in a manner that allows all of the student's peers to notice and comment on it. In other words, race-learning is hardly a private affair but becomes public because it occurs around students and teachers — either in the classroom proper or in the

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<sup>8</sup> The most canonized novel in this subgenre of literature is Nella Larsen's *Passing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006) which is the story of long lost friends Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, who both pass in the early twentieth century. Irene's son, Brian Redfield Junior, is called a “nigger” in school and subsequently learns about his race (231-232). Since the novel does not follow him into adulthood, we cannot determine whether he passes as an adult. However, it is interesting to note that in the case of this canonized passing narrative, the “race-learning” occurs with the son of a passer and not the actual female passer. I contend that men learn about race in school because it is the public sphere; in chapter two, I will argue that women learn about it at home because it is the domestic sphere. The parents in the passing narratives analyzed in this dissertation know that their daughters might be limited to domesticity because of the confluence of their race and gender. To help them cope with this hindrance, they teach their daughters the nuances of passing from young while they are still at home, as seen in novels like *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia*.

<sup>9</sup> There are many texts in the tradition of passing narratives, and I have chosen these three specifically because they are the *only* ones written by men with male protagonists, and they all happen to follow the same path that has gone unnoticed. It is generative to think about their similarities especially because they are spread out across the twentieth century. There are two outliers in the tradition that are male-authored passing narratives about women: William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1852) and Walter White's *Flight* (1926). Most narratives about racial passing are written by women.

schoolyard. These protagonists suffer a severe type of trauma at school, and racial passing is the manifestation of it. While trauma theorists have dominated aspects of literary study over the past two decades, work on the intersection of trauma and racial passing narratives remains scant.<sup>10</sup> School, broadly conceived, is the premier place where students must confront race.

The major goal of this chapter is to rethink the beginning of passing for male characters. It is important to emphasize the gendered implications because female passing characters, as I will argue in chapter two, learn that they are black before entering school as a result of their parents, who teach them to navigate race. However, for the fictional men in twentieth century literature, their parents actively *thwart* all discussions about race at home, which explains why being rendered black for the first time at school is shocking to them. Secondly, I question the notion of passing simply as a form of resistance. Readers of these narratives take for granted that characters cross the racial line to avoid dealing with racial prejudice, especially during the Jim Crow era. With the protagonists analyzed in this chapter, passing is not a choice but is the end result of enduring the trauma of learning about race in school. By redefining traditional views of passing in this way, we gain a complete understanding of the connections between institutionalization and jumping the color line: education emerges as one area where black male characters pass *because* of it and not to obstruct racial norms.

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<sup>10</sup> Critics like Jennifer L. Griffiths and Anne Cheng have written exemplary texts on the intersection of trauma theory and race. However, when it comes to trauma and the sub category of racial passing, little has been said. My argument for this chapter then, is that the classroom is a site of trauma for black boys who have no other choice but to pass. For more on race and trauma, see Jennifer L. Griffith's *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African-American Women's Writing and Performance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); and Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).



Thirdly, I discount the conventional notion that violence leads to racial passing. For instance, in a pivotal scene that is often adduced as evidence that his passing begins after witnessing it, the Ex-Colored Man observes a lynching. He notes his “shame” with belonging to a race that has bodies mutilated and discarded at public spectacles, and begins pondering “the Negro question” as a result (497-498). Harryette Mullen believes this is precisely the point where the Ex-Colored Man’s race-shifting begins, but he does not explicitly use the language of passing here; his rhetoric is of one who will remain *passive* about the ways in which people will categorize him (76). She believes that he crosses the color line because this is “preferable to the loss of life of the black man burned alive, whose horrific public execution by a white mob determines the narrator’s decision to pass...and escape the stigma of blackness” (87). However as Randall Kennedy rightly observes, “passing long hovers in the background” of the plot (311). Similarly, Michele Elam notes that in Roth’s *The Human Stain*, “the first time [protagonist Coleman] Silk performs a ‘pass,’ he is in a ring at a public boxing competition” (Elam 106). Coleman is not *passing* per se, but is following the orders of his coach, who told him “not to mention that he was colored” (Roth 98). Racial passing requires a long-term willingness to achieve the ideals of whiteness, which is not the case for a teenager competing in a fight who avoids discussing his race *only* at his coach’s request. Looking carefully at each protagonist’s diction suggests that violence cannot be the impetus for passing because this latter phenomenon comes first, long before violence. By the time the Ex-Colored Man and Coleman Silk encounter potential bloodshed, either via lynching or a boxing match, they have already started to remain passive about being black after their experiences in school. This logic complicates the beginnings of passing

for men by asserting that it is not hyperviolence but actually racial hypervisibility that initiates passing. Moreover, racial passing is an adolescent phenomenon for the boys explored in this chapter. Even though they are at different ages, they learn about race by the time they are teenagers, before reaching adulthood.

Lastly, I apply psychoanalytic criticism to these narratives to examine the relationship between the mirror stage and racial development. Lacan's mirror stage, which he develops in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," occurs when a child first sees himself in a mirror. Before this point, he does not understand the separation between himself and the world around him. He considers himself fragmented because he is aware he has hands and feet but not aware that they are connected to the rest of his body. Seeing his image in the mirror, however, shows him his totality for the first time, providing him with the sense that all his body parts are connected and he can move them at once. He also discovers the division in the world between what he can move and what he cannot. What this mirror stage does, then, is underscore his conception of himself as different from everything else. As provocative as this hypothesis is, Lacan's formulation does not "address the implications of racial difference," according to John Sheehy, who is one of the contemporary critics who maps the mirror stage onto race (401). He argues that in *The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, when passing figures see themselves in mirrors, it "marks a point at which the enigmatic American dialogue of race is resolved into a single human being" (402).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Another useful theorist is Kaja Silverman, who published *Threshold of the Visible World* in 1995. This text is interested in answering the question of whether or not psychoanalysis has a theory of love. She goes about this question by using psychoanalysts, such as Lacan, to examine the broad field of vision. She examines the social and psychic forces that constrain us to look and identify in normative ways. As interesting as this analysis is, she minimizes a discussion of race and specifically the utility of her theory for racial passing. Judith Butler's "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge", *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, 1993), breaks away from most psychoanalytic feminists who analyze gender

Interactions with mirrors initiate what I call a phenotypic bipolarism. The protagonists try to process the trauma of being rendered black by looking at their reflections and realizing a split between what they see and what the world sees. The “real” is the skin color others see but the passers cannot, but what is more socially determinative is the skin that others can comprehend. Phenotypic bipolarism refers to the vacillation between the two skin colors that they are stuck between—black and white—upon encountering the trauma of their reflections. The movement back and forth appears in a number of ways, ranging from the Ex-Colored Man’s distancing of black culture before reading books on accomplished black men, to Coleman Silk’s affairs with both black and white women. Neither character is initially clear on which side of the color line to align himself with.

Undergirding this chapter is the notion that racialization is a long-term process. Each character’s double consciousness extends further into his life than the ways in which DuBois predicted: John, the Ex-Colored Man and Coleman *transition* into another world instead of inhabiting both the black and white ones. On a formal level, they share the rhetoric of duality to represent their collective movements while seeking answers about their phenotypes with the help of mirrors. In twentieth century passing narratives, race-learning in school forces light-skinned black boys to grow up into men who racially

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before considering all other subject positions. By exploring Nella Larsen’s novella *Passing*, Butler challenges readers to examine the confluence of race, gender, sexuality and class because these subject positions influence each other; one factor cannot be extracted from the others. She believes that the characters in Larsen’s text engage in “queer” and “performative” behaviors in order to pass. As a result, Butler implores readers to comprehend “the psychological complexity of cross-identification and jealousy” (173). In this way, we move away from viewing *Passing* as a prototypical tragic mulatta narrative, in order to read Irene’s breakdown as a response to the psychological problems she faces due to being oppressed by race, class, gender and sexuality.

pass.<sup>12</sup> When “the black boys raise their hands,” they do so ostensibly to interact with their instructors and peers, while inadvertently highlighting their African-American status—a category they spend the rest of their fictional lives trying to conceal.<sup>13</sup> This chapter mines the source of their stealth.

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<sup>12</sup> I see racial passing as a theme that is not only specific to African-American Literature but also to American Literature more broadly. It is true that a majority of narratives on racial passing were written by blacks, but my dissertation is largely interested in creating a new taxonomy for the genre, which entails resituating texts in literary traditions they have not yet been in. Roth’s *The Human Stain*, for instance, is often placed in a white male and/or Jewish tradition, but placing it in a tradition of passing texts opens up discussions about literary influences and the ways in which the classroom can be reconfigured in literature. Moreover, as a contemporary novel, it proves that racial passing still occupies the literary imagination.

Conspicuous in my formulation is Philip Roth, who is the sole white author I am analyzing in this chapter. In an interview with Charles McGrath, he admits that his knowledge of passing came from his time as a graduate student in the 1950s, when he dated a light-skinned African-American woman who passed as white. Back then, he did not imagine that the woman’s story of “self-transformation [and] self-invention” would motivate him to pen a passing narrative decades later (McGrath). However, it left a “lasting impression” on him and provided the impetus for *The Human Stain*. What he describes in this interview is his own tangential relationship to race and to passing specifically; he did not have to experience any firsthand racialization in the classroom as Charles Chesnutt and James Weldon Johnson may have had to. I include him in this chapter because he helps to expand the discussion of passing to show that it is not limited to the classroom proper. The classroom, or the site of race-learning, is much more expansive than one might initially assume. Roth’s novel argues that the boxing ring can be an extension of the classroom because racialization happens here just as it does in traditional school houses. By making this move, I imply that there is a generative link between passing and enclosed institutions: the school room and the boxing ring are both structures that box black and white bodies within them. The walls of the classroom are comparable to the ropes around a ring, and in each context, protagonists must encounter the opposite race and negotiate their meanings. In Coleman’s case, this means following his coach’s orders by pretending to be white in order to get a prestigious sports scholarship. In short, I believe that Roth, despite being the sole white author in a chapter dominated by black ones, merits inclusion because he elucidates the ways in which passing can occur by arguing that it is not so linearly determined. He highlights the absurdity, fluidity and elusiveness about race, by arguing that it is not so rigid after all if it can be circumvented throughout the twentieth century by the likes of Coleman Silk. Moreover, Roth has stated the Ralph Ellison is his sole black literary hero. I want to suggest that he has read other writers from the black literary tradition, even though he would never articulate that. Based on the correlations articulated in this chapter, I believe that he has read the black writers who have written passing narratives.

<sup>13</sup> The title of this chapter is a quote from Brooke Kroeger’s *Passing: When People Can’t Be Who They Are* (2003), a collection of personal narratives on contemporary passers. Chapter two focuses on a white teacher transplanted to rural Virginia who is told she must count her black students for the annual census. This is a classroom scene which raises the threat of hypervisible blackness by being reminiscent of the race-learning of James Weldon Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man*. Unlike his teacher though, she “would have died sooner than ask, *All the black boys [to] raise their hands*” (50 italics in original).

“Black as Ink”: Classroom Trauma and Passing in *House* and *Ex-Colored Man*

John Walden’s racial development follows the trajectory outlined above: education leading to racialization. He is the protagonist of Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), which tells the story of two siblings who pass in the post-Reconstruction south. John and Rena Walden are the children of Molly, a free mulatta, and her nameless white benefactor. The text opens with John returning to his maternal home in North Carolina after several years living as John Warwick in South Carolina. His visit is hardly one to reaffirm family ties: as Melissa Ryan explains, the widowed John only returns home because “he needs a caretaker for his now-motherless son and promises to Rena the wide world of white opportunity” (39). This “white opportunity” is a euphemism for his true goal, which is to “convince [his] sister Rena to return with him to South Carolina to *pass* and seek her fortune as a white gentlewoman” (Belluscio 140). Molly intuits a problem based on the secrecy shrouding her son’s return trip and her own internal doubts that her daughter will ever return. If so, Molly assumes that Rena might do it “like her brother, under the cover of the night” (287). Though the text does not initially clarify the reasons for John’s stealth, the narrative clues suggest that whatever has been previously transgressed can barely be spoken of, lest it compromise John’s now privileged position which forced him to cut his familial ties in the first place.

John’s race-learning helps to explain his secrecy, as it demonstrates his *gradual* realization of his race. This understanding develops in two scenes, with the first occurring at school. After revealing that the fifteen-year-old John has “no external sign to mark him off from the white boys on the street,” the narrator writes:

He soon came to know, however, that there was a difference. He was informed one day that he was black. He denied the proposition and

thrashed the child who made it. The scene was repeated the next day with variation, — he was himself thrashed by a larger boy. When he had been beaten five or six times, he ceased to argue the point, though to himself he never admitted the charge. He [referring to God] must have meant him to be white. (373)

John realizes that there is something setting him off from his white peers. This “difference” is one that he does not initially perceive, responding violently to his classmate’s revelation. Even after several fights he refuses to stop contradicting his peer and does not openly admit to being black, in scenes that collectively foreground “the racial determinism of his plight” according to critic Stephen Belluscio (140).

Despite John’s seeming passivity, the “proposition” does have an effect on him. As the narrator notes, “his playmates might call him black; [but] the mirror proved that God, the Father of all, had made him white” (373). Though John’s refusal to continue fighting suggests his passive acceptance of being black, he requires further proof and looks in the mirror in search of more answers. What the outside world sees is merely a construction that contradicts how he sees himself as he processes the trauma of being raced. The mirror image is frightening and as a result, a splitting occurs where he sees himself as white according to God’s mandate, despite being rendered black by everyone else. There is a lack of phenotypical markers to “prove” his whiteness to his classmates as the visual validation becomes a primary indication of his doubt regarding his race after being called out at school.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the mirror image, which he turned to in search of phenotypical verification, is not what it purports to be for passing characters.

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the image of the mirror in the passing narratives of Charles Chesnutt and James Weldon Johnson, see John Sheehy, “The Mirror and the Veil: The Passing Novel and the Quest for American Racial Identity,” *African-American Review*, 33.3 (1999): 401-415.

Instead of being a site of identity consolidation and unity, it is one of ambivalence, identity confusion and splitting.

The suspicion about his heritage is heightened in the second part of his race-learning. After his blackness becomes hypervisible, he retreats into the library where his voracious appetite for books motivates him to pursue a legal career. John then walks into Judge Archibald Straight's office one day on a whim, proclaiming his intention "to be a lawyer" (376). During a lengthy exchange in which the formidable judge attempts to determine John's dedication and foresight, Straight makes comments such as, "You want to be a lawyer...you are aware, or course, that you are a Negro" (378); "You are black, and you are not free" (repeated twice on page 379); and "[You are] Black as ink, my lad...[because] one drop of black blood makes the whole man black" (379). The language of ink anticipates a similar image used several decades later by Franz Fanon. In chapter five of his pivotal text *Black Skin, White Masks*, he argues that "the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye" (89). Though the theorist specifically refers to the person on the train who proclaims "Look! A Negro!" when seeing him, the concept underlying this exchange applies to Chesnutt's novel as well: skin color is written onto the skin regardless of what the actual color of the skin looks like. Judge Straight is the "Other," who hyperbolically assigns the darkest skin color, or the "dye," to the future lawyer by calling his phenotype "black ink." This imagery also anticipates the title of Roth's *The Human Stain*, in that blackness is seen as a type of tangible mark that racial passers try to circumvent. Fanon might put this another way: the hypothetical "denegrification serum" would allow the "black man [to] whiten himself and thus rid himself of the burden of this bodily curse" (91).

What the Judge achieves in his office is to educate the wide-eyed John on the impediments that he would face as a black attorney. Not only is it illegal for “men of color to practice the law,” it is also taboo because “public sentiment would not allow” for this transgression of the social order (380). John maintains his stance, arguing that his light complexion is tantamount to unequivocal whiteness, thereby ignoring his black ancestry. It is not until the judge educates him about the one-drop rule and on the term “mulatto” that he begins to comprehend the meaning of his race (379-380). The friction lies in the fact that John considers his actual body as the source of his identity, the meaning of who he is. However, Straight wants him to realize that his body only has meaning in what the social order ascribes to him. John’s body does not matter; instead he needs to worry about whether or not he can accept race as a signifier written onto him. He then definitively states “From this time on, I am white,” before brokering a deal to clean Straight’s office in exchange for studying his legal books in stealth. This scene ends with the eighteen-year-old John leaving his family indefinitely, prompting Molly’s sorrowful prediction that “he’s gone over on the other side” (382). The “other side” refers not only to John’s physical movement across the state border from North to South Carolina, but also to the racial line he transgresses to pass as a wealthy white lawyer.

As a result of his passing, we now have more contexts for John and understand why the opening trip back home is surreptitious: he proudly abandoned his life a decade before in order to be a lawyer. It is also now clear that the initial impulse for his racial passing came from his late and measured race consciousness. In the first scene, John angrily defends his whiteness with his classmate through fighting; in the second, his belligerence is replaced initially by stubbornness, then acceptance about what his skin



should mean regardless of its actual color, especially once the judge recites the law to him. Additionally, the use of the mirror is not just a literary trope but also a meta-commentary for John's progression, since instances from his pre-passing stage are revised for his passing phase as the two parts of his life begin to mirror each other. The school setting becomes the more intimate venue of Straight's office, with the judge acting as his educator for John's simultaneous apprenticeships into the law and into race.<sup>15</sup>

John's race-learning is also juxtaposed with a retreat into literature—his father's library is replaced by Straight's legal repertoire, thus implying that the realization of blackness is incomplete until searching for textual validation. He does not find any explicit answers in the books, but comprehends the difficulties he might face as a black lawyer. Matthew Wilson argues that John views his choice to pass as a “rational decision” yet one that “collides with the social realities of race and has inevitable familial consequences” (140). Thus, when he decides to pass, he does so by metaphorically killing off his family, since any relationship to black people could ruin his legal career. The novel itself takes it a step further by killing John off. Midway through the plot, he drops out completely and his story is replaced by Rena's narrative. Melissa Ryan notes that he “vanish[es] from the novel as if he had never been” (40), while William Andrews takes it one more step by dismissing John altogether. He claims that the novel consists of two unconnected halves “what might be entitled ‘Rena in White Society’ ... [and] what might be called ‘Rena in Black Society’” (151). Ryan and Andrews are less concerned with the question of what happens to John after traveling to “the other side” of both the Carolinas

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<sup>15</sup> Apprenticeship was the primary means of a legal education in the nineteenth century, which John benefits from.

border and the color line, but Chesnutt insists that it is Rena's story that helps to complete the mirroring of John's life.

Like her brother, Rena's race is made hypervisible in school; unlike him however, she does not *learn* about her race in the classroom and it is not an automatic precursor to passing.<sup>16</sup> Instead, her blackness is highlighted when she sits for her teacher's examination after she has already started passing. When her pursuer, Wain, drops her off at school, he inadvertently "leak[s]" the fact that Rena is a "colored girl" (421). Upon hearing this, "several of the would-be teachers" oppose her "presence in the room," thereby requiring her to complete her examination two hours after the white teachers (421). The narrator makes a point to inform us that not only does she pass her test "without difficulty" but she also receives "the only first-grade certificate issued to-day. [She] might teach a higher grade of pupils" as a result of her successful completion of the teacher's exam (421). Rena's teaching career begins within a few days, while she attempts to forget some of the pain and embarrassment from her arduous certification process.

The image of a strange white woman ambling into Rena's classroom vaguely "interested in the colored people" foreshadows the moment when Rena must out herself (426). After she dismisses her students for recess, the stranger (who later turns out to be the mother of one of her potential suitors) asks her if she is "really colored," a question to which she affirmatively responds (426-427). The stranger then "sighs regretfully" and urges her to pass: "If you choose to conceal it, no one would ever be the wiser" (427). By

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the role Rena plays in the story, see Melissa Ryan, "Rena's Two Bodies: Gender and Whiteness in Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*," *Studies in the Novel*, 43.1 (Spring 2011), 38-54; and Daniel Worden, "Birth in the Briar Patch: Charles W. Chesnutt and the Problem of Racial Identity," *Southern Literary Journal*, XLI.2 (Spring 2009), 1-20.

this point though, Rena has already been passing for a few years but began welcoming her blackness, as seen by her employment at an all-black school.<sup>17</sup> Yet even this does not stop the woman from quizzing her about being black and its significance to her as an educator.

Though this scene is situated in a chapter subtitled “An Interesting Acquaintance,” Chesnutt’s larger project for this text is arguably more “interesting” because it underscores the connection between hypervisible race and school; the former is made explicit in the latter. John Walden can only pass after learning what the significance of his blackness implies, as his interactions on the schoolyard and in the office of Judge Straight attest. Understanding his race becomes a trauma for him, and he must shift from black to white as a result of not wanting to deal with being hypervisible. In parallel academic contexts, both his bully and mentor remind him that being black is a major impediment, not only as a phenotypical marker but also as a social transgression. This is a different story for his sister though. By the time she enters her classroom, her pedagogy is less important than her phenotype as the stranger’s inquiry attests. Passing for Rena is not the *result* of this hypervisible blackness but predates it.

Chesnutt thus forces readers to grapple with the question of gender—how is it that brother and sister racial passers can have completely different experiences at school? He sets Rena up as a counterpoint to her brother, since her classroom scene is less focused on *learning* about race and more about it being conspicuous. As I will argue in the next later chapter, women passers realize they are black much earlier than their male counterparts

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<sup>17</sup> According to Belluscio, Rena “feels obligated to help less fortunate blacks, so she becomes a schoolteacher, a profession significant not only because it was one of the only white-collar options for black women in the postbellum South but also because it implicitly involved a commitment to social and political activism” (217).

do, and need not wait until school to figure out the social, legal, and historical implications of inhabiting black skin. For the focus of this chapter, John Walden is the first fictional example of a male passer who jumps the color line after being made black in school though denying it. Chesnutt sets up a logical progression of “race-learning leads to passing,” a trajectory taken up further in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

The nameless protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s novel passes as white, and like John, learns about his race within an academic setting.<sup>18</sup> As a young boy, he stands up in class at the request of his teacher who wants all the white students to rise, but she then chides him by telling him to remain seated because he is black (400). In response, he slowly comprehends the weight of his phenotype:

I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise, I did not know it. When school was dismissed, I went out in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying: “Oh, you’re a nigger too.” I heard some black children say: “We knew he was colored.” (400-401)

Afterwards, he runs home to examine himself in the “looking glass” that “hung on the wall,” noticing his own physical features for the very first time (401). He does not know how long he actually stares at himself in the mirror but recalls previous comments he has heard about his appearance, all before running downstairs to ask his mother if he is indeed a “nigger” (401). What we as readers know, however, is that this mirror image is important in the development of racial passing. The classmates see something that the Ex-Colored Man cannot determine; there is an imaginary black shadow hovering over him, which is vastly different from what he himself can comprehend. According to John Sheehy, the image that the protagonist sees “*must* remain fragmented, [he] *must* deny

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<sup>18</sup> For the remainder of this chapter, I use “narrator” and “protagonist” interchangeably when discussing the Ex-Colored Man, since the main character serves both roles in this novel.

some part of what he sees in the mirror, leaving him finally with the unresolvable choice between living either as a physically ‘white’ black man or as a secretly ‘black’ white man” (404, emphasis mine). I render this the beginning of his phenotypic bipolarism in which he bounces between blackness and whiteness because he is traumatized at being relegated to the former. The first manifestation of this irresolution is his questioning of his mother on whether he is really black, when he crudely renders himself “a nigger.”

Though his mother evades the question, one thing that is obvious is the similarity between the Ex-Colored Man’s development and John’s. He does not fight the way John does, but his status as an African-American becomes clearer in the classroom; this time, it is the *instructor* who initiates the race-learning and not the students. In response, he questions himself with the help of a mirror. As John Sheehy observes, the Ex-Colored Man is searching for “visible evidence of his identity—a sign or mark which might brand him indisputable as either black or white” (401). Much like John then, he thinks he can verify how the “Other” sees him and possibly reconcile it with how he sees himself, but the reflection he sees raises more questions than answers.

The protagonist looks back on that day as a crucial one—the day in which the nascent seeds to pass were planted in his head. He recalls the event with vivid detail, as he was “fully conscious” that a “radical change” came over him (401). According to him, “I have often lived through that hour, that day, that week, in which was wrought the miracle of my transition from one world into another; for I did indeed *pass* into another world” (403, emphasis mine). What he describes is his newfound double consciousness, which W.E.B. DuBois theorizes in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He calls it the

Sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused

contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (215)

Johnson had DuBois in mind when writing *Ex-Colored Man*. Yet it appears that more than the narrator's duality is made clear on the day he learned about his race in school. His invocation of "passing" into a different world is a very provocative one; had the Ex-Colored Man been thinking strictly about his double consciousness, which involves inhabiting two worlds, then he could have used only the language of duality. Instead, he takes it one step further by noting his *transition* into another world, and not simply his occupying multiple subjectivities. In other words, by "passing into another world," he reveals that transgressing racial boundaries is the long-term result of his race-learning.

This focus on duality continues long after the classroom scene. Reflecting further on that pivotal encounter, The Ex-Colored Man asserts:

In proportion to his intellectuality, art of dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race. I have often watched with interest and sometimes with amazement even ignorant colored men under cover of broad grins and minstrel antics maintain this dualism in the presence of white men. (403)

Once again, the narrator continues to invoke DuBois' double consciousness, but more forcefully than before as the diction proves. He declares that blacks maintain a duality in their everyday lives, from looking at themselves through a "colored" lens, to the physical acts of donning "minstrel" masks (Johnson 403). That he renders "dual personality" an art is very telling, because it implies that maintaining multiple subjectivities requires creativity, foresight and skill. This is underscored by his use of the "freemasonry" image, which "suggests a club with which he can, at his discretion, affiliate" (Kawash 65). His remarks reveal both a criticism of his fellow blacks and of himself, since he is equally

culpable in sustaining a lifelong duality. He articulates this oscillating relationship with blackness—or as I call it, his phenotypic bipolarism—only after it is made explicitly clear at school.

The first indication of this fluctuation is manifested in the distance he maintains from other black students: “But I do know that when the blow fell, I had a very strong aversion to being classed with them” – “them” meaning the “black and brown boys and girls” at his school (404). After a short time, he hears a speech on Touissaint L’Ouverture, which he admits has a “double effect” on him (417). This oration stirs him to feel great “pride” in being black, to the point that he starts having “wild dreams of bringing glory and honour to the Negro race” (417). As a result, he borrows books about the lives of notable black men throughout history, including L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Alexandre Dumas. In the weeks after being raced in the classroom, he is uncertain how to proceed because of the trauma inherent in learning about his race, which everyone seemed privy to all along. This uncertainty translates into an attempt to reconcile the black and white world by initially detaching himself from his classmates then exhibiting pride at black men who have distinguished themselves previously.

The Ex-Colored Man initiates a point that Fanon expounds upon decades later. Learning about black antiquity, Fanon discovers that black men have been extremely successful for millennia. He summarizes his epiphany by noting that “the white man was wrong, I was not primitive or a subhuman; I belonged to a race that had already been working silver and gold 2,000 years ago” (109). Realizing the long history of black achievement that history has overlooked helps Fanon reconcile his own feelings of colonized inferiority. With Johnson’s narrator though, his racialized duality lasts longer

as he vacillates between the “attraction and repulsion to both black and white identities” (Belluscio 152). For instance, traveling throughout the south allows him to render Atlanta women as “so fair that it was difficult to believe that they had Negro blood in them” while “many of the blackest boys were fine specimens of young manhood, tall, straight, and muscular, with magnificent heads...were the kind of boys who developed into the patriarchal ‘uncles’ of the old slave régime” (Johnson 426). Here, he employs white stereotypes of beauty to assume the white gaze towards black students. He does not believe that light-skinned black girls could be African-American, nor could he imagine that the boys could achieve anything without regressing into shameful slave mentality.

The irony here is that, as a light-skinned black person himself, the same criticism he has of black women could be hurled at him: his complexion misleads people into believing he is white, which enables him to pass as a musician in Europe. His use of “boys” is also jarring: this “highly loaded epithet” from the same narrator who idolized black maleness shows him “pretend[ing] to admire blackness” while simultaneously condemning it (Goellnicht 20). In applying the Ex-Colored Man’s own criticism onto himself, we realize that his vacillation on blackness—from wholeheartedly embracing it, to shunning it, and then gazing upon it—plagues characters who shift races. In an extreme case of this fluctuation, John Walden cuts all ties from anything black when he moves away from home and passes indefinitely. One major difference though, is that John’s interiority is completely hidden, whereas this is not the case for the Ex-Colored Man. John is a “counterpoint to Johnson’s confessional and contemplative ex-colored man” (Sheehy 410). Wilson similarly notes that he is “clearly more conflicted” in regards



to the ethics of passing, than either John or Coleman Silk (who will be discussed later) (142).

What distinguishes the Ex-Colored Man of course, are his travels throughout both the United States and Europe, or as Eugenia Collier puts it, he makes “an endless journey” (365). The journey that he grapples with is the psychological trip into his childhood as he recalls his race-learning. Trying to understand the significance of that day in retrospect, he realizes that his sheltered youth did not prepare him to understand his blackness until it was made hypervisible. He recalls being raised as a “perfect little aristocrat” who dressed well, played the piano well, and divided his time between “music and school books” (395-397). He often invented games to keep himself occupied, since he lacked playmates and avoided friendships with his peers at church (397). His mother teaches him his “letters, figures...hymns...and some old Southern songs,” in an effort to prevent him from “straying too far from the place of purity and safety” (395-396). Moreover, his “faint knowledge of prejudice” and ignorance of “how it ramified and affected our entire social organism” leave him crippled in his encounter with hypervisible blackness as the classroom scene attests (412). He goes further by arguing that “the whole matter” of race “was rather hazy” to him (414).

This “haziness” is epitomized in an often-cited scene from the text, where the Ex-Colored Man asks his mother about his racial background for the first time. Instead of offering a concrete response, she “tremblingly” replies that his father “is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you” (402). But the narrator is less concerned with his father’s prominence and more so with comprehending the meaning of the term “nigger.” Though his classmates cast this aspersion to him, his

mother's nebulous reaction only serves to "assure the narrator's confusion surrounding his racial identity is never resolved" (Andrade 261). He then spends the remainder of his life in a futile attempt to navigate blackness and whiteness. Robert Stepto is less sympathetic about the Ex-Colored Man's racialized subjectivity: his idyllic youth renders him "a racial misfit" (32). But is it really this simple? It is more accurate to consider him as afflicted with a delayed comprehension of his blackness in post-Reconstruction America, which forces him to maintain a part of his subjectivity in a place he cannot access because dissociation is the only way he knows how to deal with the trauma of race. Despite his mother's deep love of parenting and domesticity, neither of these categories can assist her in teaching him what it means to be black. Though she herself is black, she fails to realize the importance of teaching her son the ways in which he should navigate his world as a black person. School, not his mother's ideal home, appears as the site of the Ex-Colored Man's most important lesson: race-learning.

School is also his impetus for leaving bucolic New England, at least ostensibly. After deciding to attend college, he must choose between studying at "Harvard or going to Atlanta" (420). Ultimately he selects the latter institution, reasoning that its price makes it appealing. However, his *true* motivation for traveling is his "peculiar fascination" with the south—which invokes the euphemism for slavery, "the peculiar institution," couched in his travels to the all-black Atlanta University (420). The Ex-Colored Man dismisses all of the black people he encounters while en route, beginning with the "big, fat, greasy-looking brown-skin man" who offers him a room during a layover (421). When he resumes his journey, the throngs of African-Americans in the streets utterly disgust him, and he critiques them for their "unkempt appearance, the

shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter” (422). With this behavior, he scorns African-Americans, thus using his aversion as a defense mechanism to ward off the trauma of being raced in public. When one of his new friends suggests eating together before resuming their travels, the Ex-Colored Man admits to being “bored and embarrassed” by the new friendship (424). The only aspect of this journey he does enjoy is the stereotypical dialect he hears almost exclusively among blacks. Readers must wonder then, when he twice expresses his unequivocal “disappointment,” is it with urban aesthetics as he claims, or with the people he persistently looks down upon?

According to Samira Kawash, it is his people. In an essay focusing on the novel’s “failure of blackness or whiteness,” she asserts that the protagonist eschews mingling with fellow blacks in favor of seeing “the curious and exotic” (65). The strongest indication of his exoticizing blackness is discernible by his pontifications about the black experience. These occur at a time when he struggles to earn money to continue his education at Atlanta University—an increasingly unsuccessful endeavor—thus making his opinions appear random and textually out of place. He goes on at length about the three classes of African-Americans observed in his travels: “the desperate class,” the class consisting of those “connected with the whites by domestic service” and finally, those who are “independent workmen and tradesmen” (434-436). The level of detail the Ex-Colored Man devotes to these observations suggests that he is hardly interested in interacting with, and thus learning from, the people he meets. Instead, his interests lie in creating arbitrary and subjective groups within which to box African-Americans, placing them into the categories that only he deems as appropriate. He also situates blacks within monolithic lists that are based merely on their *perceived* associations with white people

and nothing concrete. The narrator seems incapable of categorizing blacks via any other interactions, thereby completely overlooking intraracial alliances.

He continues this line of thought:

It is my opinion that the colored people of this country have done four things which refute the oft advanced theory that they are an absolutely inferior race, which demonstrate that they have originality and artistic conception, and, what is more, the power of creating that which can influence and appeal universally. The first two of these are the Uncle Remus stories, collected by Joel Chandler Harris, and the Jubilee songs, to which the Fisk singers made the public and the skilled musicians of both America and Europe listen. The other two are ragtime music and the cakewalk. (440-441)

These lines are fascinating for offering insight into the protagonist's psyche. Primarily, the narrator is steadfast in his belief that African-Americans must be classified according to his own arbitrary reasoning. He utters these words near the end of his stay in the south, as his perpetual movement seems to strengthen his argument. Secondly, and more importantly, he relegates black achievement to "artistic conception" by his own admission. He cites creative endeavors as evidence that blacks are not at all inferior, yet he conspicuously omits the academic achievement among this population. He is clearly aware of the intelligence and foresight of the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, as well as the oratory prowess of Frederick Douglass, but they are obscured in favor of artistic endeavors. To exclude these men and others of their stature highlights the Ex-Colored Man's contention that creativity trumps all else and is the sole thermometer for black achievement. The list seems hastily construed and incomplete, a conspicuous problem especially in light of the narrator's obvious interest in classifying black subjectivity from before. Moreover, the absence of scholarly blacks stands out because education is inextricably linked to the protagonist's own development and

explains his trajectory: he is on the way to Atlanta University to engage in book-learning, years after the classroom becomes the site of his race-learning.

The Ex-Colored Man's categories are continuous with Johnson's own observations. In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Johnson himself explicitly argues that literature and art are the two criteria that should be used to judge the success of a group of people. He uses this preface to describe, at length, that much of the creative output in America derives from African-Americans. The implication is that, contrary to dominant thinking about African-Americans, they did not deserve to be stereotyped as inferior since their creativity proves otherwise. Besides, if the likes of Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar—the former a slave and the latter the son of escaped slaves—can become talented poets, how can anyone criticize and stereotype the entire race? This is the question that undergirds Johnson's entire preamble, especially when he cites blacks from other countries who were talented, such as English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and French playwright Alexandre Dumas, who both attained international acclaim.

To readers of Johnson's writing, these revelations are nothing new, as he places similar reflections in the mouth of the Ex-Colored Man ten years prior. The main difference though, is that while the fictional character is engaged in a *race-learning*, the novelist is more interested in *race-teaching*. He cites myriad examples of renowned blacks to make it clear that notions of inherent black inferiority are completely fictional, while implicitly questioning the logical basis of racism. Johnson realizes that the education most people received blatantly omitted black achievement and he takes it upon himself to rectify this in his preface. While he could not have known this, he

inadvertently opens a space for Frantz Fanon to argue three decades later, that transhistoric black history provides a thorough, accurate, and nuanced negation to racial inferiority. Situating the Ex-Colored Man within these contexts highlights the broader importance of his rhetoric as he reflects Johnson's own inclinations to educate and represent his race.

The Ex-Colored Man leaves his childhood classroom with ambivalence towards members of the African Diaspora—first despising the race he realizes he belongs to, then welcoming the fact that it consists of formidable leaders like Frederick Douglass and Touissant L'Ouverture. By the time he approaches the ever-elusive Atlanta University, these leaders pale in comparison to the artistic creativity that is the sole arbiter in undermining racial stereotypes. His heightened awareness about race parallels his consciousness after his racial innocence ends when told to sit back down. Why then, are academic settings the place where race becomes prominent in these novels? At the start of the twentieth century when they were set, W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington offered conflicting visions for black education, in debates which seeped into the literature. However, this historical specificity presents a problem: it does not take into consideration novels from the remainder of the century, which also include educational settings as flashpoints for the passing subject. One recent example of the inextricability of passing and learning is portrayed in Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000).

#### “The Most Demanding Curriculum”: Mirrors, Spooks and Racial Passing

Coleman Silk undergoes a long racial development in school, an institution more broadly defined in *The Human Stain* than in previous narratives. It includes not just the

classroom proper but also the boxing ring. The irony is that he is a black man passing as Jewish, who is accused of racism in his college classroom, years after he first learns that he is black with the help of Dr. Fensterman. Fensterman, described as “the Jewish doctor, the big surgeon from Mom’s hospital down in Newark,” visits Coleman’s parents to convince them to let Coleman graduate salutatorian instead of valedictorian of East Orange High School (85). This visit is prompted by young Bert Fensterman, who aspires to be a doctor like his father and believes the only way to achieve it is to graduate at the very top of his class. In exchange, the elder Fensterman offers to help Mrs. Silk advance to the position of “head nurse on the medical-surgical floor” and to pay three thousand dollars towards Coleman’s undergraduate education (87). The only stipulation is that Coleman must earn B’s on two of his final exams instead of A’s, thereby ensuring secondary status and the expectation that he would be the “highest-ranking *colored* student ever to graduate E.O [East Orange High School]” (87 emphasis mine). The benefits might seem tempting, particularly the financial one, yet Mr. and Mrs. Silk flatly refuse to be bought and watch their high-achieving son attain secondary status.

In trying to comprehend the racism underlying Dr. Fensterman’s entreaties, Mr. Silk goes as far as to say he “wanted to kill that man” (88). Coleman, however, does not understand it at first. When his sister first narrates the tense encounter, he is excited to learn about the prospect of his struggling family earning three thousand dollars, which is “more than Dad makes in a whole year” (88). He starts running around to visualize his excitement, and even admits that the doctor’s proposal meant nothing to him. In recollecting the scene years later, it is clear that “the larger picture he didn’t get yet” (88). This “picture” is not just the fact that Dr. Fensterman is highly unethical by purporting to

use his position as a medical doctor to advance Mrs. Silk's career without considering her qualifications and diligence; it is not just that he wants to buy his son's way into an Ivy League education, even though being salutatorian is not tantamount to exclusion from the highest echelons of academic excellence. Moreover, it is not just irrationality that undermines Dr. Fensterman's appeals; instead, what Coleman does not "get yet" is the ability to comprehend the blatant racism that motivates the uninvited guest. Not until years later, when understanding his selfhood purely in terms of academic development, does Coleman realize the ways in which the Doctor is situated on a continuum of men whose racial beliefs on his achievement are seen, retroactively, as planting the nascent seeds of his racial development.

One other doctor on this spectrum is Doc Chizner, who offers him boxing lessons and teaches him the ways in which he can use his light skin color for deception. Chizner, also Jewish, is described as a "dentist who loved boxing" and begins training Coleman at fourteen years old (88-89). Coleman's first act of narrative secrecy comes in the form of his stealthy boxing lessons, which he hides from his father because of his focus on academics before the seemingly frivolous activity of recreation. In a sarcastic dinnertime exchange between father and son, the elder Silk questions his son's extracurricular activity by suggesting that Coleman disregards him as a father:

"I was thinking that maybe Mac Machrone, at the Newark Boys Club, was your father."

"Come on, Dad. Mac's my trainer."

"I see. So who then is your father, if I may ask?"

"You know. You are. You are, Dad."

"I am? Yes?"

"No!" Coleman shouted. "No, you're not!" And here, at the very start of Sunday dinner, he ran out of the house and for nearly an hour he did his roadwork, up Central Avenue and over the Orange line, and then through



Orange all the way to the West Orange line, and then crossing over on Watchung Avenue. (92)

By questioning his status as father, Mr. Silk implies that someone else is actually Coleman's parent, or that boxing is taking his place. He is partially right: while Mac is indeed just Coleman's trainer, Doc Chizner is a symbolic father to the promising athlete, teaching him the rules of the social order. Thus, when Coleman sprints out the house at the end of the conversation, roaming through several parts of New Jersey, this can be read as his physical act of renouncing his dad. He eventually returns home, but not before "throwing punches" as his substitute father Doc taught him to do (92). Coleman escapes his biological father and imitates his surrogate one in the process.

Mr. Silk and Doc are foils for each other: the former is obstinate in his belief that life should focus on literary endeavors, while the latter enjoys everything but literature. Furthermore, Mr. Silk rarely offers useful advice to his son, whereas Doc Chizner enjoys providing Coleman with a real-world education. One such example regards race, or the lack thereof. On their way to a boxing match at West Point, Doc registers his hope that Coleman's boxing skills can impress the visiting University of Pittsburgh coach: "if nothing [about race] comes up, you don't bring it up. You're neither one thing or the other. You're Silky Silk. That's enough. That's the deal" (98-99). According to his logic, when everyone sees Coleman, a light-skinned black boy, alongside Doc, they would think he's "one of Doc's boys" and that he's "Jewish" (99). To be one of Doc's "boys" means that Coleman is under his tutelage and that he officially recognizes him as an adopted son. This latter category is certainly made possible by the lack of parental bonds noted in the fiery dinnertime exchange: Doc fills the void that the rigid Mr. Silk cannot.

Telling Coleman to remain silent about his blackness is a step in his developing racial awareness. Though he admits to “laugh[ing] loudly” at the prospect of passing as Jewish in order to get into the University of Pittsburgh—especially since he really desires Howard University—Coleman quickly has a change of heart. In one of his boxing matches, Coleman notes that he “love[s] *secrets*. The *secret* of nobody’s knowing what was going on in your head...that’s why he liked shadowboxing and hitting the heavy bag: for the *secrecy* in it” (100 emphases mine). He relishes in the ability to lie and keep everyone guessing—a far cry from dismissing Chizner’s notion to pass. The rapidity with which he vacillates shows the effect that the possibility of passing has on him, as well as his developing race-learning, underscored when Chizner is situated within the same narrative lineage as the two other novels previously examined. He teaches Coleman that in order to be a notable fighter, he must obscure his race and pass.

The narrative progression recalls Judge Straight, who takes the young John Walden under his guidance and teaches him that he can only be a successful lawyer by passing. In both instances, the men who want to educate black boys actually train them to begin jumping the color line. Though the Ex-Colored Man does not *learn* about his race the way these other two characters do from their mentors/fathers, his sexual and subservient relationship with the anonymous benefactor deteriorates after spending time in Europe and realizing his need to be near his struggling brethren in America. What these texts reveal is that race-learning entails phenotypically ambiguous black boys forgetting they are black and gradually realizing the broader range of options that their skin color promises.

Because of this, Coleman's tenacity in wanting to attend Howard University is unexpected, since it is a historically Black institution. Doc has all but promised Coleman a scholarship to Pittsburgh, a place he would more readily fit into because of his skin color. Additionally, Howard is the school that Mr. Silk has long decided would be the only one his son to attend; the ultimate act of defying his father would be to matriculate at a school other than the one that Mr. Silk desired "for as long as Coleman could remember" (99). When placed in tandem with each other, these reasons raise the question of Coleman's sincerity in studying at Howard. Is he genuinely interested in studying around black people, contrasting with the predominantly Jewish environment of his youth in which he feels most comfortable, or does his behavior parallel that of the Ex-Colored Man, who embarks on a reverse migration south in order to gaze at African-Americans?

This question remains unanswered because after Coleman reaches campus, he becomes the *object* of the gaze instead of the subject. As the narrator notes, "within his first week at Howard," he is rendered a "nigger" at a Woolworth's in town (102). What's worst for him though, other than being denied a hotdog on the sole basis of his skin color, is his immediate realization of how hastily he goes from graduating at the top of his class to being called the most vile epithet for African-Americans: "At East Orange High the class valedictorian, in the segregated South just another nigger" (102). Here, he begins to see his development through an academic lens, which is especially astute and appropriate given that the "nigger" remark is a major step in his race-learning.

Up until this incident near the historically black institution, Coleman has not been critical of his myriad racialized encounters. He realizes however, that book-learning and race-learning are completely tethered to one another, and have been for much of his

academic life. Reflecting on his high school days—where he distinguished himself by consistently earning top grades—he revises his notion of it as a positive space to one where he actually “had *not* escaped the minimally less malevolent forms of exclusion that socially separated his family and the small colored community from the rest of East Orange” (103 emphasis mine). In this less pernicious form of racism in high school:

There were teachers from whom Coleman sensed an unevenness of acceptance, an unevenness of endorsement compared to what they lavished on the smart white kids, but never to the degree that the unevenness was able to block his aims. No matter what the slight or the obstacle, he took it the way he took the low hurdles. (104)

Though Coleman lacks the critical terminology to call out the type of racism exhibited towards him, we as readers can render this “passive racism” because it is not the overt form of exclusion exhibit towards black pupils.<sup>19</sup> While his educators were disproportionate in their interactions with him and his peers, they did not highlight his blackness, as is the case for both John Walden and the Ex-Colored Man. These two earlier protagonists were explicitly told that their blackness implied some fundamental inferiority, rendering them unable to practice law and to stand up in class, respectively. Coleman had to initially contend with *sensing* difference, but not being hindered by it yet. He further contrasts with his equally high-achieving brother Walt, who was told “I couldn’t believe your grades were as high as they were” after having to contest a low grade he knew was unfair (104). Hearing variations of this remark frequently made Walt “always a little angrier about everything” (104). One could just imagine that he would have been enraged if he were called a “nigger” instead of Coleman, who quietly registers

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the key terms to call out prejudice, see Beverly Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

his disgust and frustration. Nevertheless, the incident finally gives the protagonist critical perspective: although offensive and painful, hearing “nigger” hurled at him is the catalyst to revisit various instances from his past and fully comprehend the ways in which he had been raced long before college, by students and peers alike.

The latter group becomes obvious after Coleman increases his boxing stature. When Doc promotes him to a boxing instructor, some of his students “were repelled by him, who didn’t like to be touched by him or to come in contact with his sweat” (104). Coleman is denied the ability to donate blood to an injured teammate, ostensibly because the family had reached their blood quota, yet he “knew what was going on,” a euphemism for the racism that he exhibited in various forms and contexts. By the time he gets to Howard University, he is astonished to hear the racial epithet thrown at him. As a result, he subsequently begins his full-fledged racial passing. Gone are the days when Doc Chizner recommended that he remain silent about his race to achieve a boxing career; now, actively pretending to be someone else becomes his way to thwart the possibility of being rendered a raced subject ever again.

Even though he dislikes being at Howard from his first day on campus, he does not take steps to abate his revulsion until being rendered a “nigger.” He is now anxious that all his classmates there see “something of the nigger about him” because they can travel and wear nice clothing while his lack of financial resources impede him (106). Coleman also opposes the term “A Howard Negro,” rendering it an appellation that implies some form of black solidarity he has little interest in negotiating or supporting (108). It is no surprise that shortly thereafter, he announces his intention to disavow Howard altogether and matriculate at New York University instead. In the meantime, he

realizes his ability to “play his skin color however he wanted, color himself just as he chose” while his heart begins “banging away like the heart of someone on the brink of committing his first great crime” (109). The diction here is very provocative: the “color” Coleman chooses is white clearly, and there is minimal chance that the “crime” to which he refers will warrant legal repercussions. However, the threat of being outed and sanctioned by public opinion might be far more damaging for characters who jump the color line.

Maneuvering from an all-black institution to an all-white one recalls an action of the Ex-Colored Man, who wavered between blackness and whiteness after the transformative classroom scene. The alacrity with which this can be done rests on the double consciousness, which characterizes both of these male passers. *The Human Stain* takes it a step further with a protagonist who does not pass generically as white, but instead passes as Jewish—a specific ethnic group that has resurfaced in contemporary novels of racial passing.<sup>20</sup> As Lori Harrison-Kahan and Dean J. Franco argue, Jewishness is used as a way to complicate the American racial binary, thus highlighting the nuances of monolithic whiteness while challenging the ways in which the black and white dichotomy can be construed.<sup>21</sup> Ross Posnock believes that passing as Jewish is a strategic move: “Seeking to be neither black nor white, Coleman shrewdly elects a third

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Senna’s novel *Caucasia* (1998). For critical discussions of African-Americans and Jews in a historical context, see Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Ethan Goffman, *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000); Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African-American, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> For a complete discussion of literary representations of the Jewish-African-American connection, see Lori Harrison-Kahan, “Passing for White, Passing for Jewish: Mixed Race Identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker,” *MELUS* 30.1 (2005), 19-48; Dean J. Franco, “Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004), 88-103.

possibility—the equivocal form of whiteness that is postwar American Jewishness” (94). Matthew Wilson puts this explicitly, in his theory that Coleman’s ultimate desire is to be “unraced” since he does not want to be either “black or white” but maintain an “oblique angle to the American racial binary and the color line” (144).

Once again, Frantz Fanon is a key interlocutor when it comes to the issue of Coleman passing as Jewish. Though *Black Skin, White Masks* was published a half century before Roth’s novel, Fanon’s prescient position on passing as Jewish seems to be in direct conversation with Roth and contemporary critics who assess the image of Jews in contemporary literature:

The Jewishness of the Jew, however, can go unnoticed. He is not integrally what he is. We can but hope and wait. His acts and behavior are the determining factor. He is a white man, and apart from some debatable features, he can *pass* undetected. (95, emphasis mine)

Adherence to Judaism is the last thing Coleman has in mind when realizing that being a race shifter would prove fruitful. He just wants to remain inconspicuous and avoid being boxed into monolithic whiteness. By passing as a Jew, he highlights his intention to imitate the Jews of his youth, and completes his transition to being the adopted son of Doc Chizner. More specifically, he enacts Doc’s advice to proceed passively by being “neither one thing [n]or the other” just “Silky Silk” (98). Passing as Jewish allows Coleman not only to revise the traditional passing-as-white narrative trajectory, but he also highlights the interrelatedness of race and ethnicity that have characterized black-Jewish relations in America.

Wearing the mask of a Jewish man, Coleman exhibits his phenotypic bipolarism through juxtaposed relationships with African-American and white partners. When he begins dating Steena, a white woman, he claims to love her “[y]et he couldn’t tell her he

was colored” (118). Instead, he invites her over to dine with his family, which is his way of revealing his true racial background, although it eventually causes her to break up with him. When he meets Ellie, a black woman, Coleman admits to her that he passes, but the impetus for this confession derives from her desire to know everything about his life (134). In fact, revealing his background is a cathartic experience for Coleman, who admits to “find[ing] all his relief” only after “[t]alking openly with Ellie” (134). He longs for more though, because life with Ellie was “fun, but some dimension is missing” and he yearns “to be secretive again” (Roth 135).

Thus, he marries Iris Gittelman, a Jewish woman, from whom he keeps the secret of his true racial heritage and gains the thrill of duplicity that he lost with Ellie by permanently passing as Jewish. As Moynihan observes, their relationship is based more on “superficial affinities” than on love (121). Coleman supports this contention himself by speaking about their courtship not in romantic terms, but in language reminiscent of the DuBoisian concept of the “double consciousness”: dating Iris allows him “To be two men instead of one [. . .] To be two colors instead of one [. . .] To be possessed of a double or a triple or a quadruple personality” (130). Coleman revises upon DuBois’s “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings and two warring ideals” when asserting his motivations for marrying Iris. He avoids telling Steena about his black heritage, yet quickly tells his black girlfriend Ellie about it. In the end, he informs his wife that he is not the Coleman Silk of East Orange, New Jersey, but a Jewish man whose original pre-Ellis Island surname was Silberzweig—a lie he maintains throughout his life (130).



Maintaining this fiction is essential to all his relationships, not just romantic ones with women. The narrative he creates also means that his biological family is completely hidden, but at one point, his double-consciousness and his family relations intersect.

Driving up to New York from a conference in Philadelphia, Coleman ponders the possibility of exiting the New Jersey Turnpike early, in order to see his mother:

There was yet another impulse to be suppressed: the impulse he felt to see his mother, to tell her what had happened and to bring her the boy [his young son]. The impulse, two years after jettisoning her, and despite Walter's warning, to show *himself* to his mother. No. Absolutely not. And instead he continued straight on home to his white wife and his white child. (180 emphasis in original)

Coleman is torn between showing his young son to his mother and continuing home. The former requires him to renege on his vow to keep his mother out of his life permanently, while also revealing himself as a racial passer to her and disobeying his brother's threat to stay away; the latter merely entails him maintaining his current route back home. He chooses this second option, which is also the easier one considering he is now Jewish to everyone. His double consciousness also situates him in line with the Ex-Colored Man's behavior, though in a less extreme case. The earlier narrator spends many years switching between welcoming and then rejecting black classmates and fellow travelers, while Coleman's double-consciousness is fleeting and is mainly centered on women. The fact that he even considers vacillating between his black past and his present as a Jewish man, shows his attempt to resolve the "two unreconciled strivings and two warring ideals" of DuBois' theory, as seen by the juxtaposition of his mother which represents the past, and his son which symbolizes the future. Yet the child is hardly enough motivation to unite the generations, because Coleman considers preserving the veneer of whiteness infinitely more important than maintaining family bonds.

Shifting identities has a number of effects on him, and the most glaring one is that it helps his career to unravel quickly. The administration of Athena University forces the esteemed Dean Silk to retire early after he wonders aloud if two of the students who never came to class are really people “or are they spooks?” (6). When the black students hear about this remark, they accuse him of racism, despite his attempt at evading culpability: “I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: ‘spook’ as a specter or a ghost. I had no idea what color these two students might be” (6). This same statement could be said of Coleman, since the new dean of faculty—who must disclose the charges to his predecessor Coleman—has no idea that the distinguished scholar is actually a black man passing as white. Had he been privy to this information, Coleman’s claims that being rendered a racist are “spurious” and “preposterous” would be more convincing. However, by this point, he has presented himself solely as a white man to students and faculty alike, thereby making it pointless to try to shake the allegations.

It is appropriate that Coleman would associate “spooks” with “specters,” especially considering the relevancy of the mirror image in narratives of racial passing. Unlike John and the Ex-Colored Man, Coleman does not see himself in a literal mirror, but in a figurative one because he sees his reflection in society. He is a light-skinned black man and is treated as such during his youth, while the term “spook” is an extension of the mirror image and is equated with the psychoanalytic concept of *imagos*. According to Jacques Lacan, *imagos* are “those veiled faces we analysts see emerge in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic effectiveness—the specular image seems to be the threshold of the visual world, if we take into account the mirrored disposition of the image of one’s own body in hallucinations and dreams” (77). To Lacan, an *imago*

refers to the image that an infant sees in the mirror and with which he identifies.

However, it is a fragmented image, with an illusion of wholeness instead of a unified one.

He thus believes that a disavowed, left behind self, occurs at this point.

For Coleman Silk, the disavowed self is his attempt to shun his status as an African-American. He tries to renounce it for most of his life but it is always present, hovering over his everyday interactions as he toes the line of hiding his blackness while living out his Jewish persona. This black shadow could have presented itself at any point, but it becomes conspicuous in the racialized encounter when he utters “spooks,” which is the specter of blackness. As someone who is erudite and conscientious in his diction, he could have chosen any number of terms to call the missing students that day, but he chooses “spooks” because the term describes his own past, which he hoped would remain hidden but was perpetually at the surface.

His career ends prematurely, and the controversy engulfing his small college town puts strains on his family, to the extent that he even blames the school for his wife’s untimely death (12). Coleman desperately searches for someone to support him as he fights the charges, but he fails to remember that as dean, he steamrolled everyone and made myriad enemies who relished the thought of seeing him leave Athena. One of the people he thought would support him is Herb Keble, whom he touts as the first black faculty member Coleman hired as dean. The irony is that Coleman was actually the first black professor, but looks to the first *phenotypically* black person for support. When it is not given, he mocks his former friend and colleague: “‘I can’t be with you on this, Coleman. I’m going to have to be with them.’ This is what he told me when I went to ask for his support. To my face. *‘I’m going to have to be with them. Them!’*” (16, emphasis in

original). The mocking tone that Coleman uses here raises the question of the true source of his ire: is it because Herb should have some loyalty to him because he was responsible for his appointment, or does he expect blind faith on the basis of racial solidarity that he never articulated but everyone else must intuit after the scandal? The text does not definitively answer, but given the unique situation in which Coleman finds himself—accused of racism though he is truly a black man who is passing—the support of black faculty at his former school would help to abate the widespread criticism in the small town.

Though difficult to know when his race-learning is completed, it is easy to see that it develops along the same plane as his academic life. One conspicuous effect of his race-learning then is that he can now verbalize some of his frustrations with his father. Mr. Silk actively forced his family to discuss literature at the expense of addressing race (Ramon 48). It is a trait that he gets from his own father, a man who owned a saloon, but who consistently pushed him to be a “serious student” who had to study Latin and Greek as part of the “old-fashioned curriculum” (22). Mr. Silk continues by saying that he “couldn’t have tried harder to be any *more* serious” (22). Even though he says this half-facetiously, he later follows his father’s footsteps by mandating that his own family love literature and become erudite. This began at birth, as seen by the middle names that each of the Silk children received from Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*: “the eldest Silk son was Walter Antony, the second son, Coleman Brutus; Ernestine Calpurnia, their younger sister, took her middle name from Caesar’s loyal wife” (93). As his children developed, so did Mr. Silk’s fascination with the English language: he never “lost his temper...[but] had another way of beating you down. With words. With speech. With what he called

‘the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens’” (92). He couples his love of rhetoric with a well-rounded education that requires the Silk family to attend museum exhibits, and to know how to employ precise classifications instead of employing vague descriptors for what they see.

Additionally, Mr. Silk actively avoided conversations on this topic; even when Coleman inquired about his father’s encounters with racism while working for the Pennsylvania Railroad, it was “beneath” the senior Silk to respond (103). After being called a “nigger,” Coleman himself “realized how *protected* his life had been” and regrets that his father stood as “the enormous barrier against the great American menace” of racism (105-06, emphasis mine). Further reflecting on his youth, he knows that he benefited from his parents’ “conscientious kindness and care” and “got just about anything he wanted” (95). However, what he fails to “get” is a racially conscious education—a statement that could easily be said of the Ex-Colored Man, whose doting, aloof mother did not provide him with insight into how to navigate post-Reconstruction America with black skin, as her focus on an education in books and music attest.

This education is useful for Coleman of course, since it motivates him to become a formidable classics professor. Yet Mr. Silk’s idealized quest to have his children love the English language as he does actually smothers them and prevents their growth in other crucial areas. As Nathan observes: “even in ordinary conversation [the elder Silk sounds as if] he were reciting Marc Antony’s speech over the body of Caesar” (92). This type of knowledge is only as good as it can provide well-rounded thinking which pushes beyond clarity in speech and fascination with canonical British literature. Absent from interactions with their sons are notions of what it means to be black men in a highly racist

and racialized society. *The House Behind the Cedars* makes no mention of any race-lessons passed from Molly to her biracial children, and this absence raises the question of whether she remained completely silent or purposely equivocated on race when raising them. It is clearer in the case of the latter two protagonists: light-skinned men who are thoroughly shocked when their blackness becomes hypervisible. Neither the Ex-Colored Man nor Coleman has parents willing to discuss race, which leaves them unprepared until they begin school and get embarrassed by teachers and students who render them inferior. Had they been privy to the weight of their own blackness, would these black men have passed as a response to the trauma of their race-learning?

In lamenting his forced retirement and trying to understand his daughter's cryptic responses during an otherwise cold phone conversation, Coleman Silk recalls several of the triumphs of his life. Throughout his youth, he "had pursued the most demanding curriculum," but his entire educational prowess proves futile as he develops into a bitter, irrational, and vindictive old man with a career that does not end on his terms (59). The true "curriculum" that he engages in has nothing to do with "Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Dickens" or other classic writers from his youth; instead he spends his life learning that transgressing the boundary of race can open up opportunities that blacks did not always have access to. Coleman's amateur boxing career and his educational attainment are due to his light skin gaining admittance into the white world. His "curriculum" begins as a boy when he was not supposed to graduate at the top of his class, and it unfolds as he understands his racialized subjectivity at Howard and thereafter as black man-turned-Jewish. The final "lesson" for Coleman is that running away from his race is hardly

tantamount to it being completely behind him: the lingering specter of “spooks” is responsible for his undoing.

### The Lineage of Twentieth-Century Male Passers

Despite developing at different points in the twentieth century, John Walden, the Ex-Colored Man and Coleman Silk share analogous trajectories in their collective pursuit of an elusive utopia where race would not matter. They all enter school without knowing the larger significant of their African-American status, and then it becomes hypervisible when others teach them what it means to be black. *The Human Stain* is a novel of “reinvention” (Wilson 141) while John Walden’s life is similarly about “perpetual renewal and reinvention” (Ryan 39). Johnson’s protagonist falls within the same description, as one who reinvents his own life after being forced into racialized submission by his peers.

The cause and effect relationship between school and passing situates these narratives in a new lineage with each other that has hitherto been unexamined. Each protagonist fails to learn about race at home because of parents who choose sheltering instead of honesty; each protagonist thus understands the meaning of his race only when students or teachers highlight it in school. Race-learning first happens in school because it is the place for primary interracial encounters and socialization into dominant ideology. As a result, school becomes the site of a severe trauma because it is associated with racial visibility. Each passer has an arduous time trying to reconcile the weight of being black, and thus searches for answers in the nearest mirror. For John and the Ex-Colored Man, this endeavor is futile—they both endure a psychological splitting and realize the

difference in what the mirror reflects and what the world maps on to them. The black shadow that hovers over and troubles them manifests itself in the “spooks” that refer to Coleman Silk’s dissociated black self. They also try to negotiate being black and being white, as their relationships with people from different races attest.

In the midst of all this, each passer looks to literature as an escape from his race-learning. For instance, The Ex-Colored Man’s self-inflicted loneliness after realizing he is black, only abates when he starts “find[ing] company in books” (404). He reads the Bible before exploring a wide collection of texts in his library, from *Pilgrim’s Progress* to *Natural Theology*, until his mother buys him other works to feed his literary appetite after he “exhausted those books in the little library” (405). This library is as impressive as the one John Walden retreats into. Similar to the Ex-Colored Man, Chesnutt’s main character enjoys “a small but remarkable collection of books” in his mother’s home after he is called teased for being black (373). The narrator offers a lengthy catalogue of the library, which includes Henry Fielding, Walter Scott, Cervantes, Milton, Shakespeare, the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress* (374). As the professor of classics, Coleman Silk might be the most well-read of the passers examined in this chapter, since his life was steeped in classic literature from birth, by a father who insisted on perfect mastery of the English language. Throughout his race-learning, Coleman refers back to books often. Together, the three male passers are heavily invested in books because the realm of fiction provides an escape from the difficulties of being black. Notably absent are titles and authors that specifically address race, which shows that after enduring the trauma of their blackness, each passer hopes to resort to their raceless youth with the help of fiction. For these men,



the trauma of being black is too burdensome to navigate, and literature becomes a way to fantasize about choosing one's race.

A parallel observation applies to Leo Felton, who also sought literature after being erroneously Othered in an institutional environment. This time though, he is called "white," and his desired literature supported this. A year after publication of *The Human Stain*, Felton's real life story about racial passing became more than literary fodder. He is the son of an African-American man and Jewish woman, yet he wanted to "rid the United States of non-whites and [people] of perceived Jewish influence," in 2001, according to Marcia Alesan Dawkins (130). He was a half-black man who passed as a white supremacist leader. Though this is an extreme case of male racial passing, I include it here because Felton's story shares similarities with the fictional ones discussed throughout this chapter. Primarily, his race is highlighted first in school, when Corey, a classmate, mocks his multiracial background. In response, Felton chases Corey around with a knife while shouting "I'll kill you" (Tough). This behavior is a violent continuation of the "thrashing" that transpires between Chesnutt's John Warwick and his schoolyard tormentor. Felton's ire in this instance led to his first stint being institutionalized, which came to a pinnacle in 2001 when he and his girlfriend were arrested for using counterfeit money in Boston. This seemingly mundane offense developed into a media spectacle as police uncovered aspects of Felton's identity that pivoted around a puzzling paradox: how can someone with both black and Jewish ancestry transform into a white supremacist, advocating for the deaths of the very people responsible for his existence? More to the point, how can Felton pass?

Perhaps the answer lies in the second similarity between his life and that of the fictional passers. As Dawkins contends, before his arrest for counterfeit money, he “found himself immersed in the racially segregated New York prison system,” a space that allowed him to fully “realize his true identity as a white supremacist” (Dawkins 132). After the Department of Corrections classified him as white, he began reading extensively in white supremacist literature while affiliating with white inmates exclusively. He enjoyed Ulick Varange’s *Imperium*, which “characterizes race as an inherently emotional business...based on personal belief and behavior” (133). Varange’s effect on Felton was strong enough to lead the latter to cite Varange’s racist rhetoric as inspiration for his own aberrant thinking (Dawkins 133). After Felton’s release, he “collected books” about a range of topics, including “how to assume a new identity” (133). If a text with this title were available to the fictional passers examined in this chapter, one might speculate as to whether or not they would search it for advice on identity transformation.

What I am suggesting here is a fruitful juxtaposition: whereas being made black in the predominantly white settings of school led the fictional passers to literature, being rendered white in the predominantly black setting of prison similarly propelled Leo Felton to books. Though the reasoning, time period, and types of books differ, what remains the same is the privileging of prose when racial categorization is in flux. Moreover, prison serves as the non-fictional amalgamation of Judge Straight’s office, the Ex-Colored Man’s train car, and Coleman Silk’s boxing ring; it becomes a place of race-learning for Felton, because his sentence included an epiphany about his racial development which develops into passing as a white supremacist.

It is very telling that Felton changed as a result of being imprisoned, considering most racial passers feel imprisoned by their blackness and all the negative associations surrounding it. Certainly black women have a harder time than men because they are hindered by both race and gender. This might explain why some light-skinned mothers and mothers of black children teach their daughters that passing as white would help them to navigate the confluence of these two subject positions. By doing so, they offer their daughters tools to avoid some of the imprisonment they have to contend with. This holds true in novels focusing on women passing subjects, including Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*. As the next chapter argues, female protagonists in these novels develop into race too, but it is completely different from their male counterparts. Whereas male characters are defined by their classroom race-learning, female characters learn that they are black long before it is highlighted in the classroom.

## “We’re All Just Pretending”: Black Women Writers and Racial Passing

### “A Family of Freaks”: Tales of Racial Development

A November 2012 episode from National Public Radio’s popular program, “State of the Re: Union,” focuses on the residents of Waverly, a small town at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountain in Ohio. The episode highlighted several of the residents of the community who are phenotypically white but who identify as black. Most of them are the descendants of Germans, Native Americans, and African-Americans who have been intermarrying for almost two hundred years. The narrator notes that they “take the one drop rule to the absolute extreme” by believing that being just part black is tantamount to being completely black (“Pike”). Even those who have as little as one-sixteenth black blood identify as black, despite the blatant racism that they have faced as a result.

One such person in this category is Clarissy Shrek, a woman who looks white, but who proudly proclaims she is black and walks with her birth certificate in her purse to prove it. This document lists her as a “Negro” due to her great grandfather’s black ancestry. She raised her two daughters to be black as well; this is feasible for her oldest daughter Carlotta who is proud of her black ancestry, but Allison thinks her “cream skin” and “long, straight red hair” make her “way too white to be black” (“Pike”). In her youth, her blackness entailed merciless taunts by her peers, including a vivid incident where a classmate tossed deodorant at her because “black people needed deodorant” (“Pike”). As a teenager, she began circumventing humiliation by claiming whiteness, which she rationalized as more logical due to her phenotype. When Allison started dating, she attempted to minimize her black heritage, telling the boys that she has black ancestry.

Clarissy however, was more upfront with the young suitors: “we don’t have black *in us*, we ARE black” (“Pike”).

An initial result of Allison’s white identification is that it led to an immediate split between her and her older sister, Carlotta, who never vacillated on her race. Carlotta cried during the interview when recalling the countless times that her own sister led the racist remarks among their high school peers. Today, Allison admits her continued passivity when her loved ones degrade African-Americans. She did not have a problem when her ex-husband took their son to a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan and little Caleb came back calling his grandmother a “nigger.” He, like his mother, believes he is white and wants nothing to do with blacks. His two year old sister though, tells everyone that she is black. Clarissy is optimistic that her youngest grandchild will continue the tradition of remaining proud of her black ancestry, especially given Allison’s obstinacy: “As long as I can pass as white, I go by white” (“Pike”).

Upon hearing this story, the host, Al Letson, was shocked—not so much because of the race shifting but because of the stark division between the siblings in *two* generations despite initially appearing as a close family unit. Although they grew up in the same home, one sister identifies as black while the other recoils at the mere mention of what she regards as a negative association. The grandchildren have continued this legacy of family division along phenotypical lines. To experts of psychoanalysis, this division might be less surprising since it seems like a racialized version of Harry Stack Sullivan’s theory of interpersonal psychoanalysis. Believing that one’s anxiety is a product of one’s relationship with one’s mother, he created the “good me/bad me” paradigm to represent the cause and effect relationship between one’s sense of self and

one's perception of a mother's attitudes toward the self. The good me represents everything we like about ourselves and is what we project into the world because it does not produce anxiety. The bad me, by contrast, is the sum of those aspects of the self that we think are negative and try to hide from others. When applied to the Shreks—and to passing black subjects more broadly—this theory suggests that the good me is often the white self that one tries to project to the world, while the bad me is the black self that one hopes to hide.

Sullivan's theory is not as well known as Sigmund Freud's, in part because his early work "is not easily accessible to the general reader" or to many psychiatrists (Mullahy ix). Most of his work appears in "journals that are stacked in university libraries" (ix). Moreover, he wanted his own psychiatric language, which led him to create "neologisms rather than communicable, clinically useful verbal tools" (Chrzanowski xiii). As a result, his theories are often difficult to comprehend, however, his interpersonal theory "is a much more open-ended system, lacking the deterministic aspects of Freudian theory" (5). Sullivan's primary goal was to understand psychiatry "as a study of interpersonal relations" and to employ a better way for "clinical observations than Freudian metapsychology permitted" (Chrzanowski 1). He disregarded Freud's primary interest in Ego psychology, asserting instead, that "personal experiences with significant people in the past invariably form a major foundation for on-going relations with other people" (Chrzanowski 3).

The impetus for Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relationships came from his own youth, when he grew up in solitude in a rural area of upstate New York. As Helen Swick Perry puts it in her definitive biography of him, "it was the human experience as

Sullivan observed around him in his growing-up years—at home, at school, and in the local newspaper accounts of the troubled lives of other people in that setting—that informed his theory” (7). In other words, he did not have many interpersonal relationships growing up, and believed it to have an effect on his own development, which he endeavored to understand throughout his professional life.

Two of the basic tenets of Sullivan’s interpersonal theory are pivotal to this chapter. He believes that “development represents a gradual unfolding, a series of changes, or phases that an organism undergoes in evolving to a mature state” (Chrzanowski 4). Since he notes that people are not capable of living in the “social organization they have been trained to live,” they are subject to anxiety, which is the primary element “in the coding and incorporation of experience during all developing phases” (Chrzanowski 4-5). Moreover, his theory assumes that mothers have the ability to pass on anxiety about parenting to their children, which effects their self-image.

According to Gerard Chrzanowski’s study of Harry Stack Sullivan,

Anxiety-free experiences (“good-me”) relate to feeling well and having a wide-angle observational horizon available for viewing oneself and others without undue distortions. The range of experiences in the presence of moderate to moderate-severe anxiety (“bad me”) is the foundation for not feeling well, requiring considerable vigilance, and dealing with a constricted observational field. (66)

When it comes to race, Sullivan’s theory seems particularly apposite, since the anxiety that mothers of black children might contend with stems from the question of how to raise their children in a racialized society. Perhaps Clarissy Shrek’s anxiety about her daughters transferred to them, thus initiating a lifelong racial split. The lighter-skinned Allison can symbolize the “good me” who presents her passing self to the world, while the darker skinned Carlotta might symbolize the “bad me” who cannot hide her race and

is still pained by the racial taunts she endured during her youth. Everything they learned about race began at home before they started their formal education. Clarissy Shrek's unconventional behavior about blackness is epitomized by the fact that she readily produces her grandfather's birth certificate, proving that she is black despite what her phenotype might suggest.

Sullivan's theory is appropriate in assessing relationships between sisters who are divided by the color line, in real life and in fiction. In the latter category, Jessie Fauset's novel *Plum Bun* (1929) and Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia* (1999) feature the relationship between sisters and the split that occurs when one chooses to live as black and the other chooses to pass. In both cases, the sisters learn about race from their mothers, which raises the question of whether or not racial anxiety is at the heart of their mothers' views on race. This chapter applies Sullivan's interpersonal theory to these novels, to better understand the racial division that arises between phenotypically black daughters and their lighter skinned sisters. The aims for this chapter are to better theorize the gendered development of racial passing literature in the twentieth century and to apply a lesser known psychoanalytic theory to black women writers who have not been placed in tandem with each other previously. This chapter situates *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia* within a new genealogy of the passing novel by contending that female passers do not develop in the same manner in which men do; instead their racial development is more systematic and begins at home.

Fauset's novel is the story of Angela Murray, a light-skinned black girl who desires a more interesting life than the traditional one her parents provide for her in Philadelphia. Her mother teaches her to pass as white and she decides to continue this in



New York City to attend art school. She leaves her sister Virginia behind for much of the narrative. *Caucasia*'s first person narrative is told from the perspective of Birdie Lee, who is forced into passing as a Jewish girl when her mother escapes the law by hiding out in various places. The first similarity uniting these texts is that passing falls along complexion lines in both the Murray and Lee households. Angela Murray and Birdie Lee both learn about passing while in their youth because their mothers do it and bring them along—one out of fun and the other out of necessity. The mothers in *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia* encourage their daughters to capitalize on their lighter skinned phenotypes to make it easier to grow up black. They view blackness as an imprisoning disadvantage, whereas passing is a social class advantage.

Formally, the texts are also comparable in that they are both variations of the bildungsroman. Each protagonist's journey culminates in her understanding that race is contingent on what we make of it. Whereas a traditional bildungsroman is a narrative of development, I assert that Angela Murray and Birdie Lee's development is specifically focused on learning about race. Since, according to Harry Stack Sullivan, development is difficult because many people are incapable of living in the "social organization" in which we have been trained to live, I believe that a development into race is a specific process that black women must navigate since their mothers are anxious about the confluence of race and gender hindering them in America. Part one of this development begins at home, when their mothers implicitly or explicitly tell them that they can use their light-skinned pigmentation to pass even temporarily. Part two occurs in school, where their race is questioned and they endure a racial unveiling in front of their classmates. Part three is defined by characters travelling and forgetting that they are

black, which results in passivity in response to racist remarks. The last part takes place when an event reminds protagonists that they are black; it marks the turning point that forces them to find their voice and return to their black families. The often elusive notion of a voice and the domestic sphere as the introduction into race mark this development as more typical of female passing narratives and not their male counterparts.

Moreover, the schema outlined here shows these women learning to pass through a process that is both private and public. As a result, racialization for female characters is longer than for male characters. This distinction stems from the gendered futures that mothers in both types of narratives envision for their children: fearing their daughters might be constrained to the domestic sphere, they teach them to pass as a way out, while they passively allow their sons to learn about race in school to prepare them to deal with the range of institutions that will humiliate them for being black. Passing appears specifically as a way out of the home, as well as tethered to bonds of sisterhood. Critics have offered a great deal of research on sisterly bonds in British and American literature yet the same critical attention to these bonds in African-American Literature is still lacking.<sup>22</sup> This is surprising, given the increased focus on black women's writing over the past several decades. With that said, by contrasting *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia* using Sullivan's interpersonal theory, this chapter seeks to understand the lineage of a specific

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<sup>22</sup> For more on sibling relationships in European and American Literary canons, see *Sibling Relations and Gender in the Early Modern World: Sister, Brothers and Others*, edited by Naomi Miller and Naomi Yavneh (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006); *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* by Sarah Annes Brown (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003); *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* by Leila Silvana May (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001); and *Sisters: Relation and Rescue in Nineteenth-Century British Novels and Paintings* by Michael Cohen (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995).

strand of black women's texts—the passing genre—by examining two passing narratives that share striking similarities despite their seven decade difference.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of the NPR radio segment, the interviewer tells Allison about the children of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings—all four looked white but only two identified as such. Relieved to hear this historical tidbit, Allison is satisfied that she does not come from a “family of freaks for having this kind of drama” (“Pike”). She then claims to “understand [her] mom and sister even better” but concludes that she is “still white” (“Pike”). By closely reading *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia*, it becomes evident that the dilemma of one sister who passes while shutting out the other one is hardly a new phenomenon; it is a story offered mainly by black women novelists. Angela Murray and Birdie Lee come to understand their families better too, yet unlike Allison, they conclude that they are *black*. Allison starts to understand race as well, but in a less straightforward manner, as evidenced by her knowledge of the complexity of what it means to have *choice* in her identity. To better comprehend this complexity, this chapter explicates the four stages of racial maturation for female protagonists in twentieth century literature, using Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal theory of “good me/bad me.”

#### “It's Just a Little Joke”: Racial Passing as a Generational Inheritance

Jessie Fauset was an Ivy-League educated teacher and editor for W.E.B. DuBois' *The Crisis*, but it is her work as a novelist that she solidified her reputation. However,

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<sup>23</sup> The most canonized passing narrative is Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) which is not a bildungsroman, in fact, the narrative offers only a few years in the lives of Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, rather than a development from youth to adulthood as in the case of the narratives included in this chapter. This discrepancy suggests that there are female-authored narratives that are not bildungsromans, as there is a wide variety of passing novels in the American literary tradition. Fauset and Senna decided to ground their texts in the tradition of a narrative of development since racial maturation is their shared primary focus.

contemporary critics describe Fauset's fiction as flawed in a number of ways, as evidenced in the works of Cheryl Wall, Deborah Barker, Mar Gallego, Houston Baker, and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, among others. Over the past two decades, they have dismissed Fauset's novels as weak and unconvincing, citing her Victorian conservatism, sentimental styles, overly dramatic plot structures, underdeveloped characterizations, affected diction, and reliance on fairy tales and romance.<sup>24</sup> These last two categories are seen as Fauset's most egregious weaknesses since fairy tales and romance are not traditionally associated with black Americans. As Ann Douglas argues, black writers employing "white material" have faced heightened scrutiny about where they stand when it comes to representing the race (86). Fauset's detractors continue the negative assessments that her peers began during the Harlem Renaissance (Wall 36). Many of the commentators take for granted, to varying degrees, that Fauset merely employs conventional forms in her work. On the surface it might appear that *Plum Bun* works within the formulaic mode of the bildungsroman, but Angela Murray's nuanced maturation into race is hardly comparable to the generic coming-of-age novels that precede *Plum Bun*.

In this novel, Mattie Murray sees blackness as a boundary worth transgressing to make life easier for herself and her daughter, Angela. Mattie and Angela are the light-skinned members of the Murray household in early twentieth century Philadelphia, while Junius and Virginia consist of the darker-skinned half. Mattie uses her phenotype to her advantage by passing in restaurants, hotels, department stores, and the Academy of Music

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Houston Baker's *Workings of the Spirit* (1993), chapter two of Cheryl Wall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995), chapter 7 of Deborah Barker's *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature* (2000), chapter 5 of Mar Gallego's *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance* (2003), and chapter two of Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's *Portraits of the New Negro Woman* (2007).

(15-16). She takes pleasure in tricking other patrons, not simply because she pretends to be white, but also because she passes as wealthy in the process. Her excursions throughout the wealthy part of Philadelphia are in sharp contrast to the shame and monotony of “Monday’s washing and Tuesday’s ironing, the scrubbing of kitchen and bathroom and the fashioning of children’s clothes” (16). It forces Mattie to forget that for the rest of the week, she is a domestic worker with middle class aspirations. Planning weekend family trips is simple: each parent accompanies the daughter whose complexion is the same. Junius and Virginia thus begin shopping together because of their dark skin color, while Mattie and Angela follow suit using the same logic.

It is not surprising then, that Angela’s racial affiliation with white people and self-hatred develop as she joins her mother on their trips to shops and across the color line. Mattie’s anxiety about race gets instilled in her two daughters. Among Angela’s “clearly formed conclusions,” is the realization that “the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure—are for white-skinned people only” (17). This reiterates her previous point that “colour or rather the lack of it seemed... [to be the] absolute prerequisite to the life” which she dreams about constantly (13). According to Gallego, Angela’s “sole desire is to pass into the white race which, she believes, has all the positive values she aspires to” (158). Japtok echoes this sentiment, in his assertion that blackness is a “restriction” on the young Angela, who hopes to have a life better than her parents (86). Angela’s inclinations are supported by Mattie’s racial passing as well as her public interactions with her family.

In a very memorable scene, mother and daughter are shopping together when Junius and Virginia walk by. Mattie does not speak to her husband or daughter but

exhibits only mild “trepidation” from Angela’s perspective (18). Later that evening,

Mattie admits her guilt:

“I was at my old game of play acting again to-day, June, passing you know, and darling, you and Virginia went by within arm’s reach and we never spoke to you. I’m so ashamed.”

But Junius consoled her. Long before their marriage he had known of his Mattie’s weakness and its essential harmlessness. “My dear girl, I told you long ago that where no principle was involved, your passing means nothing to me. It’s just a little joke; I don’t think you’d be ashamed to acknowledge your old husband anywhere if it were necessary.” (19)

This exchange reveals that the Murrays understand Mattie’s passing as mere amusement:

Junius calls it a “little joke” while Mattie herself renders her racial duplicity a “little game” (19). He claims that he is not at all slighted by his wife’s ignoring him nor does he take it very seriously, yet a joke is meant to be harmless. Both Mattie and Junius know that acknowledging each other in public would be tacit acknowledgment of her blackness—a dangerous endeavor given the racial norms at the beginning of the twentieth century. In turn, it could end her endeavor to pass if her acquaintances see them conversing. A visibly dark man dialoguing with a phenotypically white woman could have elicited any number of questions about his intentions as well as her safety, to say the least. Fauset is aware of the irony of rendering Mattie’s silence as a “little joke” considering the danger that both characters would have found themselves in.

It might be easy to focus on the parents in this exchange, critiquing Mattie as selfish and shallow and Junius as dismissive and naïve. Noticeably quiet though, is Angela. She is with her mother when her other family members pass by, yet she too avoids speaking to them. The only thing she can express is relief that “Papa didn’t see us” because it would inevitably mean publicly acknowledging their shared blackness (19).

Had she not known any better, she could have hailed Junius and Virginia out of respect. However, Mattie has shown Angela the way to publicly pass as white: strictly evade all people of color even if it means disrespecting her immediate family. While Mattie admits wrongdoing to her husband, she does not explain anything to Angela afterwards, implying that if she does this again, she expects her daughter to remain quiet and follow suit. The first step in Angela's understanding of race is understanding that she has the *carte blanche* to do anything required to prevent her blackness from being revealed—a mentality instilled by Mattie Murray who is anxious about raising black children in racialized America. In this first step, race is rooted in the family and home, which contrasts with the men in the previous chapter who first learn about it in the classroom. Placing this scene upfront in these female-centered passing narratives transforms the forthcoming classroom scenes by minimizing the power of school to teach race to these women. By the time they enter the classroom, these female passing subjects already know about race and are less shocked to encounter it since the family interaction happens first. Moreover, this opening example sets up the lighter-skinned Angela as the “good me” of Sullivan's paradigm and the silent, darker skinned sister Virginia as the “bad me” – the result of Mattie's maternal anxiety on race.

In high school, Angela befriends Mary Hastings who is elected to the editorial staff of the student newspaper. Esther Bayliss wants the position too, but Mary chooses Angela as the assistant, to Esther's chagrin. As a result, the defeated student cautions her classmates to think twice before “trust[ing] subscription money to a coloured girl” (43). Mary is shocked at the allegation, proclaiming “Angela, you never told me you were coloured!” (43). Angela maintains her defensive stance, yelling “Tell you that I was

coloured! Why of course I never told you that I was coloured! Why should I?” (44). The tone of Angela’s response is very striking, since it reveals her attitude of passing as an already learned behavior. Why should she divulge of her color, knowing that it would hinder her mobility?

From Esther’s perspective, the revelation is more fodder to prevent Angela from assuming her position. If she would lie about being black, “what wouldn’t she have done with our money!?” according to her logic (44). Angela’s reticence about her blackness has less to do with a desire for her classmates’ money and more about her mother’s teaching. Since Mattie makes it explicitly clear that passing as white comes with social benefits, Angela does so in part because she wants to be friends with the white students. She considers her life “dark and tortured” and her only respite is to have white friends (38-39). When the protagonist exclaims “why of course I never told you that I was coloured,” she makes it seem as though her silence should be completely obvious to her accusers because she has mobility in mind (44). Yet given her previous passivity when she let her father and sister walk by on the street without speaking, what is obvious to readers is that this a continuation of her silence on race. Angela realizes that not speaking out about blackness means attaining social advantage, which was an arduous task for black women in the early twentieth century. They were constricted by race and gender, yet for those who were light enough to pass, using their phenotype meant attaining better treatment than darker skinned black women. Angela Murray certainly knows this, and continues her silence as the novel progresses.

Angela attempts to prevent further instances when her race might be called out, and continues to do so when she enrolls at the Art Academy. It is not mere coincidence



that she aspires to be an artist since it is a career that allows her to create—an extension of a duplicitous life already predicated on creativity. As a racial passer, she has to invent a fiction for herself, which includes remaining nebulous about her race while interacting with her fellow art students. Angela “had not mentioned the fact of her Negro strain, indeed she had no occasion to, but she did not believe that this fact if known would cause any change in attitude. Artists were noted for their broad-mindedness” (63). If Angela truly believes that her liberal peers would not see her race as a problem then she would have mentioned it, in hopes of being accepted regardless. Verbalizing her blackness is something she cannot fathom though, since her mother already instilled in her the need to remain silent and attain a higher social class position. Angela’s problem is not “their broad-mindedness” but her own idea that “all the things which she most wanted were wrapped up with white people. All the good things were theirs” (73). The main thing she wants after high school is an art career, and she passes as white in order to achieve it while affirming her mother’s lesson in class. In other words, Angela’s complexion is a type of cultural currency that can get her positions that her sister Virginia can only dream about.

Angela’s goal of racial stealth is thwarted in art school, and once again the culprit is Esther Bayliss. She is now a model and refuses to pose for Angela’s class though she is the guest for the day. Esther announces to the class that Angela Murray is indeed black, discovered a few years ago when they studied together in high school (71). She says with conviction, that she would not pose even if they offered her “ten times” more than the amount she is earning now (72). She is adamant about this because Angela is one of the nascent artists ready to draw her, “as though she were as good as a white girl” (72).

Nobody responds to what they consider to be Esther's unfounded rant. The instructor, Mr. Shields, speaks to his wife about it later, before travelling to the Murray home on Opal Street to observe the visibly black Virginia entering it. When confronted the next day, Angela responds incredulously "Coloured! Of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I!" This repetition is very telling, as it again reveals that Angela construes passing as a learned behavior. By sarcastically asking "Why should I" she implies that she should not have to reveal that she is black since it would only prevent her from achieving social mobility, as her mother desires.

Both school incidents share the spectacle aspect of Angela's racial unveiling, and this scene is the adult version of what she endured in high school. Back then, Esther revealed the protagonist's race to Mary and her peers. In art school, Esther reveals Angela's race to her *teacher* and peers, but the stakes are higher this time around: Mr. Shields expels her from class on the basis of what he believes to be her deception. From a reader's perspective, Shields' action is not as surprising as his students' *inaction*. Nobody stands up for Angela when Esther suggests that Angela's race automatically renders her unqualified. According to the accuser, only white people can produce art, which contradicts the narrator who admits that artists are inclined to be accepting. This stops at race. Regardless of how liberal artists proclaim to be, there is no guarantee that accepting African-Americans would fall under their tolerance, which Angela realizes when her art career in Philadelphia ends prematurely. Her increasing knowledge of race is not just about it being called out, but it also entails learning the ways in which blackness is a litmus test of tolerance, especially in academic settings. Moreover, this scene renders being black as a disadvantage and imprisoning.

In commenting on Angela's ordeal in art school, the narrator remarks, "she felt as though she were rehearsing a well-known part in a play" (72). Cheryl Wall highlights Fauset's affinity for "theatrical tropes" as evidenced in the form of her final novel *Comedy: American Style* (1933), but the literary metaphor is especially apropos in *Plum Bun* (80). Angela is the main character, Esther is the antagonist (in the first section), and the central problem is that of racial passing—especially who gets to determine when to reveal blackness and on what grounds. The "well-known" part for Angela, is that she is always pressured to reveal herself even when it otherwise goes unnoticed. Her classmates are completely oblivious of her race until Esther's belated and unnecessary revelations. Angela then shifts the setting of her self-created drama by moving from Philadelphia to New York City, the city frequented by racial passers attracted to its size and anonymity. Traveling is a crucial step in any narrative of progress, but for Angela Murray, New York City becomes pivotal to her increasing knowledge of race.

#### Angela's "Curiously Thwarted and Twisted Life": Finding Her Voice and Her Race

Upon arriving in Manhattan, Angela Murray resolves that her new life will be vastly different from the one she lived in Philadelphia. She facilitates this transformation by introducing herself as Angele Mory, a French version of her birth name, which foreshadows her move to France at the end of the narrative. Living in this guise as Angele, she enrolls in art classes at Cooper Union, making predominantly white friends and dissociating from her sister Virginia. One of her new classmates is Rachel Powell, the only *visibly* black person in the class who Angela invites to lunch. Powell accepts, but annoys the protagonist in the process: Angela arrives late to the tea-room, leading to a

“fifteen minute” wait (108). When inquiring about what prevented Powell from entering and reserving a table before Angela’s arrival, possibly saving time and frustration, she tersely says “I didn’t know how they would receive me if I went in by myself” (109).

Given the racial stereotypes and social norms at the beginning of the twentieth century, Powell’s reluctance to enter an establishment limited to white patrons is understandable. Angela though, does not initially see it this way. She fails to remember “those fears and uncertainties” that Powell must contend with (109). Angela has thus forgotten that being black comes with severe restriction of movement. Forgetting this important detail signals the third stage of development for the female passing subject, a rejection of blackness. The protagonist takes it a step further by not only disregarding her blackness, but also by failing to imagine its social implications.

Failing to remember the challenges of black movement is particularly conspicuous for Angela, considering that she “certainly knew” about this from Virginia (109). To Angela, her darker-skinned sister is now just another relic from the past whom she hopes to leave behind. Fauset sets the two sisters up as foils for each other. Virginia is innocent, idyllic, enjoys domesticity, and hopes to have a family and household just like the one she grew up in. She is also a music teacher, a job she takes very seriously because it allows her to help other African-Americans because she sees herself as a race woman. Whereas Virginia surrounds herself with black people, Angela scorns them. Geography underscores this difference as seen by Virginia’s choice to live in Harlem while Angela opts for downtown Manhattan. Moreover, the lighter-skinned sister rejects their home and family and wants to be the complete opposite of everything on Opal

Street.<sup>25</sup> From a psychoanalytic perspective, the two sisters are prime examples of Sullivan's interpersonal development paradigm. According to him, mothers exhibit anxiety to their children and the children internalize it and respond accordingly. Mattie's anxiety is that of race, and her daughters respond according to their phenotypes. As a light-skinned woman, Angela represents the "good me" while the darker-skinned Virginia represents the "bad me."

One could read Fauset's distinction as a critique of racial passing: what is its usefulness when it eventually leads to Angela's loneliness and discontent? It is a question that hovers over the narrative, but becomes increasingly prevalent as both sisters navigate New York City. When Virginia informs Angela that she is moving to Manhattan, Angela's response is tepid, proclaiming "I don't suppose we'll be seeing so much of each other" (152). The protagonist would rather spend her time with Roger Fielding, her lover with whom she hopes to live on Long Island. Virginia intuits her sister's desire. When she arrives at Pennsylvania Station and sees Angela speaking with a white man, she approaches Angela saying "I beg your pardon, but isn't this Mrs. Henrietta Jones?" (159). Jones' name refers to a game played in their youth, but this time it serves as Virginia's stealthy acknowledgement to her sister that she has finally arrived. Virginia chooses this covert introduction lest she outs Angela as black by talking to her in such a public venue. Angela plays along too, proclaiming that she is not Mrs. Jones, but the unsuspecting Roger Fielding rudely interjects "Of course she isn't Mrs. Jones. Come Angele," before leading her away (159). Roger is unaware why this seemingly random black woman

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<sup>25</sup> For more criticism on Angela and Virginia as foils, see Eva Rueschmann, "Sister Bonds: Intersections of Family and Race in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy*" (1993), chapter two of Martin Japtok's *Growing Up Ethnic* (2005), chapter two of Sherrard-Johnson and chapter seven of Deborah Barker.

would bother his girlfriend, or that this “Mrs. Jones” skit developed from a childhood joke. The joke is actually on him since the two strangers are African-American sisters. Angela does not disabuse him, choosing romantic loyalty over family affiliation. In doing so, she continues her reinvention by ending the possibility of a relationship with Virginia even though she relocates to a new city with only strangers to rely on.

For all her desire to transform herself into Angele Mory, there is one aspect of Angela that remains constant: silence. The price she pays for mobility is her lack of a voice for most of the text, including when Roger addresses her sister brusquely at the train station. This scene is comparable to Angela’s youthful reticence during shopping trips with her mother. When Virginia walks up to her as an adult, Angela does not reproach Roger for being rude and quietly accepts his desire to leave. She is never able to speak up for herself, which is a behavior learned in a racialized context, further exacerbated by her interactions with him.

As a virulent racist, Roger enjoys putting African-Americans in their place at every opportunity he gets, such as during a dinner date with Angela. When a black family prepares to sit near their table, he addresses the headwaiter “authoritatively, even angrily” (132). Roger brags about stopping those “coons” from sitting down, where they would “spoil white people’s appetites” (133). He continues his racist diatribe by promising never “to have them here with you Angele...I’ll bet you’d never been that near to one before in your life had you?” (133). The irony of the situation could not be clearer: Roger thinks he is protecting his beloved “Angele” from those inferior blacks, but little does he know that she is black herself. A similar incongruity exists in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, where John Bellew addresses his wife Clare as a “Nig,” proclaiming he would never

allow a “nigger maid” to clean their home (172). African-Americans, according to Bellew, give him “the creeps...the black scrimy devils” (172). Roger Fielding would agree with this notion, since both men hold stereotypical views of blacks that their passing lovers silently undermine.

Clare appears nonchalant about her husband’s opinions, while Angela is more conflicted. Internally she is disgusted by Roger’s tirade, but responds by remaining “silent, [and] lifeless” (133). He rambles on about the variety of ways in which he has harassed African-Americans, during which time Angela vacillates from discomfort to conformity:

To this tirade there were economic reasons to oppose, tenets of justice, high ideals of humanity. But she could think of none of them. Speechless, she listened to him, her appetite fled.

“What’s the matter Angele? Did it make you sick to see them?”

“No, no not that. I—I don’t mind them; you’re mistaken about me and that girl at Martha Burden’s. It’s you, you’re so violent. I didn’t know you were that way!” (133-134)

Clearly Roger perceives a change in his date’s demeanor. She merely *thinks* about speaking out against his racism but instead stays quiet as he proudly recounts mistreating African-Americans. When he explicitly questions her about her silence, she has the opportunity to criticize him then, but she objects solely on the basis of his “violent” ways. The real problem is not his temper but his racist perceptions of the group of people that Angela stealthily belongs to. She already knows about Roger’s violence, therefore this is not a new development for her; she uses it as a cover to hide her disgust at his prejudice. They are still in the courtship stage and she could have demanded that he change his views to become more liberal. However, she chooses the easy way out—silence—as the

perpetual stance to take towards race and perhaps to keep her from the danger of being rendered black.

Part of her rationale for silence is fear that standing up for blacks will be equated with *being* perceived as black, a problem she cannot broach as she seeks upward social mobility. Roger's wealth prevents her from risking the prospect of losing him, especially over seemingly insignificant racial matters. The pinnacle of her passing would be marrying a prosperous white man who can move her up in social status, which she renders an "assured future, wealth, protection, influence, even power" (151). Angela alludes to her mixed motives throughout their courtship: "she felt very kindly toward him; perhaps she was in love after all" (151). True love would not elicit the tentative term "perhaps," and her use of it undermines her proclamation of love as she tries convincing herself of reasons for putting up with Roger.

She faces an uphill battle in this regard due to his habit of dismissing black people. In explaining the purpose for a business trip, he says he must help his father because "the damned niggers have started running north" (150). Angela once again remains silent about his use of the most reviled racist epithet for African-Americans, choosing instead to respond to his questions about scheduling their next meeting. If he can become so livid at the mere thought of African-Americans, how would he respond when he discovers the black ancestry of his beloved "Angele"? Angela sees this as a problem, and her silence is a learned behavior to prevent it from progressing into a bigger problem that would hinder her mobility. Yet this is the same silence that allowed her father and sister to pass by unnoticed, and the same silence that ends her relationship with



her sister after Roger interferes. Despite hoping to leave the past behind, her reticence about race links her to it just as much as her light-skinned phenotype does.

Gradually, Angela finds her voice, with the help of a lecture on race that helps to speed up her racial development. When a speaker named Van Meier visits Manhattan, Martha Burden invites her friend Angela to attend. He is a renowned black scholar, but Roger is skeptical that this “nigger...really has brains” (216). Rather than verbally convince him otherwise, Angela lets him join in on their uptown excursion to hear the DuBoisian-esque lecturer.<sup>26</sup> He extols the virtues of successful black people helping out other black people in the name of “racial pride,” people who are “our less fortunate, weaker brethren” (218). Reminiscent of the “talented tenth” paradigm, Van Meier challenges African-Americans who “have forged forward” never to forsake the “unwashed, untutored herd” (218). After his remarks, he is flocked by guests wanting to personally praise him (218-219). The narrator notes that Roger too is “visibly impressed” but he scolds Angela’s friend Paulette for excessively praising Van Meier (219-220). While Paulette elevates him to “a god,” Roger questions how much of the speaker’s ancestry is white, because “that’s where he gets his ability” as an orator (220). Angela’s response to his ignorance is to commend Van Meier, saying she has never been “more interested in [her] life” (221). For once, she musters the ability to speak up. Though her rejoinder is muted—she does not critique Roger’s blatant racism again—she informs him that the speech is exemplary regardless of Van Meier’s background. That his topic focuses on race is significant too, considering Angela has sought to avoid the mere mention of it at all costs.

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<sup>26</sup> A few critics have argued that Van Meier is a fictionalized version of W.E.B. DuBois, who was a supervisor and friend to Fauset. See, for instance, Japtok 92 and Barker 175.

It is not an overstatement to say that listening to Van Meier is life-altering for Angela, as both David Levering Lewis and Mar Gallego have argued.<sup>27</sup> In the weeks following the lecture, Roger “had lost his charm for her,” yet he is completely oblivious as to the cause of it (223). Angela starts lamenting the past, wishing she still lived in Philadelphia and regretting the distance between herself and Virginia (224). Roger changes too, in fact, “the difference between his attitude and that of former days was very apparent” (229). Though he attempts to ascertain the motives underlying her sudden change, she still cannot articulate the wish that is on her mind: she desires a return to blackness. Angela vaguely states that she yearns for her youth as well as for her sister, and both symbolize the life she once lived as a black person.

This important change happens only after hearing Van Meier preach the necessity of sustaining racial pride. By internalizing his message, Angela begins to understand that racial pride entails welcoming Virginia at the expense of being called “black.” It also means a necessary distance from Roger Fielding, the man who detests African-Americans though he is unknowingly dating one. Angela would be unable to fully actualize Van Meier’s message as long as she deals with someone who happily relegates African-Americans to “coons” and “niggers”. However, she faces the dilemma of contemplating a return to blackness or letting Roger give her everything that her mother instilled in her – a higher economic class and mobility. Upward mobility explains her silence since she is motivated by economic gain instead of romantic desires. Nevertheless, surrounding herself with a racist during her turning point is too much to handle. When Angela declares her intention to “never endure again the treatment,” she ostensibly vows never to

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Gallego 162.

put up with her lover's dismissal of her for such a long period. A deeper meaning exists within her nebulous assertion in that the "treatment" she refuses to "endure" is his racism. With Van Meier's lecture as her primary motivator, Angela realizes her duty to *her race*, and not to a white man who cannot bring himself to recognize black humanity.

Shortly thereafter, the relationship with Roger dissolves and she tries to rekindle a bond with Virginia, who is nonchalant about seeing a woman who avoided her at the train station in order to sustain a lie. By this point however, Angela's voice is developing and she tells him that there is absolutely no chance of them being together, when he tries to see her again. Even when he begs, Angela is firm in asserting that relationships based on lies are pointless. This is a subtle way of referring to her lost bond with Virginia, as this is the primary "relationship" that was undone because of Angela's penchant for "secrets and games." She now prefers to spend time with black people and with people who are undoubtedly progressive in their thinking of African-American civil rights. In short, Angela Murray's desire to be around black people is slowly developing and she refuses to let Roger Fielding hinder her.

The final step of Angela's development is racial solidarity, which happens in conjunction with her developing a voice. According to the narrator,

Although she no longer intended to cast in her lot with Virginia, she made no further effort to set up barriers between herself and coloured people. Let the world take her as it would. If she were in Harlem, in company with Virginia and Sara Penton she went out to dinner, to the noisy, crowded, friendly, "Y" dining room, to "Gert's" tea-room, to the clean, inviting drug store for rich "sundaes." Often, too, she went shopping with her sister and to the theatre; she had her meet Ashley and Martha. (325)

Angela engages in a process called "passively passing," a term I define as the process by which a light-skinned African-American does not claim affiliation to blacks or whites.

Instead, she places the impetus on determining her racial affiliation in the hands of the people she encounters each day. If a person assumes she is black or white, she remains passive and says nothing. Passive passing contrasts with active passing, wherein a light-skinned black person verbalizes her whiteness in order to pass as such. Silence then becomes the determining factor in characterizing a person as either actively or passively passing.

Echoing the Ex-Colored Man, who also proclaims his intention to “let the world take me for what it would,” she essentially says that she will no longer attempt to prove her whiteness, but will instead let the world guess her ethnicity (Johnson 499). Not only does Angela frequent Harlem, but she does so with her black sister and black friends. If people want to place her based on her personal affiliations as she suggests, she would be rendered black. Though this is a far cry from her previous behavior when she wanted nothing to do with African-Americans, her actions are still tentative. She does not disavow passing which would be an active move, but instead declares her passive intention to avoid the euphemistic “barriers” that defined her former life as a race shifter. By loosening her stance on associating with blacks, Angela suggests a declining interest in pretending to be white.

Angela spends more and more time in Harlem, a setting that includes “a hidden consciousness of race-duty” (326). She sees it as her “duty” to gradually engross herself in talk about African-American culture and the humiliations they face. This proverbial race talk is precisely why “Harlem intrigued her,” for it grants her specific spaces to freely listen to blacks in hopes of finally becoming black (326). One such venue is the salon on 136<sup>th</sup> Street where she often listens to black patrons “whose blood she shared but

whose disabilities by a lucky fluke she had been able to avoid” (326). Hearing these patrons leads to Angela’s most sympathetic opinions about African-Americans thus far: “What a wealth of courage it took for these people to live! What high degree of humour, determination, steadfastness, undauntedness were not needed, --and poured forth!” (326). After spending so many years avoiding blackness, overhearing race talks rejuvenates her into welcoming her African-American ancestry. It is very telling that her radical shift with race happens after Van Meier’s appearance, because the juxtaposition shows that *his* words helped to spark an interest in hearing the words of *other* black Americans. Moreover, when placed in tandem with other, Van Meier and Harlem residents all prove the accuracy of her late mother’s words: “life is more important than colour” (333).

One specific aspect of “life” that Angela considers very important is her friendship with Ms. Powell. This is the same black classmate who Angela initially invited out to eat when they first met, but who “was still difficult and reserved” (334). They find common ground when both win fellowships to study in France. In light of Powell’s commitment to race work, it comes as a shock that passivity prevails when she is ultimately denied passage to France because of her race.<sup>28</sup> She is still able to maintain her fellowship, providing she can procure money to travel abroad for the duration of it. Upon hearing this, Powell’s friends rally behind her and try to get her to fight, yet they have “a hard time in making Miss Powell show any fight” (336).

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<sup>28</sup> Ms. Powell’s denial of her fellowship was based on the true account of Augusta Savage, a black artist who sought admission to the Fountainebleau School but was denied on account of her race. For more on this see Sherrard-Johnson, 75.

Her colleagues speculate on why this is the case. Anthony, for instance, believes that African-Americans have been conditioned to pick and choose their battles wisely, and this is one that she has decided is just not worthwhile (338-339). Miss Tilden is more pessimistic, inferring that Powell's silence means that she had no inclination toward social justice in the first place (344). If she really felt adamant about racial equality, Tilden argues, then Powell would fight the committee's decision instead of letting her colleagues do it on her behalf. Ms. Powell does not offer much insight herself, as she proclaims to be "sick and tired" of this situation, hoping to "let it drop" (343). This is a conversation on African-Americans—race talk—which Angela inevitably finds herself thrust into. At the heart of the discussion is determining whether or not to respond to blatant racism, especially considering it is a daily occurrence.

The most vocal member of this group turns out to be Angela Murray, who finally admits to being black: "I mean that if Miss Powell isn't wanted, I'm not wanted either. You imply that she's not wanted because she's coloured. Well, I'm coloured too" (347). She makes this claim to stand in solidarity with her friend, a move which can be misconstrued as ironic considering she was the same woman who once renounced blackness but now welcomes it. When one of her classmates urges her to retract her words, Angela responds with her most provocative commentary on race:

Do you really think that being coloured is as awful as all that? Can't you see that to my way of thinking it's a great deal better to be coloured and to miss—oh—scholarships and honours and preferments, than to be the contemptible things which you've all shown yourselves to be this morning? Coming here baiting this poor girl and her mother, thrusting your self-assurance down their throats, branding yourselves literally dogs in the manger? (347)

With these words, Angela reprimands the people gathered who want to criticize Ms. Powell's alleged passivity. She renders them unbearable dogs who are clueless as to what the slighted woman is now enduring. In doing so, she teaches them that being black is not so bad after all. "Scholarships and honours" are transitory, whereas her black identity is long term and less superficial.

In commenting on the relationship between the two women, Deborah Barker believes that Angela begins the friendship "polite but distant" (194-95). She then progresses to being an important ally moved by "Miss Powell's fierce pride" (Sherrard-Johnson 75). Wall elevates their friendship to the status of "sisterhood" (75). This term suggests a level of familiarity and camaraderie absent from Angela's interactions with other blacks, including her own sister. Both Powell and Virginia were initially dismissed by Angela, who grows from trying to avoid Virginia at the train station to openly embracing her "sister" Powell. These correspondences suggest that Miss Powell functions in the narrative as a stand-in for Virginia, reminding Angela that it is time to finally support members of her own race.

By defending Powell and admitting her blackness, Angela faces humiliations that parallel previous instances when her race was revealed. Similar to high school and art school, others help to reveal her blackness in a public forum. This time, the journalists who gathered to cover Powell's story find Angela's admission far more interesting, and publicize it accordingly. The most damning exposé is entitled "Socially Ambitious Negress Confesses to Long Hoax" (352). As a result, she loses her job, just as abruptly as she lost her status as an art student when her classmates alleged her blackness previously. She again reaffirms that race is real and has very dangerous ramifications when black

people attempt to improve themselves. Moreover, Angela fully comprehends that despite her desire for upward mobility the “business of passing” can lead to many problems that cannot always be easily rectified (354).

By having this epiphany, she reaches the pinnacle of her racial growth, and is now the complete opposite of her former self. Gone are the days when she remained silent in the face of racist bigotry; the epithets “coon” and “nigger” coming from Roger would be unfathomable now. Gone are the days when she would actively avoid all conversations of race, as seen by her steadfast support of Ms. Powell. This is a far cry from her youthful protestations against all her black associations who relentlessly discussed race. Lastly, gone are the days when she felt ashamed at having a black father and sister; now she cannot get re-acquainted with Virginia fast enough.

In fact, it is her sister who first learns of her next move, which is to sail to France regardless of the sanctions against her. Before sailing, she returns home to Opal Street then back to New York City, where she makes one last racial proclamation: “as sides are concerned, I am on the coloured side” (373). The return home is an important element of many narratives of development, yet *Plum Bun* is far from a conventional text. For one thing, Angela’s mother teaches her the benefits of passing as a little girl. Mattie Murray’s inclination to pass is validated when Angela’s blackness is called out in school, and she is put on the defensive for not revealing her African-American heritage sooner. This is her second step in racial development, and when her race becomes a problem again in art class, she absconds to New York City. The beginning of her professional art career corresponds with the third part of her growth, when she renounces her African-American



heritage and remains silent lest it gets revealed again. The final part of her racialized development is her return to blackness after hearing Van Meier's lecture.

Thinking back after arriving in Paris, Angela sometimes lets her "mind dwell on her curiously thwarted and twisted life" (376). Though the description is apposite because of the many stages she endures, hers is a development specifically into blackness that critics have largely ignored. In doing so, they miss the opportunity to speculate on the significance of the correlations between Jessie Fauset and Angela Murray. Like Angela Murray, Jessie Fauset suffered through classroom humiliation, recalling her first day of high school when her white childhood friends from youth "refused to acknowledge [her] greeting" (Sylvander 27). Similarly, Fauset was hugely influenced by the preeminent race man W.E.B. DuBois, who was her "teacher, mentor, and friend" and represented in the book as Van Meier (Wall 41). Lastly the author's geography is the inverse of Angela's: Fauset went to Paris to study at the Sorbonne, and then to Harlem to join her peers as the literary renaissance flourished (Wall 38-53).

Sound literary scholarship is not predicated solely on mapping an author's life onto her characters, but in this case the similarities strongly correlate to Angela's own life. Since "Jessie Fauset's own life story does enter the novel in a number of ways," the points of convergence raise the question of whether or not the text itself is passing (Japtok 71). Is this fictional novel more autobiographical than it purports to be? If so, then it reverses the trajectory of the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which was a novel published as the protagonist's first person account. Fauset herself said that her novels are "taken from real life" and that the "stories are literally true" (qtd. in Starkey 219). It would be fascinating to contrast the two texts, determining the ways in which the

protagonists pass racially and their texts pass generically. However, by overlooking *Plum Bun*, scholars miss the unity between its form and content.

In reviewing Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues*, Fauset impulsively places "Hughes's work in the context of western literary tradition" but this is myopic, for his experimentations with "spirituals, blues, and jazz" elevate him as a founder of African-American modernism (Wall 56-57). An analogous observation categorizes Fauset's critics. They too, eagerly place her within the generic category of the bildungsroman, but her work is far too complex for this conventional genre. Instead it is more accurate to call this a narrative of *racial* growth. Fauset, like Hughes, is the originator of her own tradition which details a girl's development from black, to white, and back to black, and it serves as a narrative precursor to Senna's *Caucasia* (1999). As the next section reveals, Birdie Lee, the protagonist of the later text, also endures a "thwarted and twisted" life due to the racial passing that her mother forces upon her.

#### "Just Another One of Her Games": Learning About Race in *Caucasia*

On the surface, it might seem like *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia* could not be more dissimilar. Senna's novel was published seventy years after Fauset's; its setting is 1970s Boston during school integration. Unlike the idyllic Murray household, the Lee home in *Caucasia* is rancorous, with Sandra and Deck constantly fighting and cursing in front of their daughters, Birdie Lee and Cole. Moreover, Deck is less passive than Junius Murray when the prospect of racial passing is raised. On a stylistic level, *Caucasia* does not include the overly stilted diction that critics dismiss as a flaw in Fauset's text. Despite these differences, a number of similarities unite the two novels, including the fact that

both texts focus on light-skinned black girls who become passing subjects. The specifics of each protagonist's growth are comparable to each other: Birdie begins passing because her mother instructs her to do so, while her growth includes racial unveiling at school and the growth of her voice. Additionally, the sisters grow apart due to their different phenotypes. Like Angela, Birdie Lee matures from being sheltered and lacking racial consciousness, to being highly aware of her blackness and all of its social and legal implications.

Birdie first learns about race at home from her mother, Sandra Lee. She is a progressive white woman who hides criminals and activists in her basement and who is married to Deck Lee, a black professor of Anthropology. Birdie recalls one of their initial disagreements stemming from their contrasting views of education. Sandra home schools Cole and Birdie Lee because she thinks this will shelter them “from the racism and violence of the world” (26). Deck initially supports the unconventional education of his daughters, and even predicts that they will serve as proof “that race mixing produced superior minds, the way a mutt is always more intelligent than a purebred dog” (26). Eventually he reverses his position and considers a traditional school for them. Sandra however, calls it anything but “traditional,” since the school Deck desires is predominantly for blacks. Sandra responds, “I guess the school makes some sense with Cole. But Birdie? Look at her sometime...try to see beyond yourself and your goddam history books. She looks a little Sicilian” (27). Her entreaties are futile, because Deck is determined to send his children to the Nkrumah Black Power School—appropriately named after Kwame Nkrumah.

At the heart of this exchange is the convergence of Deck's intellectualism and his daughters' contrasting skin tones. He is progressive in hoping that they can prove the value of race mixing, yet the manner in which he conveys this optimism is problematic since he compares them to dogs. Based on his logic, the mental superiority of mongrels cannot compete with that of purebred dogs, which is his way of expressing happiness that his daughters are similar to "mutts." Sandra is less interested in making a political statement and more concerned with chiding her husband's inability to clearly see his daughters. By telling him to look beyond the history books, she mocks his erudition and asserts that he spends too much time analyzing and less time parenting. If he would spend more time in the latter position, then he would realize that Nkrumah, as a school for black children, is not a feasible place at all for a phenotypically non-black girl like Birdie to attend.

Birdie does not initially criticize her father for being unable to separate his scholarship from his parenting. Instead, she tries to infer the meaning of "Sicilian" based on her mother's admonition. To her, the word sounds "dirty off [Sandra's] tongue" before she notices Cole staring at her, trying to find "something she had never seen before" (27). When preparing for bed later that evening, Birdie again thinks about why she is rendered "Sicilian" and not her sister:

I glanced at my sister's reflection behind me. She was also brushing her teeth, only neatly. Her hair was curly and mine was straight, and I figured that this fact must have had something to do with the fighting and the way the eyes of strangers flickered surprise, sometimes amusement, sometimes disbelief, when my mother introduced us as sisters. (29)

Birdie intuitively senses there is *something* that makes strangers skeptical when hearing that she and Cole are sisters. She is too young to realize that the specific issue is Cole's darker

phenotype, whereas hers is too light to be considered black. This contrast is highlighted by Cole's curly hair and Birdie's straight hair. Yet she can only guess that there is a correlation between this unnamed difference and the "Sicilian" label from her mother. Although it is indeed nascent, the narrator first becomes aware of her skin color as a result of her parents' conversation about school. "Sicilian" is just one term that will be used to (mis)category her during her adolescence, and it defines the first part of her racial development.

Once she begins Nkrumah, Birdie's knowledge about race becomes much more explicit. On the first day in the Black Power school, the girl who looks anything but black becomes the object of everyone's gaze. When waiting for history class to begin, a student asks if she is "a Rican or something?" Another one sarcastically states "I thought this was supposed to be a black school" (43). When another boy throws a spitball at her, he interrogates her by asking "what you doin' in this school? You white?" Birdie feels her classmates staring at her but instead of responding, she finds solace in the "dried lumps of bubble gum" which prove to her that countless other students have sat there and have "lived through this moment" (44).

Teenagers, both real and fictional, often endure taunts from their peers, but the added element of race means that the insults are particularly sharp in *Caucasia*. Birdie's classroom experience parallels the Ex-Colored Man's, yet his problem is blackness while her problem is her perceived non-blackness. As in *Plum Bun*, this is an instance in which the source of authority women fight against is school, dominated by a black community and not a white one. Unlike the Ex-Colored Man, Birdie has a response to the question of her race—Sicilian—but the teacher walks in before she can utter it (44). In thinking about

assuming this title, she proves that her mother was successful in rendering her as other, which is comparable to Angela's decision to pass at Mattie Murray's urging. Birdie internalizes Sandra's category by contemplating a fictional Italian ancestry, foreshadowing the different identities that both women will affect when they start passing.

The narrator continues to feel the dried gum under her desk, moving her "fingertips...as if trying to read Braille" (44). Not only is this Birdie's way of coping with racialized humiliation, but the Braille reference suggests her inability to see what is going on, especially given her inexperience in conventional classrooms. Just as she tries to read during the taunts, her classmates are eager to "read" her, through their attempts to place her either as "Rican" or "white." She looks like something they have not seen before which leads to the multiple levels of reading at Nkrumah—and this persists beyond the classroom. For instance, in the bathroom, one of Birdie's classmates pulls her straight hair, and asks "Why you so stuck up? You think you're fine" (46)? Her peers read her as someone who pretends to be something that she is not by virtue of her skin color and hair. They attempt to fix her in the limited categories with which they are familiar. School thus emerges as the second part of her racial maturity because it is where Birdie's race is first questioned publically and extensively.

The narrator realizes that the only way to survive Nkrumah is to create a new identity for herself. Ralina Joseph puts it more bluntly in her discussion of contemporary mulattas: Birdie must pretend to be black, which is "the first iteration of passing in *Caucasia*" (76). The irony is that in society she eventually pretends to be Jewish, but while in an all black school, she must first assume what she thinks is a black identity in

order to remain inconspicuous. To initiate this, she changes her hairstyle, begins wearing lipstick, and talks about boys, in a trifecta that catapults her to being “one of the more popular girls at the school” (62). Birdie has to work harder to achieve the same type of popularity her sister enjoys, and in the process, foreshadows the racial passing that her mother forces onto her. She blames the racial dynamics of Nkrumah for teaching her “the art of changing...a skill that would later become second nature to [her]” (62). Birdie has fond memories of playing dress up with Cole in their youth, but at Nkrumah, it is no longer a “game” since she has to “erase the person [she] was before” to become someone else and appease her peers (62). Sandra notices the changes too, especially when she catches her daughters “smearing [their] faces with her makeup in front of the big mirror” (65). Her assessment of their newfound narcissism is a bleak one: “You girls are turning into little tarts before my eyes. This is the end, you realize” (65).

She reads it as the conclusion of her daughters’ freedom, but it is not this simple. In fact, if Birdie were truly free from the start, then she would not feel compelled to change her appearance so quickly. The transition girls make from being unadorned to changing their hairstyles while wearing jewelry and makeup is an expected, commonplace occurrence. For Birdie however, this change takes on extra expediency because she is not just transitioning into girlhood, but into what she perceives as *black* girlhood. She assumes that making herself resemble her peers is a guaranteed way of becoming less conspicuous, and the act of putting on makeup literalizes Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask”. Much like the speaker of the poem who believes we all wear a metaphorical mask that “hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,” Birdie’s physical mask of makeup has a comparable effect – makeup hides the white skin that her

classmates detest. She can initially be read as passing as *black*, because looking black might lead to peace for the non-black looking girl at the black institution.

It is hardly enough for Birdie to merely look black—she mimics black cultural practices as well. In one of her rituals, she stands before “the bathroom mirror, practicing how to say ‘nigger’ the way the kids in school did it, dropping the ‘er’ so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment, *nigga*” (63 emphasis in original). One way in which she hopes to fit in is thus by sounding like her black peers. Another way is by imagining herself as one of them, which occurs when she first visits the home of her classmate Maria: “I imagined my name was not Birdie or Jesse or even Patrice, but Yolanda, and that Maria was one of my many cousins. I imagined myself Cape Verdean” (69). She sees herself as having some type of kinship with both Maria and the West African island, believing that naming an African nation as her home would provide the ultimate relief from her tormentors. The impetus for this should not be placed solely on the homogenous school Nkrumah, but also on Sandra, who first introduced to her daughter the possibility of assuming different identities. Commenting on Birdie’s “Sicilian” appearance was the precursor to this desire to be “Cape Verdean” as they both prove the ease with which Birdie can shift her identity.

In Suzanne Jones’ essay on the reemergence of the racially mixed figure in contemporary American literature, she argues that Birdie is not accepted at school until she learns “the cultural markers of blackness” (91). Even though, as she further notes, “Birdie’s transformation [is] a performance,” her parents remain oblivious to the racial fluctuation (92). After the last fight between Sandra and Deck, the latter moved out the house and only comes around on weekends to see his daughters. He does not really “see



me at all” according to Birdie, because “Cole was my father’s special one...his prodigy—his young, gifted, and black” (55). She sees Cole as the favorite because she is physical proof that Deck did not get too whitewashed while studying at Harvard and listening to white academics discuss “the Negro Problem” (56). He fears that his Ivy League pedigree might have made him white, but the darker skin Cole contradicts this notion.

Her role serves a narrative function that Deck might not even realize: in accordance with Sullivan’s interpersonal theory, she is the “bad me” because of her skin color. Sandra dislikes Cole because she is dark like Deck, while favoring Birdie, the light-skinned “good me.” This is the start of family affiliations developing along phenotypical lines. Deck prefers Cole because she is dark just like he is, which is underscored by the fact that the name “Cole” is a homonym for “coal,” and it is easier for them to be in public without others questioning if they are related. The narrator looks more like her mother, implicitly undermining him as a pro-black academic while making it difficult for him to treat her like he does Cole.

Not surprisingly, he is disappointed when Cole is sick and only Birdie can spend time with him. When the latter comes downstairs, Deck’s eyes look behind her in search of Cole, “the real reason” of his visit. (57). He is eager to see her because the weekly visits afford him the opportunity to indoctrinate her with his Afrocentric theories. For instance, he tells Cole about America’s fascination with castrated black boys, and that white boys do not like to be the object of the gaze (72). He also teaches her that whites love seeing black people making spectacles of themselves, which explains his derision of popular 1970s comedies like “What’s Happening” (73). Even though these theories are directed at Cole, her interests are now with boys and not toward heeding her father’s

Fanonian critiques. He hopes that the daughter who shares his complexion would also share his racial politics, yet his desire is in vain. Birdie overhears his speculations instead and even repeats them at Nkrumah. Her pro-black instructors praise her, especially when she critiques the black people acting like “jigaboos” on television (72-73). The narrator’s actions raise the question of whether or not she has actually learned and internalized her father’s teachings or if she repeats them at school solely to impress her peers? The latter seems more plausible, given her perpetual stance of “acting black” linguistically and culturally to prove her authenticity.

No other black character highlights Birdie’s difference more than Carmen, Deck’s new girlfriend. During their first encounter, the protagonist notices Carmen’s increasingly cold demeanor toward her, as well as her failure to make eye contact, while making brusque answers to Birdie’s questions (90). When Cole brags about her sister, “Carmen looked bored,” prompting Deck to demand that Cole talk about herself instead (91). Birdie calls her the “icing on the cake” since she solidifies all the changes that are happening simultaneously:

Others before had made me see the differences between my sister and myself—the textures of our hair, the tints of our skin, the shapes of our features. But Carmen was the one to make me feel that those things somehow mattered. To make me feel that the differences were deeper than skin. (91)

What Birdie articulates is not just frustration with Carmen, but a heightened awareness that her difference is now problematic. Birdie always intuited her father’s resentment towards her because of their different skin tones. With the addition of his girlfriend into their lives, she understands that she will never be able to completely fit in with phenotypically black people because they will ignore her as a white outsider looking in.

The problem with Carmen, as Jones argues, is that Birdie's skin color is a constant reminder that Deck was married to a white woman (92). Carmen often alludes to this with caustic statements affirming that Birdie is "Cole's little sister, even if she doesn't look like a sister" (93). The implication of this quote is that she will always be othered regardless of blood relationships, leading Birdie to realize that regardless of how black she envisions herself to be, she will never be considered black enough.

Carmen pulls Cole closer to Deck by making sure the three of them enjoy each other's company while excluding Birdie. However, the attention Birdie lacks from her immediate family is rectified by attention from her white maternal grandmother. Sandra's mother comes from old Puritan stock, dating back to Cotton Mather, and she tries to instill white pride in Birdie at every chance she gets (99). She has always disapproved of Sandra's interracial relationship with Deck and sees Birdie as proof that her lineage will live on, despite Deck's black heritage. Cole's phenotype cannot support her wish. In other words, the visibly black side of Birdie's family fails to see her, while her white grandmother is meticulous in teaching her youngest granddaughter about "how good" her white ancestry is (100). At the same time, Sandra has been spending more and more time hiding people in her basement. The weekends that used to be devoted to Cole and Birdie are now occupied by trips to see her friends in stealth and helping her "multiracial crew of activists" abscond (75). Being preoccupied with her activism forces her to remain oblivious of her daughter's racial consciousness.

Sandra's involvement also means that she places herself in dangerous situations with people on the run, angering Deck and leading to their separation. At one of their dinnertime arguments, he chides his estranged wife by saying "if you were gonna get

involved in something like this, at least have some balls about it...I told you not to mess with those crazy thugs” (118). Whomever she has been hiding precipitates her own hiding and ultimately the splitting of the Lee family. As Sandra and Birdie prepare to run, Deck, Cole and Carmen plan to leave for Brazil. At this point, the astute narrator knows “then and there that we were parting” (120). Deck, Cole, and Carmen look like a complete family because they are all darker skinned, and it is easier to travel as such. Sandra cannot hide successfully if she brings Cole along, therefore she only brings the daughter who looks as white as she does. Senna never clarifies what specific reasons motivate Sandra to start running, but her ambiguity gestures to a larger point about race: the main problem of the novel is not that Sandra hides strangers in her home, since contributing to the racialized division of her family is far more dangerous for their unconventional family unit.

Equally problematic is that she teaches Birdie to lie about her race, which helps them to live in stealth. Sandra claims that the FBI is after them, but “the fact that [Birdie] could pass,” due to her “straight hair, pale skin, [and] general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race” means the possibility of their pursuit being thwarted (128). To facilitate their transition from private citizens to fugitives, Sandra creates new personas for them. In doing so, she initially encourages Birdie to choose whether she wants to be “Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, [or] Greek” but ultimately rationalizes that “Jewish is better” (130). Birdie’s fictional life includes being “the daughter of an esteemed classics professor and so-called genius named David Goldman” (130). With these new identities, the protagonist is now “a half-Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman, with a white mama named Sheila—and the world was our pearl” (131).

In feigning Jewishness, Sandra and Birdie contrast with many of their literary predecessors. In texts that include *Running a Thousand Miles For Freedom*, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and *Passing*, the characters pass generically as white. In *Caucasia* however, mother and daughter affect Jewish identities, therefore suggesting that in contemporary iterations of passing, there are more expansive ways to pass instead of living generically as white. Furthermore, their passing as Jewish is an interesting choice considering they know nothing about this religion at all. Kathryn Rummell believes that Birdie “does not have to bone up to rabbinical law because she can reject the cultural/religious aspect of her new race” (7). She can reject it to an extent, but must always live in fear that someone might discover it. The irony is that the success of their new identities is contingent upon *not* being around actual Jews who would question their religiosity for ignoring traditional holidays or not maintaining dietary restrictions. In failing to consider these potential impediments, they prove that passing as Jewish is a movement to the unknown for them both. The overall purpose of passing seems to be, to assume an identity that is completely foreign and exotic to the one held before, even if it means remaining on high alert about meeting people who would undermine your allegiance to it.

Given the complications of passing specifically as Jewish, Sandra’s claim that “Jewish is better” is premature. Deck must have intuited that his daughter would be forced to pass into this unknown territory, because he leaves a package that Birdie must take with her:

Scrawled in magic marker on the side of the box was the word “Negrobilia.” I recognized my father’s chicken-scratch handwriting. My mother scoffed when she saw what was inside. It included a Black Nativity program from the Nkrumah School, a fist-dick pick (the smell of

someone's scalp oil still lingering in between the sharp black teeth), a black Barbie doll head, an informational tourist pamphlet on Brazil, the silver Egyptian necklace inscribed with hieroglyphics that my father had bought me at a museum so many year's before, and a James Brown eight-track cassette with a faded sticker in the corner that said "Nubian Notion," the name of the record shop on Washington Street. (127)

Every element of this box suggests that Birdie is to think of her blackness while on the run. The school program symbolizes the story of Christmas told from a black perspective, as well as the school that he hoped would instill black consciousness in his light-skinned daughter. All of the remaining objects—the pick, black Barbie, the literature about Brazil, and the necklace—represent pride in black culture, and the pick especially connotes the naturally curly hair that eludes Birdie. Arguably the most telling object in this box is the James Brown cassette. As the "Godfather of Soul," Brown's sonic affirmations of black Americans epitomized the definition of being black in America. The fact that the record shop has "Nubian" in its title suggests that the tape was bought at a black-owned establishment, explicitly referencing the "buy black" slogan from the early 1970s.

Even the title of the package is relevant, since the term "Negrobilia" is itself a neologism that refers to objects representing black existence—a phrase that might as well serve as the subtitle of the collection. The contents of the shoe box are to remind Birdie that she is black despite the racialized contexts in which she would find herself. At first, Sandra tells her she can be "Sicilian," and now she chooses Jewish instead. In between these two categories, Nkrumah encourages her to be black, while her maternal family sees her as white, thereby showing the inherent instability of Birdie's identity. Like Angela Murray, home is where Birdie first learns how her phenotype can be used to transgress boundaries, and this is magnified when she begins her formal education. This progression characterizes the first and second part of Birdie's own race learning.

What specifically precipitates their move is unclear, since the text only states that Sandra wakes Birdie up early one morning and commands her to pack enough clothing “for a few days” (124). Birdie overhears her mother mumbling to herself “something about a felony and the fuzz and prison time” while they get ready, but none of this is confirmed beyond Sandra’s own suspicions that the FBI is on her trail. This ambiguity explains why the start of their passing is marked by the protagonist’s admission that she considered passing as “just another one of her games to get us out of a bind” (128). The “game” image recalls Mattie Murray’s “old game of play acting again” in *Plum Bun* (19). The stakes for Sandra and Birdie are much higher though: if they do not play the “game” of Jewishness carefully, they risk having their race and crime uncovered. If Mattie’s persona of whiteness is discovered however, she must only worry about the public scorn of her friends and family, which can be more embarrassing than legal action. The “game” becomes increasingly serious when Birdie, who begins this endeavor at eight years old, must continue her racial duplicity for four years as they move about New England. Birdie’s movement is not just physical but also psychological—travelling forces her to move from racial ignorance to someone who completely embraces her blackness. As the next section reveals, a part of Birdie’s growth is her ability to find her voice and understand race as she relocates from place to place.

#### “I Keep Expecting You to Vanish”: Movement, Silence and Racial Unveiling

The third step of Birdie’s maturation is defined by the confluence of forgetting the past and silence—the former is one of the things Birdie’s mother instills in her, and the latter is an outcome of it. Sandra starts dating Jim, a white man, whom she envisions as a

surrogate father for Birdie now that they are on the run. The problem though, is that Sandra has been so successful at teaching her daughter how to lie, that the only father Birdie really sees is the one they created. Birdie admits that “my father was fading on me. Not the Jewish father. I could see David Goldman clear as a day...it was my real father, Deck Lee, whom I was having trouble seeing” (188). Eventually Deck’s “eyes, then his nose, then his mouth had faded” in her memory (189). David Goldman is a mere figment of Sandra’s imagination, but to Birdie, this “father” replaces her biological one.

It would be easy to rationalize her atypical behavior by saying that the lack of sight has now gone both ways: whereas Deck once failed to “see” his daughter because she looked white, she now returns it through her inability to “see” him. This is underscored by the details of her fictional father which come to mind readily – she could imagine his “rumpled tweed jacket, [and] a yarmulke bobby-pinned precariously to his loose afro” but he is a man she has never even *seen* (188). There is more going on than a deep psychological retribution directed at Deck for his aloof demeanor: the protagonist no longer views passing as “a game” because it causes a “slow and sneaky” transformation (190). She turns to her box of Negrobilia in search of solace:

Fingering the objects—the fisted pick, the Nubian Notion eight-track cassette, the Egyptian necklace, the black Barbie head—and tried to tell myself, “I haven’t forgotten.” But the objects in the box looked to me just like that—objects. They seemed like remnants from the life of some other girl whom I barely knew anymore, anthropological artifacts of some ancient extinct people, rather than pieces of my past. And the name Jesse Goldman no longer felt so funny, so thick on my tongue, so make-believe. (190)

Deck gave her the box for this very reason, to remind Birdie that despite their separation, she is still black. She believes that uttering “I haven’t forgotten” will somehow help her to remember her past but she just cannot, as evidenced in her observation that the objects



made specifically for black people are mere impersonal “artifacts.” They have lost their luster for her because they represent a girl from the past but not *her* past. Birdie has now traded in her blackness for Jewishness, and the fact that she embraces “Jesse Goldman” as her identity instead of Birdie Lee attests to this. As a result, she is comparable to Angela Murray, who completely forgets what it means to be black, yet she takes it one step further by passing as a specific ethnic group instead of passing generically as white as Angela does. Forgetting her father, dismissing the relevance of her collection of black artifacts, and admitting that “Jesse Goldman” feels less foreign, when placed in tandem with each other, suggests the extent to which Birdie has now successfully passed: no longer is she a half black girl but has assumed a completely Jewish identity.

An important component of forgetting blackness is silence in the face of racist remarks from one’s peers. In Birdie’s case, it begins with Nicholas Marsh. Marsh smokes marijuana with Birdie, and cautions her against staying in the sun too long because she “might be colored in the right light” (204). He follows up by making more racist remarks. According to him, when black babies are born, their lips say “inflate to five thousand” (204). Also, he does not believe Birdie can be black because she is pretty and will “look really hot in a few years” (205). His first comment implies that African-Americans have tire-sized lips, while his second one assumes that being black and attractive are antithetical to each other. Birdie does not offer a word or gesture in response to either statement, but chooses silence as the easy way out. She could have objected on the grounds of supporting African-Americans without revealing herself to be one. Like Angela Murray however, she misses the chance to speak up for herself lest her antagonist conflates support for blacks with *being* black.

A potential naysayer could say that her passivity stems from the smoke-filled context in which they find themselves, since being under the haze of drugs could inhibit her response. Yet the real issue is that Birdie has now embodied the subjectivity of Jesse Goldman and has killed off her blackness. Moreover, if marijuana is the main cause of her silence, what is the rationale for other instances when she is equally voiceless and less under the influence? Such is the case in her interactions with Mona, a friend of hers who denigrates Samantha, the only visibly black girl in the school they now attend. According to Mona, their peers call Samantha “Wilona...the lady on ‘Good Times’” while the boys refer to her as “Brown Cow” (223). Birdie is conflicted about the epithets, vacillating from feeling “guilty about passively listening to her classmates’ racist remarks” to “not wanting to be black New Hampshire” for fear of revealing her duplicity (Jones 94).

The narrator begins finding her voice after becoming suspicious of her mother’s stealth. She first stumbles across a postcard from her Aunt Dot to Sandra. As Deck’s sister, Dot is the only link to him but Sandra fails to inform her daughter. In the postcard, Dot states that she has returned to America and would like to reconnect with both Sandra and Birdie (231). Birdie wants to respond and inquire about her father, but the postcard lacks both a date and a specific location within Boston. Coupled with this absence is Sandra’s failure to even mention the document to Birdie, causing the girl to be “suspicious” because it implies that Sandra knows more about her family’s whereabouts than she has let on (232). In response, Birdie hides it in her box of Negrobilia and begins an “investigation” of her mother, whom she renders a “betrayor” for not divulging information “that might help us find Cole and my father” (233).

Despite Sandra's claims that she is running from the FBI, the only legal language comes from Birdie after she finds the postcard, when she calls her mother "suspicious" and worthy of "investigation." Hearing this diction from Birdie and not law enforcement raises the question of the real source of Sandra's running—is she running from a crime committed via her activism or is she running from blackness, symbolized by the darker phenotypes of the husband and daughter she leaves behind? To Birdie, keeping information about Deck and Cole is worse than any offence her mother may have committed in Boston, and she makes this clear in her changed behavior. The protagonist admits that after realizing Sandra's stealth, she becomes "sullen, hostile even" in their interactions (233). Sandra rationalizes this change by saying that her daughter is "just going through puberty" but does not understand that the *real* crime she has committed is standing in the way of the unification of her family (233). Upon realizing it, Birdie changes from someone who was silent and passive to someone who actively criticizes the white people around her. Much like hearing Van Meier's speech helped Angela Murray renounce her racial passing, the final part of Angela's development begins with finding the postcard that precipitates her return to blackness.

She dramatizes this return by first disavowing her Jewishness, and everything that came along with this contrived identity. After being forced to equivocate about it, the narrator removes the Star of David "and put[s] it at the bottom of [her] underwear drawer" (247). She then disavows Jim, Sandra's boyfriend. Feeling like he has overstepped his bounds in attempting to be her father, Birdie exclaims "you can't be my dad, I already have a dad. And he was a whole hell of a lot cooler than you" (256). Not only does this statement show her increasing interest in finding her biological father, but

it also highlights the development of her voice. Previously, she passively accepted the lie of her Jewishness and of Jim as her father. After he wants to discipline her she makes it clear that her father is Deck Lee, and Jim will never be able to come close.

More importantly than vocalizing her frustrations with her family, she is better able to respond to prejudice, thereby continuing her development. When Mona calls a group of black teenagers “niggers,” Birdie punches her friend and says “shut the fuck up. What do you know?” (263). The protagonist’s reaction is immediate and terse, and a far cry from the silence she assumed in response to Mona’s and Nicholas’ initial racist remarks. Instead of letting Mona continue her racial ignorance, Birdie makes it clear that she will stand up for the teens. She becomes even more outspoken when Jim admits that he knows their entire story, including the Jewish façade that Sandra created to hide her indiscretions. To his point, Birdie sarcastically asks if he also knows that both she and her father are black, and that she has a “nappy-headed sister” whom her mother “sold to the gypsies” (272).

Birdie saves her most biting remarks for her mother whom she now completely distrusts. Sandra has hidden Deck and Cole’s location and revealed her story to Jim, even though she commanded Birdie not to utter a word about their past to a single soul. Letting her daughter down twice, she now has to answer to Birdie’s inquiries and waning respect: “What the hell is going on Mum? Why are we here” (275)? When Sandra tries to speak, Birdie shoots right back, accusing her of favoring Cole though she has no evidence for this. According to the narrator, her sister was “loved the best” and was the only daughter who Deck and Sandra “wanted to keep” (275). She would never have used these words with Sandra when they first began passing, yet she changes dramatically after finding the

postcard that the elder Lee did a poor job of hiding. Discovering this message is the turning point for Birdie—she turns her distrust for her mother into being critical of their continued stealth and of race itself. Undergirding her accusations is her profound difficulty in understanding the incentive to continue hiding, especially now that their stealth is no longer safe since Jim is privy to their history.

To Birdie's surprise, Jim is hardly the only other person in New Hampshire to know about her race; her black classmate Samantha does too. Samantha and Cole are very similar, as they are both dark skinned black girls with white mothers. Birdie begins sympathizing with her and sees her as a stand-in for her lost sister. When the narrator runs into Samantha at a party, she even says that the girl "appeared as my sister under the broken swatches of sky" (283). This is the same Samantha who Mona previously made fun of while Birdie remained silence, in a passive acceptance of the scorned girl's *visible* racial difference. Birdie has changed perspective and now interacts with Samantha for the first time at this party and their discussion prompts the racial passer to admit that she is "not really Jewish. It's a lie" (285). In trying to find the words to describe her racial background, Birdie frames it negatively; she articulates who she is *not*, instead of describing who she is. The negative framing contributes to her development, because she now has to disavow her artificial life in order to fully convince herself of the real one. To render herself a non-Jew continues the rejection that began when she placed the Star of David in her drawer, suggesting that repudiating Jewish symbols is not fully complete unless accompanied by verbal declaration of her deception.

If Birdie hopes to prevaricate on her racial background, her last question prevents it from happening. When she asks Samantha "what color are you?" she responds with

“I’m black. Like you” (286). Birdie is shocked to find out that Samantha knows that she is half African-American, considering the great pains taken to hide her racial identity while in hiding. She expresses her astonishment not just in words but also in actions. Heading home quietly, she is pensive about her time with Cole and all the changes that have characterized her life since being forced to pass as Jewish. Upon getting home, she runs away with her scant luggage, walks to the center of town, and waxes poetic about her situation: “I wondered...if I too would forever be fleeing in the dark, abandoning parts of myself that I no longer wanted, in search of some part that has escaped me. Killing one girl in order to let the other one free” (289).

What the protagonist describes here is the process of her racial unveiling. She is discovered to be black but instead of running from it, she intends to embrace it. For one thing, retrieving her box of black artifacts implies that its contents have no longer lost their relevancy as she previously intimated. Instead, they are important enough for her to take with her on her journey. Grabbing the box after her blackness is revealed is tantamount to a return to blackness, as though Samantha’s admission is just what the protagonist needs to free herself from the disguise of Jewishness and fully return to her actual life. When she articulates her desire to replace “parts of herself” with the part “that has escaped” Birdie implies that her Jewish identity is now a part of the past and her blackness is what has escaped. In other words, the girl she metaphorically “kills” is the one who once wore the Star of David; the one she now wants to be “free” is the black one who has been hidden since leaving Boston.

To facilitate this transformation, Birdie travels back to Boston. Like Angela Murray’s in *Plum Bun*, her transformation is incomplete without first returning home.

Birdie has a specific purpose in leaving anonymity in rural New Hampshire for the city of Boston: she now hopes to find her family. While there, she learns that her father was not in Brazil for as long as they believed, but is now in San Francisco (354). It does not initially occur to Birdie that Deck has lost interest in seeing her since he has been in America without looking her up. Instead, she procures money from her maternal grandmother to visit the west coast in search of the other half of her family.

When she finds her father in California, their exchange is a tense one – she wonders why he never tried finding her, but he assumes that Sandra and Birdie were living underground and searching for them would have been futile. Instead, he spent the past several years writing his magnum opus, a seven hundred page monograph that he considers more important than resuming a relationship with his youngest daughter (391). She tries to explain the type of life she suffered while he did his research, proclaiming “I passed as white, Papa,” but he is unfazed. As a race man, she expects him to angrily discuss “the evils of passing,” but he too has changed; instead of a lecture he surmises “there’s no such thing as passing” (391). Race, according to the professor of anthropology, is a complete “illusion, make-believe,” “a costume,” which can be “switched” easily because “we’re all just pretending” (391). His post-racial diction is ironic: if race is illusive, then how can he reconcile the state of race relations in America with his desire to escape to Brazil? If race is illusive, then how can he build a career studying it, especially since this “costume” led him to write a tome that has generated “some interest” (390)? If race is illusive, then what was Birdie doing during his absence?

In her most critical commentary on race, Birdie turns the tables on her father by lecturing him, instead of having the Anthropology professor lecture her:

You left me. You left me with Mum, knowing she was going to disappear. Why did you only take Cole? Why didn't you take me? If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum 'cause I looked white. You don't think that's real? Those are the facts. (393)

She accuses her father of colluding with her mother in dividing their family along phenotypical lines. This separation that he participated in contradicts his current stance on the fiction of race. If he truly believed that race is not real then he would not have allowed his family to be divided because of skin color. By referring to her ideas as “the facts,” Birdie suggests that her lived experience is far more convincing than his research project. Whereas she once sat idly by while the people around her made assumptions about African-Americans, the narrator cannot contain her anger anymore because of her profound knowledge of race gained as a result of passing. The process of finding her voice has also taught her the relevance of race *within her own family*—an epiphany neither Deck Lee nor anyone at the Nkrumah School could have anticipated.

Shortly after speaking with her father, Birdie reunites with Cole and they agree that race is a social construction created to keep people separate (408). This might have been what Deck wanted to articulate, but he fails at this endeavor. Extolling the non-existence of race is not the same as preaching its role as a social construction, which Birdie has long discerned but can only vocalize after living as a Jewish girl. Cole remains on high alert, which she intimates by saying “I keep expecting you to vanish” after their six years living apart (412). Birdie's days of disappearing are over though, since she only had to do it as a result of her mother's desire that they pass as Jewish to thwart law enforcement, even though the question of whether this was even necessary is never fully answered in the text.



### “Black Like Me”: Moving Back to Blackness

In the last scene of the novel, Birdie calls attention to her racial affiliation, when she sees a young girl on the bus whom she admits is “black like me” (413). According to Rummell, this final scene is actually the beginning, as it marks the first time “Birdie has fully defined herself on her own terms” instead of passively letting others define her (12). In the process of understanding race, Birdie’s maturation parallels that of Angela Murray’s in *Plum Bun*. In part one of their development, each protagonist’s mother teaches her about passing in her youth—Mattie Murray tells Angela that passing is a way to enter all-white settings, while Sandra Lee forces Birdie to pass in order to help them both run from the law. They are motivated by anxiety, which Harry Stack Sullivan believes is a problem all mothers must contend with. For mothers of black children, the anxiety is not just how to raise them but how to raise them knowing America’s racial history. Once in school, each girl endures the humiliation of having classmates criticize her because of her skin color. In Angela’s case, her peers think she is white until she is forced to admit otherwise, while Birdie’s classmates render her anything but black in the context of Nkrumah.

Part three of their development is when they begin passing full time, which is marked by rejecting blackness and assuming silence. Once in New York, Angela does not remember what blackness entails, while failing to stand up to Roger’s racist remarks against the group of people she belongs to. Similarly, in falling into her role as a Jewish girl, Birdie forgets her black father and is voiceless as her new friends dismiss African-Americans on the basis of absurd stereotypes. The final part features them returning to their childhood homes and to blackness, precipitated by happenstance events. Angela

accepts the invitation to hear Van Meier speak and Birdie stumbles upon a postcard that suggests her black family is still around. Consequently, these women realize that they have been wasting time racially passing and start seeking African-Americans as if trying to rectify their duplicity. Fauset's protagonist stands up for Ms. Powell, while Senna's stands up to her father—a man who claims to be the expert on race but contributes to the racial separation of his family. This four-part schema characterizes the ways in which the daughters in these passing narratives learn about race.

In writing about the literary tradition of passing texts, Ralina Joseph argues that *Caucasia* “references and pays homage” to a range of novels, including Fauset's *Plum Bun* (70). There is no book history evidence that Senna read *Plum Bun* in order to write her own passing narrative, but Joseph's idea is plausible given the similarities outlined in this chapter. These texts are not traditional bildungsromans as men have defined it for centuries; instead, these female authored narratives show characters who have a *racial* development, as well as psychological and mental growth. Senna's novel does more than “pay homage” to Fauset's earlier work; it centers *Plum Bun* as the first text to systematically detail the four-step process in which women learn how to pass and then disavow this endeavor. More importantly, this schema reveals that racial passing is a gendered phenomenon, in part because the seeds of race shifting are planted in the home for women, while men only begin to comprehend race in school. The correlations between *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia* might be easy to dismiss considering the wide swath of time separating their publication dates and the settings of their plots. However, they are united via the common theme of black women passers *rediscovering* what it means to be “black like me” after spending years running from their African-American backgrounds.

One of the common themes throughout passing narratives is the theme of communication. Racial passers live anonymously and avoid communicating with too many people who they deem outsiders, lest their secret is revealed. Sometimes this is inevitable though, such as when Angela admits her solidarity with Ms. Powell on the basis of their shared blackness—reporters in the room pounce on her revelation and announce it in newspapers the following day. In other instances, communication is useful in influencing the decision to disavow passing and return to blackness. This is the effect that Van Meier’s speech has on Angela, and she takes to heart his “Talented Tenth” rhetoric. Birdie’s investment in blackness begins after she finds written communication from her black aunt, whom she assumed was not even in the country. The theme of messages, both verbal and written, prove to be useful for the development into race in both *Plum Bun* and *Caucasia*.

Other types of communication are not always within reach of other passers. As the next chapter argues, some of the writings by real-life passing subjects remain unpublished until after their deaths. They are skilled at writing book reviews, letters, essays and short stories, yet writing the memoir remains elusive. This is certainly the case for Anatole Broyard and Anita Reynolds, who thought that writer’s block prevented them from writing about their lives. Instead, I argue, they could not write their memoirs because it would lead to outing themselves as raced.

## “A History That’s Stranger Than Fiction”: Passing, Writing and The Lost Self

### A “Distant Presence”: The Life Writings of Passing Subjects

The field of life narrative, which includes autobiography and biography, has not garnered much critical attention. According to Ian Donaldson’s aptly titled essay “Biographical Uncertainty,” the idea that biography could be a viable area of study is a recent phenomenon, since English departments shunned this genre for most of the twentieth century (306). While they raised “epistemological and ethical” inquiries about studying biographies, New Critics rejected the genre by focusing on texts themselves instead of the lives of authors, citing the latter as unimportant to serious literary study (306-307). Autobiographies have fared slightly better in the academy, with the narratives of Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass as two of the autobiographies that have been taught regularly. According to Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s essay “The Trouble with Autobiography: Cautionary Notes for Narrative Theorists,” readers are more sympathetic to encountering autobiography because it provides “intimacy and immediacy of the first person voice” and firsthand testimony of historical events (361). Perhaps this might explain why, over the past few years, biographies and autobiographies have flooded the literary market while gaining traction as an area of serious critical inquiry.

The popular and scholarly interest in life writing raises several important issues; chief among them, is the question of veracity. Since biography is by default predicated on someone writing *another person’s* narrative, the question becomes how much are subjects willing to reveal to their biographers? Roland Barthes, for instance, was wary of being written about after his death, because he accused biographers of paying attention to

merely “a few details, a few tastes, [and] a few inflections” that they would surmise from his accomplished life to attempt a coherent narrative (14). Donaldson drives home this point by referring to the life of English Renaissance writer Ben Jonson, who left behind fragments of his life for critics to write about, yet “they are fragments none the less, minute particles of a life whose larger form, shape and colour have vanished beyond recall, tantalizing in their incompleteness” (317). Undergirding this idea is the problem of memory, and the inability to remember all the details of one’s life story. This is especially the case in autobiography when a person must remember specific aspects of his or her life story in order to recount it. Smith and Watson note the difficulty in “reciting the totality of the past because each of us lives in time and takes ever-changing perspectives on the moving target of our pasts” (357). As a result, both genres blur the lines between fact and fiction. Jerome Bruner, one of the founders of narrative construction theory, agrees with this assertion. In “The Autobiographical Process,” he argues that a “life as lived” does not exist; a more accurate formulation is “a life created or constructed by the act of autobiography” (38). This definition is critical to Smith and Watson’s monograph *Reading Autobiography*, in which they note the fictional aspects of autobiography and biography that complicate it as a genre of study.

They are not alone in questioning the accuracy of life narratives. English dramatist and journalist Dennis Potter detested biographies, rendering them “hidden novels” that make discerning fact from fiction a challenging endeavor (Carpenter 12). Later on, he described autobiographies as “a complicated set of lies” (15). The subjects of some biographers were uncooperative, precisely because they wanted to maintain their “set of lies” instead of revealing the truth. For instance, when Deirdre Bair went to

interview Simone de Beauvoir to write a biography of her, the acclaimed French philosopher and feminist presented “facts” that were not in accordance with what Bair had already discovered through published research (14). As Ian Donaldson puts it, de Beauvoir “developed her own powerful and apparently authentic narrative of her life” and wanted this fictionalized narrative to trump the one that Bair was attempting to complete (314). The onus was thus on the biographer to determine a way to write about de Beauvoir independently, without contradicting the life that she already created.

When it comes to the life narratives written by and about people of color, writers and subjects face an added set of impediments. In writing about postcolonial writers, Gayatri Spivak originated the term “withheld autobiography” to refer to postcolonial writers who pen fictionalized narratives for subjects who are silent because they lack access to writing (7). In other words, it is “the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less repressed other” (7). These types of narratives, according to Spivak, rework the traditional meaning of autobiography by exposing readers to the voices of those who cannot speak directly. This impetus is prevalent in African-American Literature as well, since the genre began with narratives of formerly enslaved narrators and some of their voiceless counterparts who lacked access to literacy. In *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), Stephen Butterfield contends “in black autobiography the unity of the personal and the mass voice remains a dominant tradition” particularly since this field emphasizes “shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility” (3) A very recent example is M.K. Asante’s memoir *Buck* (2013), which opens with a dedication “to all the young bucks,” implying that he too is sharing his story for all the black men suffering in his native Philadelphia who could not verbalize theirs.

Asante may have included this dedication not only to honor his boyhood friends who lost their lives to drugs and violence, but also because the trend for narrators in black autobiography has been to stand with other African-Americans and vocalize the collective plight. Paul Gilroy believes that African-American autobiography “expresses in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation” (69).<sup>29</sup> According to Sudhi Rajiv, black autobiographers “show the movement from the consciousness of their predicament” (iii), while Magnus Bassey notes that they “critique and highlight the problems of racism in America and in the world as a way of beaming the search light on the predicament confronting race relations” (216). He reminds readers that the audience for black autobiography often expects to find insight into “black life” in these texts, and that the writers deliver by emphasizing group consciousness, even if the unintended effect is that African-American culture gets inadvertently pathologized (220).

Black women autobiographers have contended with extra pressure to prove themselves in their narratives. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) was considered a fraud for a very long time, until Jean Fagan Yellin authenticated her work in the early 1990s (Smith and Watson 359). Kenneth Mostern devotes a section of his monograph, *Autobiography and Black Politics* (1999), to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942) and the fact that she avoided telling a lynching story even

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<sup>29</sup> For more on black autobiography, read William Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1986); JoAnn Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989); Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1974); David Dudley, *My Father’s Shadow: Intergenerational Conflict in African-American Men’s Autobiography* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); V.P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996); and Sidonie Smith, *Where I’m Bound* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood, 1974).

though a majority of autobiographies from her time period included this scene. He portrays Hurston as an aberration who vacillated on sympathizing with black Americans (103-109). What unites these two black women from different historical periods is the perception that whatever is absent from their narratives implies an inherent flaw of their work. The fact that Jacobs has been canonized *only* after it was proven that her text was factual attests to this point, as does Mostern's harsh criticism of Hurston for failing to narrate a lynching scene.

Over the past two decades, the popularity of black life narratives has been supplanted by the life narratives of mixed raced subjects.<sup>30</sup> With the start of the new millennium came the publication of the life narratives of racial passers. Historian Martha Sandweiss, for instance, published *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line* in 2009, about Clarence King, a white geologist who passed as black in the late nineteenth century in order to marry a black woman. This text is joined by Bliss Broyard's biography of her father Anatole Broyard, *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life – A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (2007) and more recently by Anita Reynolds' autobiography *American Cocktail: A "Colored Girl" in the World* (2014). These latter two are the point of departure for this chapter, which argues that

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<sup>30</sup> In the 1990s alone, biracial authors wrote extensively about their lives navigating race in twentieth century America, as evidenced in works such as Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir on Black and White* (1994), Judy Trent-Scales' *Notes of a White Black Woman* (1995), Gregory Howard Williams' *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* (1996), Toi Derricotte's *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* (1997), and Wade Hall's *Passing For Black: The Life and Careers of Mae Street Kidd* (1997). Each of these authors, except the last one, is a light-skinned black person writing about being confused for white and their movement across the color line. In Hall's case, he is the amanuensis for Mae Street Kidd, a Kentucky politician who passed as white during the mid-twentieth century. In fact, these texts all refer to passing or at least the potential thereof.



racial passers have a difficult time writing their narratives because they rejected parts of themselves in order to circumvent race.

Analyzing the life writings of racial passers is a novel idea, according to Juda Bennett's article "Black by Popular Demand: Contemporary Autobiography and the Passing Theme." He examines the theme of racial passing, in search of the "discursive productions that may not address passing in the traditional sense (through narrative) but that broadly engage in the theme of passing" (263). He is motivated by the dearth of scholarship on the intersection of life writing and racial passing. Specifically, he notes that autobiography might appear antithetical to passing narratives because these latter texts are "predicated upon secrecy and therefore antagonistic to confession" while the former is centered on honesty by default (262). Indeed, even the term "passing autobiography" has been contested by scholars who believe that "postpassing narratives" and "transraciality" are more accurate characterizations (Wald 116-51, Awkward 180). However these terms prematurely assume that race is no longer a problem in America; to write a "postpassing" narrative wrongly implies that if race is no longer a delimiting category, then passing can no longer be a viable option. Much like Smith and Watson, I prefer the term "life narrative" since it allows for a nuanced comparison of the contemporary personal narratives under consideration in this chapter, while the terms "autobiography" and "biography" can trouble the boundary between fiction and nonfiction.

Bennett's essay is one of only two texts that addresses the intersection of passing and autobiography.<sup>31</sup> Absent from this nascent field of scholarship are the life narratives

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<sup>31</sup> For a thorough literary historiography of passing literature and autobiography, see Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997) Pages 246-284.

explored in this chapter, which is justifiable since they are very recent examples. However, literary critics have been reluctant to apply theories of writing to the life narratives of passing subjects. This might be due to the liminal status that real life passing subjects assume because they must perpetually remain on the color line. Since they distort lines of race, critics do not know if they trouble lines of genre as well. If so, it raises the question of whether literary critics hesitate applying theories of writing to the life narratives of passing subjects, lest they miscategorize them for telling fictionalized lives. Passing subjects who write about themselves often quote from established passing fictions. For example, Adrian Piper's autobiographical essay "Passing for White, Passing for Black," liberally cites a range of novelists, including James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, Frances Harper, and Mark Twain. Sandweiss' *Passing Strange* opens with a quote from Roth's *The Human Stain*, while Gregory Williams' bestseller *Life on the Color Line* uses Langston Hughes' poem "Cross" as an epigraph. The poem expresses the biracial speaker's confusion and anger about being a "cross" between two races. Bennett's claim that real-life "passing cannot be understood without the help of fictional narratives" is appropriate in light of these works that reveal their debts to fictional iterations of racial passing (263).

In the case of Anatole Broyard and Anita Reynolds, they are not beholden strictly to passing fictions, but to a broader range of writers who were pivotal to their development. Anita Thompson was born in 1901 in Chicago and died in 1980 in the Virgin Islands.<sup>32</sup> She was a dancer, actress, educator, writer and psychologist—all due to her ability to jump the color line. Anatole Broyard was born in 1920 in New Orleans and

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<sup>32</sup> She married Guy Reynolds in the 1950s. This book was written and published under her married name.

died in 1990 in Massachusetts. His transgression of the color line allowed him to pretend to be white in the military and at the *New York Times* where he was the literary critic for decades. Though no evidence exists that their lives crossed, they both spent time in New York City, a place where all passing subjects eventually end up. Additionally, World War II provided a turning point for both of their lives especially on the subject of race. The start of the war forced Reynolds back to America to be reminded of her black heritage again, while it offered Broyard a way out of America where could begin passing full time as white.

More similarities abound with their writing. *One Drop* is Bliss Broyard's biography of her father, Anatole Broyard, which she based on the plethora of his fiction and non-fiction that he wrote over four decades. He wrote his life story but it was published only after his death. Bliss makes it very clear that as thorough as that narrative might seem, it is actually lacking in one important area: race. He took pains to avoid mentioning it in his work. Similarly, Anita Reynolds' story was also published after her death, but she actually wrote her autobiography in the 1970s. After her demise, *American Cocktail* remained buried in the archives until being published earlier this year.<sup>33</sup> Like Broyard, Reynolds was equally judicious in not writing about her black past once she began eschewing it.

Their collective silence about race is the starting point for this chapter since Broyard and Reynolds tried writing about themselves for years before they were successful. They erroneously believed that writer's block was the primary impediment, yet they were more productive in other types of creative writing. This suggests that the

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<sup>33</sup> The recent publication explains why the secondary apparatus for this section of the chapter is relatively thin. This chapter provides the very first scholarly intervention on it.

mode they were attempting to write in, life writing, was the problem, and not the easy scapegoat of writer's block. In theorizing the act of writing, Jacques Lacan noted in "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," that writing is precisely where one is not: "this reference to the real-life context of my lecture, by showing whom I tailored it for, also marked those to whom it is *not* addressed" (413 emphasis mine). In his seminal essay "Signature Event Context," Jacques Derrida pointedly asked "one could say that at the moment when I am writing, the receiver may be absent from my field of present perception. But is not this absence merely a distant presence, one which is delayed or which, in one form or another, is idealized in its representation?" (7). For the passing subjects of this study, Lacan's notion of the "distant presence" is revised as the black self that is left behind. Frantz Fanon stated it cogently in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Certain laboratories...have begun research on how the wretched black man could whiten himself and thus rid himself of the burden of this bodily curse. Beneath the body schema I had created a historical-racial schema. The data I used were provided...by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories. (91)

Though it refers specifically to black men, this theory is equally applicable to black women, who also face the problem of living in a racist society where their phenotypes created a "bodily curse." Despite the gendered language of this theory, it still highlights the dichotomy of black subjects being split between the corporeal schema and the historical-racial schema.

For passing subjects, psychological fragmentation is translated into their white fictional selves verses their left-behind black selves. In this chapter, I argue that writer's block was hardly at issue for Broyard and Reynolds; writing specifically about *themselves* was an arduous task because they struggled to hide their black pasts, which

writing would force them to veer too close to if not tacitly admit it. Derrida and Lacan contend that writing is always addressed to an absent entity, while Fanon believes that blacks are perpetually disjointed due to the cumulative effects of racism. In combining these theories for racial passers, I argue that imbedded in Broyard's and Reynold's fictional personas is a trace of their rejected black selves. Their pens were the tools that could be used against them in excavating the blackness that might spring to the surface at any point. As a result, passing emerges as a racial inscription that is powerful enough to complicate writing as a process of inscription itself. In other words, these subjects could not write over the racial codes that society imprinted on their skins, because life writing entails being dangerously close to the very truth they sought to hide.

I make these claims by comparing Broyard's *One Drop* with Reynolds' *American Cocktail*, based on the types of writing that each passing subject published—in which race is noticeably absent or minimized. My major goals for this comparison are to reveal the underlying structure of real-life passing narratives, especially the ways in which books and writing become major tropes for these texts. I also intend to initiate critical intervention on the life writings of passing subjects, since passing *fictions* have received the vast majority of scholarly attention. Moreover, I assert that the black self is lost not just psychically but also geographically, as both Broyard and Reynolds prove with their movements throughout America and abroad. As bell hooks said after writing her autobiography, she did not feel like she wrote a complete account, but mostly one composed of “those experiences that were deeply imprinted in my consciousness. Significantly, that which was absent, left out, not included also was important” (159).

This chapter assesses the lived experiences that Broyard and Reynolds attempted to present in their life writings, by focusing on what they conspicuously “left out” – race.

### “My God I’m a Negro”: Anita Reynolds’ Passive Critique of Racism

According to George Hutchinson, the editor of Anita Reynolds’ memoir *American Cocktail* (2014), she first began narrating her life story by speaking into a tape recorder each day beginning in 1972. After having it transcribed, she turned to Howard Miller, a teacher who was also one of her tenants, to help her restructure the manuscript (50). She reviewed his version and added revisions of her own, which Hutchinson “incorporated into this first published edition” of the text (51). As per her instructions, her manuscript was donated to Howard University after her death in December 1980, along with letters, pictures and the initial drafts of this work.

Hutchinson, an English professor at Cornell University, discovered her papers in the Howard University archives several years ago while working on his biography of Nella Larsen. The similarities between the two women were too uncanny to go unnoticed: they had similar life dates and mingled with the same crowds in New York during the same time period. After examining more of Larsen’s and Reynolds’ documents, he concluded that indeed, the two women “had known each other in years past” (17). Since Larsen was prone to creating characters based on actual people she knew, he began questioning whether Audrey Denney, a character in *Quicksand*, was actually a fictional representation of Reynolds. To support this, he points to the fact that Audrey was “raced but not restricted by race, desired and desiring yet self-possessed, a model of feminine agency irrespective of racial boundaries” – traits he finds in Reynolds (16). Despite the

generative correlations, Hutchinson concedes that Reynolds is “considerably more remarkable than Audrey Denney” as evidenced by her autobiography, which he found “impossible to put down” (18). While her voice is clear and her prose is witty and engaging, the most striking stylistic features of *American Cocktail* are the literary techniques, such as irony, imagery, figurative language, and foreshadowing.

The very beginning of Reynolds’ memoir foreshadows the dual themes which become pivotal to her life: race and writing. The foreword begins with an anecdote about the former, when a group of tourists visiting St. Croix asked Reynolds “how long did it take you to get that wonderful tan?” (55). With her trademark wit, she responds “about four generations” (55). She concludes the preface with her goal that the memoir will serve as a meditation of her life “growing up [as] a ‘colored girl’ in the United States, Europe and North Africa” (57). In between these racial bookends, she refers to her time spent in Paris in the 1930s, where she associated with the likes of James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, William Carlos Williams, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Edna St. Vincent Millay (56). Many of these writers were represented by William Aspenwall Bradley, the renowned literary agent who encouraged her to write about her family’s history. She had no interest in writing professionally, choosing instead to pass her time “star gazing” at the American ex-patriate literati (57). By foregrounding the themes of race and writing in her introduction, Reynolds suggests that she reads people and books the same way, similar to the ways in which the Caribbean tourists attempted to “read” her race.

Despite her promise to describe memories of being a black girl—which she makes “no apologies for”—she actually defers bringing up her race again for several pages. When she does, she first alludes to it using vague language that forces readers to read

between the lines of her meaning. Her critiques of racism are never followed up by actions to combat it. Reflecting on her formative years before starting school, she expresses concern that her “dark skin might attract unfavorable attention” (64). Once in school, her fear dissipates when her artwork is praised. After her kindergarten teacher gave her some clay to “make anything we like,” Anita recreated her favorite teddy bear (65). The teacher approved it by parading her around to every class in the building, where she “lifted the clay teddy bear for them to see” (65). Her peers responded by laughing at her but she actually enjoyed her “auspicious debut as the only brown-skinned girl at the Washington Street Grammar School” (65).

Conspicuously absent from this recollection of school is a discussion of race. Her concerns about attracting negative attention because of her phenotype are mild, considering she was born at the start of the twentieth century when Jim Crow laws were in full effect. As a black girl she could have suffered from many types of violence because of negative perceptions about her “dark skin.” More importantly, Reynolds does not critique her teacher’s behavior. When she boasts about the young Anita, only to elicit laughter from the other students, one must wonder if this entire scenario is racially motivated: did the teacher parade the only black girl around in order to praise her creativity or to prove that she was some type of racialized novelty? Writing about this incident decades after it first occurred does not prompt Reynolds to acknowledge the problem of being the only black girl in school and subsequently the only one eliciting laughter. Instead, she welcomed the attention: “I have enjoyed going to school” ever since being raced in the classroom (65). When the nameless teacher instructed her to “make anything” out of the clay, she unknowingly foreshadowed Anita’s racial identity.



Just as Anita took the clay and created a new rendering of her teddy bear in her youth, she takes the confusion over her racial identity to create a new one for herself in adulthood. In the process, she disassociates from her black past and considers herself an “American Cocktail.” This is the primary indication that Reynolds will avoid addressing race even after calling attention to it in her opening anecdote, lest she revisits the inconvenient truth of her blackness.

As much as Reynolds tries to avoid bringing up the role of race when remembering her youth, she is unable to ignore it because of the company her parents kept. When hotels failed to accommodate black travelers, her parents welcomed them into their home, inadvertently allowing young Anita to eavesdrop on their conversations. Frequent houseguests included A. Philip Randolph, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington (78). Their discussions centered on “the problem of the Negro in America” (78). More specifically, the intellectual debates that her parents entertained focused primarily on the ideological differences espoused by Washington and DuBois on African-American self-improvement (78). Ultimately they sided with DuBois, who took a special interest in their daughter. In rare commentary on race, she asked him why black soldiers returning from World War I were not using their new machine gun skills “making the South safe for democracy” (79). He later suggested to her mother that she had “a little Bolshevik” living with her because of her radical ideas (79).

DuBois’ interest may have also been sexual in nature. In describing her first sex acts, she notes that the initial one was with a girl but she lost her virginity to an “intellectual giant” (84). Recounting this latter instance as “far less agreeable, [and] brutal in fact,” she omits further information about the man in question (84). Hutchinson

includes a note suggesting that DuBois was the only person who Reynolds would consider an “intellectual giant” at age 22 (305). Historian David Levering Lewis supports this claim, in his argument that DuBois and Reynolds had an affair at the same time she was referring to (104). As she does with race, she leaves the details of the sexual encounter nebulous, perhaps because it was DuBois or because it was not consensual, as her description implies.

Nevertheless, DuBois did play a major role in Reynolds’ early life, and influenced other interactions she had with famous African-Americans, as evidenced by her use of DuBoisian rhetoric. After Madame C.J. Walker’s daughter, A’Lelia Walker, lived in the Thompson home, she also introduced her hosts to her adopted daughter, Mae. A few years later, Mae asked Reynolds to be her bridesmaid in an extravagant ceremony in New York. Though the narrator participated, she considered the gaudiness unnecessary in light of the problems that African-Americans had to contend with. The wedding immediately followed the NAACP annual convention, where the guests engaged in serious discussions about “the Negro problem,” while the wedding included “dancing and flirting” (95). Contrasting the severity of race issues with the seeming frivolity of the wedding, Reynolds recalls that it caused “quite a battle within my personality...I, too, was torn by conflicting feels” (95). Invoking DuBois’ notion of duality, Reynolds reflects on her dilemma of wanting to help African-Americans struggling under Jim Crow at the same time she participated in a lavish wedding. Though she enjoyed the ceremony, in retrospect, she believes that both time and “the cost of the wedding would have been usefully applied to civil rights cases and support of the anti-lynching legislation” (95). In light of this observation, one might expect her to be more active in using her privilege

and class position in fighting racism. However, while Reynolds detested racism towards African-Americans, Hutchinson makes it clear that “she was hardly heroic in her own racial politics” (35). Instead, she chose to act in ways that benefited her at the expense of supporting anti-racist causes.

One of the areas which took precedence for her was dance. The famous modern dancer Ruth St. Denis trained Reynolds herself because her “exotic” looks made her look like an Indian (85). This eventually led to admission in the Norma Gould School of Dancing, where she was happily chosen “for all the exotic solos” (86). However, the school failed to admit black or Jewish girls. When Gould introduced Reynolds as Mexican, she obliged, and assumed the pseudonym of “Matelle” in order to sound less “black” (86). Looking back in her memoir, Reynolds considers this moment as her first instance of passing as someone else. Her dancing career could have been the starting point of using her position to help undermine racism. Instead of following Gould’s desire to pass as Mexican, Reynolds could have integrated the school and questioned the logic of discriminating against blacks when she was a black woman talented enough to study with a renowned dancer. Considering her aforementioned critique of the mistreatment of blacks, the ease with which she accepted the identity someone forced upon her is quite jarring; silence was her response when confronted with personal racism at the dance school. One could question Reynolds’ own complicity in the “problem,” of race relations, since she maintained a successful career but with a feigned persona. She relished the “exotic” roles given to her, pretending to be “Egyptian and Spaniard,” among other identities, foreshadowing her later life in Europe when she passes as “exotic” (86).

As Reynolds' success continued, she viewed race as less and less relevant. Her professional dancing skills led her to Hollywood, where she attained more roles while not questioning the racial logic of why she had to pretend to be something else in the first place. In her most ironic movie role, she acted as though she was not black. According to her, "the climax of the story came when I had to face the shock of learning who I really was. I had to pull on my face most dramatically and utter with astonishment: 'My God, I'm a Negro!' It was difficult to stifle the giggles" (87). The source of her laughter might initially appear ambiguous, because on one hand she is an actress and this could be read as a character she is paid to portray. On the other hand though, a deeper meaning of her laughter could stem from the actual disconnect between who she was racially and who she pretended to be. In other words, perhaps she "giggled" because her art began to imitate her life, wherein she was genuinely shocked at being reminded of her black past considering all the ways in which she passed as other people. When she "giggled" in the movie, the joke was truly on her audience: she was acting as someone other than black on screen, while being content with her phenotype because it meant access to a wider variety of roles.

Her distance from African-Americans also served as the source of her mother's discomfort with her profession. Mrs. Thompson considered Hollywood to be "immoral and the next thing to appearing in a circus" and tried to "dampen" her daughter's professional ambitions (87). Reynolds characterizes her mother as prudish and overly concerned with the politics of respectability, especially for a middle class black woman. As she puts it, "mother despaired, however, at my becoming a proper lady," suggesting that Mrs. Thompson's dismissal of her career was based primarily on a desire to see her

daughter in a reputable position for black women (81). While this might have been a plausible undercurrent of Thompson's reasoning given her history of helping African-Americans, she was also indifferent because she knew that a dancing and acting career allowed her daughter to renounce her black heritage.

Her move away from home further marked a move away from African-Americans. She relocated from one major city to another, before finally abandoning the United States altogether. First, she temporarily settled in New York City before realizing that Manhattan offered the "pleasure, stimulation, newness and excitement," that Los Angeles lacked (102). New York was also the city where she most "wanted to be" because the size and diversity of the place allowed her to be both racially anonymous and a social butterfly. In Harlem, she befriended Paul Robeson and Claude McKay, introduced to her by her cousin Langston Hughes. She also spent time in Greenwich Village conversing with Eugene O'Neill and Edna St. Vincent Millay (100). After passing to take courses at Columbia University's Teachers College, she moved to Baltimore, back to New York City, then sailed to Paris.

While en route to France, Reynolds recalls her excitement about leaving America: "I felt while crossing the Atlantic a great sense of going home, to a place where I really belonged. Away from the lynchings, away from the Negro problem, away from the polarization, away from all the disagreeable aspects of life in the United States" (113). Reynolds' expatriate status is fascinating, given her previous yet waning interest in helping blacks suffering under Jim Crow. Her vacillation now turned into a desire to leave African-Americans completely behind, yet she carefully notes that she was not "running away from American Negroes, [since] Countee Cullen and Yolande Du Bois

were coming soon to Paris on their honeymoon” (113). This logic is flawed, because if they did not choose Paris as the location of their honeymoon, then Reynolds would have completely avoided blacks, and would have been satisfied keeping the “Negro problem” at bay. Given the two themes that start her memoir—race and writing—Reynolds’ life in America can be characterized primarily through her relationship to race, even if done so in a distant and roundabout way. In Paris however, race emerges as a secondary concern, and writing becomes slightly more prominent. As the next section elucidates, the disavowal of the former explains her lack of success with the latter.

#### “My Own Writing Was Not Going Very Well”: Writing in Vain as a Passing Subject

In Reynolds’ recollections of her time as an expatriate, she reveals that she left her black past in America, while her identity shifted according to the people around her during her European travels. After becoming reacquainted with a long lost uncle in Paris, who was her sole relative there, she introduced her new attire by saying “I thought I looked rather like Gloria Swanson” (115). Reynolds was very much aware of fashionable black luminaries living in Paris alongside her, as she laments never meeting “Florence Mills or Josephine Baker” (114). However, she does not compare herself to either of these African-American women, choosing instead to use a *white* American actress as the sole basis for comparison. Her invocation of Swanson is indicative of the conscious omission of African-Americans from her new life abroad. Even though her uncle disapproved of her articulation of a seeming resemblance with Gloria Swanson, there was nothing he could have done because of her desire to maintain her distance from blacks while hoping to be white.

Upon meeting Kristians Tonny, a Dutch surrealist painter, Reynolds' identity shifted again. He admitted his "fascination with American Indians" and placed Reynolds in this category during his visits when he would "sit and just look" at her (117). Rendering his newfound love interest "Pocahontas or some character out of Fenimore Cooper" he fetishized her and she did not find this to be problematic at all (117). Instead of criticizing his assumption, she states, "I never tried to pass myself off as an Indian. Usually, when asked, I was an 'American cocktail,' for among the French that included Indians, Negroes and everything else that made up a different kind of American" (118). Reynolds' defensive tone arises from her presumption that readers might call her a passing subject in light of her interactions with Tonny. However, her defense is weak. If she truly rejected Tonny's characterization of her, then she would have been more forthright in proclaiming that she is not an American Indian but is indeed African-American. Just as she did when she first began dance school, she let someone else dictate her identity and did not correct him. In other words, her passivity allowed her to pass.

Moreover, the title she gives herself, "American cocktail," does not ease racial confusion but only exacerbates it. George Hutchinson cites this neologism as proof that she never "passed altogether" nor did she ever "hide her blackness" (37). However this same term evidences the opposite, that she was actively obscuring her race. A "cocktail" is defined as a mixture, and as Reynolds herself notes, adding the qualifier "American" allowed her acquaintances to see her as *anything*—belonging to any racial or ethnic background, which could include Indian or black. In Tonny's case it was the former, and her silence about it underscores her willingness to accept the racial ambiguity. Additionally, Hutchinson notes that Tonny's biographers refer to her as Anita Matelle

and “never mention that she was African-American” (37). For Reynolds, being “a different kind of American” is a pithy euphemism for not acknowledging her black ancestry.

Despite her wish to ward off her African-American heritage, she did not escape it as easily as she initially hoped. While living in France, Reynolds socialized with a long list of prominent writers—including Djuna Barnes, Louise Bryant, William Carlos Williams, Claude McKay, and Ford Madox Ford, as well as the literary agent William Aspenwall Bradley—all of whom encouraged her to write. She obliged, beginning with a “*Gentleman Prefer Blondes* type piece based on my experiences as a chorus girl” which she considered as humorous as Anita Loos’ original, yet she quickly discarded it without showing it to anyone (127). Her second piece was a short story about lynching. In describing this latter work, the author states:

I put my soul into the skin of a girl who was supposed to have been raped by the man who was lynched. Without showing it to my friends in Paris, I sent it off to a literary magazine in London. It was accepted, but the editor wanted me to make it part of a series and asked me to send more immediately. I had no more to say. (127)

The plot of the story centers on the two types of violence that African-Americans in particular have been subjected to with alacrity, rapes and lynchings. Her entire writing process was kept a secret, in that she did not solicit the feedback of her powerful literary friends, nor did she offer the title or publication information for the story in her memoir. Anita Reynolds, like James Weldon Johnson before her, published her meditations on race anonymously. Rather than expand her nameless piece into a longer series to call attention to racism, which would have been expected considering her critique of Mae



Walker's gaudy and ill-timed wedding, she rendered this is a stand-alone story written merely on a whim.

In his chapter on the role of lynching in African-American literature, Kenneth Mostern argues that between *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) and the start of World War II, black middle class autobiographers narrated lynching "as a crisis which moves middle class actors toward racial identification" (84). He cites Ida B. Wells Barnett, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White as a few of the writers who depicted lynching as a catalyst to their racial identification. Reynolds does not fit neatly into this theory—she started writing her life story in the 1970s—yet she published her short story during the same period that these writers wrote about lynching. In her case though, she already had racial identification when she lived in America before penning the narrative, making the timing of this publication intriguing. She does not clarify what prompted her to write this text, but her reaction to it is illuminating. Having "no more to say" relates not just to her creative output but to her expatriate life as a whole: writing about African-Americans was a difficult endeavor because it entailed unearthing a racialized subjectivity which she had long denied.

In Reynolds' next writing project, she again failed because the topic was race and she did not want her pen to reveal her lost self. Both Bradley and Bryant urged her to "write the history" of her family (128). Although she refused on the grounds of her responsibilities in Paris which would prevent her from writing, they convinced her that all she really needed was a change of scenery. To "leave and go to North Africa, to Tangier," would have helped her "work without the distractions of Paris" (128). Before leaving, she received a sobering admonishment from her friend Arthur Wheeler, who

suggested “that the sooner I forget the problems of the Negro, the more comfortably I would live” (129). She completely disagreed with Wheeler, and recalls a deeply engrained “counterpoint of feeling” that motivated her to continue her project despite his disapproval (129). This “feeling” was not enough for her to complete any writing. After spending time in Morocco trying to write in vain, she belatedly realized that her “own writing was not going very well” (138). In retrospect, she cites both her “haphazard” writing style and the lack of “documents to work from” which forced her to complete the gaps in her narrative with her own observations instead of the prerequisite scholarly material (138). She believed that taking a writing break to read books—which is a trope common to most passing narratives—might minimize her writer’s block, yet this proved not to be the solution either (128). What escaped her reflections on writing her family history is the role that race played. The real hindrance to her writing process is the tension between wanting to keep her black self hidden yet feeling inclined to tell the story of her *black* family. If the unconscious is structured like a language, as Lacan articulated in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” then Reynolds could not find the right words to narrate her unconscious repressed blackness (413).

Her inability to narrate race transcended her writing projects from the 1930s. Even looking back from her vantage point of the 1970s when her memoir was first drafted, she remains largely non-critical of the ways in which race affected her dealings with people. This becomes blatantly obvious when she was misread and fetishized but did not realize that her ambiguous phenotype rendered her a mystery to many people who encountered her. For instance, in vivid detail, she describes a train ride from Paris to Marseilles en route to Tangier, sharing a car with a German man who stared at her

intently. Though disconcerted by the fact that each time she lifted her head from the book “he was staring at [her],” she politely engaged him when he sat next to her to inquire about her reading material (133). She believed that the end of their journey would mark the end of their conversation, however before hailing a cab at Marseilles, he pointed to two boys and said “aren’t they wonderful? Aren’t they beautiful? I could just eat them alive” (134). Disgusted by the “pederastic overtones of his remarks,” she ran to her hotel room where she barricaded herself to prevent him from coming after her (134).

Reynolds did not have to worry about the man on the train following her; he was one of countless European men who travelled to Morocco solely to sleep with young Arab boys (135). Even with this knowledge, she questioned why she thought he wanted her “after drooling over the little boys” (135). Reynolds failed to even consider the ways in which her gender and ambiguous phenotype attracted his unsolicited attention. He might have wanted to speak with her in order to ascertain her racial background, but used the book she was reading as an easy conversation starter. What Reynolds describes on the train is evocative of Frantz Fanon’s “Look! A Negro!” scene from *Black Skin, White Masks*. In that instance, Fanon recalls being in a train car when a child points him out to his mother and exclaims “Look! A Negro!” He uses this incident, in which “the Other fixes me with his gaze” to meditate on the historical and psychical resonances of racial hypervisibility (89). Among his pivotal observations, he notes that blacks are more prone to being the object of the gaze when they are away from their home countries, blacks endure a DuBoisian “two systems of reference” in their daily encounters, and they feel “disoriented” when confronting the Other especially after being reminded of their responsibility to their “race and ancestors” (89-92).

Fanon and Reynolds stand out to other passengers on the trains they ride in, yet Fanon's commentary after realizing his exotic status contrasts sharply with Reynolds' lack of reflection. Given the correlations between these two examples of racial hypervisibility, Reynolds' failure to write about race makes her train example more conspicuous than Fanon's. Due to the long history of whites gazing upon bodies that are ambiguous or darker skinned, the passenger may have been intrigued by a desire to categorize her race, even if Reynolds does not explicitly articulate this. Perhaps he too intended to utter some variation of "Look! A Negro!" but chose the more subtle option of sitting next to her instead. His sexual proclivities—taboo as they might be—were with the young Moroccan boys, therefore his interest in her might have started with the "exotic" ways in which she was perceived. For her to even speculate on his racist intentions would entail invoking the missing black self that she abandoned in the United States. Silence is a more feasible and safer option for her, since she has completely removed blackness from her life as seen by her inability to even write about it.

It is important to note that Reynolds' inattentiveness to writing about race cannot be read as race being completely absent from her life. According to George Hutchinson, "her choices and their effects were also conditioned by racial divisions not only as they were drawn in the United States but as they functioned in France, England, Spain, and North Africa" (19). This becomes especially true in her romantic relationships. She fell in love the man whom she calls "Prince Charming," a British military captain described as "somewhat Italian in appearance, though he was a Yorkshireman" (158). In describing life with him, Reynolds notes that

My role in my relationship with Charles was that of the exotic woman. Perhaps he had wanted an East Indian girl and hadn't been able to have

one, or perhaps his experience with dull white women had given him the impression that an exotic woman would be the perfect sex partner. (160)

Rendering herself “East Indian” and “exotic” is an interesting maneuver, considering the colonial history of England and India. Founded in 1600, The East India Company was a British trading company that was initially created to trade items such silk, cotton, indigo, and opium with South East Asia, particularly the Indian subcontinent. Frenise Logan argues that one aspect of their business was also the slave trade, as they “shipped Madagascar slaves to India and the East Indies” (339). According to the British National Archives, their slave trade was not localized in the southeast region of Africa, but the East India Company also “collected slaves from the West Coast of Africa for its settlements in South and East Africa and in India and Asia.” In 1858, when Queen Victoria assumed control of the British East India Company, it marked the official beginning of the British Raj—the rule of the Indian subcontinent which lasted until 1947.<sup>34</sup>

Whether Reynolds knew of this history of the East Indian Company is unclear, yet she was certainly aware that her relationship with Charles in the early 1930s corresponded with British Rule of India. She inadvertently invokes this colonial context by situating herself in the way that she does, whereas Charles was British, and she assumed the identity of “East Indian”. This juxtaposition underscores his colonial fetish that he tapped into by exoticizing his relationship with her, but she acquiesced by not

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<sup>34</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Chandrika Kaul, for her excellent history of British rule over India, written for the British Broadcasting Cooperation, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/independence1947\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/independence1947_01.shtml), as well as to the National Archives of the United Kingdom for their history of Britain and the Slave Trade, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/slavery/pdf/britain-and-the-trade.pdf>. A thorough list of books on the history of the East Indian Company can be found through the British Library at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/trading/booksgifts1.html>.

correcting him at all. She welcomed the identity he imposed on her, especially due to their intense sexual attraction: “Sexually, we enjoyed the same wavelength...I thought he was an elegant English gentleman and he thought I was a pretty East Indian girl” (169). There is no textual evidence that he *ever* discovered her true racial background. By this point in her life of course, her status as an African-American had long been lost and she could not admit that to continue her relationship with a man who fetishized her, she had to pretend to possess an identity completely unrelated to her own.

In her role as Charles’ exotic partner, Reynolds relocated from Morocco to England to live with him permanently. If she feigned unfamiliarity with colonialism previously, she was confronted with it as soon as her ship arrived and she spoke with a customs agent. When he asked her about the source of her merchandise, she explained not only that it came from Morocco, but also that the country is “in Africa” (162). He then allowed her to proceed on the grounds of “Africa belongs to us” (162). As in previous instances when confronted with race while outside of America, Reynolds writes nothing about this racialized exchange, even though the conversation is illuminating. For the customs agent to be reminded that Morocco is “in Africa,” underscores the long held stereotype that Africa is a monolithic country instead of a continent consisting of several unique nations. Looking back, she tersely says that her move to England marked her “return to civilization” which raises the question of whether she is being ironic or if she believed her time in Africa was being “uncivilized” in comparison to her return to England (162). Considering her fear that writing about race would force her to confront her lost self, it is difficult to ascertain whether Reynolds truly believes that civilization

lies in the nation that has been responsible for colonizing many countries populated by darker skinned people.

From a literary standpoint, her passivity about race upon entering England foreshadows her return to America at the end of the memoir, when she gets reminded of her status as an African-American. While in England, she thoroughly “enjoyed the English” (164) and admits to being “quickly Anglicized” yet she was never too far away from “the doings of the American Negro community” (163). Even though she shared some physical space with African-Americans in England, she does not share in their beliefs about racism—or at least does not write them as such. For instance, Reynolds notes her shame upon encountering Paul Robeson’s wife, Eslanda, because she “kept intimating that the British had the same color prejudice that the Americans had” (174). Ostensibly, the author says that her embarrassment for Mrs. Robeson derived from the context they were in—a bridge party with upper middle class British women—which is why she was certain that they took offense to Robeson’s comments (174). Given Reynolds’ stance with race thus far, her distaste for the remarks also represented her *own* desire to avoid hearing about African-Americans lest she gets reminded that she is black too. In other words, listening to Eslanda Robeson articulate the points of convergence between American and British “color prejudice” reminded the author that she had the privilege of escaping such racism with the help of her phenotype, ability to relocate, and disinterest in discussing race.

This last impetus for her aversion to Mrs. Robeson’s critiques became obvious within the context of colonialism—a topic that initiated a fight between Reynolds and Charles, and marked a turning point in their courtship. Charles became angry when

reading in the newspaper that English engineers were detained in Russia, and began comparing the laws of Russia and England. Reynolds however, was more critical of people from the latter country:

[Charles]: Those dirty Bolsheviks have no law that compares to English law. English law is the foundation of all civilized codes of law. Englishmen anywhere in the world should be sent home for trial and not be subjected to the barbarous so-called laws of countries like Russia!

[Reynolds]: Well, if they don't want to take a chance on being accused or arrested in other countries, or if they don't want to live under the laws of another country, they should stay home.

In the explosive dialogue, Charles' rhetoric aligned him with colonialism, especially his use of the epithet "dirty Bolsheviks," and the fact that he viewed English law as infinitely superior to all other types of laws. Reynolds sided with the Russians, citing the need for any country to impose its laws on visitors, and if visitors cannot obey then they should remain where they were in the first place. The difference in perspective led to Charles' rage: he attacked her by throwing his glass at her face, leaving her "with a black eye and him with a heavy conscience" (176-177).

Charles immediately realized that his outburst was unnecessary, and quickly apologized while tending to her wound. He then changed his behavior and became "completely opposed to all forms of colonialism...to the point of agreeing with the communists" (177). She describes him as "anti-imperialist" and adverse to any form of "exploitation," yet she is reticent about her own transformation (177). In her memoir, Reynolds argues that the redeeming quality of colonialists is that they always "had something to offer" (177). Using the French as her prime example, she notes that they could teach Arabs better ideas about advanced medical practices, and that Indians could benefit from learning about plumbing habits from the British (177). Absent from her



praise is criticism of the violence that the colonized endured at the hands of their colonizers, and condemnation for the type of education that colonized subjects attain when colonized, making it seem as though colonialism was actually a benevolent institution.

Though Charles renounced the authority of the British Empire in favor of Communism, Reynolds' evolution is much more profound, especially when seen through the lens of Fanonian ideology. According to Fanon, when a colonized person "forgets his place, if he thinks himself the equal of the European, then the European becomes angry and rejects the upstart, who on this occasion and in this 'exceptional instance' pays for his refusal to be dependent with an inferiority complex" (74). Reynolds and Charles map directly onto this theory. He is the Englishman (the colonizer), she is his "East Indian girl" (the colonized), and he has succeeded in colonizing her mind. As the European colonizer, he is indeed outraged that his "East Indian girl" has "stepped out of place" by standing up to his imperialist ideology, prompting the attack. Consequently, Reynolds developed her own version of an inferiority complex, to which her sanguine view of colonialism attests. This is the pinnacle of her identity as a passing subject. Not only does she feign the identity of a woman from India, but she also convinces herself that being under British rule is not as entirely detrimental as it initially appears.

If a potential naysayer wanted to assert that Anita Reynolds' put on an "exotic" act only for Charles, her life after him would contradict this notion. The combination of Charles' evolution into Marxism plus an incurable cough that he developed, caused Reynolds to lose interest in him. As this interest waned, she began a relationship with Guy de Chateaubriant, who considered his new partner "his dream of the island child

come true, the creole, the exotic girl of the islands who could live with him in France in a civilized world and yet retain all the charm of the jungle” (224). Reynolds draws a sharp contrast in her narration of their affair. On one hand, she was again relegated to an “exotic” woman in order to appease a man, but on the other hand, he wanted her to be “civilized” in his native land while still exhibiting traits that represented the “charm of the jungle” (224). Instead of commenting on his racialized phraseology, Reynolds reveals her nonchalance towards it: “I didn’t care how he fantasized about me” (224). She goes on to express that her intense love for him trumped everything else. In making these observations about Guy, Reynolds proves that passing ambiguously as “exotic” was now second nature to her after letting others dictate her identity. To Charles, she was “East Indian,” but to Guy, she assumed the role of a generic creole girl from the islands. The specific islands are left ambiguous, because they do not matter; what matters is that Reynolds is happy to have any identity but her own—African-American.

Hutchinson argues that “in a sense, her roles in Paris were extensions of earlier ones in Los Angeles and Hollywood” (33). As much as she denied her blackness while in Europe though, she was forced to confront it when returning to the United States. With the start of the Second World War, she fled France and travelled to Spain. From Lisbon, she departed on the S.S. Manhattan, “sent specifically from New York to rescue Americans” (43). The ship was appropriately named, coming from the island that many passing subjects call home. When she first saw the American flag painted on the ship, she choked up, citing her happiness at being American (267). Once on board, Reynolds was met by a bevy of reporters who took pictures of her “as someone of importance: Egyptian? Arab? East Indian?” but as soon as she arrived in her home land, the flashes

ceased (267-268). The reporters figured out “that I was just an Afro-American expatriate of no importance, a common or garden variety of colored women forced ‘home’” (268). Her assumption is correct. The picture of Reynolds on the boat was sent solely to the black press in Baltimore while her face was not featured in the newspaper that the rest of her white shipmates appeared in, the *New York Times*.

After realizing that a return to America also meant a return to blackness, Reynolds offers minimal commentary on its implication. For one thing, she puts the word “home” in quotation marks, implying her doubts that she really belongs in the United States at all. Even though she was born in America, her ideas about race largely occurred in Europe. More importantly, she argues that the flag “still looks red, white, and black” even in the 1970s after witnessing integration and “American Negro revolts” (268). She declares that there are “no tears in my eyes looking at it today,” underscoring her pessimism about the American flag’s symbolism (268). In analyzing her concluding remarks, Hutchinson argues that her discussion of the flag suggests that her identity is not representable at all in America (45). After years vacillating between being an “American cocktail,” “exotic,” “East Indian,” and “creole,” all of these categories were collapsed when she landed on American soil. It is only here, as Hutchinson observes, where “Anita Thompson was once again black” but she remained unable to reconcile this monolithic category with the ambiguous racial subjectivity she assumed abroad (45). In the first version of her manuscript, Reynolds verbalized this explicitly: “I had found it very strange to feel like a ‘race’ in the presence of Negroes instead of like a person, as I had for so long in France. When I arrived in the U.S. in 1940 it seemed that everything had a racial tone” (45). She omitted these reflections from the final published draft, and replaced them with the

observation of the reporters and the flag. Reynolds' revision is telling, as they reveal her inability to understand that simply because she left behind her black self in America while she lived in Europe, does not mean that race disappeared during her time away.

For her to write *any* critique of race is a surprise to readers of *American Cocktail*, considering she carefully treads around the issue throughout her time away, especially in her creative writing. In her private letters however, some of which are included in the appendix, Reynolds returns to the two intertwined themes that open this edition: race and writing. On the subject of the former, she makes her harshest observations about racism in America. In a letter to her mother where she responds to lynching, she wonders how Americans can remain passive about prejudice, especially since she would “kill barehanded all the vile whites in the world” (279). This observation is jarring because, with the exception of her discussion with DuBois about black soldiers returning to a racist homeland, she does not promote violence against whites in her memoir that circumvents race. In a letter to her brother, she advocates for the superiority of mixed-raced people using Fanonian diction: “despite the inferiority complex which holds them in subjection today,” Reynolds argues, “half-breeds have everything in our favor” including physical and moral strength (286). Even though she does not claim mixed race status herself, she thinks that biracial people are superior to the “sangs purs” (286).

Before concluding this same missive, she also admits that she has “almost forgotten [race] exists” because she grew accustomed to “being always surrounded by real artists” (288). Here, she creates a false hierarchy where “real artists” are in a class of their own and do not have to think about race—a topic that non artists must deal with, according to her logic. When considered in tandem with each other, these remarks

suggest that she has thought about race, even if her memoir does not betray this fact.

Knowing that her autobiography would be for public consumption, she remained guarded about race, whereas she expressed more latitude in the private correspondence with her family since she believed nobody else would read them.

There is no way to know for certain how Reynolds felt about this public versus private dichotomy inherent in memoir writing and letter writing. What is clear though, is that her letters offer more candor about writing, especially when she self-consciously calls attention to her inability to compose creative work. Consistent throughout her correspondence is the invocation of the humility topos, where she feigns to be ignorant of writing skills. For instance, in a letter in which she responds to her godchild's request for short stories, Reynolds complains that she is "not very ingenious in narrative" (275). In a similar vein, she complains to her mother that "I've been writing a long time, haven't I? And it all doesn't mean much," which implies that even though she has extensive drafts written, she feels as though she really has nothing since the story lacks fundamental elements such as plot and setting (296). In yet another letter, she suggests that a "change of environment" would help to reinvigorate her and ease her writer's block (293).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The humility topos, according to the list of literary terms compiled by Carson-Newman University, is "A common rhetorical strategy in which an author or speaker feigns ignorance or pretends to be less clever or less intelligent than he or she really is. Often donning such a *persona* allows a writer, poet, or playwright to create humorous, self-deprecating effects, or in the case of an argument, may cause the opponent to underestimate the opposition. One of the first examples of the humility *topos* in action includes Socrates and his Socratic method of argument, in which Socrates pleads his own ignorance so he can ask particularly difficult questions to those who disagree with his philosophy, eventually forcing them to make self-contradictory assertions" [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit\\_terms\\_h.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_h.html). The humility topos is prevalent in African-American Literature as well. For instance, in his preface to *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington expressed his concern that his book has told an "imperfect" story (xxv), while in W.E.B. DuBois' forethought to *The Souls of Black Folk*, he refers to his text as "my little book" (209). In self-consciously calling attention to her seeming lack of writing skills, Reynolds joins this lineage of black writers who express humility about their texts.

Most critics point to the Middle Ages as the point when this strategy was most prevalent, particularly in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. However the humility topos has always been present in African-American Literature for hundreds of years. For instance, in John Marrant's *Narrative of the Lord's*

While she considers writing to be a futile endeavor, she circumvents the true hindrance to her creativity—the fact that her topics often touch upon race, even if tangentially. After giving an incomplete draft of her manuscript “MOCKING-BIRD” to the editor William A. Bradley, she secluded herself in the mountains above France in order to write each day. She then wrote to her mother that she hoped to receive more information “about Grandma; she is the heroine of the story and I don’t want to go on making up stuff” (298). Reynolds implies that her progress has stalled as a result of the minimal amount of information she has on her grandmother, but lack of information is not the main problem. Reynolds’ grandmother is black, but to inscribe this onto paper entails dealing with her own renounced blackness. As long as she has a missing self that she left behind in America, she would have been unable to write about anything related to black people because it would force her to confront her denied truth.

One of the reasons that Reynolds’ writing stands out is because she knows how to write other types of literature and she surrounds herself with powerful writers. She is pleased to learn that a friend of hers published a book in which she “showed up as a character,” as well as a book by Eric d’Haulleville, and in the poetry of Jacques Baron (198). Hutchinson also believes that she appears in Larsen’s *Quicksand* as Audrey Denney, to “probe the psychology of the bourgeois but politically progressive ‘race

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*Wonderful Dealings* (1785), he is “at a loss to find the words to praise [God]” (85); in Harriet E. Wilson’s novel *Our Nig* (1859), she claims to be in a “humble position” which explains why her narrative is full “of errors” (209); in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Linda Brent hopes to be “more competent” as she lets northern women know of the conditions that black enslaved women had to endure, and closes her preface wishing for “abler pens” (2). In the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington uses his preface *Up From Slavery* to admit that he is telling an “imperfect story” (1), while W.E.B. DuBois’s Forethought to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) expresses his wish for his “little book” to be well received (2). Anita Reynolds is thus not alone as an African-American writer who self-consciously calls attention to her anxieties about writing, but she is the only passing subject to do so, making her all the more fascinating as a figure to study in light of this chapter’s dual foci of writing and race.

women' of the 1920s" (15). When it comes to her own work though, the author can only promise her godchild in a letter that the narrative she has been working on diligently will have a "history that's stranger than fiction" (278). Though this specific tale is never completed or published, her entire life can be categorized as "stranger than fiction." Anita Reynolds traversed America, Europe, and North Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, when black women were largely limited by the terror inflicted by Jim Crow Laws and daily racial aggressions. She evaded American racism by hiding her African-American ancestry and not writing about it in her creative work, with the exception of the short story. In the process, she became the protagonist of her own narrative, with a plot that is predicated on equivocating about her ambiguous background in her personal and professional lives, and a cast of characters that features an eclectic variety of notable writers.

One such person Reynolds befriended was F. Scott Fitzgerald, who received a positive book review from the young actress. After he published his short story collection, *Tales of the Jazz Age* in 1922, Reynolds wrote an award-winning review of it in *Flash*, which was an "African-American magazine in the Los Angeles area in the late 1920s" (274). The book review includes diction that foreshadows Reynolds' later life in Europe: "'May Day,' the best story in the book, is nevertheless a bitter modern cocktail in which ex-soldiers, Socialists, college failures, flappers and alcohol are shaken together and mixed like oil and water" (272). Perhaps this is where the title of the memoir is derived from, since Reynolds depicts herself as a "cocktail" and encounters people who are as diverse as the characters she lists in Fitzgerald's collection. The original titles for her memoir referred to color in some form: "The False Spring Violet," "The Tan

Experience,” and “Caramel: Autobiography of a Drop of Burned Sugar” (Hutchinson 51). Reynolds’ final choice highlights her skin color explicitly, but only as a secondary concern in her subtitle: *American Cocktail, A ‘Colored Girl’ In the World*.

Readers can only guess what Reynolds thought of Fitzgerald’s second novel, *The Great Gatsby*, which is “a novel about American self-invention” according to Bliss Broyard (34). Gatsby reinvents himself, not unlike Reynolds’ own reinvention upon travelling to Europe. Both Fitzgerald and his magnum opus also appear in *One Drop* (2007) which Bliss Broyard wrote about Anatole Broyard. Like Reynolds, Broyard’s life story focuses on the dual images of writing and race, but he was more tortured when he could not connect the two ideas in print. Also like Reynolds, Broyard searched for a wide range of sources to blame for his writer’s block, never recognizing that his left behind self was the primary impediment. As the next section explains, Anatole Broyard followed a similar racial trajectory as Anita Reynolds, especially in rejecting blackness as a precursor to his inability to write about himself.

#### “This Gentleman’s Color is White”: Anatole Broyard’s Omission of Race

Similar to *American Cocktail*, Bliss Broyard’s *One Drop* opens with an anecdote in the present, before evolving into the past events that led up to it. The two memoirs also share preoccupations with writing and race—initiated by the opening revelation that a dying Anatole Broyard has withheld an important secret from his children. Bliss recalls perceiving a family secret, one which caused her youthful fascination to explore her “mother’s file cabinets and my father’s study for elaboration, clarification, some proof...” (3). The ellipsis in this sentence concludes the text’s very first paragraph and



sets up the tension with writing that persists throughout hers and her father's lives. Bliss cannot even complete her thought because she is at a loss over what exactly the papers might reveal about the secret she could only intuit.

With the family all gathered around Anatole, Sandy Broyard prompted her husband to confess to his children but he equivocated each time. First he stated his regret that they never really communicated with each other, then he said he must be more thoughtful about how he will "present things," before concluding that he cannot confess because he has become too enervated from cancer (10-15). He was doubtful that his children were interested in him at all: "if we did, he wondered, why didn't we read more of his writing?" (11). In response to this, his son, Todd, said "I'm supposed to understand my father by knowing his opinion on the latest Philip Roth novel" (11).<sup>36</sup> Frustrated by her husband's deferral of the truth, Sandy Broyard eventually revealed to their children, Bliss and Todd, "your father's part black," to which they respond positively while questioning the absurdity of his initial hesitation (16).

Broyard's reluctance appears to be straightforward, in that it stems from his fear of revealing his secret to his children, yet his words are fused with irony—a literary device that is common throughout passing narratives. He lamented the lack of communication that permeated the Broyard household, but expressed this at a time when his own children attempted to coax him into being candid about his secret. Moreover, telling his family to learn more about him from his writing implied that there are clues about his secret in his published material. If the secret appeared self-evident in his

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<sup>36</sup> Interesting that Roth is the example here, considering he did not write about race until *The Human Stain* (2000). As I will show later in this chapter, some critics believe that Roth's novel is based on Broyard's life.

writings, Bliss would not have had to resort to stealthily searching her mother's file cabinets and her father's study in order to ascertain the truth. Perhaps this is Broyard's point, that if he *wanted* his family to discover his black heritage, then he would have been straightforward about it in his published work instead of verbalizing it. Instructing his relatives to search for his race in his writings then, is not solely his way of deflecting Sandy's provocations; it is also his indirect way of intimating that if he has not published anything remotely related to his secret life, then the pressure to reveal it is trivial.

In directing his family to his writing, Anatole also invoked Michel Foucault, who hoped that his books would "be fragments from an autobiography" since he believed that "each of my works is part of my own biography" (Macey xii). According to this reasoning, if critics truly wanted to learn about Foucault, they should look no further than his writings which were already in the public domain. This logic justified Bliss Broyard's quest to examine her father's works after his death from prostate cancer. She discovers Anatole's life by exploring a range of documents, including his legal papers, journal entries, book reviews for the *New York Times*, his published creative writing and the various incomplete drafts of fiction that he worked on continuously but never published. In the process, she learns that he hid his blackness for most of his life, but never wrote about it directly. Like Anita Reynolds, the fact that his black self is also his left behind self made writing about African-Americans a challenging endeavor. For him to invoke this topic would have entailed encountering the truth about himself and undermining the fiction he wanted to live.

Writing about her father proved to be difficult for Bliss Broyard too, since her research raised more questions than answers. The primary one was the difficulty in

determining when he first began passing. Indeed, “the colored boy from New Orleans and Brooklyn was harder to locate” because he was never candid about his race in his journal (316). Nevertheless, she pieces together parts of her father’s life, and speculated on the others. Anatole Broyard was born in July 1920 to Nat and Edna, French-descended Creoles in New Orleans (308). He was the middle child and only son, as Lorraine was born before he was and Shirley came two years after (308). Of the three children, Anatole “was the lightest child” which explains why Bliss never saw her darker skinned aunts growing up (17).

In the winter of 1927, the Broyards relocated to Brooklyn. Bliss believes that the train ride north was her father’s “first foray into a ‘colored’ facility” because the family sat in the filthy Jim Crow car (311). She argues that this train ride marked his introduction into realizing the privilege that his phenotype would afford him, since “the journey from South to North was my father’s first trip from black to white. He saw that crossing the color line could be as simple as walking a few steps down the platform of Washington’s Union Station” (312). Crossing the Mason-Dixon Line was tantamount to the end of “Jim Crow service” and marked the freedom to move around and sit alongside white travelers (312). Anatole was six years old during this trip and might have been too young to fully comprehend the privileges he would have based on his phenotype. However, Bliss includes an important observation about black travel during the Jim Crow era, in that he entered the train as a light-skinned black boy but departed seeing the better treatment given to his white counterparts.

Life in New York City was difficult for the newly transplanted Broyards, mainly because of racial problems. In the French Quarter, Nat Broyard did not believe in race,

considering his Creole background as an “intermediary position in the racial order” (311). As a result, he only interacted with Creole friends and family within walking distance of his home. In their new home though, the black-and-white racial boundary was harder to ignore, despite their best efforts. As Shirley Broyard recalls, “there wasn’t much conversation in her family about racial identity” and certainly her parents never disclosed their true racial background to anyone, even telling the census workers in 1930 that they were actually Mexican and Portuguese (331). When it came time to gain employment, Nat and Edna passed as white; he did it to join the carpenters’ union, and she did it to attain a job ironing clothes at a commercial laundry (328).

These biographical details are important to understanding Anatole Broyard’s own racial development. After starting school in Brooklyn, both the black and the white kids harassed him. According to Bliss, “the black kids picked on him because he looked white and the white kids picked on him because they knew his family was black” (17). He developed his running skills after being consistently chased by the neighborhood kids (335). Running away from the bullying children prefigured his return from the Second World War, when he wanted to run away from the racial distinctions of black and white. When he returned home from school with a torn jacket, Nat Broyard never questioned his son, perhaps because questioning him would be an acknowledgment of his own culpability in Anatole’s problems. Nat was racially conservative and disliked blacks, which contributed to his son’s own racial confusion (332). Racial passing was an intergenerational response to racism in the Broyard home, and it left the young Anatole feeling uncertain as to where he fell in the American racial spectrum.

As a student, he followed a trajectory that parallels John Warwick, the Ex-Colored Man, and Coleman Silk, as a sheltered child contending with racial confusion within interracial schools. According to Broyard's sister, Brooklyn College was where he first began passing, based on the fact that "he certainly seemed to change around the time" of his matriculation (345). He was already conspicuous on campus because he began college at sixteen after skipping two grades in his youth, and he donned an oversized coat that resembled the "kind of cape someone might have worn to a nineteenth-century duel" (341). Coupled with his youth and atypical attire, Broyard also stood out racially, causing his classmates to "speculate about where he belonged" when he tried sitting at the white students table at lunch (340). Shirley concedes that nobody in their family went to college before; her brother was unaware how to act while there and he feigned a white identity as a result. Bliss is less speculative, arguing for the difficulties in knowing when Anatole first pretended to be white. She thinks that he just failed to identify as black while in college, by avoiding the black students in the cafeteria and neglecting to reveal that he resided in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a predominantly black neighborhood (346).

Some of the ambiguity about his first instance of passing can be attributed to the documents that Bliss cites, which suggest that he could have officially started jumping the color line at any point in his young adult life. For instance, in March 1938, seventeen-year-old Anatole visited the local Social Security office to apply for a social security card. Bliss includes a microfilmed copy of his application in *One Drop*, which has two check marks for question twelve—one for "White" and the other for "Negro" (354). The check mark for "Negro" had been scratched out, while the one for "White" remained,

thus raising the question of who made this change and under what circumstances. On one hand, it could have been Anatole himself, who first admitted his blackness then decided, before submitting the form, that he would be better off claiming white status. The change could also have been made by the clerk at the desk who collected the forms. Bliss creates a fictionalized narrative of the event, in which the clerk's supervisor takes one look at Anatole and proclaims "this gentleman's color is white" therefore making the final decision of his race even if it had already determined on the application (353). Since "the original application was destroyed in the 1960s" we cannot determine whether the change was made with two different pens or one. While the dual answers to the question of color highlight confusion or vacillation of Broyard's background, they do not reveal precisely who contributed to the source of this change. This might be the point. Regardless of who made the decision to render him white, the fact remains that it was the first time his race was reinscribed on a *legal* document. Writing and race became inextricably linked for Anatole Broyard upon his visit to this office.

Over the next several years, legal documents continued to list Broyard as white. After dropping out of Brooklyn College in 1939, he began dating Aida Sanchez, a Puerto Rican. When they decided to marry, their marriage license listed them both as white (369).<sup>37</sup> Additionally, when he was drafted to fight in World War II, his military paperwork listed him as white (370). Similar to the social security application, Bliss is uncertain whether he checked off the white box himself, or if the military intake administrator considered him white because of his phenotype. Broyard wanted to avoid blackness anyway, because he lived his white existence, but the main paradox of his time

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<sup>37</sup> Sanchez was his first wife, with whom he had a daughter. Sandy, Bliss' mother, was his second wife.

in the military was that he had to “command a Negro stevedore company” (370). Bliss remembers her father’s reticence about his time leading an all-black company in the army. His experiences there may have led to his silence and to completely ending his affiliations with black people.

By all accounts, Broyard was a lackluster commander of the 167<sup>th</sup> Port Company because he did not enforce the orders directed by his superiors. Being chased by African-American boys in his youth may have traumatized him so deeply that he was not able to assert himself with other black men, thereby leaving him an ineffective leader. Bliss raises another possibility of his wartime experiences with race, by assuming that her father would have “heard the kinds of remarks that whites felt free to make when blacks weren’t around” and he would have witnessed the inferior treatment that black soldiers endured (374). The most convincing evidence that the war changed Broyard’s racial outlook came from the only wartime story he shared, about having to chase a deranged black soldier who stabbed another serviceman (374). Bliss wonders if the shouts of “catch that crazy nigger” from other officers made him fear for his own life while he was in pursuit of the stabber; her father began questioning who was *really* the one being chased (374). These speculations point to the fact that Anatole Broyard’s experiences interacting with African-American men in the army altered how he viewed race after his return. In keeping his war stories silent, he suggests that race is an unspeakable topic for a person pretending to be white.

Bliss puts his transformation gently: “my father’s service in the army probably made him feel more distanced from blacks than ever” (375). Her use of the tentative adverb “probably” coupled with her euphemistic “feel more distanced from blacks”

implies uncertainty with her own assertions, even though the evidence is clear that the Second World War forced him to be around blacks for a sustained amount of time and he was transformed as a result. In contemplating this change, Bliss situates her father's life story in the tradition of passing fictions, which "often feature a pivotal scene where the light-skinned protagonist witnesses some mistreatment of blacks that convinces him or her to cross to the other side" (374). Invoking James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as a prime example, she refers to the lynching scene as pivotal in convincing the protagonist to abandon his blackness and live completely as a white man (374). Reading the Ex-Colored Man's life as an analogue for Broyard's, Bliss argues that a similar racial catalyst occurred when her father was stationed in New Caledonia: "he saw something during his time with the 167<sup>th</sup> that helped him make up his mind about how he would live his life when he returned to New York" (374). This is a vague way of saying that he would "live his life" without any reference to his black past. In essence, Bliss Broyard argues that, though the details of his encounters overseas might be obscure, her father left his black past behind before returning to America after World War II.

It is interesting that Bliss refers to Johnson's *Autobiography*, since his disavowal of blackness begins in the classroom *before* he sees a lynching, and it is followed by an immersion into books, not unlike her father's own trajectory. In Broyard's case, his quest to begin a new life for himself and eschew racial boundaries is evidenced by his desire to open a bookstore in Greenwich Village. When Broyard returned to America, he vowed to "live outside a world where roles were predicated on race" (375). This is similar to his father's ideas about race, since Nat Broyard avoided the black-white binary by referring to himself simply as Creole. The senior Broyard lacked the educational background to



appreciate the value of different types of writing, whereas his son always appreciated literature. During his summers off from school, young Anatole devoured Tarzan books and the complete works of Alexandre Dumas. Nat was ecstatic with Broyard's love of Dumas, since his black and French ancestry was similar to the Broyards' own racial background.

Anatole enjoyed Tarzan to such a great extent, that he conceived of a creation myth about his origins that was similar to Tarzan's, by claiming that his grandfather was walking one day when he "saw a pretty girl sitting in a coconut tree. He coaxed her down and made her his wife" (142). This fictional tale of his beginnings paradoxically acknowledges his great-grandmother's Caribbean roots, while "dismissing his bit of blackness as just another accident of lust" (143). He told this Tarzan-esque story as a joke to his close friends and to his second wife, Sandy. To the majority of people with whom he interacted post-war, he was a white man without black heritage. The Tarzan-inspired narrative encapsulated his relationship to books, wherein he was drawn to the fantasy lives that his favorite authors created. Books allowed him to think that he had the *carte blanche* to choose his life in the same manner that his favorite literary characters choose theirs. He devoted his new life to literature, through the bookstore, his friends in the New York literati, and eventually through his position as the influential *New York Times* book critic.

Despite being immersed in books for his entire adult life, his own creative writing stalled and he was unable to write as many stories as he wanted to; especially the ones based on his life. Like Anita Reynolds, Broyard could not write creatively because it would have brought him too close to the racial truth that he renounced after World War

II. The dual themes of race and writing characterized Broyard's life as much as it did Reynolds': he progressed from primarily circumventing race to living completely as white, a trajectory that corresponded with his increasing inability to write about himself. The next section investigates the ways in which creative writing proved to be a futile endeavor for Anatole Broyard, because it would have forced him to remember that he is actually black.

#### "A Wonderful and Important Story": Broyard's Lost Self and His Failed Writing Projects

Anatole Broyard's business did not survive because it was not generating enough money. It was a small used bookstore that "traded in then hard-to-find translations of Kafka, Mann, and others, as well as his favorites Wallace Stevens and D.H. Lawrence" (136). Before he was forced to close it, he enjoyed the company of visitors who would discuss literature with him (384). Eventually, Broyard's immersion in literature caused him not to know where fiction ended and where his own life began, or as Bliss puts it, her father's "favorite writers became his adopted family" (384). Anatole himself put it more bluntly, in his posthumously published autobiography *Kafka Was the Rage*: "I could trade in my embarrassingly ordinary history for a choice of fictions. I could lead a hypothetical life, unencumbered by memory, loyalties, or resentments" (136). Engrossing himself in fiction permitted his refashioning without the limitations of racial identity. In tethering the real and the fictional, Broyard created his own narrative, beginning with nebulous histories about his origins.

One example of his fictional history was in his invocation of the Tarzan narrative, which rendered him "exotic" to the people who heard this story. Sandy Broyard still

thinks so, as she explicitly states in her own autobiography that she “married an exotic man” (*Standby* 142). The use of “exotic” raises the question of whether Anatole relished this description just as Anita Reynolds did. She passed as an “exotic” character while in Europe and Africa, and Anatole may have also been pleased to escape racial characterization by simply pretending to be “exotic.” In yet another narrative of a creation myth, he also declared that he “sprung from [his] own brow, spontaneously generated the way flies were once thought to have originated” (23). This vision is preposterous because he is far from having been developed in a vacuum, as Bliss’ research makes clear. According to her, it was his way of saying “he’d come from nothing” (23). Post-war Lower Manhattan was a place “where everyone tried to unmoor identity from its roots and re-create the self in a new, bohemian mold” (Kaplan 135). Broyard was thus not alone in holding this sentiment in 1950s Greenwich Village.

There was a deeper level to this second invented biography. Broyard’s diction invokes F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*: “The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself...so he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent” (Fitzgerald 105). Both Jay Gatsby and Anatole Broyard rendered themselves with variations of the verb “spring” to express their subjectivities without families or histories, thereby explaining why the latter “greatly admired Fitzgerald’s novel about American self-invention” (34). Fitzgerald showed up in the lives of both Anita Reynolds and Anatole Broyard, which highlights an interesting matrix of references. Reynolds knew him and wrote a review of his short stories; Broyard did not know Fitzgerald but saw his most famous character, Jay Gatsby, as a reflection of himself. Bliss understands the

connection after remembering that her father often “admired the view from the porch” just as “Jay Gatsby stands in front of his mansion and stares at the green light of Daisy Buchanan’s dock across the bay” (34). The green light represents a close yet unrealized goal for Gatsby—Daisy Buchanan. According to Brett Kaplan, Broyard’s goal was not just to attain a woman, but to write the “Great American Novel” in the same vein as his literary heroes, including F. Scott Fitzgerald (Kaplan 128). However, he was painfully unable to do so

Instead of a novel, Broyard published an impressive collection of writing over his lengthy literary career, which included “hundreds of book reviews, a short story, and two books” (266). What the public did not see were the personal archives which served as Bliss Broyard’s starting point for her research, the “many drafts of stories that he wasn’t able to publish and the journals and notes he kept for the novel he could never finish” (316). His first published essay was “Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro” from *Commentary* in July 1950, which was a play on Sartre’s essay “Portrait of an Inauthentic Jew” from a May 1948 issue of the magazine. Broyard’s version highlighted “various avenues of flight” for African-Americans (60). He asserted that African-Americans should maintain a “stubborn adherence” to their own identities, despite all of the “distorting pressures of one’s situation” (394). African-Americans should remember their “innate qualities and developed characteristics as individuals, distinguished from preponderantly defensive reactions as members of an embattled minority” (394). He also wrote that many blacks “with ‘typical’ features are accepted as whites merely because of light complexion” (395).

Bliss Broyard interprets her father's prose as proof that he did not see any fundamental differences between blacks and whites (395). However, the theme of "Portrait of an Inauthentic Negro" evidences his justification for passing. Even though he argued that blacks should remember their essential selves, it is not enough to prevent others from categorizing light-skinned African-Americans as white. In his own case, he passed not only because others imprinted their beliefs on his skin, but also because he wanted to enjoy all the benefits of being white, with the first one being ensconced in the Greenwich Village literati. Reading this article in light of his racial duplicity, Anatole Broyard essentially admitted to being a passing subject, but couched it in diction that made him appear as though he was sympathetic to the problems that plagued African-Americans. If he truly believed that racial differences between blacks and whites were nonexistent, why did he choose to ward off the former in favor of the latter?

His next essay for *Commentary* was "Keep Cool, Man" about Jazz music. In situating his early publications in tandem with each other, Bliss Broyard concludes that "the majority of what my father had published [in his early years as a writer] did concern black people and black culture" (399). This statement has to be qualified though, in order to avoid overstating the case of his relationship to black Americans. While the two essays for *Commentary* were indeed directed towards African-Americans, this focus changed when he began writing personal short stories a few years later. The first one he published was "What the Cystoscope Said" (1954), which is a "fictionalized version of his father's death" from cancer. Shortly after this story appeared, Anatole published his second autobiographical story, "Sunday Dinner in Brooklyn" (1954), about a man residing in Greenwich Village, who feels estranged from his parents in Brooklyn when he visits for

weekly Sunday dinners. Anatole shows up in the story in two ways: the narrator's name is Paul (Anatole's middle name), and his nickname is Bud (a truncated version of Anatole's own nickname, "Buddy"). Missing from these narratives is race, explaining why they resonated with so many people; readers read the racelessness of the characters as white.

In the context of Broyard's racial passing, the characters exemplify his attempts to reconcile his black past with his white present. In the first story, the protagonist tries to return to the past and mend his relationship with his distant yet ailing father. In the second text, the protagonist's parents "cannot figure out how to read him" and are unsure how he conducts his life when he is away from them during the week, especially since his only contact with them is through weekly dinners (Kaplan 137). Without these obligatory dinners serving as a lifeline, Paul would completely divorce his family. That the autobiographical short stories focus on parents implies that Broyard used his pen to work out the problem of how to address his black parents in light of his new life as a white man. In the second story especially, the narrator from Greenwich Village seems to look down on his parents in Brooklyn, and the major themes that emerge are intergenerational conflict and the difficult choice of separating from family. The less obvious theme that he could not articulate was race. If Paul is a passing subject like his literary creator is, then it would provide him with another reason to avoid the parents who represent his racial past.

Since the audience who read his stories in 1954 were unaware of Broyard's background, the added layer of race for the characters was lost on them. This was a purposeful choice, because he was both passing as white and adamantly opposed to the potential pigeonholing of his writing. As he admitted to his sister Lorraine, he just

“wanted to be a writer, not a Negro writer,” and he initially succeeded (398). “What the Cystoscope Said” and “Sunday Dinner in Brooklyn” established him as a serious writer, and led to an offer to combine the two pieces into a longer work. Indeed, by the end of 1954, he received “a contract for a novel expanding the story of his father’s death against the backdrop of leaving his childhood home of Brooklyn for Greenwich Village” (316). The literary world began anticipating this work, including the likes of Norman Mailer, who called Broyard’s short stories “first rate” and exclaimed that he would “buy a novel by him the day it appeared” (qtd. in *One Drop* 401). John Updike quipped that the most famous book of the period “was the one Broyard was *not* writing” (qtd. in Gates, “Passing” 198). Anatole Broyard desired to write his fictionalized life story, about “a young man’s journey from a provincial Brooklyn boyhood to sophisticated Greenwich Village alienation” (401). He did not live to see its publication, though it was his lifelong dream to complete the novel and achieve the literary fame he felt he deserved. The problem is that he would have had to deal with race in order to continue, which was untenable because his left behind black self would have sprung to the surface.

Everybody attempted to predict the impediment to Anatole Broyard’s writing process. Though his journals were filled with extensive notes, he admitted that he was stuck trying to “get his character into and out of a room” (401). Bliss surmises that her father “became paralyzed under the weight of everyone’s expectations” and set the standards too high for himself (401). Some of his closest acquaintances suggested that he spent “all his creative energies on seducing women” when he should have been writing instead (407). The reading public did not learn of Anatole Broyard’s status as a passing subject until Henry Louis Gates published an article about it in a 1995 issue of the *New*

*Yorker* and again in his book *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1997). In both instances, he is heavy handed in critiquing Broyard, rendering him a “guilt-ridden fugitive” (xix) who was “racked by his inability to write his own Magnum Opus” largely because his writer’s block was an extension of his refusal to admit his racial identity (198). Maureen Perkins questions whether Broyard was hindered by the typical “mixed race person’s inability to speak of whiteness” (275). What these commentators all overlook is that *blackness*, not whiteness, contributed to Broyard’s failure to write the narrative based on his life.

Bliss includes a very effective image which helps to explain her father’s writing troubles: “For my father, trying to write honestly about his childhood without being honest about all its particulars was rather like trying to write one of those lipogram novels that never use the letter *e*” (400). To write anything without the letter *e*, let alone a novel, is restraining and tortuous, particularly because it is the most common letter in the English language. Knowing of his racial background makes this analogy an apt one. For Broyard to pen a tale about his life, without addressing how it was mediated by race, was also an arduous endeavor. By leaving his black self behind during World War II, he thus ended the possibility that he could ever write about himself honestly. Writing an autobiography, according to Maureen Perkins, means that “everything must be told, that secrets are the equivalent of a betrayal of the autobiographical pact, and that the author should hold nothing back” (271). As a passing subject, Anatole Broyard was certainly holding back—or more accurately, keeping back—his black past, thereby preventing him from writing an honest narrative of his life.



Broyard was thus no different from Anita Reynolds. She too spent several years writing, but in her case it was a history of her family, which she could not complete because they were black and she disavowed that side of her heritage. One major difference is that she did not have a book contract, whereas Broyard had one for almost fifteen years. By 1969, “people in the literary community stopped holding their breath” (402). Once he began his job as the *New York Times* book critic, his publisher canceled the contract, yet Broyard tenaciously held on to the notion that he would complete the book (437). With this goal in mind, he spent much of his free time in the 1970s writing and revising the chapter on his mother, Edna, hoping to at least publish this as a stand alone section from the incomplete manuscript. However he “never managed to bring the story line to some satisfying conclusion” (439). His constant revisions coincided with her deteriorating health, and each draft made her look “slightly different from the last” (439).

Broyard was mortified when he visited his mother Edna in the nursing home and she could not recognize him at all, translating this onto paper by portraying the mother in the narrative as “devolving into vagueness” until she could not recognize Broyard’s fictional self, Buddy (439). Both Paul and Anatole failed to see the irony of the situation, that if a son can forget his mother, his mother can just as easily forget her son. As expected, this chapter did not reveal her racial background, implying that he disavowed her black body too, which explains why it could not be fully written. After Edna’s death, Broyard abandoned the chapter altogether and turned to other sections of the manuscript, realizing that writing to his mother would not bring her back into existence nor would it help him to reconcile his present as a white man with his past as a black one.

Eventually, Broyard's autobiography was published as *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (1993). It came out three years after his death, and almost forty years after he first started drafting it, with the help of Sandy who edited and completed the manuscript. Literary reviewers praised it for its candor. As Greg Carter writes, the narrator is "forthcoming about his working-class background and his recent enrollment as a part-time student at the New School for Social Research" (98) while Maureen Perkins argues that he "made no attempt to be coy about his sexual adventures" (272). Taken in tandem, these remarks encapsulate all that Buddy reveals about himself, especially his class status, educational aspirations and sexual proclivities. Noticeably absent from this autobiography is race—just as Broyard originally intended. In Sandy Broyard's own autobiography, *Standby* (2005), she is equally elusive about it. Her allusions to it are cryptic: according to her, Anatole had "struggles with his roots" (133) and "unresolved issues of his own childhood" (205). In addition to calling him an "exotic man" (142), she admits that she will remain silent about "some of what I know" and that "there are some things that as his wife of thirty years only I know" (166). One can only imagine that the purpose of her enigmatic rhetoric is to obscure the fact that Anatole Broyard was black.

Sandy's silence is noticeable because her text was published fifteen years after Broyard's death and almost ten years after Henry Louis Gates' revelations about his racial duality. More importantly, *Standby* first appeared in 2005, at a time when racial consciousness did not have to be hidden, and mixed race status was actually welcomed. She focuses much of her memoir on Anatole's illness and death, but his race is absent, as are her reactions to knowing of his secret for three decades, and her Herculean effort to

get him to confess to their children. She has no problem *speaking* to Gates about “her husband’s denials and steadfast maintenance of his secret” which provided fodder for his first article on him, “White Like Me” in 1996 (Kaplan 129). She acquiesces to discussing his racial passing orally, but stops when it is time for her to inscribe it onto paper. Her silence implies that Anatole’s secret must always be protected in print, even if most of the literary world is privy to his racial transgression. The lack of race in the Broyards’ separate autobiographies suggest that neither passing subjects, nor their loved ones, can rewrite the racial codes that society has imprinted on them.

Anatole Broyard was equally conspicuous in his inability to write about race, especially given his career in which he interacted with many famous writers and produced approximately fifteen hundred book reviews (Broyard, *One Drop* 316). In the late 1960s, he “produced more writing than he had in years” including short stories for *Playboy* and *The New Yorker* (Broyard, *One Drop* 430). The two books he published were collections of his book reviews, *Aroused by Books* (1974) and *Men, Women and Other Anticlimaxes* (1980). These writing projects did not present any problems for him since race was not a theme at all. His pen failed him only when writing his autobiography, when he feared encountering his own blackness.

When race did appear in his book reviews, it was often to critique African-American writers, a category of authors of which he was especially critical (436). He disliked writers who sacrificed “aesthetic concerns for a political agenda” (436). For example, even though Toni Morrison’s novel *Tar Baby* was well received, he quipped that it was a “protest novel, but the reader might have a few protests too” (qtd. in *One Drop* 436). According to Bliss Broyard, her father refused to use his position at the *New*

*York Times* to “promote black literature, a fact that made some African-Americans who knew about his ancestry very angry” (436). Their anger stems from the notion that there should be some form of African-American solidarity, which meant powerful black writers should help those who were trying to succeed. Toni Morrison, for instance, helped to publish the works of Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Angela Davis when she edited books at Random House. In Broyard’s case, his column could “make or break an author’s career” (433) and if he had his way, many black writers would not have had writing careers at all. In being angry with him for passing as white and ignoring African-American writers, his detractors could not know that his lack of support was less about them and more about his own inclination to ward off his past. In 1950, he was open to discussing black people in his writing, as proven by his publications in *Commentary*. By the late 1970s, he became completely averse to supporting black writers and to writing about black culture. This reversal represents his transformation into a passing subject: it was not enough for him to feign whiteness, he wanted to avoid race at all costs even if it meant condemning black authors.

Despite this inclination to avoid reminders of his forgotten black past, blackness kept springing up for Anatole Broyard in various ways. The first of which was through his complex relationships with the few black people he encountered. For instance, Brent Staples relayed a story to Henry Louis Gates about their time at the *New York Times*: “when Anatole came anywhere near me...his whole style, demeanor, and tone would change...I took that as him conveying to me, ‘Yes, I am like you’” (Gates, “White Like Me” 77). Bliss shares a similar story in *One Drop* with the example of Leroy, the man in charge of the crew who cleaned their home during her youth. She recalls that her father

spoke to Leroy “in a familiar way, saying *Hey man!* and *What’s happening?*, which made it seem as if they knew each other from somewhere” (43, emphasis in original). She goes on to note her shock that her father spoke in “Leroy’s particular way of speaking” (43). Sandy Broyard supports this claim by making gestures to demonstrate the ways in which Leroy and Anatole related to each other, which Bliss interpreted as “they used to be black together” (44). These examples underscore the same idea, that Broyard felt comfortable around only *some* blacks—the ones he felt superior to. Staples was a junior staff member at the Times when Broyard was senior, and Leroy was the Broyards’ house cleaner. He stopped visiting their home after one of his men “broke a decorative plate and hid the remains rather than confessing the accident” (43). Perhaps Broyard fired Leroy for emphasizing an apposite metaphor for himself: he too “hid the remains” of his past instead of admitting his true racial heritage. Encountering black men like Leroy and Staples reminded him that he maintained the secret of his race, yet his diction and gestures signaled that he was indeed one of them. This was his furtive way of “confessing the accident.”

With most other African-Americans, Broyard was less willing to interact with them amicably, but espoused prejudiced ideas instead. For instance, 1963 was the year in which the Broyards relocated from New York City to suburban Connecticut and also the year when the civil rights movement seemed to reach its apex. Images of the March on Washington, the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, and the protests of segregated lunch counters did not make their way into the Broyard household, where Bliss admits to growing up sheltered from race. Just as Nat Broyard kept his children free from racism, Anatole continued the same regime for his own children, by not inviting any talk about

race or racism in their home. According to Bliss, her father loathed the movement that Dr. King fought so hard for:

He was opposed to turning race into a movement that collapsed affiliation and identity, requiring adherence to a group platform rather than to one's 'essential spirit'...my dad only saw the ways that such collective action could become an avenue of flight, distorting a person's sense of self. (428)

Coupled with this belief was his friend Michael Vincent Miller's observation that Broyard's attitude about race radically changed during the civil rights movement. According to him, Broyard's lexicon now included words like "spade" and "jigaboo" while he also began "making derogatory comments about black people" (428). Unbeknownst to his friends, Broyard's new vocabulary and stance on the civil rights movement was an extension of his racial passing, creating two ways in which to read his behavior. On one hand, for him to openly support equality for blacks would have been a tacit admission that he was actually black. He tried to convince himself and his peers that he was racist, thereby preventing the slightest suspicion of his true racial origins from being raised.

On the other hand, it was possible that he began internalizing some of the racism that he endured before deciding to pass as white. Perhaps he really did believe that blacks were wasting their time fighting for equality, especially since he always said that "blacks were and should be different and separate from whites" (429). If this Fanonian reading is true, then it would mean his conduct on race was no different than Anita Reynolds: whereas she internalized the colonial ideas about Indians, Broyard adopted the racist thinking that characterized America in the 1960s.

Miller's defense of his friend was that he genuinely did not see segregation as a problem and was not prejudiced (Broyard 428). This assertion is difficult to believe in

light of his angry comments about his neighbors. A few months before he died, Anatole wanted to sell his home and move to an address far away from the blacks who resided in nearby low-income housing. On the morning when perspective buyers were scheduled to see the home, he became angry with the “black kids playing outside down the street...these people aren’t going to want to buy this house when they see that!” (50). Bliss responded to this outburst with “Jesus Christ Dad, you sound like a goddamned racist” (50). She describes his reaction to her appellation of racism as “angry, hurt, confused, [and] defenseless” (50). As the literary connoisseur, he might have been noting the irony of the fact that he could not be considered racist because of his black ancestry. He might have also been having a brief flashback of his youth in Brooklyn, when he was bullied and humiliated by black kids not much older than the ones he now wanted to keep away from.

More likely the case though, Broyard had internalized the racist mentality of the wealthy white people who lived nearby, and who also complained about their black neighbors. He took it one step further by wanting to sell their home altogether and move to a racially homogenous location, thereby enacting his version of white flight. Broyard did not dislike adolescents altogether, since he “loved children indiscriminately”; instead he disliked that they were specifically African-American children whose mere presence would have alarmed potential buyers (50). Since he was silenced by his daughter’s expletive-laden reproach, we cannot surmise precisely what he was thinking, yet the image of *black* kids suggested that race was encroaching too close for him to handle. After decades living as a white man, he knew that his death loomed as cancer ravished

his body. Therefore he wanted to die away from blackness, where black kids would not have to remind him of the youth that he distanced himself from.

His efforts to run from his black past were ineffective, since it kept appearing in the place he was most accustomed to finding solace—the written word—even after his death. Whereas Anita Reynolds appreciated being the inspiration for some of her friends' creative writing, Broyard found it insulting. For instance, he was a model for Max, the writer and critic in William Gaddis' novel *The Recognitions* (1952). He did not take issue, at least publicly, with what appeared to be an accurate representation in this text. He is also referenced overtly in Anais Nin's *The Diary of Anais Nin* (1971). Nin describes "three striking figures: Anatole Broyard, New Orleans-French, handsome, sensual, ironic; Vincent, tall and dark like a Spaniard; and Arthur, with mixed Negro and Jewish blood" (180). He rejected this observation on the grounds that he was "falsely accused of being someone else" which can be seen as an unfair assessment (qtd. in Kaplan 131). She does not mention his race in her text, but by grouping the three men together—two of whom are described explicitly in racialized terms—Broyard was displeased with the list for suggesting that he is "racially different from white" (Kaplan 131). He thus assumed that readers would discover his racial difference based on this fleeting reference.

He saved most of his vitriol for Chandler Brossard for publishing the novel *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952). Broyard and Brossard were best friends, solidified by the fact that the former served as the best man in the latter writer's wedding (397). He must have been flattered to also serve as the inspiration for Brossard's protagonist, Henry Porter, yet this flattery disappeared when he read a draft of the introduction: "People said Henry



Porter was a ‘passed’ Negro. But nobody knew for sure. I think the rumor was started by someone who had grown up with Porter in San Francisco. He did not look part Negro to me” (Brossard 1). With this introduction, Broyard’s race was revealed through his fictional self. In response, Broyard did not sign the release, thereby compelling Brossard to omit his identifying information (*One Drop* 398). The published American version describes Henry as illegitimate instead of black, but the change was not enough to salvage their friendship.<sup>38</sup> Bliss believes that her father’s resentment was caused by Brossard’s undermining the “[East] Village credo that they were all free to discover themselves without being encumbered by familial or ancestral histories” (398). The real justification for his response which Bliss does not articulate is that Brossard excavated his black past and put it into print. He was not amenable to seeing his race in a book, even under a fictional guise, after finding books to be an escape from blackness in the first place.

Broyard used his own pen to retaliate against Brossard two decades later. In his very first book review for the *New York Times* after taking over the book critic position, he argued that Brossard’s new novel *Wake Up. We’re Almost There* (1971) was “so transcendently bad it makes us fear not only for the condition of the novel in this country, but for the country itself” (434). His words outraged Brossard and countless readers, who wrote in to condemn Broyard for using his column as his “bully pulpit” (434). He caused enough controversy that the Times editors contemplated his dismissal, leading Bliss to speculate that “he was too blinded by his desire for revenge to think through the possible consequences” (435). Though *Wake Up. We’re Almost There* is not a roman à clef,

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<sup>38</sup> Both the French and British versions have maintained their original introductions calling out the protagonist’s passing subjectivity, however the American version does not.

Broyard still harbored resentment with the racial revelation of Brossard's first novel, and couched it in the disparaging review of the second text. As the feud between the two writers became rehashed in print, Bliss notes that "one crucial detail" was missing: "exactly what my father had found so offensive about Brossard's characterization of him" (434). It is very telling that Broyard's peers speculated about his race verbally, often in hushed tones, but did not dare to put anything onto paper. Perhaps they too feared speaking up, lest they encountered his wrath the same way Brossard did. Another rationale for their silence is that, in order to prevent Broyard from exposure, they decided against writing anything that would remotely lead to speculation. In doing so, they anticipated Sandy Broyard's actions, when she spoke about his race but could not write about it, even after his death.

The most recent fictional iteration of Anatole Broyard's life came in the form of Coleman Silk, the protagonist of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000). Several literary critics have convincingly mapped the similarities between Silk and Broyard.<sup>39</sup> The obvious correlations include the fact that Coleman and his friend Nathan Zuckerman are neighbors in New England, just as Broyard and Roth lived near each other in New England. Moreover, Zuckerman writes a story of his friend's racial passing, not unlike Roth himself writing the story of Broyard's racial duplicity. According to Brett Kaplan, Broyard and Silk led lives that were "strikingly similar": both fought in World War II

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<sup>39</sup> The most thorough argument is found in Brett Kaplan's essay "Anatole Broyard's Human Stain: Performing Postracial Consciousness" which appears in *Philip Roth Studies* 1.2 (Fall 2005). Other sources on the influence of Broyard on Coleman Silk include book reviews by Gail Caldwell, "Philip Roth's Latest Hero is a Man Undone by Freedom and Identity," *Boston Globe*, May 7 2000: M1, and John Leonard, "A Child of the Age," *New York Review of Books*, June 2 2000: 6-10. For scholarly discussions of this matter, see Elaine B. Safer, "Tragedy and Farce in Roth's *The Human Stain*" *Critique* 43 (2002): 211-27, and William G. Tierney, "Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus" *Journal of Higher Education* Jan/Feb 2002: 160-172.

before spending the post-war years in the East Village, both sought love in the New York City subways, both were content that their children did not betray their black ancestry by having dark skin, and both were circumspect about their passing (127).

More germane to this chapter is the shared trope of writing. On a personal level, Roth and Broyard enjoyed an amicable relationship, perhaps since the literary critic held the writer in high esteem. Broyard lauded Roth for his willingness to listen to critics and revise his writing accordingly (“Listener” 39). In *Kafka Was the Rage*, he reflected on the novel that established Roth as a writer, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) by adding the layers of feminism and gender politics to the earlier work. On a narrative level, the story of Coleman Silk’s memoir is essentially a fictionalized version of Anatole Broyard’s story. Silk struggles to write about his life, before eventually asking his friend Nathan Zuckerman to take over his pen. He peppers the text with the frustration of writing about his own life: he wonders if he will ever be able to “maneuver the creative remove,” and belatedly realizes that “every page of it makes [him] sick” (19). After completing the first draft of his manuscript, he sarcastically renders it a “raw thing” which cannot compete with “what the pros do” (19). Adding to Coleman’s dissatisfaction is the fact that he is a professor who has been publishing throughout his academic career. Though Broyard was not as hard on himself as Silk is, he too struggled for a long time to narrativize his life story—which was only published after his death just like in Silk’s case—and noted the irony of being a literary man who could write different types of texts except his own story.

In trying to help his friend, Nathan Zuckerman justifies Coleman’s writer’s block by saying that he could not write the book because it had already been written, “the book

was your life. Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time but with you it could only be concealment and so it would never work” (345). The same logic applies to Coleman’s inspiration, Anatole Broyard. Broyard devoted his entire adult life to “concealment” and writing about himself caused anxiety about confronting the unconscious repressed truth of his blackness. The implication of Zuckerman’s observation is that if only Coleman did not pass, he would have been better able to write about his life story; similarly if Broyard did not live as a passing subject, he would have been unafraid to write. Fearing that their pens would betray their racial duplicity, Silk and Broyard died leaving behind partially written meditations of their lives.

Roth waited for a decade after Broyard’s demise in order to transpose his life into a novel. One might wonder how the late literary critic would have responded to this fairly accurate iteration of his life. Would he have been angry enough to write another vicious attack in his *New York Times* column as he did when Chandler Brossard first represented him, or would he have accepted the truth of his race in light of the liberal multiculturalism of the twenty-first century? After all, according to a conversation between Henry Louis Gates and Bliss Broyard, it was incumbent on her to write about her father’s racial identity, because “it would make a wonderful and important story” (107). His story was indeed an interesting one, not least of all because of the thematic overlaps between his life and Anita Reynolds’. Both were passing subjects in the twentieth century who tried in vain to write about themselves, and never realized that their secrets impeded them more than anything else. This was made all the more painful by their ability to write other types of literature, while stumbling over their own life narratives. Reynolds and Broyard both have histories that were stranger than fiction.

“This Secret is More Painful Than the Cancer”: Concluding the Lives of Passing Subjects

In describing the contemporary life writings of racial passers, Juda Bennett argues that “one of the most common features of contemporary passing autobiographies is the vehement disavowal of passing” (263). Reynolds and Broyard complicate this assertion. Throughout Reynolds’ memoir, only once does she defend herself from passing, explaining that she is a mixture—an “American Cocktail”—instead of a passing subject (118). Broyard’s autobiography does not mention passing at all, but the biography of him, *One Drop* makes it explicitly clear. For both of these texts to fit within Bennett’s theory, the “common features” would be the “vehement disavowal of blackness” since this is a more accurate categorization of Reynolds and Broyard. As this analysis has made clear, they reject being black, which is the primary reason they struggled to write themselves into being. If, according to Derrida, there is a “breaking force” that is not “an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text,” then the “breaking force” for passing subjects is the split between blackness and whiteness (9). To achieve the latter, they had to distance themselves from the former. The unintended consequences for Broyard and Reynolds is that race was largely absent from their writings. With the exception of Reynolds’ short story about lynching and Broyard’s very early essays for *Commentary*, their published work is devoid of references to African-Americans because they wanted to abandon this racial past. Thus, when faced with the specific tasks of narrating their lives, they could not do so without also divulging of their racial backgrounds—an impossible notion for passing subjects.

The warding off of their black heritage and its concomitant problems of writing are just two of several commonalities between Broyard and Reynolds: both had deep

connections with established writers and found themselves immersed in books, both endured racialized experiences on trains, both were forced to relocate as a result of World War II to face blackness yet again, and both had romantic partners who rendered them exotic because of their seemingly ambiguous backgrounds. These correlations are generative in highlighting the lives of passing subjects. Even though they had different trajectories, their ideas about race paralleled each other, raising the question of how many other actual racial passers followed the same path.

The similarities uniting the two should not conceal the points of divergence. For one, Reynolds makes it clear that she began passing when she enrolled in dance classes, while Broyard's first act of jumping the color line is more ambiguous because his original social security form is lost. Secondly, *One Drop* encompasses Broyard's entire life, while *American Cocktail* ends somewhat prematurely, with the start of the Second World War, though Reynolds lived another four decades. She eventually settled in St. Croix, where she "passed between the different communities—white and black, islanders and mainlanders" until her death in 1980.

Death itself provides another point of divergence between *American Cocktail* and *One Drop*. Reynolds was full of life, and loved every minute of it. In a letter to her friend Jean, she admitted to feeling "a little guilty saying how much fun I have had being a colored girl in the twentieth century" (50). Nevertheless, her autobiography is peppered with references to all the "fun" she had. On the other hand, Broyard maintained a morbid fascination with death, which is referenced throughout his life. His very first short story was "What the Cystoscope Said" (1954) about his father's death, and his first posthumous publication was *Intoxicated by My Illness and Other Writings on Life and*

*Death* (1992), about his incurable cancer. According to critic Maureen Perkins, “he was determined to observe and chronicle his body’s decline” at the end of his life (272).

Broyard tried to keep death away as vehemently as he tried to keep blackness away: he did not want the cancer to disfigure him because “at the end you’re posing for eternity” (20) and “dying should be like a birthday party to end all birthday parties” (34).

Sandy Broyard was less pensive about her husband’s impending demise because of his secret. After prodding him to open up to their children, she noted that “this secret is more painful than the cancer” (10). She was concerned about the possibility that he would die without finally admitting that their children had black ancestry. Perhaps Sandy did not want her future grandchildren to be born with darker skin and be placed in the awkward position of explaining that it came from Anatole’s side of the family. She may have also had in mind the fact that both Nat Broyard and Anatole Broyard were diagnosed with cancer, and since cancer seemed hereditary, Bliss and Todd would have to monitor their health very carefully. This would include disclosing of their racial heritage since blacks have been more prone to certain types of ailments than their white counterparts. During Anatole’s illness, he was more concerned with narrating his death than communicating with his family. Indeed, he told his wife that he wanted “to live everything...[even] be alive at his death and remain conscious and writing for as long as he could” (Perkins 276). If the secret was indeed “more painful than the cancer” then he did not reveal it, opting for one final effort to pretend that his black past never existed, as his inability to admit his racial passing attests.

Seventeen years after his death, Bliss published *One Drop*. In underscoring the advantages of writing about deceased subjects, Ian Donaldson notes that “they can’t

answer back, they can't prove you wrong, they're unlikely suddenly to change their habits and most importantly, they can't be hurt" (311). In some respects though, Broyard died long before the cancer claimed his life, and Reynolds died before her physical death in 1980. Passing subjects have a long history of enduring two deaths, with the first one being the symbolic loss of their black past. Just as passing and writing are inextricably linked, the themes of passing and death are equally tethered to each other. The next chapter argues this point by examining the image of death in fictional passing characters—the lives that Broyard and Reynolds wanted to emulate.



“Destroyed By Such Hideous Unmasking”: Bodies & Deaths of Racial Passers

Death is not the greatest loss in life.  
The greatest loss is what dies within us while we live.  
-- Norman Cousins

“In Despair and Contemplating Suicide”: The Tragic Mulatto in the Twentieth Century

According to Sterling Brown, the image of the tragic mulatto in American literature is actually “a lost, woebegone abstraction” that is neither realistic nor original (43). This was the first of Brown’s definitions of the image, which he elaborated on in monographs and essays published between 1933 and 1966. Among his observations, he asserted that writers who employ this stereotype do not engage in serious social matters; that a sharp gender distinction exists in which a male mulatto is more militant and intelligent than his female counterpart; as a result of the mulatto’s dual blood line, his intellectual leanings come from his white side while his emotional urges come from his black ancestry; and lastly, white authors are more inclined than black authors to use the tragic mulatto stereotype in their works (Sollors 223-225).

Brown was the first critic to systematically define the nuances of this image, and since then, many other critics have continued to clarify his ideas.<sup>40</sup> For instance, Judith Berzon argues that the tragic mulatto was created solely “for the white man’s imagination” and is a figure designed to suggest that white culture—and not black culture—is superior (99). Werner Sollors believes that the term refers to “biracial descendants” who are unable to determine whether they are black or white (222-223).

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<sup>40</sup> For the most in-depth engagement of the criticism on the tragic mulatto, see chapter eight of Werner Sollors’ *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

Ellen Peel also notes that the in-between status of mulattos is precisely why they are tragic; they deserve more pity because they contend with the dilemma of being both black and white (230-231). Most recently, Reginald Watson has argued that the tragic mulatto is actually a female character, a marginalized figure “dominated mainly by heredity, not social factors,” who is also a didactic tool used by black and white writers (53). Watson further argues that this image has gone through “several phrases of development and progression” (50). The latest phase of “development” is the subject of this chapter, where I locate the tragic mulatto as a nineteenth-century phenomenon that has been radically altered in twentieth-century literature.

Both Watson and Leon-Francois Hoffman argue that the tragic mulatto first appeared in French literature in 1815 before appearing in American literature through Lydia Maria Child’s short stories “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843). These works centered on protagonists who are light-skinned women from illicit relationships between white slaveholders and their black slaves. Each main character considers herself white and free until her father’s death, when discovery of her black past forces her to suffer a life in slavery. The very first novel published by an African-American, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), centers on the mixed-raced daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Currer. In the denouement, Clotel is forced to jump into the Potomac River to escape slave catchers. Child and Brown employed the tragic mulatto image as an abolitionist tool: biraciality highlighted the sexual exploitation that white masters subjected enslaved women to. Moreover, white reading audiences have historically been more willing to identify with mixed-raced characters than with black characters. Given their usefulness for undermining slavery, tragic mulattos are

peppered throughout nineteenth-century literature. Alain Locke argued that “nearly a score of plays and novels on the subject of the quadroon girl and her tragic mystery” were published between 1845 and 1855 (217-218). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the image mainly figures in novels in which racial passing ensues or is at least a possibility, including Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892).

Undergirding these texts is the fact that external forces—such as slavery—force mixed-raced characters to die passively, where they succumb to the pressure of living in a raced society. In several twentieth-century passing narratives however, external motivations for death are replaced by protagonists who hasten their own deaths, as evidenced by Victor Grabért in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s short story “The Stones of the Village,” Solaria Cox in Vera Caspary’s novel *The White Girl* (1929), and Coleman Silk in Philip Roth’s novel *The Human Stain* (2000). By closely reading the demise of these protagonists, this chapter asserts that twentieth-century passing subjects *want* to die, which differs from their literary predecessors who are agent-less victims of nineteenth-century fictions.<sup>41</sup>

I make this claim by applying Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the death drive to these works. He first published his theory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which he argues that human behavior is not simply driven by sexual instinct, but also by

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<sup>41</sup> In Brown’s *Clotel*, the title character commits suicide by jumping into the Potomac River *not* because she wants to, but because she has to. She is surrounded by slave catchers on the Long Bridge and has no other choice but to jump into the river to prevent recapture. In the context of twentieth-century passing subjects, Clotel initially seems to fit within my schema, but the main difference is that she is forced to kill herself during slavery, whereas the twentieth century passers in this analysis kill themselves to prevent others from knowing that they are black, as evidenced by their inorganic blackness that is resurrected. They suffer a racial paranoia that Clotel lacks. For her, passing and suicide were to save her life.

various internal drives. According to him, it is human nature to avoid everything that is not pleasurable. When faced with unpleasurable events, we repeat them in an attempt to return to “inorganic life to restore an earlier state of things” (308). The death wish, or death instinct, is our inherent desire to return to the inorganic state from which life emerged (315). In other words, it is easier to die than to continue revisiting events that are traumatic. Freud tweaked his terminology for the remainder of his life, but ultimately concluded that our instinct for death was as prevalent as our need for sexual satisfaction (148-149).

With this focus in mind, I assert that twentieth-century characters who pass as white, such as Victor, Solaria and Coleman, exemplify Freud’s paradigm of the death drive. They fall into this schema not solely because of their racialized subjectivity, but because they lead false lives and the fear of being discovered is a risk with which they cannot contend. Moreover, they must contend with internal blackness, which gets resurrected. As a result, they desire death, viewing it as a far more feasible option than maintaining their racial lies, thus ending their time tiptoeing around the issue of their black ancestry while never fully escaping all the negative connotations associated with blackness. Suicide is the ultimate manifestation of the death drive, which motivates passing subjects at different historical moments in the twentieth century. In making this assertion, I believe that they take an active role in their deaths, unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors who could not fit in either black or white categories and deteriorated as victims of a slave-based society. Since the passive tragic mulatto appears primarily—but not exclusively—as a nineteenth-century phenomenon, I argue that the

more appropriate term to describe the demise of twentieth-century passing subjects is “active death”.

This shift in nomenclature is historically based. Up until Emancipation, distinctions amongst African-Americans were sustained to distinguish between the enslaved, free blacks, and mulattoes. I believe that the end of slavery marked the collapse of these categories, only to be replaced with the strengthening of the black and white binary. Whereas the tragic mulatto was used as an antislavery tool to demonstrate the sexual violation of enslaved black women, the impetus for this image became moot once slavery ended. Emancipation erased the status of the tragic mulatto trope, and those who were light-skinned blacks were automatically rendered “black” even if they pretended to be “white.” Beginning in the twentieth century, racial passers became symbols of anti-racism, since the ease with which they jump the color line proves the fluidity of the black and white boundary.

In depicting racial passers, some authors allow them to die, suggesting that racial duplicity might lead to untimely death. The authors examined in this chapter highlight the “active deaths” of racial passers by using them as symbols of anti-racism. More specifically, by portraying the deaths of their protagonists, Dunbar-Nelson, Caspary, and Roth collectively ask “what is it about post-slavery society that still motivates African-Americans to pass?” and “why is death the only recourse when the fear of racial discovery becomes eminent?” The answer to both questions lies in the fact that living as African-Americans has always been a dangerous endeavor because of slavery, Jim Crow and institutionalized racism. Pretending to be white while enjoying the privileges inherent in whiteness is far more practical than being black. When the threat of racial discovery

looms, passers decide that they are better off dying at their own hands than having others reveal their blackness. Applying Freud's theory of the death drive to narratives of racial passing, I explore the intersection of biracial subjectivity and death—a specific confluence that has not received any critical attention.

In recent years, critics have started to analyze death through a racialized lens. For instance, Sharon Holland's interdisciplinary monograph, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000) argues that there is a deep connection between black subjectivity and death. Specifically, examining "the space of death" provides a timely and logical metaphor for comprehending the intersection of discourses and black bodies. Karla Holloway's *Passed On: African-American Mourning Stories* (2002), includes analyses of music, film, literature and archival research, to argue that African-Americans in particular suffer from untimely deaths more frequently than any other group, and as a result, "Black culture's stories of death and dying were inextricably linked to the ways in which the nation experienced, perceived, and represented African America" (6). While the focus on black subjectivity is useful, both texts overlook subjects who are black but look white. They raise the question of how passers are situated within theories of death, or do they not fit at all as an extension of their inability to fit into racial boundaries while alive?

Abdul JanMohamed examines death another way. In his book, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (2005), he argues that the history of slavery and Jim Crow has led to a "death-bound-subject" who appears throughout African-American Literature. From birth, this subject knows of his impending demise. JanMohamed's goal is to "comprehend the 'normal' effects of the threat of death on the

formation of subjectivity” (2). He proves this thesis by applying Lacanian psychoanalysis to the canonical and minor texts of Richard Wright’s corpus. His monograph is comprehensive and persuasive, but is limited to Wright’s oeuvre, and believes that black subjects die mainly because of societal pressures.

There is another way to reconceive of the trope of death, which is more expansive than the dominant critical perspective. In reconsidering narratives of racial passing, “active death” is my theory to describe the deaths of twentieth-century passing subjects. They are afflicted with two “warring ideals,” to use DuBois’s term, which are the death of their black pasts coupled with the fiction of their white selves. When their inorganic blackness (the first death) springs back up and undermines their lies, they hope to die again to prevent their fictional lives from being revealed as inauthentic. My analysis does not assume that living in a raced society plays no role in these characters’ desire to die; instead, I take for granted that this is *one* impetus to die, while the death drive is another. The image of death hovers over the protagonists’ lives long before they meet their ends, as evidenced by the symbolic and literal deaths of their relatives, which pepper the texts.

In this chapter, I draw the distinction between passive death in nineteenth-century literature, when slavery created a chokehold on black Americans and forced mulattos to succumb to it, and the active death in twentieth-century literature, when mixed raced characters took their lives into their own hands. My goals are twofold: to demonstrate that active death is a precise replacement for the tragic mulatto trope in twentieth-century texts, and to initiate a Freudian analysis of reading texts within this tradition.

In 1927, W.E.B. DuBois stated, “White Americans are willing to read about Negroes, but they prefer to read about Negroes who are fools, clowns, prostitutes, or at

any rate, in despair and contemplating suicide” (276). The death drive is propelled, at least in part, by the way every organism seeks to die in its own idiosyncratic terms, which is supported by the characters in this study. Victor Grabért, Solaria Cox, and Coleman Silk are all in “despair and contemplate[ing] suicide” by the ends of their lives, because they no longer maintain the safe façade of their feigned identities. “Passing away” is also a polite euphemism for death, which underscores the semantic connection between passing and dying. This relationship is explicitly clear in Grabért, Cox and Silk’s divided selves. The loss of their black pasts renders them unable to handle its resurrection during their lives as white Americans. Characters who decide to “pass,” are also inadvertently deciding to die. Nowhere is the tethering of passing and death more obvious than in the narratives analyzed in this chapter, which are peppered with literal and figurative deaths.<sup>42</sup>

#### “My Blood is Tainted in Two Ways”: Bloodlines and Immortality in “The Stones of the Village”

Alice Dunbar-Nelson was a local-color writer who wrote about New Orleans, her hometown, at the turn of the twentieth century. Even though she was a poet, educator, journalist, and political activist, she does not receive much attention from literary critics (West 5). When they first started evaluating her work, it was often in relation to male writers; for instance, she is primarily known as the wife of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. In his study of black writers, Vernon Loggins argues that her writing was not as good as that

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<sup>42</sup> Foreshadowing is an important literary trope for passing narratives, especially with the theme of death. Passing subjects metaphorically kill off their families before killing off their blackness. It seems that they are unable to deceive their friends unless they ensure that their black families will not show up and accidentally reveal their identity.



of her “master” — referring to her contemporary and fellow local color writer George Washington Cable (318). His use of the term “master” shows precisely how inferior many scholars viewed her work in the context of a predominantly male literary establishment. Jordan Stouck argues that the problem with Dunbar-Nelson is that her “activism contrasts with her rather conventional narrative forms” (271).

Other critics have couched their criticisms of her writing not in sexist rhetoric but by citing the ostensible racelessness of her work. Gloria Hull, the premier scholar of Dunbar-Nelson’s oeuvre, argues that while she helped “to create a black short-story tradition” (“Introduction” xxxi-xxxii), her writing is separated “from her black experience” (*Color, Sex, Poetry* 52). Violet Harrington Bryan agrees with Hull, criticizing the absence of race in Dunbar-Nelson’s writing. Frustrated by the difficulties in determining the racial identities of her characters, Bryan renders her fictional treatment of race “ambivalent” (“The Myth of New Orleans” 71) but also asserts that her gradual use of racial themes coincided with changes in her personal life which made race more problematic for her (“Race & Gender” 133). On the other hand, Kristina Brooks believes that the problem actually lies in “the reader’s response to characters whose race does not verifiably adhere to one side of the black-white binary” (8). In other words, she thinks that focusing on Dunbar-Nelson’s ambivalent characterizations is moot and we as readers are at fault for not being able to see past racial dualities.

By the time Dunbar-Nelson wrote the short story “The Stones of the Village,” the issue of race became an increasingly prominent topic for her. According to Bryan, this narrative “treats the problems of race more explicitly” than her earlier work (“Race and Gender” 138), and Stouck sees this short story as revealing a “crisis of identity in which

race is simultaneously overdetermined and denied” (270). Marylynn Diggs has rendered it “a perfect example of the narrative of passing, secrecy, and the fear of detection” (13). “The Stones of the Village” appeared in Dunbar-Nelson’s unpublished manuscript *Stories of Women and Men*, written sometime between 1900 and 1910 (Hull, “Introduction” 3). The protagonist of the story is Victor Grabért, a light-skinned Creole raised by his West Indian grandmother in turn-of-the-century Louisiana. As a result of his own race-learning, he develops into a character who passes racially and has an inevitable death. Much like John Walden and the Ex-Colored Man, he suffers through “derisive laughs and shouts, [and] the taunts of little brutes, [who are] boys of his own age” (3). He would rather be with them than remain at home though, because he chafes under Grandmere’s “stern, unloving” parenting; she provides food and shelter but is emotionally distant as they live in poverty (4).<sup>43</sup>

As difficult as life is for him, he has no choice but to cope with his grandmother’s detached demeanor. She is his only relative, because neither of his parents is around to raise him: “For his mother had died, *so he was told*, when he was but a few months old. No one ever spoke to him about a father” (4, emphasis mine). Victor is unsure about his mother’s death because the details are left ambiguous, as the phrase “so he was told”

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<sup>43</sup> This short story follows a conventional passing plot, of a person who passes, achieves professional status, and loses it when the racial duplicity unravels. It is different from Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* because we actually get a complete picture of Victor’s life, whereas John mysteriously drops out of Chesnutt’s narrative. John, like Victor, becomes a lawyer, but as I argue in chapter one, his narrative gets replaced by his sister’s passing story, so his fate is unclear. In the case of Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, I read it less as a passing narrative and more as a “refusal to pass” narrative. Both Iola Leroy and Dr. Latimer are mixed-raced professionals, who refuse to use their light complexion to pass, though the theme hovers over the entire text. Some of their acquaintances perceive them to be passing, while others wonder why they are not passing. At the end, Latimer marries Iola and they vow to help African-Americans. Moreover, they don’t exhibit any desire for death. The protagonists in this chapter want nothing to do with African-Americans nor do they see any need to continue living once their blackness comes out.

attests. It leaves open the possibility that maybe his mother did not die at all, or perhaps she has died in a different manner than he initially thought. With the death of his mother, the parenting responsibilities would automatically fall to his father, yet his nameless father is omitted from family discussion, creating even more ambiguity. Throughout the text, he is referred to as “a father” and not “Victor’s father,” and the indefinite article in the former title implies that his father is distant and impersonal. He might be dead or alive yet has always been absent from Victor’s upbringing. Regardless of the details, Grandmere metaphorically kills off Victor’s father by not mentioning him at all. The symbolic and actual deaths of Victor’s parents foreshadow his own deaths, both of his Creole past and of his eventual white present. The primacy of the deaths that foreshadow his own proves that passing subjects cannot have any reminders of their raced relatives if they are to lead successful lives as white. He later intimates that he lacks a history when he begins courting a white woman; not having a family is crucial in maintaining his duplicity.

The image of death continues with his employer, whose death is equally ambiguous. Grandmere sends Victor to New Orleans to live with her friend Madame Guichard so that he can “mek one man of himse’f” (6). While there, he finds employment in a bookstore, where he works for three years. The only reason he stops working is because the bookstore owner dies, “and his shop and its books were sold by an unscrupulous nephew” (8). The details of his death remain unclear, but a lawyer takes over his affairs, telling Victor that his future is set: the late owner has left behind a will that provides money for his former apprentice, with the only stipulation that he must attend Tulane University (9). At this juncture, Victor has to decide between admitting to

his blackness and being denied the chance to attend college, or remaining silent about his race in order to become college educated (9). He chooses the latter, rationalizing his decision by realizing that Madame Guichard “was not near” and “Grandmere would have willed it so” (9). His deceased employer was not aware that he was black, and probably would have dismissed Grabért if he found out. Instead, he leaves Grabért the privileges of whiteness as a racial inheritance—books, money, and the means to attain a college education.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of his benefactor’s generosity and his subsequent racial passing, Victor uses Tulane University as a stepping stone to attain his law degree, then avoids references to his black past during a successful legal career. While vacationing in Switzerland, the now-successful lawyer receives a letter informing him that his grandmother “had been laid away in the parish churchyard. There was no more to tell” (11-12). Instead of mourning the woman who raised him, he simply says “Poor Grandmere...I’ll go take a look at her grave when I go back” (12). The details of her death remain ambiguous, much like Victor’s parents during his youth. He finds out about her death *after* her burial, thereby making it seem as though the cause of it is old age or perhaps even insignificant. Victor treats her more as an afterthought, proclaiming his intention to merely “look at her grave” instead of systematically mourning her.

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<sup>44</sup> As I asserted in chapter one, the Ex-Colored Man and John Walden, the respective protagonists of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The House Behind the Cedars*, both turn to books after they become raced in the classroom. Additionally, Anatole Broyard worked in a bookstore when he returned from World War II. Victor follows a similar trajectory though his race-learning lasts longer: his peers ridicule him, he is sent away first, and while away, he immerses himself in books by working in a bookstore. He had “grown pale from much reading. Like a shadow of the old book-seller, he sat day after day pouring into some dusty yellow-paged book, and his mind was a queer jumble of ideas” (8). If immersion in books is a prerequisite for passing, then Victor proves this by becoming lighter through reading. Moreover, the phrase “yellow-paged book” is reminiscent of the “fast yellowing manuscripts” that conclude *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

The narrator highlights Victor's nonchalance and callousness explicitly:

But he did not go, for when he returned to Louisiana, he was too busy, then he decided that it would be useless, sentimental folly. Moreover, he had no love for the old village. Its very name suggested things that made him turn and look about him nervously. He had long since eliminated Mme. Guichard from his list of acquaintances. (12)

Once returning from Switzerland, Victor vacillates from his initial inclination to visit his grandmother, to not being interested at all, rendering it a complete waste of his time. The protagonist associates Grandmere with his youth in the village, a place he loathes because it conjures up memories of the endless taunts he received and of his subsequent race-learning. As much as he hates the past, Madame Guichard is the second person to raise the protagonist, but he symbolically kills her too by omitting her from the cohort of people he considers "acquaintances" (12). The juxtaposition of Grandmere's actual death with Guichard's metaphorical one suggests that their collective demises are essential for Victor's development: representations of his life as a black person must be disavowed to ensure that nothing from that past can complicate his current life as a passing subject.

Victor knows that it is in his best interest to avoid interacting with blacks if he wants to continue his legal career. With this in mind, he fails to stand up for a prisoner who is called a "nigger" even though he initially feels inclined to do so. On one hand "the lawyer was tingling with rage and indignation," even though "the affront had not been given him" (13). However, he tersely asks "What have I to do with them?...I must be careful" (13). This rhetorical question underscores the distance Victor hopes to create between himself and other African-Americans, as he second-guesses his initial inclination to speak up on behalf of the slighted prisoner. However, even as he attempts to separate himself from blackness, he still has a particular proximity to it which he

cannot escape. His indignation at the “affront” also indicates how he receives it as a black man living as white. Much like the prisoner, Victor himself has to process the remark, which suggests that—while he may live as white—he is not completely outside that ubiquitous “blackness” that he expects to escape. His behavior suggests that he still maintains internal identification with blackness; the comment marks a return of his repressed racialized subjectivity. If he truly disavowed his Creole past, he would have remained oblivious or unsympathetic to the remark. Victor is instead protectionist, opting not to say anything that could potentially expose his racial background.

By referring to the black prisoner in a category of “them,” he connotes a hierarchy between his phenotypically white self and the visibly dark and nameless prisoner. He sees himself as superior not just because of differences in class but also in phenotype. This observation also applies to his relationship with the women who raised him, since “them” can be read as a veiled reference to Grandmere and Guichard—one who actually died and the other who dies symbolically. It is no surprise that his recollection of the prisoner is followed by firing his black office manager. Whereas he was passive when encountering the prisoner, he actively removes blackness from his law practice by hiring a “round-eyed Irish boy” to replace the black office manager (13). In doing so, Victor suggests that passing as white entails divesting oneself of external blackness and hiding it as internal. He has negative associations with the lost object of blackness after suffering through the “derisive hoots of ‘Nigger! Nigger!’” in his youth (5).

Michael Tritt puts this more explicitly. According to him, Victor is “victim to culturally-created prejudices” during his childhood (2). I read this trauma as one reason why he passes and forcefully kills off his past, yet he has to consider its long-term effects

when he begins courting Elise Vannier, a white woman. Dating her brings about the morally fraught dilemma of lying about his family history. Whereas Elise comes from a large family and expects Victor would as well, he admits that “not one” of his relatives is living (15). It is true that his family members are dead but what remains unclear is whether Madame Guichard, his surrogate mother, is still alive. He knows that her family “would want to know all” about Victor’s genealogy but lying is his way of appeasing them. Having no family is a more viable option than having an African-American one. Otherwise, with a trace of black lineage, he would be unable to court her.

As a lawyer, Victor is aware that he is violating miscegenation laws by being in an interracial relationship. The court of public opinion would be harder to assuage though, since acknowledging this interraciality could incite physical violence against him. This dilemma places Victor in the difficult situation of lacking “family ties [that are] so important in validating lineage” (Stouck 283). Victor and Elise thus serve as foils for each other: while her family “had traditions” and “a long line of family portraits” to show off, Victor had neither, and would “have destroyed” Grandmere’s picture if one even existed, “lest it fall into the hands” (16). He is paranoid that someone might discover his racialized heritage and expose his duplicity.

In addition to being more worried about erasing his black past, he eventually realizes that his future poses even more problems: “If ever I have a son or a daughter, I would try to save him from this” (17). “This” refers to Victor’s blackness, even though he does not name it as such, verbally referencing it would invoke an identity he renounces. Having children raises the possibility that they would come out with dark skin, forcing him to admit to Elise that he is actually African-American. Fully cognizant of this risk,

Victor sheepishly admits to himself that his “blood is tainted in two ways” (17). When discussing race in America, the image of blood is of primary importance, even if the logic is flawed. The “one-drop rule” stipulates that anyone with merely one drop of black blood is African-American by default. At the time “The Stones of the Village” is set, Louisiana laws defined blackness as having as little as 1/32 of “negro blood” (Dominguez 2). Blood is not a racial marker at all, and the one-drop rule was an irrational way to keep blacks and whites separated. In trafficking in this racial mythology of differences between blacks and whites, Dunbar-Nelson challenges readers to reconsider the absurdity of using it as a racial indicator. Victor’s belief in it underscores a major flaw with the reasoning behind the one-drop rule: fearing that his children might look black does not mean that their children (his future grandchildren) will come out completely white either. Each effort to negate his blackness to pass as white is futile – claiming that he has absolutely no relatives, destroying any existing pictures of them, and remaining vigilant about having children will not make his African-American ancestry disappear. To Grabért’s dismay, his “blood” will always remain “tainted” and no amount of racial repudiation can resolve it.<sup>45</sup>

The other way in which he perceives his blood as “tainted” is through socioeconomic class. Whereas Victor grew up poor, Elise hails from a very wealthy family, and he is conscious of their class differences. Much like her bloodline, Elise

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<sup>45</sup> One of Dunbar-Nelson’s contemporaries was the historian Charles Gayarre, with whose work she was familiar. In 1885, Gayarre delivered a speech at Tulane University, where he argued that, even though there are 250,000 Creoles living in Louisiana at the time, they do not have “a particle of African blood in their veins” (Gayarre 3). It is interesting to note that Tulane University was Victor’s alma mater in “The Stones of the Village,” and he certainly did not want to acknowledge the “African blood” in his veins either. Whether or not Victor serves as a stand-in for Gayarre in Dunbar-Nelson’s story is uncertain. Nevertheless, the references to blood remind readers that it is hardly a scientific justification to maintain segregation.



inherited her wealth from her family, and would pass both on to their children if they decide to become parents. Victor however, was unable to attain any wealth and will only be able to pass on his African-American blood to them. The confluence of their different class statuses and races becomes explicitly clear in references to slavery. When it comes time to decide upon where to spend their summer vacation, Elise complains that her father wants to go to their plantation, but she prefers for her and her mother to travel elsewhere. She then asks Victor “haven’t you some sort of plantation somewhere?” as she recalls a mutual friend of theirs who once mentioned it (14-15). Elise wonders why Victor “never spoke of it, or ever mentioned having visited it” (15). The reason he has not mentioned this plantation previously is because it is a complete fiction, like many other aspects of his life. He claims that his family owned a plantation several generations ago, yet the image that comes to mind instead is one of the “little old hut” that he actually grew up in, which is far from the fictional plantation. However, by invoking this image, Elise assumes that Victor comes from a family of slave-owners and is thus wealthy. The irony of course, is that the Grabért family is the complete opposite of Elise’s inference in that they are impoverished blacks, and if they were on a plantation they would have worked it instead of owned it.<sup>46</sup>

In analyzing the plantation scene, Michael Tritt argues that the narrative employs “dodging and ambiguity...to evade the revelation of the truth” (5). The “truth” about Victor’s background motivates him to cover up his race and class, which are both evoked

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<sup>46</sup> Of course, the location of this story is New Orleans which was “the South’s busiest slave marketplace,” according to Richard Campanella (111). He also notes that “a visitor to New Orleans arriving any time prior to the Civil War could not help but witness an entire cityscape of slavery” (324). What this means then is that the characters in the story would have had deep involvement in, or at least knowledge of, New Orleans slavery, despite Victor’s avoidance of the issue.

by the plantation image. Class status, especially being in a lower socio-economic position, is also deemed a cause of “tainted” blood. The protagonist’s youth was plagued by poverty, a class position that might be rendered an inherent “defect” passed along through bloodlines. On the other hand, Elise reaffirms her whiteness and her class by mentioning the plantation. The wealth and status that she can pass on to future generations might derive from the capital made off of blacks working their plantation-turned-summer-home.

The convergence of Victor’s class status and family evokes Orlando Patterson’s pivotal study *Slavery and Social Death* (1982). According to him, an enslaved person was “formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, [and] was also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage” (5). Patterson argues that the enslaved were forcefully divorced from their genealogies because they were prohibited from having access to their ancestors’ social heritage. What this means for Victor is that social death is equated with a lack of inheritance to pass on; his blackness is an inherent loss that his future children will not have to encounter. His racialized past thus places him in a constant state of disavowal. Even though Victor has never been enslaved, by pretending that he does not have any ancestors, he unintentionally enacts one of the problems that the enslaved faced. Slavery forced a rupture from the past, and Victor purposely claims genealogical isolation to dissociate from blacks. In the process, he proves that his self-imposed social death has the unintended effect of situating him closer to the descendants of slaves, which is the last thing he wants as a racial passer.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> JanMohamed uses Patterson’s theory in distinction to his own. According to him, Patterson sets up social-death to theorize enslavement, yet “actual-death” refers to the specific types of death that the

Harkening back to slavery hovers over Victor's marriage to Elise, especially once they have children. When Elise and Victor have a son, Vannier, she specifically wants a black maid whom she renders an "old mammy" and a "darkey" (20). Victor is adamantly against this and verbalizes his hatred for African-Americans generally. He believes that black staff would "frighten children" or would be "shiftless and worthless and generally no-account" (20). As a Creole man who was raised by two black women, it is difficult to completely believe his vitriol towards African-Americans. One way in which Victor's actions can be read is the completion of his racial passing; that his success at passing as white is evidenced by his inability to even remember that he is black. In other words, he has killed off everything he believes represents his black past, and has replaced it with hatred for African-Americans instead. What is more likely the case though, is that his fear of being raced is getting too close for him to deny it. Employing a black nanny would force Victor to remember that he descends from Creoles, and he does not know how to reconcile his desire to avoid his own people with his intention to live as white. A black domestic working in their home might raise the probability that his race would be revealed since she can detect that he is passing far more easily than a white person can. As his marriage to Elise attests, he has perfected the ability to conceal his true heritage from whites, which means that having a black nanny could be a dangerous endeavor if she discovers his secret. Though articulating racist sensibilities undermines Elise's desire

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enslaved chose in order to escape their masters. This distinction is important because with actual-death, slaves were able to exert their own autonomy in making the decision to end their lives *and* in the ways they opted to do so. In other words, social-death did not have the same use value as actual-death because the latter "provides [the slave] with the only means of negating the master's power over him" (18). In my own formulation of death, I see active death as a modern phenomenon wherein passing subjects choose to die and hasten their own deaths, not strictly to undermine slavery, but to prevent racial exposure and to kill off their inorganic blackness.

to have blacks in their home, it actually means he can continue to bury his blackness and pass.

Despite Victor's desperate desire to excise African-Americans from his life, he is unable to due to the nature of his profession. As a lawyer, he works within the turn-of-the-century racist southern legal system that often reminds him of his racial background. For instance, when a black litigant arrives at his office seeking legal representation, Victor flatly denies the man's request because he views blacks as having the "sheerest incapacity" (23). This racism is a façade: the real reason Victor refuses the client is because of the fear of discovery: "What could he have meant by coming to me...do I look like a man likely to take up his impossible contentions?" (23). The man's desire to have "the best civil lawyer in the city" is far from "impossible"; the only problem is that the praised lawyer happens to be a Creole passing as white. Considering Victor's response to having a black nanny, it is clear that his response to working with black litigants is similar: being in close proximity to African-Americans could be tantamount to discovery. Achieving a coveted judgeship would be pointless if his race becomes public knowledge. Fearing disqualification, he invokes a variation of this question in all of his interactions with African-Americans: "how can I associate with blacks since they might reveal our shared ancestry and detect that my identity has not been buried after all?"

Victor eventually becomes a judge, a position that allows him to actively regulate "racial and, indirectly, sexual boundaries" (Stouck 284). In this new position, the bane of his existence becomes a black attorney named Mr. Pavageau. He argues a case before Victor "about a troublesome old woman, who instead of taking her fair-skinned grandchild out of the school where it had been found it did not belong, had preferred to

bring the matter to court” (25). The narrator characterizes both the judge and the lawyer as “irritated” – the former hates that on a hot day, he has to listen to “such a trivial matter,” while the latter hates the judge’s duplicity (26). After Victor says that the law demands that the child’s blackness renders him ineligible to continue at the school, Pavageau sarcastically says “Perhaps Your Honor would like to set the example by taking your son from the schools” (26). Victor first responds with uncomfortable silence, before stammering out that his son does not attend public school after all (26).

This scene transpires before a room full of people, including young Vannier Grabért. The protagonist gets more than he anticipated after the case sounds more like it could have been Grandmere and a young Victor as the litigants. He considered his grandmother as “troublesome” has always been “fair skinned.” Just like the boy at the center of the case, Victor was once a young child who faced trouble at school, and the “stones” in the title of the short story can refer to the real and verbal stones hurled at him because of his lighter-skinned complexion. The only difference between this lawsuit and Victor’s life is that Grandmere did not bring anything to court; her way of rectifying young Victor’s troubles was to send him down to New Orleans.

Victor’s own son does not have any of the problems that the senior Grabért faced by being born into what seems like a completely white family. In this courtroom scene, the protagonist’s past and present are juxtaposed. He is at once reminded of his Creole youth because of the racial problems the light-skinned boy faces, while his own white-looking son represents the future without visible signs of blackness. Pavageau further underscores this by sarcastically asserting that the precedent in the court case can be set by Victor himself, who should remove his own child from school if he is to follow the

law that he himself enforces. When the narrator describes Victor as “irritated” it has less to do with the unbearable weather and more with an inconvenient truth: the juxtaposition of his past and his present means he will never be able to stop remembering that he is a white imposter whose Creole background is on the brink of exposure.

Victor retaliates against Pavageau by fining him “for contempt of court” yet this is *truly* punishment against publicly speculating that the judge is black (27). He wants the judge to begin treating blacks fairly and resorts to embarrassing him to accomplish this. For a week after the case, Victor cannot sleep as he ponders the source of the lawyer’s courtroom comment: “How did he know? Where had he gotten his information?” (27). The prospect that his nemesis has been spreading rumors of his ancestry tortures the protagonist, leading him to confront Pavageau himself. From this conversation, Victor learns that the second woman who raised him, Madame Guichard, has died but is Pavageau’s aunt. It was she who informed the lawyer that Victor is black (28-29). He admits that he mentally buried Guichard years ago, yet she is responsible for his current psychological torment because she revealed the major secret of his life. Victor and Pavageau come to an agreement in which the former will begin treating black litigants fairly, in exchange for the lawyer’s silence (29).

The compromise seems like a fair one, but the judge remains paranoid that someone would nevertheless find out and report his blackness to the law and his family. In preparing for a banquet in his honor, the convergence of these two conflicting entities in his life causes him to worry much more than usual. He thinks about the “joke” he has played on everyone who will gather to honor his judicial accomplishments, but refers to “Elise and the boy” three times as motivations to maintain his racial stealth (30-32). If not

for his family present, he would call the guests “fools” who are unaware that “I’m a nigger—do you hear, a nigger!” (31). The fact that Victor even considers revealing himself highlights his tortured mental state. He feels the dual pressure of navigating between the Scylla of admitting his race on his own terms or the Charybdis of having someone else name it for him. Nobody imposes this other than himself, and as the banquet approaches, his thoughts are on his racial passing instead of the ceremony. This behavior proves that his black past is not completely buried, but is waiting to spring to the surface. Calling attention to the blackness that he hoped was dead foreshadows the final scene of the narrative, when it gets resurrected one last time. From a political standpoint, the banquet portends “a virtual triumph...in the next contest for the District Judge” (31). Tritt puts this differently, in that Victor has indeed become a “victor” due to his wealth and status, yet he is constantly “tormented by inner discord” (4).

This “discord” becomes explicit during his speech. He begins his remarks by addressing “Mr. Chairman,” but soon realizes that his late grandmother, Grandmere Grabért sits in the chairman’s spot instead. She “looks at him sternly” as she recounts his life after he “sailed down the river to New Orleans” (32). The narrator does not reveal her words, but suggests that they upset the protagonist because he responds with “you don’t understand—” before his speech abruptly ends. She may have chastised him for building his career on a farce, but the omission implies that her words may not matter, what matters instead is Victor’s reaction:

The words would not come. They stuck in his throat, and he choked and beat the air with his hands. When the men crowded around him with water and hastily improvised fans, he fought them away wildly and desperately with furious curses that came from his blackened lips....He arose, and stumbling, shrieking and beating them back from him, ran the length of the hall, and fell across the threshold of the door. (33)

It is important to note that Victor chokes *not* on food but on words—possibly the words defending his racial passing to the grandmother whom he has long forgotten. His black self is still within him, it is his true, left behind self, which is a danger springing forth from his lips. Readers might initially think that he dies because passing is too much for him to handle and he succumbs to the weight of his own duplicity, yet his death is more nuanced than it might seem. Grandmere arrives right at the moment he is about to outline his political agenda, therefore she represents his past while the speech is supposed to highlight the future. The text again implies that he would be unable to proceed without first addressing his present and his past—the racial duality that is responsible for his success. Grandmere’s job is to remind him that he cannot move on because he is living a lie, and to punish her grandson for not helping blacks despite his powerful position.

This ending has received the most attention in the scant criticism of this short story. Tritt notes that the threshold, which should represent accessibility and openness, actually becomes the point where “there is no freedom of entry for Victor” and he “succumbs to the debilitating psychological frailty...that has dogged him his whole life” (8). Gloria Hull believes that he dies as a result of “psychosis [and] madness” (“Introduction” xxxv) as evidenced by the fact that “his mind completely snaps” after seeing the image of his late grandmother (“Shaping” 36). She further notes that these traits help to define him as a “tragic mulatto” (“Shaping” 37). These perspectives locate Victor as agent-less in hastening his death. Using rhetoric of “succumbing” while insinuating that he goes “mad” overlooks the role he played in his death.

The blame for it should not be placed solely on the shock of seeing his late grandmother. Instead, the death drive is a desire to return to inorganic matter. For passing



subjects, killing their blackness to create new identities for themselves entails turning blackness into inorganic matter and internalizing the loss. When it starts to come out, it is a dead, inert and gruesome form of the self that emerges. Victor responds to this resurrected lost self by submitting to it, as evidenced by his blocking the guests who come to his aid. “Water and improvised fans” are not enough to keep his dead self from re-emerging to choke him, nor are they sufficient in keeping him from racial exposure, which is his greatest fear. Moreover, Victor confronts his inorganic blackness right before he dies; not only does he engage with his black ancestor, but his lips turn black as he collapses on a threshold. He lived his life on a metaphorical threshold between his black self and his white present, hoping that the latter would win out. Instead, the image of him dying with blackened lips is a condemnation of passing: regardless of how much he hopes to be white, his internal and inorganic blackness will ultimately prevail.

The last line of the narrative again calls attention to Victor’s paranoia: “The secret died with him, for Pavageau’s lips were ever sealed” (33). Victor’s obsession over the discovery of his secret proves to be unnecessary, since his nemesis remained silent. Death is foreshadowed throughout the entire story, as the ambiguous deaths of his caretakers and employer attest. Leading up to Victor’s death, the successful lawyer and family man frequently returns to the trauma of his youth when his peers derided him for being black. He is cautious when meeting blacks in adulthood because he is unsure whether or not they will divulge his true racial heritage. According to Freud, reliving initial trauma initiates the need to return to an inorganic state—for Victor this denotes a space where blackness re-emerges as inorganic. Death literalizes the discovery that he is still black, and he dies trying to prevent it from engulfing him. Dismissing medical help is one way

to deal with resurrected blackness; for Solaria Cox, suicide emerges as her only option, after contending with blackness is a sexualized fashion.

#### “This Tortured Uncertain Life”: Solaria Cox’s Fear of Racial Discovery

Despite Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s writing capabilities, her short story about passing was not published during her lifetime but first appeared posthumously in Gloria T. Hull’s edited collection of Dunbar-Nelson’s oeuvre. The author wanted to expand “The Stones of the Village” into a novel, but Bliss Perry of *The Atlantic Monthly* reminded her that the American public did not care for meditations on “the color line” (Hull, “Introduction” xxxvi). By 1929, this idea would have been outdated. It was the height of the Harlem Renaissance, during which time many white Americans enjoyed reading literature by and about black Americans. This was also the year in which Vera Caspary published her second novel, *The White Girl* (1929).

Similar to Dunbar-Nelson’s text, this novel is largely ignored by literary critics. According to Caspary’s own admission in her autobiography, *The Secrets of Grownups* (1979), publication of her novel led to rumors that it was actually written by a black woman who passed as white (116). In comparing the works of Wilkie Collins and Vera Caspary, A.B. Emrys argues that *The White Girl* can be characterized as a “sensation novel” because of the focus on “secrets and lies and its scandalous actions” (103). More than its “plot lies,” Emrys also asserts that the novel critiques the sexual harassment of women (103). Caspary is best known for her popular detective novel *Laura* (1942), which became a film in 1944. Since then, *Laura* is the main reason she is remembered today and is the primary focus of research on Caspary’s work, thus overshadowing her

other texts (Bakerman, “Vera Caspary’s Chicago” 81). As a white-authored novel about a black woman, which offers a disapproval of sexual harassment, *The White Girl* contradicts what the American readership would have been accustomed to in 1929. Eighty-five years later, literary critics are still unsure how to assess it.

This novel focuses on the concomitant images of blood, family, and death, in order to question the logic of racial passers and suggest that their demise is predetermined, similar to “The Stones of the Village.” Caspary’s protagonist is Solaria Cox, a light-skinned African-American woman in Chicago in the early twentieth century, who passes as white. The word “solaria” is the plural form of the noun “solarium,” which has two definitions: it can be a room in a house that has extensive glass to admit sunlight, or it can refer to a room that is furnished with tanning beds or sunlamps used to acquire an unnatural sun tan. The irony of these distinctions is that solaria are used to produce darker skin but as someone who passes, Solaria Cox aspires to be anything but darker.

Her hatred for blackness manifests itself in many ways, primarily through dissociating from her parents, Francia and Desborough. She hates the former because of her seemingly backwards and uncouth demeanor, while the latter passively accepts his plight, thereby angering Solaria since she thinks he can do better. She is ashamed of her father’s work as a janitor, euphemized as “the sight of his labors” (16). Desborough’s position causes Solaria to wonder if “the blood of the Mississippi Coxes [is still] buried so deep in his veins?” (16). Since he performs his job “like a good servant,” Solaria sarcastically assumes that the blood of his enslaved ancestors—the Mississippi Coxes—motivates him to do manual labor even after several decades removed from slavery. Her logic is flawed because she does not realize that as an uneducated black man in the first

half of the twentieth century, her father's employment opportunities are limited. Therefore, he has to take any job that pays him, and though she considers his janitor position as an extension of slavery, he holds this job out of necessity. The references to blood and enslavement also evoke Victor Grabért: whereas he is afraid of passing on his blood to his children, Solaria is ashamed of the blood she carries from enslaved ancestors.

As a result of his hard work, Desborough suffers two heart attacks, but he quickly recovers after the first one and returns to work (30). He is less lucky after the second attack. Despite coming home looking ill, Francia orders him to "come along now, you lazy niggah" (34). Desborough moves his hand but closes his eyes. In Francia's typical fashion, she yells at her husband and garners the attention of all their neighbors, to Solaria's dismay. Initially, it seems that the younger Cox prefers to remain inconspicuous and not make a scene, but she is guided by a constant fear of being associated with negative traits that she believes are peculiar to African-Americans. At her father's funeral, she is disgusted by her mother's "ecstatic moaning and singing," knowing that "white people sneered at the negro's violent, showy grief" (37).<sup>48</sup> She feels that Francia makes all African-Americans look bad by vocalizing her sorrow. After Desborough's death, Solaria is stuck at home with Francia, but this arrangement proves to be uncomfortable: "There was no friendship between the two women, yet neither would acknowledge her hostility for the other" (43). With her father no longer around to serve as the provider and glue for the family, Solaria sees no reason to stay.

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<sup>48</sup> Caspary's *The White Girl*, does not capitalize the "N" in the word "negro," therefore all references to the term "negro" that are in lower-case come directly from the text. There is no evidence as to why Caspary made this stylistic choice, but it is important to note that African-American writers capitalize it, but the white writer Caspary chose not to follow suit.

What ultimately pushes Solaria over the edge is a heated exchange with her mother, in which the latter gets angry that the former left her job with no other prospects for earning money. Solaria does not explain to her mother that she has to quit after her supervisor, Mr. Winkelberg, sexually harasses her. Francia would not understand anyway, since her sole motivation is attaining money, believing that working for white people is the only way to make this happen. With no other source of income for the house, an irate Francia attempts to hit her first with a vase and then with a broom (67). It is at this moment that Solaria chooses to leave her childhood home. In doing so, she foreshadows the remainder of the novel when she moves to a new location to prevent racial exposure. After this first altercation, she abandons both her mother and Chicago, effectually killing her mother off since she never speaks to or about her again.

Once Solaria finds herself in New York City, she appears as an orphan: her father is physically dead and her mother is metaphorically dead to her. Like Victor, she finds a surrogate mother in Mrs. Seabury – a woman who allows Solaria to live with her as a boarder. This arrangement is based on the fact that she pretends to be white in order to procure the room. She also passes when Seabury's son, Oscar, takes her on a date, where she sits apprehensively in the white section of a movie theater while fearing that someone might question her for sitting there (76). Trepidation becomes second nature to her, for, like Victor Grabért, she spends the rest of her life worrying and avoiding the inquisitive eyes of everyone she meets. Nevertheless, Solaria stands out because of her attire: she dons a "simple black coat drawn tight across her hips, [with her] severe black hat pulled low over her carefully tinted face," which cause "shabby men and women [to] stare at her" (77). She will never fully be able to dissociate from blackness: even if she uses her

light phenotype to her benefit by passing, she gradually becomes accustomed to being conspicuous rather than shunning it.

Solaria might be able to fool her associates into believing she is white, yet internally she knows that her black heritage is always with her, as the frequent references to blood attest. When an African-American man whom she has been flirting with, Al, hugs and kisses her against her will, she is not as angry with him as she is when her former supervisor did the same in Chicago. Instead, she responds with ambivalence, blaming both herself and Al for this encounter:

It was the colored blood in her, the heritage from some forgotten ancestor that released these warm wild winds of passion. She was ashamed to cherish the memory of the kisses. She was sad to think that Solaria Cox who considered herself so dignified, so refined, should not have been able to control her feelings when a man laid his hard lips against her face and the jazz records played their restless accompaniment to the swift dancing in her heart. (86)

On one hand, she knows it is wrong for Al to kiss her since she does not want it. On the other hand, she blames her “colored blood” as the reason why she stealthily craving his affection. This scene transpires with jazz as the soundtrack to her pensiveness, yet jazz is another aspect of black culture that she scorns because it comes from a group of people she renounces. In suggesting that her African-American blood is responsible for her desire, she implies that she is not above stereotypical images of black women in which they are considered lascivious, and associates aspects of herself that she detests with qualities she considers innate to African-Americans. Her response to Al also reveals an interesting gendered twist for passing subjects. Whereas Victor is paranoid about inorganic blackness in his professional life, Solaria’s inorganic incorporated blackness resurfaces through her sexuality, as she enjoys physical intimacy while being turned off

by the race of the man offering it. The fact that she thinks about race while being kissed foreshadows the end of her life, when her lips blacken as she commits suicide in order to hide her race.

Her immediate black ancestor—her mother Francia—languishes in Chicago while Solaria works odd jobs in New York City. To Solaria, ignoring her family is tantamount to divorcing herself from blackness, yet she never completely avoids her heritage since the topic of blood comes up regularly. When the West Indian elevator operator named Fitz invites Solaria out on a date, she irrationally thinks that he knows that she is black, and is clandestinely trying to blackmail her into dating him. She creates an illogical mental narrative in which the elevator man, described negatively as a “barbarous dark figure in a badly fitting uniform” reveals to Mrs. Seabury that her white-looking boarder is indeed black (111-112). There exists no indication that he even cares what Solaria’s racial identity is or would reveal it if he found out. Solaria’s sole rationale comes from herself: “her dark blood made her subject to the insults of low class colored men” (113). The image of blood recalls Victor’s disgust with his blood, and underscores the fact that neither racial passer can completely disregard their African-American ancestry. Moreover, Solaria believes that the men who are attracted to her assume she is black specifically because of her blood, as though they are able to see right through her façade of whiteness and gaze into her DNA. What she finds as her “conspicuous” blackness is in her sexuality.

The exchange with the elevator operator forces her to remember her family back home, albeit fleetingly. Her brother Lincoln is a lawyer, but is forced to work as an elevator operator. She recalls a letter he sent to her that awaits her reply—a letter

informing Solaria about the mother she has symbolically killed off. She finds out that “their mother had married again, but her husband had taken what was left of the insurance money and deserted her. Now Francia worked as a washerwoman for white families on the South Side” (113). Rather than helping her mother out, or at least sympathizing, the protagonist looks down on her family in Chicago. She calls them “shabby people” while guessing that her brother Jackson was “probably as low and miserable as the rest of the family” (114). In light of what she perceives as their inability to “secure places in the world, she becomes fearful that the same lot could follow her in a life “marked for poverty and humility” (114). Absent from her reasoning is the difficult and limited choices that African-Americans had in the early twentieth century, yet her self-hatred and desire for whiteness prevent her from comprehending the context of racism in which she finds herself. It explains why Francia can only be a washer woman; it explains why, despite having a law degree, Lincoln can only be an elevator operator. Thinking that his light-skinned sister is living affluently in New York City, he hopes to solicit money from her to abate their poverty.

The plight of her family is not as important to the protagonist as her racial deception. Instead of sending money to the people she has killed off, she gives money to Fitz. Solaria is paranoid that he might reveal her blackness, and in turning down his invitation, she hands him a rejection note “wrapped in a five dollar bill” (115). Throughout “the summer and fall,” she willingly participates in what she renders an “extortion system” (115). For it to be considered extortion however, he would have had to make it clear that he is only accepting money in order to prevent him from blackmailing her. While he accepts the money, it is more likely that he sees it as tips for



his service as an elevator operator, not as proverbial “hush money” to keep him from revealing her racial secret that he may not even be aware of. The protagonist, however, has lost all reason in ensuring that her innocuous suitor remains silent about her black identity.

She stops buying his silence not because of the belated realization that her behavior is illogical, but out of financial necessity. As the holidays approach, business in the photography studio she works in is slow, and she vows to start saving her money. Solaria believes that “it was ridiculous to pay five dollars a week to an elevator man” (115). Instead of admitting this to him explicitly, she remains hidden in her room to avoid him. Solaria initially renders this passive-aggressive game as a viable alternative to facing Fitz, but every time Mrs. Seabury’s doorbell rings, Solaria is afraid: “Her fingers shook, [and] her wrists were unsteady” (116). After several hours of paranoia, she realizes it would have been better just to give him money, to guarantee the peace of mind that he would not confront her.

Solaria does not have enough money to pay him one last time, which causes physiological and emotional effects on her:

Her skin was like dry hot leather coated with icy rain drops. She heard the elevator creaking up and down its narrow canal. She paced the floor of her room until her feet ached. Standing beside the window she would glance down the steep shaft of the courtway and think how pleasant would be an endless sleep. (116)

The scene is one of many indications of Solaria’s internal death drive, which allows her to view death as an easier alternative than facing her blackness, which is alive in her sexuality. Fitz’s role in the narrative is to introduce a tension between Solaria’s fictional white self and her inorganic black self. It would seem that instead of telling him that his

invitations to date make her uncomfortable, she would prefer to contemplate suicide, euphemized as an “endless sleep” that would result from jumping in the courtway (116). Yet this does not paint the entire picture of her rationale; the resurrection of blackness through her sexuality instills more fear in her. Her death drive has more to do with negative perceptions of race and her own passing than with Fitz specifically. She fears that her employment, relationships with men, and her room at Mrs. Seabury’s would be jeopardized. Referencing suicide foreshadows her death at the end of the narrative, and suggests that she prefers it over being a sexualized black woman.

To ease her negative feelings, Solaria reneges and pays Fitz one final time, with her “gold chain, pearl earrings, [and] silver link bracelet” (118). Her jewelry is certainly worth more than the five dollars she has routinely given him, and she offers it to him because it will be the last time she intends to encounter him. After returning to her apartment, she packs her clothes and tells her landlady that she will travel home for Thanksgiving, but this is an easy excuse to leave the place permanently (118). She seeks to avoid associating with blacks at all costs, and the best way to guarantee that Fitz will never question her racial background is to move away from his place of employment. By relocating, Solaria repeats a trajectory that many racial passers follow, in preferring to travel elsewhere to hide from anyone who would discover their true race.

Solaria eats dinner alone in a cafeteria before finding a boardinghouse to spend the holiday weekend. She then walks around New York City dejectedly with “no sense of direction...she moved swiftly, threading her way through the crowd as if she were hurrying somewhere” (121). Eventually, she escapes the crowds, and turns east at fifty-seventh street, “walking slowly now, feeling the cold tingle in her fingertips” (26). If she

continues to walk in this direction, she would eventually walk into the East River, which might indeed be her goal considering she pensively ambles throughout the city alone, during a holiday that most people spend with family. Even in a city as densely populated as New York, she feels the pain of solitude, on Thanksgiving no less. It is only broken by Eggers Benedict, a black man who tried to date her when they first met in Chicago, now in New York pursuing his music dreams. She accepts the invitation to visit his studio but her discomfort being around African-Americans is quite palpable: “Suppose someone should see her with a negro, someone she knew. Suppose they should ask her to leave the hotel [she is staying in temporarily]” (125). When her friend Dell returns to New York City, the narrator takes up residence in the white woman’s home. Relocating puts her at ease, because she does not have to worry about Eggers, another man, disclosing of her blackness and sexuality.

One night, Solaria receives a telegram from her brother Lincoln, but Dell believes it was sent by “somebody marvelous” who will come to take her boarder to dinner (143). Solaria corrects her by sheepishly saying that Lincoln is “my brother” (143). Dumbfounded, Dell responds with “your brother. Why, Solaria, you never told me you had a brother” (143). She is shocked that Solaria has not confided in her. From the protagonist’s standpoint, why would she feel the need to discuss her relatives in the first place? Like Victor Grabért, she has metaphorically killed off her family to pass as white. By mentioning that she has brother with a law degree, she knows that her friends would assume that he (and by extension she) is white. However, revealing that she has a brother who operates elevators, the assumption might be that her family is black. To prevent him from being associated with her lies and from being miscategorized, she fails to bring him

up at all, symbolically killing him off. Even though her father is the only relative who has actually died, Lincoln and Francia metaphorically suffer the same fate, as Solaria's omission attests.

As desperate as Solaria is to hide her blood relatives, it is actually blood that she believes implicates her as being black. When she gets distracted while cutting her nails, she cuts her finger, causing a "bright fountain of blood [to jet] out" (156). After she admits to Dell that Rita, a mutual friend of theirs, has been secretly dating her boyfriend, Basil, Rita retaliates by revealing the protagonist's own secret that she has attempted to conceal: "You've got nigger blood in your veins; that's what's biting you, Solaria Cox" (161). Oscar Seabury informed Rita of this previously, and it underscores the tethering of sexuality and race that the novel is concerned with. Oscar, the first person to date Solaria in New York and the only white man to do so, is the man whom she least expects would disclose that she is black. In doing so, he proves that the blackness she thought was hidden is always ready to spring to the surface. Rita calls this revelation "too good a joke to keep back" since Solaria is nothing more than a "dirty nigger" according to her (161).

In the trajectory of these scenes, the protagonist's blood first becomes hypervisible to her peers in a literal sense after she cuts her finger. It prefigures the second scene in which her racial passing is revealed where her blood is referenced as "proof" of her blackness. Blood is a trope in this text just as it is in "The Stones of the Village." Both narratives ask readers to consider the false science that the image invokes. Race is not determined by blood, which Charles Drew would prove through his research on blood transfusions during the Second World War. Victor and Solaria's reliance on it

as a racial marker underscores the futility of passing and the absurdity of maintaining a rigid color line.

Devastated by the news that her race is no longer a secret, Solaria responds in her typical fashion of walking around the city dejectedly:

She walked to the edge of the river and stood on the wide-planed boards of the dock looking down into the water. The lights of the city were like golden fish leaping in and out of the silvery shadows. The dock was deserted. It would have been so easy to take one step, two steps forward into the shining water. (161-162)

This scene has become a familiar one in Solaria's life, in that she has a history of leaving and contemplating suicide while trying to keep her blackness a secret. In the first example, after thinking that Fitz knows of her racial passing, she walks along Fifty-Seventh Street towards the East River, yet is intercepted before arriving. In this case, after hearing unambiguous proof that her race has been revealed, she resumes her walk and gets closer to the river, suggesting that the more people who discover that she is black, the closer she will get to killing herself. Being a black woman is unfathomable to her, thus jumping into the "shining water" slowly emerges as a more feasible alternative.

Instead of death by drowning, Solaria decides to give life one more chance, and again relocates. This time she ends up moving to a boarding house run by Mrs. Zimmerman but still insists upon leaving. She reasons that "if necessary she would go back to being a negro. Anything was better than living this tortured uncertain life" (168). She would return to her African-American heritage only as a last resort, because of her increasingly precarious existence. She juxtaposes movement with a return to blackness, contrasting with her previous actions in which she hoped movement would lead her *away*

from it. This inclination is short lived though, because the only place she goes to is a party hosted by her friend Latzos.

Though she is reluctant to attend, it turns out to be fortuitous for the protagonist: she meets David Lannon, the last person with whom she would be romantically involved. She quickly falls in love with him and is introduced to his mother within a matter of months. Solaria postpones meeting Mamie Lannon though, because she is uncertain about “whether they kept servants who were negroes” (178). Like Victor in “The Stones of the Village,” Solaria is concerned that meeting black help could lead to her exposure. A black domestic might be able to detect her race easier than the Lannons can, and she avoids visiting in order to thwart possible exposure.

In addition to gender and geographic location, another major difference between Victor and Solaria is the effects of racial passing on their bodies and employment; exposure for him would complicate his career in the courtroom, but for Solaria, the court of public opinion is more powerful. As a woman, she has to remain extremely cautious to support herself—a task that could be Herculean if others discovered that she was not the white woman she proclaimed to be. Moreover, she admits that inquisitive countenances from blacks in general cause her to “blush” and exhibit a “swift change” that would confirm their suspicions (178) whereas the only physical effect of blackness for Victor, comes in the form of his penultimate blackened lips. Her blushing highlights the bodily ways in which blackness re-emerges from her that are very different from Victor. Avoiding the Lannons and their potential black servants enables her to remain protectionist about being African-American.

David eventually stops showering Solaria with affection, which prompts her to assume that he has figured out that she is black (195). She imagines several scenarios in which her secret is revealed, while convincing herself that “without David’s love and to have it destroyed by such hideous unmasking would be the most painful humiliation she could possibly suffer” (196). Racial passers have to wear the mask of whiteness to ensure the success of their duplicity, and certainly Solaria is no different. She has maintained this mask consistently since relocating from Chicago to New York City, and considers suicide at the mere mention of her black past. Now however, the stakes are much higher, as she has to think of the ramifications of discovery for both her career and for the white man she adores. Based on her previous actions, the text suggests that she would not survive another “painful humiliation” of her black background; having her mask thrown off for a final time would anger David and thus be the death of her.

As their relationship develops, her unmasking takes a backseat to the problems that arise from her masking. One issue is her dislike for David’s mother, Mamie Lannon, an intrusive woman who mothers him as though he is a small child.<sup>49</sup> However, Solaria’s aversion is nothing more than jealousy at the closeness of their relationship. She is keenly aware that “she had no one except David to love her, but David had plenty of love in his life before she came” (213). The problem then is not Mamie Lannon’s overbearing demeanor but the fact that Solaria does not have any relatives to show her any type of affection or care that her partner gets regularly. She fails to realize that she has brought this on herself though, after metaphorically killing off her black family to ensure that they

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<sup>49</sup> For instance, during one of David’s colds, Mrs. Lannon visits him and is “fierce in the intensity of her nursing,” leaving the protagonist exasperated that someone else has taken over David’s convalescence (Caspar 213).

do not ruin her chances of living permanently as a white woman. Had she not been preoccupied with forging a new identity for herself, then her circular argument would be moot—she could have enjoyed a healthy relationship with her family if she accepted being a black woman. Gradually, Solaria understands that she cannot have it both ways. Nevertheless, blaming Mamie Lannon without being reflective of the *true* source of her jealousy is another easier alternative than admitting blackness.

The other problem that arises in David and Solaria's courtship is that the latter is unwilling to be in the company of African-Americans, even at a distance. After dining with Mamie Lannon and Solaria, David invites them both to a jazz symphony concert performance by a "colored man" named Eggers Benedict—the same Benedict who was once interested in dating Solaria (264). Mamie refuses the tickets on the basis of her lack of interest in a "dirty old nigger concert" (267). David understands that his mother represents an older white perspective that did not care for blacks at all. She admits that she is old-fashioned and can only see blacks as "servants" considering the "colored help" she had during her adolescence (265). Solaria's reasoning is more ambivalent: "I don't know. I just don't think I'd like it" (264). In response, he questions why she will not choose to attend a concert in which good music will be played, and he renders her ignorant for maintaining "this ridiculous prejudice" (266). She does not want to attend the jazz concert for the same reason she hesitates meeting black servants: being surrounded by several black people increases the likelihood of discovery. If a black audience member looks at her askance, it would cause a "swift change" that would reveal her as a racial imposter (178).



An argument between the couple ensues, culminating in his terse affirmation “we just can’t have kids,” since he is worried about not being able to “give them the right start” (273). He does not explicitly clarify what “the right start” entails but if they have children who are born with a dark complexion, then his mother would certainly disown them as her disparaging remarks about African-Americans attest. It is not clear whether or not he is privy to Solaria’s African-American background but perhaps this is the point: his ambiguous language highlights the plight of all racial passers, who live in the precarious position of having to decide between not having children or having them yet knowing the risk factor involved.

The last stage in Solaria’s life begins when her long lost brother, Jackson, wants to meet with her before he sails away to Europe again. She is indifferent to this reunion. Even though she is interested in what he has accomplished, she again reminds herself that being out in public with him would mark her as black. Additionally, by this point in the narrative, she fears that David’s love for her is slowly waning, and the last thing she wants is having him see her in public with a black man. After vacillating, she reasons that “this dinner with Jackson...[will] be her last intercourse with any negro” (290). Considering the confluence of her race and sexuality in the novel, Solaria’s diction is quite telling. “Intercourse,” in other contexts, refers to sexual intercourse. In proclaiming that she will have no other “intercourse” with African-Americans, she also implies that she will never be intimate with them either, lest this act reveals her blackness. Nothing Solaria has said in this narrative proves to be more prescient.

Despite her caution and foresight, both her white partner and her black brother visit at the same time. When David sees the protagonist hugging a black man, he regrets

intruding “on this happy reunion” and quickly drives off (292). This devastates Solaria, because David now has unambiguous and physical proof that she is black, and has been wearing a racial mask for the duration of their courtship. After this realization, Solaria dissociates from reality and enters a trance-like state: she knows that her brother Jackson is talking but she does not respond to him, and she knows that they are walking together in midtown Manhattan but has no idea of the destination (292-293). The text does not explicitly clarify what she ponders while Jackson tries to reconnect with her, but this is precisely the point. Instead of dealing with the difficult convergence of her black past and white present, she opts to completely remove herself from her reality by being present physically but not mentally. In the context of the death drive, this disassociation suggests that she is now at a midpoint in her life between her seemingly buried blackness and her living whiteness. Perhaps she spends the time planning her suicide, which the novel has been alluding to.

As Solaria continues spending time with Jackson, she realizes that they have little in common—he is a wealthy businessman who is proud of his blackness, while a lucrative career has eluded her as she tiptoes around her African-American heritage. The one thing that unites them, other than their ancestry, is their harkening back to slavery. In bragging about the opening of his southern style restaurant in London, Jackson proudly states that the “English people like us to be ourselves” (295). He further admits to running his “place...like an old Southern plantation,” even though he has [n]evah seen an old Southern plantation” (295). He laughs at his assertion, before explaining that his restaurant does resemble a plantation, with the help of his orchestra which “dress as field hands” (295-296). He justifies his peculiar actions by admitting that throughout Europe, it

is easier to fit into stereotypical black images than to be an individual: “I have brains and money. But in my business I’m a jazz negro” who will gladly sing “about my mammy” any day if the need arises (296).

Resorting to slavery is a provocative endeavor for both siblings. For one thing, Jackson’s rhetoric both revises upon and foreshadows his sister’s own use of the image of enslavement. In her first reference to it, she disparages her father for still having to perform unskilled labor even though slavery has long ended for African-Americans. Her brother, despite never visiting a plantation, happily represents one in his restaurant to capitalize on European stereotypes of blacks. Solaria wants nothing to do with “the blood of the Mississippi Coxes” because they were enslaved (16), yet Jackson embraces it. In so doing, the Cox siblings are both passing—Jackson hides his education and taps into antiquated images in order to appease white patrons, while Solaria distances herself from their enslaved ancestors because it helps her to racially pass. They offer two contrasting perspectives on blackness, wherein he performs what he perceives as blackness and she fears that her sexuality will betray her hidden blackness.

Solaria evokes slavery again in reference to her beloved David. She believes that his knowledge of her racial passing would “always be a whip that he held over her” but she would be willing to endure any of his beatings or torture if it meant they would be married (297). Furthermore, “as the evening advanced her humility increased. She felt now that she would cast herself on the ground before David and tell him she was joyous to be his slave” (297). The actual whip that slave masters once used can symbolize the information of Solaria’s racial passing that she hopes would remain a secret. Just as slaves were forced to be humble before their masters, she feels the need to be humble for

David, in a description that is filled with irony and sexual overtones. Even though she has been adamant about shunning blacks, she nevertheless invokes the most atrocious historical event that has happened to African-Americans to make her point: if becoming subservient to David is a prerequisite to marrying him, then she would gladly oblige.

By this point, Solaria has now removed herself from her present in order to return to her family's past by invoking enslavement, rendering it an apt metaphor for her situation. Additionally, the invocation of slavery represents the re-integration of her blackness (as seen through her sexuality) with her fictional whiteness. She does not see that while slaves were *forced* into subservience, she has the freedom to choose independence instead. Her reference to enslavement also compares with Victor Grabert's. He refers to it by creating an identity for himself in which he symbolically kills off his black family, thereby inadvertently becoming a "genealogical isolate," to use Orlando Patterson's term (5). Solaria is more explicit in using the language of enslavement to reveal the extent of her love for David, while evoking the long-held association of marriage and enslavement right before her suicide. In short, while the rhetoric of slavery marks Victor's social death, it serves as a precursor to Solaria's actual death.

Solaria does not get the opportunity to test her theory that bowing down to David would prove beneficial for her; she commits suicide instead. The day after Jackson's revelatory visit, she reads a love letter from David, which ends with the chilling proclamation, "I love you and would rather die than hurt you" (304). At first, the letter appears to contradict her fears that David despises her because of her blackness. However, she discards it after realizing that he wrote it before running into Jackson, and before realizing that she is black. The disintegrating papers symbolize the split between

her and David, since she convinces herself that “David would never come back...David would not come back” because her African-American heritage disqualifies her from being his wife (305). After seeing her reflection in the bathroom mirror, she imagines that her “white skin seemed to darken, [and that her] lips [are] becom[ing] thick and coarse” (305). Though “frightened” of this image, “she could not turn away” from it (305). In the final scene, Solaria gets “the large bottle [of poison] at the end of the shelf” and consumes it while “watching the face in the mirror” (305). This image is resonant, for her lips darken and thicken, and she kills herself by taking poison through the mouth.

Comparing Solaria’s and Victor’s deaths elucidates the ways in which the death drive is important for twentieth-century passing subjects. For one thing, both protagonists encounter blackness one last time before dying: Victor sees the image of his grandmother and Solaria’s downward spiral begins when she sees her brother the day before being mortified by her reflection in the mirror. Additionally, when Victor’s inorganic blackness resurfaces at the banquet, he does nothing to keep it hidden and it leads to his blackened lips. For Solaria, her inorganic blackness is always close to being revealed through her body, long before her suicide. Her proximity to black men causes her to blush and become paranoid. She uses suggestive language to assert her fear not just of being called black—as in Victor’s case—but of being raced specifically via her sexuality. In light of the corporeal ways in which she intuits the weight of her race, it is not a coincidence that her entire body blackens, whereas just Victor’s lips change colors. From his lips, blackness and words spring forth during his death scene, but Solaria’s lips are used to take in the poison in a death scene that concludes a novel where lips are in the sexual register. Her suicide is the culmination of her pensive walks around the river and her

thoughts of jumping out the window. Unlike Victor, who waves away the room full of people who surround him as he dies, Solaria isolates herself in the bathroom to ingest poison. She shuns the sensationalism that would have accompanied her *Clotel*-esque death by jumping. These narratives collectively argue that African-Americans who transgress the color line will have to grapple with their internal blackness before passing away.

In the only scholarly criticism of Solaria's death, A.B. Emrys believes that her suicide is merely "implied" (104).<sup>50</sup> This idea comes from the seemingly ambiguous final sentence, when she reaches for "the large bottle at the end of the shelf" (305). It is the same bottle referenced in the previous scene: "The large bottle at the end [of the shelf] had a red label. 'Poison!' said the warm red letters" (301). Thus, when the protagonist reaches for the last bottle after seeing her darkening reflection, it is the poison that she reaches for (instead of medicine) and subsequently consumes. Hastened by David's acknowledgement that she is indeed African-American, Solaria kills herself, rendering death as the sole alternative to her friends' rejecting her because of her race.

#### "He Yearned To Do It With All His Might": Coleman Silk's Death Wish

Whereas Victor and Solaria both die after encountering their inorganic blackness, Coleman Silk's death is slightly more ambiguous. He does not die immediately after

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<sup>50</sup> One of the critics who has written extensively on Caspary's work is Jane S. Bakerman. Her essays that reappraise Caspary's work, "Vera Caspary's Chicago, Symbol and Setting," *MidAmerica*, 11 (1984), 81-89; and "Vera Caspary's Fascinating Females: Laura, Evvie, and Bedelia," *Clues*, 3 (1980), 45-52, surprisingly do not include any mention of Solaria Cox, even though she fits well within both texts. Her omission from "Vera Caspary's Chicago" is quite peculiar, since Chicago plays a major role in Solaria's upbringing and her racialization, and she eventually decides to relocate. There are no concrete reasons why Solaria is excluded from most criticism of Caspary, but I would argue that critics do not know how to analyze a female racial passer depicted by a *white* woman during the Harlem Renaissance.

confronting his blackness, but certainly dies before his neighbors and former colleagues can discover it. Silk is the light-skinned African-American protagonist of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000) who passes as Jewish during his career as a college professor.<sup>51</sup> After he renders absent students "spooks," they call him a racist—an accusation that leads to his dismissal. As Coleman's confidante, Nathan Zuckerman must narrate the details of Coleman's demise, while revealing that many members of Coleman's family are metaphorically or literally dead also, thus foreshadowing Coleman's death.

The first death that is narrated, though certainly not the first chronologically, is Iris Silk's, Coleman's wife. In the opening pages of the novel, Nathan states that Iris Silk "suffered a stroke and died overnight while he [Coleman] was in the midst of battling with the college over a charge of racism brought against him by two students in one of his classes" (4). The scandal engulfs his bucolic New England town, and even effects his family. By juxtaposing the death of Coleman's career with the death of his wife, Nathan initially suggests that the former has an effect on the latter; that Coleman's poor choice of words indirectly caused Iris' stroke. Coleman too, blames her death on Athena University. He wants Nathan to write a story about their ordeal, focusing on the ways in which "his enemies at Athena, in striking out at him, had instead felled her" (11). He accuses the faculty of Athena University for "creating their false image of him," and for blatantly mischaracterizing "a professional career conducted with the utmost seriousness

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<sup>51</sup> His decision to pass as Jewish is unique, and I address it in my first chapter. In short, there are two ways to read Coleman's choice. On one hand, he could have been influenced by the Jewish doctors whom he encountered in his youth—such as his boxing coach Doc Chizner who encouraged him to pass; or passing as Jewish keeps him from being raced, where he could elect a third possibility for his identity that eschewed the strict confines of being black and white.

and dedication” (11). As Coleman attempts to persuade Nathan to write on his behalf, he twice renders her death a “murder” and thinks “they meant to kill me and they got her instead” (12-13). It is not surprising that as a classics professor, he renders her death as being “felled,” similar to the way Homer writes about the Trojan War in the *Iliad*. Coleman’s main battle however, is with his former colleagues, whom he persistently bullied as dean. After news of his alleged racism developed, they happily rejoiced to see the powerful Dean Silk reduced to widower desperate to save his career. According to Coleman’s logic, his former colleagues “murdered” Iris as the ultimate form of retaliation.

This assertion is flawed of course, since Iris dies of a stroke and not at the hands of Athena faculty. Her death has a powerful effect on Coleman, which explains why anger trumps his rationality. After once again hearing Coleman’s irate proclamation, “these people *murdered* Iris!” (12, emphasis in original), Nathan notes that his neighbor’s face has become “dented and lopsided,” and resembles a “piece of fruit that’s been knocked from its stall in the marketplace and kicked to and fro along the ground by the passing shoppers” (12). The invocation of “passing” in this description is telling; it explicitly refers to patrons who would not notice a discarded piece of fruit, which Coleman’s face now resembles. However “passing” is also the endeavor that the protagonist engages in, and is the premier reason for his wife’s demise—for if he had been forthcoming with his blackness all along, the question of his racism would not have been raised at all and he would not have had to suffer the loss of his career and partner. Coleman is quick to blame others for Iris’ demise, which transforms him to such an extent that his face has lost its youthfulness to become “strangely repellent” and



“distorted” (12). This depiction recalls the inorganic blackness that both Victor and Solaria encounter before their deaths; the former sees a “distorted” black self that is resurrected, while the latter is “repelled” by her darkening skin.

While Iris’ death has a physical effect on Coleman, his father’s death has an emotional effect on him. Mr. Silk dies while “serving dinner on the Pennsylvania Railroad dining car that was pulling out of 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station in Philadelphia” (106). As an African-American man in the first half of the twentieth century, Mr. Silk would have faced any number of insults due to the pervasive system of Jim Crow. Though dining car waiters were well-paid and respected, working for the interstate Pennsylvania Railroad meant that racial humiliation was magnified for him as he served white passengers. In reflecting on the indignities that his father had to contend with, Coleman rhetorically asks how this elder Silk could “have taken this shit” especially since racism “in one form or another” happens every day in the dining car?” After being called “nigger,” Coleman is better able to “gauge his father’s fortitude” and realize “all that his father had been condemned to accept” (105). He continues sympathizing with Mr. Silk by recognizing his “defenselessness” and the source of the “insufferable way he conducted himself” (105-106). As argued in chapter one, the senior Silk is overbearing and stern with Coleman and his siblings, but his oppressive behavior at home stems from his inability to assert himself in other aspects of his life because he works as a black waiter in segregated train cars.

Nevertheless, Coleman detests his father’s formidable behavior growing up, and he only feels some semblance of freedom after Mr. Silk’s death. He then decides to leave Howard University and create his own life for himself, one that his father can no longer

“sonorously dictate” (106). As much as Coleman mourns for Mr. Silk, his lamentations are balanced out by knowing that he now has his own autonomy since he was no longer “circumscribed and defined by his father” – a man who thrived at “making up Coleman’s story for him” (107). His belated independence is nothing short of “exhilarating,” and he feels motivated to join his older brother Walter in combat during World War II as a result (107-108).

Going off to fight in war raises the potential for death, but it is Mr. Silk’s death that affects Coleman’s life more than combat. The only detail readers get is that the elder Silk died while serving dinner as his train departed Philadelphia, but there are no other facts about the circumstances. Two possibilities arise from this ambiguity. Primarily, Roth implies that prolonged exposure to racism can result in death for African-Americans, as seen by the fact that Mr. Silk collapses in a Jim Crow train car while serving passengers. In other words, *how* African-Americans die is less important than the fact *that* they die, because racism will inevitably lead to death either through physical violence such as lynch mobs, or through the cumulative effects of having to navigate a raced society. Secondly, Mr. Silk’s nebulous death foreshadows Coleman’s own seemingly ambiguous death at the end of the narrative. It is evident that the protagonist dies in a car crash but rumors initially circulate as to what specifically causes it. For Mr. Silk, he also dies in a mode of transportation, but whether it is a stroke, heart attack, aneurysm, or some other ailment is omitted from the narrative.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> There is a very long history of African-Americans being constrained by interracial settings on trains. For instance, Lutie Johnson, in Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* (New York: Mariner, 1946) knows that she can speak to her employer, Mrs. Chandler, while they travel on the train from Queens to Manhattan. However, the minute “the train pulled into Grand Central, the wall was suddenly there” (51). In James Baldwin’s novel *Another Country* (New York: Vintage, 1962), the narrator notes that the train Rufus travels on—leading to his own suicide—moves in a way to “protest the proximity of white buttock to black knee” (86). Amiri Baraka’s play *Dutchman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964), takes place entirely on

Though Mr. Silk suffers an actual, albeit mysterious death, the rest of his family dies metaphorically. By cutting ties with his widowed mother and his siblings, Coleman envisions an easier life for himself because they collectively represent a black past that he detests. When he goes to his mother's home to reveal his intention of marrying Iris, a Jewish woman, he has this exchange with Mrs. Silk:

"And she believes your parents are dead, Coleman. That what you told her."

"That's right."

"You have no brother, you have no sister. There is no Ernestine. There is no Walt."

He nodded.

"And? What else did you tell her?"

"What else do you think I told her?"

"Whatever it suited you to tell her...I'm never going to know my grandchildren."  
(137)

Now that his father is deceased, Coleman feels more capable to live his own life without any added pressure for Mr. Silk's approval. One such effect of this is his desire to marry outside of his race and pretend that his entire family is dead. Mrs. Silk is fairly calm at this revelation, as evidenced by the fact that she does not ask if Coleman has symbolically killed them off, but states it as a *fact*, making it seem that she has already intuited this behavior. Yet it is not just that he omits his mother from his new life, Coleman takes it a step further by saying that his siblings are also dead. This is all a lie of course, because the only member of his immediate family who he has lost is his father. At the end of this dialogue, Mrs. Silk exclaims that she will never see her grandchildren, thereby foreshadowing a later instance when Coleman ponders taking his son to see her

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the New York City subway, where Lula, a white woman, attacks Clay, a black man, after making sexual advances and racist comments to him. Frantz Fanon, writing from a post-colonial perspective, uses the site of the train for his meditations of the daily experiences of being black. His famous "Look! A Negro!" encounter between him and a white woman occurs on a train car in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952, reprinted 2008). What I'm suggesting by providing this representative list, is that Mr. Silk's death in a train car can serve as a powerful protest against forced and degrading encounters he has had to endure while serving the Jim Crow car.

but then purposely misses the exit on the New Jersey Turnpike. Indeed, she will not be acquainted with her grandchildren, because to them, he has absolutely no family before his relationship with Iris.

The narrator notes that Coleman was “murdering” his mother, yet she thinks his inclination to remain separate from his family began long before Mr. Silk’s death. In a provocative scene, she invokes slavery and his infancy to prove her point:

You’ve been giving fair warning almost from the day you got here. You were seriously disinclined even to take the breast. Yes, you were. Now I see why. Even that might delay your escape. There was something about our family, and I don’t mean color—there was always something about us that impeded you. You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You’re as white as snow and you think like a slave. (139)

Mrs. Silk reads her son’s rejection of her breast milk as the initial act of foreshadowing that suggests he never wanted to be black in the first place. One of Freud’s disciples, Melanie Klein, would agree. She has argued that the primary experiences of an infant are divided into two opposing states, good objects and bad objects, which are manifested in their mothers’ breasts. The “good breast” provides nourishment and is thus the most wanted one, whereas the “bad breast” is the one that does not feed the infant, and leads to hunger. The “bad breast” then becomes the object of malevolence for the child, who now fears abandonment as a result of the lack of food (Mitchell and Black 92). Even though Klein may not have had passing subjects in mind when formulating this theory, it is an apt lens through which to view Coleman Silk. If the “good breast” and the “bad breast” represent split, opposing entities, then applying her theory to Coleman raises the issue of whether his psychological splitting is actually race-based—in that the breasts represent his internal racialized duality. In other words, Mrs. Silk’s assumption is astute; the

newborn Coleman felt “disinclined to take the breast” because he equated the “bad breast” with the blackness he eventually shuns.

Since his family has “impeded” his lifelong aspirations to live as a white man, Coleman now takes the liberty to create an entirely new genealogy for himself, but not before his mother lectures him about the family he has decided to ward off. Mrs. Silk reminds him about their family history, which included enslavement. In her first reference to slavery, she uses hyperbole to call him “white as the snow” while simultaneously holding an enslaved man’s mentality (139). She believes his blackness is in his mind. The irony of this statement compares with the other characters in this chapter, Victor Grabért and Solaria Cox, who both invoke slavery while passing as white. Coleman stands out because his mother first renders him a slave before anyone else does, by implying that he is afflicted with a Fanonian inferiority complex that makes him want to be white even though he was born black. Mrs. Silk reminds her son that her father’s ancestors were runaway slaves who escaped via the Underground Railroad to settle in Lawnside, New Jersey, while her mother’s family included a slave whose owner was killed in the French and Indian War (141).<sup>53</sup> By providing the details of her family’s enslaved past, she hopes to convince Coleman of the problem underlying his decision, since he comes from a long line of African-Americans who refused to be hindered by slavery and Jim Crow.

Furthermore, Mrs. Silk considers it an insult that in light of her ancestors’ achievements, her son disavows his blackness to create an entirely new identity for

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<sup>53</sup> Lawnside, New Jersey was the birthplace of Jessie Fauset, author of *Plum Bun*, which is a passing narrative analyzed in the second chapter. It was a station on the Underground Railroad and was an all black town.

himself. In assessing the rhetoric of enslavement, linguist Marcia Alesan Dawkins believes that “even without a master, Coleman is enslaved by the future he imagines for himself” (117). According to Ronald Emerick, Roth’s protagonist is motivated by “total freedom to live his life on a grand scale, and passing for white appears to be the best way to gain such freedom” (74).

To execute his liberation, in which he pretends to be *Jewish* and not white, Coleman must first symbolically kill off his family, which begins with his mother. Michele Elam accurately notes that he “consciously decides he must metaphorically ‘murder’ his mother” (111). During Mrs. Silk’s remarks, Coleman silently envisions her death, particularly “the disease that would kill her, the funeral they would give her, the tributes that would be read and the prayers offered up at the side of her grave” (Roth 140-141). The juxtaposition of family, enslavement and death at this juncture implies that Mrs. Silk’s metaphorical death is just not enough for Coleman; for him to truly pass as something else, he can only imagine her physically dead at the hands of some hypothetical ailment. In fact, her imaginary physical demise is as nebulous as her husband’s, suggesting that death by any means will allow Coleman to create a new identity. He simultaneously renders his mother’s blackness and bad breast as inorganic.

When his brother, Walter Silk, discovers that he has cut ties with their family, he becomes more vocal in critiquing the race-shifter than Mrs. Silk: “Don’t you even *try* to see her. No contact. No calls. Nothing. Never. Hear Me? *Never*. Don’t you dare ever show your lily-white face around that house again” (145, emphasis in original). Like their mother, he invokes Coleman’s white phenotype in criticizing his decision. Walt’s goal then, is to make Coleman suffer through a symbolic death in the same way in which he

made their mother endure one. In other words, the Silks are all dead to Coleman now and he is dead to them, thereby granting him the *carte blanche* to pass without his family hindering him.

In contrast to the range of metaphorical and literal deaths in *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk's doomed death takes up the most narrative space. After a horrific car accident, rumors abound speculating on the specific details of his demise. His nemesis and replacement at Athena University, Delphine Roux, is the first faculty member to learn the facts of the crash. Her secretary, Margo, calls her late at night with a terse message: "Dean Silk...is dead! A terrible crash. It's too horrible" (280). Delphine learns from her that he died "in the river. With a woman. In his car. A crash" (280). The "woman" turns out to be his mistress, Faunia, and he indeed drove his car into the river, which Nathan confirms. Everything else about Coleman's death is mostly hearsay that the gullible townspeople believe, in their quest to determine what caused the once powerful dean of faculty to meet such a horrific end.

The first rumor is that Faunia performed oral sex on Coleman as he drove, causing him to lose control of his vehicle. Police officers supposedly deduce this detail from the position of their corpses when his car is pulled from the river (283). However, Nathan's conversation with a state police trooper completely contradicts this notion. The officer explicitly addresses the rumor of oral sex with the terse statement "none of that's true, sir" (295). Instead, he tells Nathan that while speeding, Coleman took a sharp turn that even "[professional race car driver] Jeff Gordon couldn't have taken" and lost control of his car as a result (295). Moreover, before getting behind the wheel, the protagonist drank "a couple glasses of wine" and took Viagra (295). These details paint

an incomplete picture of his end, yet they at least raise the question of whether or not he wanted to die. Though it is illogical for someone as intelligent as Coleman Silk to behave irresponsibly, especially with his mistress beside him, he mixed medicine and alcohol before driving and was too incapacitated to realize he should approach the sharp turn with caution.

Nathan however, hesitates blaming Coleman's death on Coleman himself. In fact, the only reason he approaches the officer is to corroborate his own theory that Faunia's ex-husband, Lester Farley, chased Coleman off the road in his car. For months he had been threatening the protagonist for sleeping with his ex-wife, which provides Nathan with enough reason to blame him. The narrator calls his friend's death a "freak accident" motivated by "the presence somewhere nearby of Les Farley and his pickup truck" (294). Though he calls Farley the "primary cause" of Coleman's death, his reasoning does not hold up (294). Farley knows of his ex-wife's every move, and if he intended to chase Coleman off the road and into oblivion, he would have done so without having her in the car. In other words, if Farley wants to be truly vindictive, he could have killed Coleman while he traveled *alone*. The narrator is stubborn in his persistence, and even tells Faunia's family at her funeral that Coleman "was forced off the road" at the hands of "her ex-husband" (300). They are unwilling to hear him though, preferring to distance themselves from this ordeal while rumors continue to circulate.

After Faunia's family ignores him, Nathan is intent to reach them via the written word. He drafts a letter in which he confidently proclaims to be "absolutely sure" that Farley and not Coleman deserves the blame for the car crash (303). Despite Nathan's attempts to serve as a surrogate investigator, his actions undermine his claim of certainty.



For one thing, he claims to know “who murdered them” but in the next sentence, he concedes that he “did not witness the murder but [knows] it took place” (303). He also does not completely end the letter, but instead says “My telephone and address are as follows—” (303). Concluding with the rhetorical device of an aposiopesis shows Nathan’s inability to continue writing, realizing that he too is speculating on the impetus behind his friend’s demise. After pondering this situation, Nathan decides it would be best to “[tear] up what I’d written” (304). He does not just end the letter in the middle of a sentence, he takes it an extra step by completely discarding it. One must wonder if he does this because he has stopped believing his own theory that Farley bears sole responsibility. If he were as confident as he proclaimed to be, then he should not have any problem with sending the letter and placing blame on Farley.

Nathan foreshadows his unreliability earlier in the novel when trying to guess at what point Faunia discovered Coleman’s racial duplicity:

Faunia alone knew how Coleman Silk had come about being himself. How do I know she knew? I don’t. I couldn’t know that either. I can’t know. Now that they’re dead, nobody can know. For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It’s now all I do. (213)

He contradicts himself by asserting that Faunia was privy to Coleman’s duplicitous life, before admitting that it is mere conjecture. Based on the strands of information he thinks he knows, he takes the liberty to piece his neighbor’s story together, even if some of the facts are vague, speculative, or missing. Nathan is a published writer, who has spent his career writing fiction before he became Coleman’s neighbor. Admitting that by its very nature, Nathan’s literary career is one predicated on being able to “imagine,” raises the question of whether he takes creative license to fill in the blanks of Coleman’s death by

speculating on Farley. In other words, is the fiction he has grown accustomed to writing now bleeding into the fiction he seeks to narrate about the nebulous death, since there is only circumstantial evidence leading to Farley?

Derek Parker Royal certainly believes this is the case, as he warns readers to “be on their guard,” considering Nathan Zuckerman’s unreliability throughout his tenure as Roth’s narrator over the decades (118). With not enough evidence to incriminate the Farleys—Faunia was not performing oral sex nor was Lester in close pursuit—the culpability of the crash turns back to the driver, who sped in his car while under the influence. The faculty at Athena speculate on the causes of the car crash, and Nathan provides a cryptic rejoinder to their assumptions in his message on their listserv: the “car accident was no accident” (293). Instead, Coleman drove erratically and ended in the river because he “*yearned* to do it with all his might” (293, emphasis mine). By using the verb “yearned,” Nathan invokes Freud’s rhetoric of desire, implying that Coleman’s death drive was the impetus for driving his car into the river. In articulating his late neighbor’s motivation for killing himself, Nathan believes that “It was to prevent Faunia from exposing him for what he was that Coleman Silk took her with him to the bottom of the river. One is left to imagine just how heinous were the crimes that he was determined to hide” (293).

The rhetoric in this description is speculative, thereby making it difficult for a definitive case to be made for Coleman’s death drive. However, understanding his trajectory calls attention to his stealth. Everyone in town has already discovered his exploitative relationship with Faunia, an illiterate housekeeper who is half his age. Though this dalliance is viewed as taboo, it is hardly the aspect of his life that he is most

“determined to hide”. What his neighbors and Faunia are not privy to is the fact that he spent his adult life as a Jewish man despite his African-American heritage. Knowledge of his racial passing could have done far more damage to his reputation than any “heinous crimes” he could have committed, after decades of tricking his colleagues into believing that he was Jewish and not black. In pointing to Coleman’s “history” and “what he was,” Nathan’s vague diction highlights the protagonist’s desire to ensure that nobody, not even his beloved mistress, discovered his blackness.

At Coleman’s funeral, Nathan meets the late professor’s sister, Ernestine, who sees passing and death on a continuum. She reveals Coleman’s biography, which provides the narrator with more fodder for his book, *The Human Stain* based on Coleman’s life. Among her revelations is the fact that when Coleman decided to cut ties with his family, their brother Walter forbade him from visiting, reasoning that “Coleman was going to break Mother’s heart a thousand times over, exactly the way he did it that day” (319). Walter essentially forced his mother to metaphorically kill Coleman much the same way Coleman killed them all off.

If Walter wanted Ernestine to follow suit by removing Coleman from her life as well, she remained unrelenting until the very end. She called her late brother at his office every year on his birthday. They used these annual conversations to inform each other of news about promotions, births, deaths, and other milestones that could only be shared in stealth since he wanted to hide his racial duplicity. Ernestine was unable to call his home, to avoid raising his family’s suspicions. She also admits to being highly critical of Coleman’s choice to have many children; each birth “was always a great trial for him” because he feared seeing visible markers of ancestry in his progeny (320). Like Victor

and Solaria, Coleman did not want his children to discover that their ancestors were African-American. He never told them anything about their black ancestry, and failed to see the implications of his actions.

Due to Coleman's silence, his children were unable to meet his mother, though she maintained the hope that he would return, up until her deathbed. According to Ernestine, her mother always looked at "his photos, his report cards, his track medals, his yearbook" as well as his valedictorian's certificate and the toys he played with as a child, in hopes of figuring out what exactly caused Coleman to pass as white and disavow them (325). She might have believed that her son's racial passing developed was in part due to his belated race-learning, since she examined his school-related documents in search of some elusive answers. Mrs. Silk eventually saw her son's racial transgression as a sickness. On her deathbed, she repeatedly asked her nurse to get her to a train because "I got a sick baby at home" (321). Both Ernestine and Walter know that the "sick baby" was her favorite child, Coleman. Considering his disinterest in taking her breast milk, it is interesting that she sees him specifically as a sick *baby*. She never got over the fact that even as an infant, he used his lips to reject her blackness, and perhaps she wanted to prevent her son from "dying" of the disease called passing. This inclination is too late: by the time she dies, the disease has consumed Coleman to such an extent that his sole interaction with his black past is through annual conversations with Ernestine. Mrs. Silk's extensive training as a nurse could not prevent his death drive from motivating him to thwart the repercussions of his racial passing.

Ernestine also recalls her late brother as being "so determined" that he had to "even be buried as a Jew" (325). She refers to the Kaddish that was read at Coleman's

grave by his son Mark (313). The Kaddish is a hymn of praises delivered at the funeral services for Jewish people, or as the narrator succinctly puts it, it reflects “the sobering message...[that] another Jew is dead” (314). Ernestine views this moment with some hilarity, because it completes Coleman’s lifelong resolve to pretend to be someone that he was not. Nathan’s reading of the morbid observation is simpler: his friend was “buried as a Jew, I thought, and, if I was speculating correctly, killed as a Jew” (325). Clearly, this is the Jewish Coleman Silk who is buried, since the black Coleman Silk has been dead.

After sharing Coleman’s history, Ernestine announces to Nathan, “Well then, you’re now an honorary member of the Silk family,” suggesting that Nathan now replaces the late Coleman as her brother (326). Nathan appreciates this gesture, and is even invited to dine with the remaining Silks at the start of Black History Month (342). He obliges, but mainly due to his inclination to “talk to Walter about Coleman” (336). She rebuffs his request by succinctly saying “Walter hasn’t mentioned Coleman’s name since nineteen hundred and fifty-six. He won’t talk about Coleman,” nor does she intend to tell him that Coleman has died (336). Nathan is surprised at this hasty response, as well as shocked that she does not inquire about the specific details of the crash that killed him (332). He fails to realize that this information might be useless to her. For Ernestine and Walter, their brother’s death could have been a suicide, an accident, a murder or the result of natural causes. The point is, that the specific nature of his departure will not bring him back to life as the *African-American* brother they lost years before.

Nathan still contends that the virulently anti-Semitic Farley murdered Coleman as revenge for sleeping with his ex-wife. To prove this point, he confronts the assumed culprit himself, yet their wide-ranging conversation makes no indication of Farley’s

culpability in Coleman's death. Instead, they discuss Farley's fishing spot, his participation in the Vietnam War and the post-traumatic stress disorder that resulted from it, his failed marriage, Bill Clinton's impeachment, and Nathan's literary career. The closest Farley comes to uttering something that might be remotely related to Coleman is when he says "you look like a man who can keep a secret" (349). However, the "secret" he does not want out is that he has found the perfect spot to fish and wants to be the sole person to enjoy it (349). Farley says nary an incriminating word in what Nathan hopes to be a revealing exchange.

Despite Farley's innocence, Nathan remains unconvinced, and assumes that he is an astute liar. He can look no further than the story he once overheard Faunia telling Coleman about someone else's suicide, which foreshadows Coleman's own demise and should disabuse him of the notion that Farley was the culprit. She recalled having to clean up after a man's suicide—a man who had a happy family and who outwardly appeared content with life. However, he drank too much and shot himself in the head, and it was Faunia's responsibility to hide the blood that would not disappear since it was "on the walls everywhere" (339). This act of violence initiated her interest in the subject of death and specifically in suicide, a morbid phenomenon which she renders "fascinating" (339). At first, it was difficult for her to understand why this nameless person resorted to suicide, but then it became explicitly clear when

I got to the medicine cabinet. The drugs. The bottles. No happiness *there*. His own little pharmacy. I figure psychiatric drugs. Stuff that should have been taken and hadn't. It was clear that he was trying to get help, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't take the medication. (339)

With the exception of the gunshot, this story is essentially Coleman's. To everyone outside the Silk home, Coleman seemed happy with his family, yet he and Iris slept apart

for several years before their deaths. Like the suicide victim, Coleman also mixed drinking with medication—particularly the Viagra pills that he needed to satisfy Faunia sexually. Of course, this sexuality link recalls Solaria. In her case, she feared that blackness would come alive through her sexuality, but his blackness is not specifically linked to it. Instead, using Viagra to maintain his erections proves that he is sexually dead, perhaps explaining the disconnect between sex and his black past.

Moreover, medical examiners found wine in his blood during the autopsy (295). The image of blood further connects the two men: whereas Faunia tried to cover up the man's blood, Coleman hid his African-American ancestry, lest it revealed him as a racial passer. This anecdote is included in a chapter entitled "The Purifying Ritual," which refers to the bodily fluids that need to be cleaned according to the tenets of many religions. It would be difficult for Coleman's blood to be made "pure" though, since he denied his heritage in favor of a Jewish one.

Faunia's story resonates on multiple levels. For one thing, Nathan does not see the generative juxtaposition of the two suicides. If he did, then the impetus behind Coleman's death might be clearer to him. The late scholar was not chased into the river, nor was his vehicle pushed off by his mistress' irate former husband. Though Coleman's actual death is not narrated—we get numerous details leading up to it and then the gruesome aftermath—the conspicuous narrative gap forces readers to question whether Coleman wanted to kill himself by driving into the river after ingesting Viagra and wine. Certainly this option would be more appealing than revealing his African-American background. Just as his affair and purported racism were exposed, his racial background could have endured a similar fate if his former colleagues continued prying into his life. If this

happened, then both his blood and reputation would have had to endure a “purifying ritual” – which entails explaining why he built his life on a racial charade without admitting to being black when students accused him of racism. The “purifying ritual” also refers to his unwillingness to ingest blackness, in the form of his mother’s milk. Coleman’s entire life is spent cleansing himself of blackness, beginning with her nourishment and ending with his Jewish burial.

The story Faunia shares of the suicide is one of many scenes of death in *The Human Stain*, since it is “a dominant theme in the novel” (Royal 127). Most literary critics only study Coleman’s demise, seeing him as a tragic mulatto who died at the hands of Faunia’s husband, Lester Farley.<sup>54</sup> By viewing Coleman within the rigid and narrow lens of the tragic mulatto, these critics assume that Farley’s anti-Semitism caused him to kill Coleman Silk. However, if Farley killed the protagonist, it would probably be because his ex-wife and the doomed professor had an affair, which might trump his hatred for Jewish people. Moreover, calling Coleman a tragic mulatto allows critics to place the blame solely in Farley’s hands, while overlooking the agency that Coleman has in his death. Like Victor and Solaria before him, perhaps Coleman is driven by a desire to avoid everything that is unpleasurable—a broad psychoanalytic category that for racial passers, refers to the discovery of their blackness.

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<sup>54</sup> Marcia Dawkins’ monograph *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012, pp 114); Ronald Emerick’s article “Archetypal Silk: Wily Trickster, Tragic Mulatto, a Schlemiel in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 26 (2007), 73-80; and Matthew Wilson’s article “Reading *The Human Stain* Through Charles W. Chesnutt: The Genre of the Passing Novel,” *Philip Roth Studies*, 2.2 (2006), 138-50, all blame Coleman Silk’s death on Lester Farley’s virulent anti-Semitism. This conclusion overlooks the role Coleman played in his own death by driving drunk into a river. These critics overstate the case by placing the blame solely on Farley.



The only critic to blame Coleman for his death is Marcia Alesan Dawkins, who sees the protagonist's "symbolic suicide" as an extension of his matricide. One could speculate that she renders it "symbolic" because Roth depicted the death ambiguously. Dawkins accurately observes a continuum between Mrs. Silk's death and Coleman's, especially since, as Matthew Wilson asserts, characters who cross the color line kill off their families and are unable to return home (141). By default, Coleman must metaphorically kill his mother, beginning with his rejection of her breast milk. Royal argues that the recurring theme of mortality is also evidenced by "the death of Faunia's children, Les Farley's social 'impotence,' ... Faunia's invalid father, [and] Silk's dying relationship with his children" (129). Added to this list are Iris Silk's stroke, Mr. Silk's demise, and the purposeful distancing of Mrs. Silk and Walter Silk. Coleman's family all die before he does, foreshadowing his own death. The main difference is that he is the sole character in the text who is passing, and considers death as more practical than being revealed as African-American.

#### "A Darker-Hued Past": Inorganic Blackness and the Loss of Life

In his review of the movie version of *The Human Stain*, critic Clarence Page believes that Roth's plot is too beholden to the "worn-out tragic mulatto formula." A deeper analysis of Coleman's death drive might lead him to rethink this assertion. From Page's twenty-first century standpoint, the tragic mulatto would certainly seem antiquated since it began as an anti-slavery image and lost its effectiveness after Emancipation. Page joins many literary critics in noting that the sole cause of Coleman's death is living in a raced society, yet this perception assumes Coleman's passivity, even

though he made the *choice* to drink and speed in his car. Driving drunk into the river prevented the possibility of his race being disclosed, thus making him far removed from Page's perception of tragic mulatto's "worn-out" traits.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Vera Caspary might agree with Page's claim that the tragic mulatto is an archaic formulation. In depicting the active roles that their protagonists, Victor Grabért and Solaria Cox, take in hastening their deaths, these writers force readers to reconsider the psychoanalytic motivations underlying the demise of racial passers. Although it is true that "death is repeatedly seen as a cost of passing," according to Jordan Stouck, a re-evaluation of the specific nature of the deaths of racial passers highlights the prominence of the death drive in narratives of racial passing (288). The trauma of being called out as black—or the fear of it—propels passers to desire a return to the inorganic state of not living. This logic explains why Victor declines help while he chokes, why Solaria consumes poison, and why Coleman drives into the river while intoxicated. Death is rendered more practical than the threat of being raced.

When placed in tandem with each other, the narratives explored in this chapter reveal the pervasiveness of active death in twentieth century passing literature. Blackness is an internal object for passing subjects, and each of them deals with it differently. Victor kills it when it is resurrected at dinner, and Solaria is concerned that blackness will appear through her sexuality. This results in her lifelong paranoia that romantic relationships with *black* men will force her internal blackness out of her. In both cases, the inorganic blackness that they thought was lost reappears when they die, demonstrated by Victor's choking death and his blackened lips, as well as Solaria's horrified image of her darkening self. In killing their internal blackness, they also kill themselves.

It is clear that the death drive motivates Victor and Solaria, but for Coleman it might appear more nebulous, both in the lack of a ghastly death scene and in his relationship to his black past. In Kleinian terms, the rejection of his mother's breast milk renders it a "bad breast" which he associates with her race. His reluctance to ingest it shows an involuntary disavowal of his African-American family which began long before his race-learning. If this theory is true, then Coleman's racialized development in the classroom is his *conscious* introduction to being black, and is the adolescent extension of the *subconscious* maternal rejection that he exhibit in infancy. He dies trying to ward off his blackness, but his death is a less powerful scene because he did not have to consume his mother's nourishment. Nevertheless, his mouth is also the portal to death in that uttering "Spook" kills his career and eventually his wife, while ingesting the lethal cocktail leads to his erratic driving. The characters in this chapter sort through race by killing their lost, inorganic blackness, while hoping that their organic passing selves would prevail. However, they cannot bury one without killing the other, since their fictional selves die either as white (Victor and Solaria) or Jewish (Coleman). The active deaths foregrounded in these novels suggest that passing is a futile endeavor in twentieth-century American Literature.

In discussing African-American burial practices, Karla Holloway quotes a black mortician, whose main job is to ensure that deceased light-skinned African-Americans maintained their skin color during burial. To guarantee this, he always had "some of the lighter shades of cosmetics" at his disposal (26). Since "death was no time to acknowledge or suggest a darker-hued past," the mortician explained that his job specifically entailed "Lighten[ing] up their loved one. The last thing [a grieving family]

would want is for somebody to pass by the casket and say, ‘your mama looks a little dark, doesn’t she?’” (27). Of the characters analyzed in this chapter, Coleman Silk is the only one who does not turn “a little dark” at the end of his life. Whereas Victor’s lips turn black as he dies and Solaria’s complexion darkens as she sees her reflection one final time, Coleman does not suffer the same phenotypical fate. Instead, he is buried with Jewish funeral rituals, further underscoring his status as a non-African-American until the very end. Despite these distinctions, the first part of the mortician’s statement defines each protagonist, since neither one wanted any relationship with their “darker-hued” past, in life or in death. As a result, Victor, Solaria and Coleman decide that it is best to “pass away” – a long term result of their decision to pass as white.

### Conclusion: “The Passing Hustle”: Passing in the Twenty-First Century

In writing about real life contemporary passers in *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are*, Brooke Kroeger narrates the life of a woman who relocates to Central Point Virginia, where “Passing” is the name of a road. According to local legend, it is named after the generations of “black residents white enough to pass” (51). With that said, “the intersection of Passing and Hustle makes for the most intriguing road sign” (47). I reference it because it is an apt metaphor for racial passing as articulated in twentieth and twenty-first century literature. The term “hustle” in urban vernacular implies obtaining items through deceitful or illicit means. Racial passers engage in a type of hustle as they maintain dual identities. I read “Passing and Hustle” as more than an obscure rural intersection; it epitomizes many of the ways in which passing subjects are forced to “hustle” in order to avoid racial prejudice.

During my final year completing this manuscript, several instances of the passing hustle became public. In each case, it became increasingly evident that passing has transpired in a variety of ways over the duration of the twentieth century, and it is still a viable option today. Writing for National Public Radio, Tanvi Misra argued that in the mid-twentieth century, some people of color, including African-Americans and people visiting America, donned turbans in order to pass. Misra cites several examples to support her claim – beginning with Chandra Dharma Sena Gooneratne. As a Sri Lankan-born graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1920's, he was shocked when faced with the anti-black discrimination he encountered while travelling in America. To circumvent racist harassment, he wore a turban because, according to him, it can “make anyone Indian” (qtd. in Misra). Of course, a turban is not only used by Indians, but he

was tapping into America's historical consciousness of being more welcoming to people considered exotic than to black people. He was not passing strictly as Indian, but as exotic, which he saw as was a safer option than to be viewed as black.

African-Americans found the use of turbans to be equally useful for them.

According to Misra, Reverend Jesse Routt , donned a turban and robes when he went to Alabama, where he fooled everyone into receiving him as a foreign dignitary. In the case of Korla Pandit, he wore a turban and played the Hammond organ on television, which catapulted him to be regarded "as a precursor to Liberace" (Misra). While playing the organ each week, he was surrounded by smoke, "dancing courtesans and elephants" which combined to make him appear more exotic than he really was (Misra). He claimed to be the son of Indians hailing from New Delhi, but he was actually an African-American from Missouri. Born John Roland Redd, he created his false identity after moving to California in 1949, with the help of his turban. Like Gooneratne before him, Pandit became "Indian" to avoid Jim Crow discrimination.

For Harry S. Murphy Junior, he did not need special attire to hide his identity. In fact, he began passing inadvertently. As Allyson Hobbs details in her special report for CNN, he was a *black* student at University of Mississippi from 1945-1946, yet he "had a white complexion and wavy brown hair" Moreover, a "military official checked the 'W' box for white when Murphy enlisted in the Navy" (Hobbs). While there, Murphy ran track for the school, dated white women and dined in segregated restaurants. Since nobody discovered the mistake, he used their error to integrate Ole Miss almost two decades before James Meredith officially did so in 1962. The only comment Murphy reportedly made about the resistance to Meredith's integration was that "they're fighting a

battle they don't know they lost years ago” (Hobbs). Though he passed as white because an official misread him, he returned to blackness after a year when he transferred to Morehouse College. In 1991, he committed suicide in New York City at age 63.

Murphy’s trajectory parallels some of the people in this dissertation. Like Anatole Broyard, legal paperwork helped to set him on the path to passing; like Coleman Silk and Angela Murray, he passed in school; like Birdie Lee, he returned to blackness after passing; like Solaria Cox, he hastened his own demise by killing himself. These points of convergence are very telling because they reveal that the line between real life and fictional iterations of passing is fluid. Moreover, they highlight the fact that passing is distinctly an urban phenomenon. Murphy, like many others before and after him, ended up in New York City years after he shifted identities at the University of Mississippi. Travelling to the metropolis is paramount for those who want to live anonymously and without the fear of discovery.

Murphy, Pandit, Gooneratne, and Routt  all passed during the time of Jim Crow, when black movement was severely restricted. Passing helped each one of these men to transgress boundaries of race and space. Routt  for example, went into a Jim Crow dining car in North Carolina and sat next to a white family (Misra). When he found out that “no Negro would dare to come in here [a fancy restaurant] to eat,” he just rubbed his face “and ordered dessert” while enjoying the racial ruse he put on everyone (Misra). Yet the prevalence of these past examples does not imply that passing only occurred when the doctrine of legal segregation was in place. On the contrary, the fact that these instances were all made public during President Obama’s second term reminds readers that passing

is still an option for people of color. The Jim Crow era ended decades ago, but vestiges of racism remain, despite notions of being in a “colorblind society.”

Case in point: in December 2013, Yolanda Spivey wrote about the role of race during her lengthy job search. After losing her job in the insurance industry, she began applying to over three hundred positions using the popular website for job-seekers, Monster.com. In order to apply to positions on this site, applicants are required to complete a diversity questionnaire, which cannot be ignored. Even though the site claims that the questionnaire “will not jeopardize your chances of gaining employment,” Spivey proved otherwise. First, she checked the box indicating that she is a black woman, before employing the “decline to identify” option. Still, her job search was futile (Spivey).

Only after creating another profile did she hear from potential employers. She used the name “Bianca White” on her resume and Monster profile, and identified as a white woman on the diversity survey. While her true profile remained open, her white one received the most attention. As she summarizes, “At the end of my little experiment, (which lasted a week), Bianca White had received nine phone calls—I received none. Bianca had received a total of seven emails, while I’d only received two... a total of twenty-four employers looked at Bianca’s resume while only ten looked at mine” (Spivey). José Zamora did not quantify the amount of employers who contacted him when he performed an experiment similar to Spivey’s. Instead, he notes that “his inbox was full” one week after he changed his name from José to Joe Zamora (Matthews). He did not change anything on his resume, meaning his qualifications were exactly the same as before. Once he dropped the “S,” his name became stereotypically white-sounding, thus guaranteeing that employers would interview him.



Spivey and Zamora did not fundamentally alter their identities, but changed their names to more mainstream, ethnically ambiguous ones. In doing so, they engaged in a form of short term passing that allowed them to be considered for employment. They were invested in more than attaining jobs; they were also interested in highlighting the ways in which racism functions today. Even though, as Matthews argues, “digital job applications would seem to be the ultimate exercise in colorblind hiring,” she cites research proving that employers “consciously or subconsciously” look over applications with black or Latino names. Spivey and Zamora are the latest examples of this phenomenon.

I cite this variety of examples to reiterate several claims about passing. Chief among them, is the notion that passing has not ended, but has shifted according to historical context. The Jim Crow era required people of color to change their appearance or remain silent about their race in order to circumvent explicit forms of racism. Now that explicit racism is illegal and obsolete, implicit structural racism has taken its place and has necessitated contemporary forms of passing. Today, wearing a turban to look “Indian” or otherwise trying to pass as something other than black is not the only recourse for African-Americans; changing identities to “look white on paper” reflects the institutional racism that has replaced the explicit racism that defined much of the twentieth century (Fordham 39).<sup>55</sup> In Spivey’s and Zamora’s cases, they passed temporarily in response to discriminatory hiring practices based on perceptions of names,

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<sup>55</sup> In Signithia Fordham’s often-cited ethnography, *Black Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), she examines the students at an urban high school to determine the factors of academic success for African-American pupils, while uncovering the stakes of attaining it. For her, passing is less about wanting to be visibly white, but is required in the form of displaying “the credentials that were traditionally associated with White Americans” – meaning that “looking white on paper” has been a contemporary way some black Americans have passed to achieve upward mobility (39).

while for Jordan Canedy, passing as white is an easier and less dangerous alternative than being black, in order to avoid being a victim of law enforcement's persistent attacks on unarmed black men.

Secondly, these examples force readers to grapple with an inconvenient truth: jumping the color line in any form—whether it is short term or long term—reveals much more about society than it does of individuals. Throughout all the cases outlined in this project, what unites real and fictional passing subjects is feeling the need to pass in part because society has compelled them to do it. Jumping the color line is a tacit admission that the color line exists, and that living as black does not afford the same opportunities and privileges as being non-black.

Lastly, the men and women in this project expand the definition and scope of passing, by proving that there is no one concrete way to pass. Passing strictly as white is not the sole option. It requires a series of complex negotiations based on context and anticipated outcome. Given the unique racial history of America, the various motivations to pass are clear, but more work must be done on passing throughout the Americas and not just in the United States. As long as racism exists, efforts to transcend it will also continue, and there might be countless Jordan Canedy's who intuit that black skin will lead to many closed opportunities. While post-race is a complete fiction, there will be several more ways to redefine the notion of passing in the post-Obama era.

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