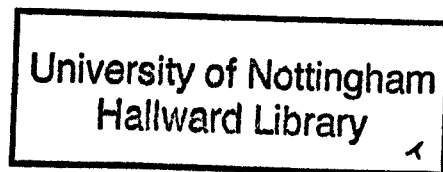


**FICTIONS OF LAW AND CUSTOM:  
PASSING NARRATIVES AT THE *FINS DES SIÈCLES***

By Sinéad Moynihan



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## Abstract

This dissertation examines narratives of passing of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century *fins de siècle*. My central thesis is that passing narratives of the 1990s and beyond evidence symmetry between the tropes of passing that occur at plot level and passing strategies surrounding the production of the texts themselves. I argue that the connections between passing and authorship that emerge in contemporary stories invite us to reconsider extant interpretations of earlier passing stories, specifically those published at the turn of the twentieth century. The Introduction challenges the historiography of the passing narrative traced in existing studies of passing. It also suggests the ways in which authorship and passing are inextricably linked via the arbitrary standard of “authenticity,” both authorial and racial. In Chapter One, I examine the relationship between the African American body-as-text and the African American author who produces a text in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (date unknown), Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) and Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001). Chapter Two takes the self-reflexive detective genre and traces the changing roles of the passing character within the conventions of the form, from *femme fatale* to hard-boiled detective. Here, I focus specifically on Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901-1902), Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) and Robert Skinner’s Wesley Farrell series (1997-2002). In Chapter Three, I examine texts whose protagonists’ gender and/or racial ambiguity serve to destabilise analogously the religious categories under interrogation in those texts, namely Hopkins’s *Winona* (1902) and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988) and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). Chapter Four examines tropes of passing in relation to three contemporary novels of adolescence, Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998) and Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex* (2002). Finally, the Conclusion discusses recent controversies of authorship and authenticity in the U.S., particularly as these pertain to the ambiguous literary category of “memoir.”

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## Abbreviations

Since this thesis often refers to more than one primary text by the same author, I have used the following abbreviations for the sake of clarity.

### *AE-CM*

James Weldon Johnson. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. New York: Dover, 1995.

### *ATW*

James Weldon Johnson. *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. 1933. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.

### *CF*

Pauline Hopkins. *A Love Supreme [Contending Forces]*. 1900. London: X Press, 1995.

### *HS*

Philip Roth. *The Human Stain*. 2000. London: Random, 2001.

### *IL*

Frances E. W. Harper. *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*. 1892. *Three Classic African-American Novels*. Ed. and introd. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Random, 1990.

### *LM*

Louise Erdrich. *Love Medicine*. 1984. New York: Bantam, 1987.

### *LR*

Louise Erdrich. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. London: Flamingo, 2001.

### *MN*

Pauline Hopkins. *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*. 1901-1903. Ed. Hazel V. Carby. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

### *OT*

Charles Johnson. *Oxherding Tale*. 1982. New York: Plume, 1995.

### *PB*

Jessie Redmon Fauset. *Plum Bun*. 1928. Boston: Beacon, 1990.

### *PS*

Robert Skinner. *Pale Shadow*. Arizona: Poisoned Pen, 2001.

### *PW*

Mark Twain. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. 1894. New York: Dover, 1999.

### *SD*

Robert Skinner. *Skin Deep, Blood Red*. New York: Kensington, 1997.

## Introduction

### “Passing” into the Present: Passing Narratives Then and Now

**Bette:** [. . .] I would never define myself exclusively as being white any more than I would define myself exclusively as being black. I mean, really, why is it so...wrong for me...to move more freely in the world just because my appearance doesn't automatically announce who I am?

**Yolanda:** Because it is a lie.<sup>1</sup>

– *The L Word* (2004).

This exchange occurs not in a nineteenth-century American novel, nor even in one of the many racial passing narratives of the Harlem Renaissance,<sup>2</sup> but in Showtime's hit drama series, *The L Word*, in an episode first aired on 7 March 2004.<sup>3</sup> Bette (Jennifer Beals), who is mixed race, and her partner, Tina (Laurel Holloman), who is white and is carrying their child, attend a support group in which the couple discuss their impending parenthood. An African American member of the group, Yolanda, takes issue with the couple over (what she mistakes for) their decision to use a white sperm donor in order that Tina will give birth to a white child. Yolanda reproaches Bette for talking “so proud and... forthright about being a lesbian,” while never once referring to herself as “an African American woman.” Yolanda notes that the other members of the group are “wondering what the hell we're talking about because they didn't even know you were a black woman.” At a subsequent meeting, Bette turns Yolanda's own critique against her, observing that *she* didn't realise Yolanda was a lesbian until she read a poem of hers. As Bette puts it, “you're not exactly readable as a lesbian, and you didn't come out and declare yourself.”

Several interrelated issues arise from the Bette-Yolanda exchanges. First, and most obviously, is that Yolanda, in charging Bette with “hiding so behind the lightness of your skin,” is effectively accusing her of “passing” as white.<sup>4</sup> As Yolanda perceives it, for Bette not to declare her blackness is dishonest, a “lie.” Why is it that in March 2004, so recently, the metaphors of concealment, subterfuge and deception that have historically characterised passing are still pervasive in U.S. culture? Why is it, in other words, that passing persists as a common trope in diverse cultural representations?<sup>5</sup> Passing is typically associated with a period stretching from post-Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement (1890s to 1960s) or, even more specifically, yoked to the years of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Gayle Wald, by the time John Howard Griffin’s memoir, *Black Like Me*, appeared in 1961, “passing was already beginning to ‘pass’ out of style for African Americans, going the way of Jim Crow buses and segregated lunch counters.”<sup>6</sup> This thesis contests this traditional historiography of the passing narrative, questioning whether passing ever, in fact, went away. And, if so, why is it back?

Second, the Bette-Yolanda exchanges raise the question that if passing is back, how do recent manifestations of the theme engage with those of the past, and to what end? In other words, how self-aware are “new” passing narratives? Beals’s own career is an interesting case in point. Beals, who plays Bette, is of mixed race heritage, and has been accused on several occasions of passing as white. She has been criticised for not self-identifying as African American or for being a mixed race individual who “use[s] their ‘minority’ status to gain an advantage while stopping short of embracing their Black heritage and the Black community in general.”<sup>7</sup> According to *Ebony*, Beals claimed she thought she would never get into Yale University. But, as a minority, she was “lucky”: “I’m not Black, and I’m not White,

so I could mark ‘other’ on my application, and I guess it’s hard for them to fill that quota.”<sup>8</sup> From *Flashdance* (1983) in which, as a “black” actress playing a “white” character, she passes as white, as some would have it,<sup>9</sup> to *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), in which she plays a character passing as white, to *The L Word*, in which she plays self-consciously with her perceived previous engagements with passing, the Bette-Yolanda exchanges reveal the multiple textual layers at which passing can operate even over the twenty years of Beals’s career.<sup>10</sup>

Equally, the Bette-Yolanda exchanges reveal the contiguity of apparently distinct categories of identity and, by extension, the possibility that multiple types of passing – race, gender, sexual, religious – intersect and impinge upon one another. In this instance, as in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), those categories are race and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> If Yolanda censures Bette for passing as white, then Bette retaliates by accusing Yolanda of passing as straight. Bette’s claim that Yolanda is “not exactly readable as a lesbian” speaks to Yolanda’s point that Bette’s own African American ancestry is not corporeally legible to the other members of the group. It is significant, however, that Bette’s “blackness” is visible to the only other African American member of the group, Yolanda. Amy Robinson posits the narrative of passing as a triangular relationship between passer (here, this is Bette), duped (the other members of the group) and the in-group clairvoyant who can “see” what/who the passer “really” is (Yolanda). Robinson argues that “[t]hroughout the literature of racial and sexual passing, members of the in-group insist on a distinctive location that allows them to recognize a never truly hidden prepassing identity.”<sup>12</sup> However, in this case, the blackness of Bette’s ambiguously-raced body is legible to Yolanda in a way that Yolanda’s sexuality is most decidedly *not* legible to Bette. Why is it that even in narratives that emphasise the interdependence and interaction of different identity

categories, racial identity – especially if this corresponds to “blackness” – seems to trump all others?

Of supreme importance for the purposes of this thesis, therefore, is the fact that Bette does not realise Yolanda is a lesbian until she reads one of Yolanda’s poems, in which Yolanda describes herself as “a black, socialist, feminist lesbian, working to overthrow the white, male, capitalist patriarchy.” The text of Yolanda’s poem thus replaces the text of her body in exposing her sexuality. One of my main concerns throughout this work is to interrogate the ways in which written texts serve, alternately or simultaneously, to fix or free up the identity categories that their authors, for whatever reasons, are seeking to conceal, evade or transcend. In other words, can one be “given away” by a written text? Or, conversely, is it possible to disguise oneself through the disembodied act of writing? Is it significant, I wonder, that in novels that *thematise* passing, their authors frequently disguise the *form* of their novels? I examine texts in which protagonists not only play at racial and gender identities, but where authors play on the boundaries between novel and other types of textual production, between fiction and history, between novelistic genres, between author(ial persona) and protagonist. I analyse novels that pass as memoirs, a mock *Bildungsroman*, a “mild genuflection to the detective form,”<sup>13</sup> a novel-within-a-novel. I examine narratives whose dramatic impetus often derives from embedded documentation – letters, emails, poems, medical reports, dictionary or encyclopaedia entries. *All* of the novels I discuss challenge conventions of form which, in a postmodern context, one would imagine to be *de rigueur*. Why is it, then, that some of the authors of such texts have found themselves charged with “inauthenticity”?

## Déjà Vu All Over Again?

This thesis challenges the traditional historiography of the narrative of passing by deploying a *fin-de-siècle* framework. Existing critical studies of racial passing narratives concentrate predominantly on fiction published in the period from the 1890s to the end of the Harlem Renaissance. This is the case in studies by Kathleen Pfeiffer (1892-1929), Mar Gallego (1912-1932), Carlyle Van Thompson (1900-1932) and Stephen J. Belluscio (1891-1931).<sup>14</sup> Juda Bennett locates the beginning of the black-to-white passing narrative in “antebellum works [. . .] peaking with the literary output of the Harlem Renaissance.”<sup>15</sup> Werner Sollors observes that racial passing is “particularly a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>16</sup> While some of these studies refer anecdotally to contemporary narratives of passing – Gayle Wald concludes *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* with a brief discussion of Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998) and Kathleen Pfeiffer references Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) in closing her book – none explore recent passing stories to account for their resurgence at the end of the twentieth century.

I consider texts from the late twentieth/early twenty-first century alongside those from the late nineteenth/early twentieth century in order to foreground a central question: are racial and gender ideologies prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century resurfacing at the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first? Is history repeating itself?<sup>17</sup> A chief contention of my work is that passing – in whatever form(s) it may take – returns at those moments in which there is a renewed faith in the body as a site of an immutable, unchangeable identity. In postmodern terms, I wonder if the supposed current “incredulity toward grand totalizing narratives” is yielding to a reinvigorated

sense of such Grand Narratives?<sup>18</sup> For instance, one medical zealot commenting as early as 1989 on the Human Genome Project, registers his complete faith in the Grand Narrative of genetics. He claims that “It’s going to tell us everything. Evolution, disease, everything will be based on what’s in that magnificent tape called DNA.”<sup>19</sup> In the latter years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, two other developments, besides the Human Genome Project, provide further evidence in this restored belief in the body as a site of definitive truth: first, what Eva Allegra Raimon describes as “a renewal and rearticulation of the United States’s long-standing fascination with interracialism”<sup>20</sup> and second, the increased reliance on bodily markers of identity in a post-9/11 context of policing U.S. borders. Taken together, it appears to me that these three developments are reminiscent of the discourse of scientific racism prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Elaine Showalter, writing in 1991, observes of *fin-de-siècle* moments that:

In periods of cultural insecurity, when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality, becomes especially intense. If the different races can be kept in their places, if the various classes can be held in their proper districts of the city, and if men and women can be fixed in their separate spheres, many hope, apocalypse can be prevented and we can preserve a comforting sense of identity and permanence in the face of that relentless specter of millennial change.<sup>21</sup>

Some commentators would no doubt perceive the yoking together of different *fin-de-siècle* periods as artificial and attempts to see commonalities between them as arbitrarily imposed. As Frank Kermode puts it, “we project our existential anxieties on to history; there is a real correlation between the ends of centuries and the

pecularity of our imagination, that it chooses always to be at the end of an era.”<sup>22</sup>

However, acknowledging the constructed nature of endings in general – and the *fin de siècle* in particular – does not make them any less powerful. As year 2000 approached, a flurry of academic studies of the previous *fin de siècle* appeared, along with numerous magazine and newspaper articles. If, as Frank Kermode observes, “the most famous of all predicted Ends is A.D. 1000,” then it is not surprising that Y2K emerged as charged with comparable symbolic power from which the contemporary novelists I discuss, most of them writing just before or just after the turn of the millennium, could not possibly have been immune.<sup>23</sup>

In their essay on the *fin de siècle*, Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken take issue with the “glib” parallels Elaine Showalter draws between the 1890s and the 1990s, cautioning against the temptation of “presentism,” that is “the reinterpretation of the past through the critical apparatuses and cultural preoccupations of the present.”<sup>24</sup> However, in his study, *Colored White*, David Roediger makes no apology for deploying what some would call a “presentist” framework, claiming that his “deliberate attempt to move back and forth in time, treating past and present in the same volume, in the same section of the book, and even in the same essay” is useful for identifying “a ‘usable present,’ which enables us to oppose racism today and to pose different and better questions about the past.”<sup>25</sup> Ledger and McCracken do concede, moreover, that the alternative to “presentism” – “rigid historicization” – is also inadequate.<sup>26</sup> The danger attached to rigid historicisation, I believe, is that it risks allowing the *fin de siècle* to exist in terms of its historical exceptionalism, evident, I think, in the reluctance of some to deploy the term *fin de siècle* in relation to any era but the period between the 1880s to 1914 or, even more specifically, the 1890s. In the title of my thesis, I deliberately use the somewhat awkward “*fins des*



*siècles*” in order to register my intention to view the 1990s to present as a historical era with as much validity as the same period in the previous centur(y)(ies).

Juxtaposing *fin-de-siècle* texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries enables me to view contemporary passing narratives as on a continuum with those that have gone before, challenging the tendency in studies of passing to view contemporary passing narratives as historical anomalies.

I have chosen the *fin de siècle* as a structuring framework due to its existence in the no man’s land of historical and cultural analysis, which reflects the in-betweenness of the fictional subjects with which I am concerned. As Ledger and McCracken argue, “within the discourse of literary and cultural criticism, the end of the nineteenth century has traditionally fallen somewhere (somewhere not very interesting) between the grand narratives of Victorianism and modernism.”<sup>27</sup> If the *fin de siècle*’s location between cultural epochs “disturbs traditional historiography,” the subject who is in-between in terms of his or her race or gender, so the argument goes, challenges the binaries of black and white, male and female and so on.<sup>28</sup> The parallel between the *fin-de-siècle* apparatus and the subjects I analyse is not just a neat coincidence, but is deeply embedded in the very structure of the works I examine. Passing is often spatially-dependent: one’s racial/gender transformation is necessarily accompanied by a change in the passer’s geographical location. In the novels I explore, geographical displacement, as a precondition of passing, is often accompanied by *historical* displacement. Almost all of them, with only one or two exceptions, take place at a complete historical remove from their time of composition and/or publication. One of their distinguishing features is the *coexistence* of tropes of geographical and historical displacement. The historical is bound up with the geographical which is, in turn, inextricable from the act of passing. The back-and-forth structure – what I would like to call the Janus face – of this thesis is

thus fundamentally compatible with the now/then dialectic of the passing narratives I discuss.

### Passing Contextualised

My understanding of “passing” will be elucidated throughout the chapters that follow in the contexts of the specific narratives. However, a working explanation of what I mean by the term is required here. Broadly defined, to “pass” is to appear to belong to one or more social subgroups other than the one(s) to which one is normally assigned by prevailing legal, medical and/or socio-cultural discourses. For example, to pass as white, if one is “black,” or male, if one is “female,” is to challenge assumptions that evidence of one’s race and/or gender is always visually available by relying upon a set of physical characteristics considered immutable – skin colour, hair texture, fingernails, genitalia and so on. By contrast, to pass into a different class is more likely to be an invisible form of passing, predicated on the possibility of changing aspects of one’s identity related to, but existing at one step’s remove from, the body – dress, accent and so forth.

The word “appear” in my definition implies a degree of ambiguity between accident and design, between passing and being “passed.” For some scholars, such as Randall Kennedy, “passing requires that a person be consciously engaged in concealment.”<sup>29</sup> Contrary to Kennedy, I would argue that the origins of racial passing in American literary history are dominated overwhelmingly by (tragic) mulattas who *involuntarily* pass as white.<sup>30</sup> In order to avoid de-historicising the racial passing story, therefore, I think it is imperative not to discount subjects who pass unconsciously. Furthermore, as Gayle Wald reminds us, it is ultimately

impossible to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary passing for even where a conscious choice to pass is involved, “such choice occurs within the context of a negotiation of categories that are authorized by racial ideology and quite literally mandated by the state.”<sup>31</sup>

I have just described the (f)act of passing. How, then, has passing been interpreted? In his recent study, Stephen J. Belluscio distinguishes very usefully between two understandings of passing. In the first, “passing means to conceal a unitary, essential, and inefaceable racial identity and substitute it with a purportedly artificial one, as in the oft-discussed case of a light-skinned black person passing for white.”<sup>32</sup> The second is an understanding of passing that is

linked to performativity and that refers not to an assumption of a fraudulent identity but more broadly to ‘the condition of subjectivity in postmodernity,’ in which our Lyotardian distrust of totalizing metanarratives, when applied to identity, has caused us to focus not so much upon identity as a unitary, essentialized entity, but rather as a process-oriented performance drawing upon a seemingly infinite number of cultural texts, ‘ethnic’ or otherwise.”<sup>33</sup>

For Belluscio, the first perception of passing, associated with the studies of Gunnar Myrdal and St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in the 1940s, is rapidly, and understandably in a postmodern moment, giving way to the second.

I would argue that passing and postmodernism make compatible bedfellows not so much because passing has been appropriated by postmodernists as evidence of the possibility of endlessly deferring a stable identity but because passing so obviously enacts what Linda Hutcheon calls the “postmodern paradox.”<sup>34</sup> In making a claim for the political power of postmodernism, Hutcheon observes that “postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine

and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge.”<sup>35</sup>

Postmodernism’s political dimension is thus one of “complicitous critique.”<sup>36</sup> This paradox is the passer’s own: by “crossing the color line,” the passer *simultaneously* subverts and reinforces the racial binary. S/he subverts it by exposing its constructedness, its permeability, its instability. But in the very act of passing, s/he also reinforces it by granting authority and credibility to the mythical “color line” as a real and true boundary to be transgressed. As Amy Robinson puts it, “the social practice of passing is thoroughly invested in the logic of the system it attempts to subvert.”<sup>37</sup> For Phillip Brian Harper, this aspect of passing disqualifies it from carrying any political significance, though it may have critical significance.<sup>38</sup> Hutcheon’s construction reminds us, however, that Harper’s opposition between critical and political is a false dichotomy. How can any phenomenon with the potential for critique not also be political? Carole-Anne Tyler is closer to the mark when she describes passing as “not quite not resistance,” a concept that does manage to capture quite convincingly the paradox of passing.<sup>39</sup> In order to heed Gayle Wald’s warning against the reproduction of “a critical dualism of ‘subversive’ or ‘complicit’ passing that echoes the binary logic of race,” I thus find Hutcheon’s notion of “complicitous critique” the most convincing and helpful apparatus for interpreting the (f)act of passing.<sup>40</sup>

To return for a moment to Belluscio’s two understandings of passing, he cautions against privileging the second at the expense of the first, observing that:

while the latter notion of passing carries more critical currency in the postmodern era, we as critics cannot forget that many passing narratives written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are governed by

the logic of the first cultural notion, and our readings must be ever aware of this.”<sup>41</sup>

I insist upon the importance of retaining an awareness of both cultural notions for an additional reason. That is, the authors of the contemporary passing narratives I discuss often exist in an ambivalent relationship to postmodernism. While their protagonists may be permitted the luxury of an identity that is always already decentred, the same postmodernist principles are not often extended to the authors by publishers, critics and/or the reading public. Contemporary writers such as Percival Everett and Louise Erdrich may deploy postmodernist techniques in their writing, but they have been roundly criticised in some quarters for doing so.<sup>42</sup> One of the reasons for which passing is back, if indeed it ever went away, is that even in this postmodern moment, expectations of “authenticity” continue to be applied to authors who are considered “marginal” for various reasons, but most often because of their ethnic background. What I wish to emphasise throughout this dissertation is the interrelationship of the theme of passing in contemporary novels and the issues of authorship that are addressed in those same novels. I consider the implications of viewing the act of writing as itself a form of passing. Another way of formulating Belluscio’s two cultural notions is to distinguish between the substitution of one self for another and the (re)creation of multiple selves from an unstable position. If the first represents *erasure* of a self in order to invent another, the second emphasises *self-making*. The two are not mutually exclusive. This is borne out in the texts I examine, in which writing emerges as *both* an act of invention and of erasure, of creation and of destruction.

A central claim of this thesis, therefore, is that narratives of passing – racial passing in particular – have, from the outset been embedded in discourses surrounding

authorship and authenticity. Indeed, racial passing narratives in American literary history count among their number at least two notorious literary hoaxes. The novel which some claim contains the very first reference to racial passing in American literary history, Richard Hildreth's *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836), was initially believed to be a slave narrative but was actually a novel written by a white abolitionist.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, first published anonymously in 1912, was thought to be a "real" autobiography until it was reprinted under Johnson's name fifteen years later. In passing narratives, therefore, authorship, authenticity and genre become inextricably intertwined. Just as the light-skinned protagonist of a racial passing narrative challenges the binaries of black and white, so the form of the passing narratives I discuss often interrogates generic boundaries.

From the above discussion, two interrelated issues demand to be addressed. The first is the particular kinds of passing under examination here. The second is the privileged status of racial passing in this and, indeed, most studies of passing. As I suggested in my discussion of *The L Word*, this thesis is concerned with texts that thematise various forms of passing, particularly racial and gender passing, and the ways in which such narratives often contest other categories of identity, too, such as sexuality, religion and class. The danger is, of course, to set up racial passing as *the* "authentic" form of passing, to suggest that other types of passing are significant only in the extent to which they relate to racial passing. In a U.S. context, I would argue, it is impossible for it to be any other way. Where tales of cross-dressing and, indeed, many other forms of disguise are universal, racial passing is considered a uniquely American phenomenon. As Werner Sollors observes, the term "passing," as shorthand for "passing for white," is an Americanism not listed in the first edition

of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>44</sup> This situation is, as Gayle Wald and others have noted, attributable to the historical application of the one-drop rule, whose unilateral nature “ensures that in the United States ‘black’ people disproportionately bear the burden of racial representation.”<sup>45</sup> If, from its very etymological origins, the term “passing” always implies “racial passing” and “racial passing” always implies “passing for white”, it is understandable that an overwhelming number of studies of passing focus exclusively on this particular form of passing.<sup>46</sup>

I acknowledge from the outset the centrality of racial passing to this thesis, but I also insist upon the importance of challenging this situation. My attempts to do so differ greatly from those who have previously endeavoured to do the same. Wald’s solution is to examine examples of white-to-black masquerade alongside black-to-white passing stories. However, this merely serves to reinforce the supremacy of the white-black racial binary, allowing a whole spectrum of white identities and *non-black* communities of color to “pass” out of the picture. Meanwhile, Stephen J. Belluscio argues that the “critical apparatus of passing should be applied to the literature of white ethnic immigrant groups who came to the shores of the United States” from the 1880s to the 1920s.<sup>47</sup> His examination of black-to-white passing alongside novels written by Jewish and Italian Americans is certainly important. Unfortunately, his decision to discuss his chosen African American authors in separate chapters from his Jewish and Italian American writers produces the same effect as Wald’s black-white/white-black focus, reinscribing at structural level a fundamental white-black divide. I emphasise the importance of ethnic and national identity to discussions of white identities, but also to discussions of black and other nonwhite identities. In Robert Skinner’s Wesley Farrell series, for example, the protagonist who is passing as white is of “colored Creole” and Irish

ancestry, a complex nexus of identities which symbolically connects him to the diverse black slave (African), black free (Haitian), colonial (French and Spanish) and white immigrant (Irish, German) communities that have historically inhabited and interacted in New Orleans, a city that has long held a reputation as “a crossover site for heterogeneous nationalities and ethnic and racial groups.”<sup>48</sup> In Louise Erdrich’s novels, German American Agnes DeWitt cross-dresses as a male priest, while Pauline Puyat, of mixed Ojibway and white French Canadian heritage, passes as white in order to become a nun.

As Richard Dyer and others have argued, “whiteness accrues power precisely through its ability to ‘pass’ as universal and invisible.”<sup>49</sup> Cultural historians such as David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev and Matthew Frye Jacobsen have shown that only by exposing the constructedness and permeability of whiteness – including the existence of multiple whitenesses rather than a monolithic Whiteness – can its hegemonic power be overcome.<sup>50</sup> Equally, I argue in this thesis that only by revealing the instability of the category of blackness can the equation of “race” with “blackness” be disputed and ultimately dismantled. Accordingly, a further way in which this thesis challenges the overwhelming dominance of the black-to-white trajectory in discussions of passing is not only to interrogate whiteness as a fragmented category, but also blackness. If, as Belluscio argues, a white ethnic subject must “pass” in order to become “American,” can a “black” subject also “pass” in order to become “black”? In this dissertation, particularly in chapters one and four, I offer passing as black(er) as an under-theorised and increasingly common variation on the passing theme. In *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) and *Erasure* (2001), the protagonists are indisputably “black” according to the visual economy of race, the most oft-deployed means of ascertaining racial identity. However, they are seen as “white” or racially



ambiguous in terms of their class background, cultural affiliations, modes of behaviour and so on. Passing for black(er), the specifics of which I outline in more detail in Chapter One, thus allows for the examination of the heretofore under-explored relationship between racial passing and blackface minstrelsy. For instance, in her discussion of John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), in which the white author recounts his passing as black in the American South by using medications, cosmetics and a sunlamp, Gayle Wald does not once mention minstrelsy. Indeed, the term only appears on one occasion in her entire study, which is astonishing given that she focuses on instances of white-to-black as well as black-to-white passing. Although I may privilege racial passing here, then, I do not do so to the exclusion of other types of passing, as most other single-author studies do.<sup>51</sup> This thesis thus represents a unique attempt to integrate discussions of various typologies of passing (racial, gender, authorial) in a variety of literary genres. In Chapter Three, I put forward cross-dressing as a form of passing and also theorise what I call "cross-passing" – incidences of a subject passing "down" in terms of one category, but "up" in terms of another.

Like the protagonists of the novels I examine, the writers I foreground also come from diverse, or sometimes ambiguous, racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. I focus on writers who identify, respectively, as white, African American or mixed race, but this thesis also explores fiction by authors of Jewish American, German American-Ojibway and Greek American ancestry. The diversity of authors is yet another way in which I challenge the overwhelming critical preoccupation with the black/white racial binary in narratives of passing. It also paves the way for an exploration of the ways in which passing operates at a formal level. The contemporary texts with which I am concerned are preoccupied with the issue of

authorship: passing features as a plot device *and* as an authorial response to the demands of “authenticity” placed upon their authors. I define the “demands of authenticity” broadly: as the expectation or belief that certain writers are or should be treating the printed page as a stage upon which to describe their own personal experiences, even when their work is most emphatically fiction. It is no coincidence that among the novels of the eight contemporary authors I explore, six novels feature writer-protagonists, whether published authors (*Erasure*, *The White Boy Shuffle*), aspiring memoirists (*The Human Stain* [2000], *Middlesex* [2002]), a voracious letter-writer (*The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* [2001]) or a child writing a “novel” as a homework project (*Caucasia* [1998]).

One author in particular merits special mention because she emerges as a crucial figure in this thesis. In Chapters Two and Three respectively, Pauline Hopkins’s serialised novels, *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901-1902) and *Winona* (1902), are analysed. Hopkins was one of several African American women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose previously-neglected work was reclaimed by black feminist scholars from the mid-eighties on. Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate and Ann duCille, among others, focused their attention upon such writers as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Hopkins, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, all of whom deployed passing as a central theme in their fictions.<sup>52</sup> Since then, Hopkins has received long-overdue critical attention, notably in John Cullen Gruesser’s edited collection *The Unruly Voice: Rediscovering Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins* (1996) and Hanna Wallinger’s *Pauline E. Hopkins: A Literary Biography* (2005). Nonetheless, existing scholarly work on Hopkins is far from exhaustive, especially in relation to her most neglected text, *Winona*.

The diverse backgrounds from which the authors I explore come also enables me to explode the enduring, and deeply problematic, myth that African American writers simply write “better” “(tragic) mulatto/a” characters and/or passing narratives. This myth stems from the assumption that African American authors, because of their racial background, are better-positioned to write “authentically” about (tragic) mulattas and passing. For example, despite Suzanne Bost’s reluctance “to draw borders where borders are fluid,” she finds that characters created by African American writers are “more empowered and fluid” than the tragic mulatto heroines of white writers.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese claims that black women writers “have informed [the trope of the tragic mulatta] with a complexity that no black man or white woman has easily appreciated.”<sup>54</sup> And Jean Fagin Yellin asserts that “when African-American writers dramatize a woman of mixed race, she is very different from the Tragic Mulatto; this woman embraces her black identity, lives in the black community, and chooses a black man.”<sup>55</sup> Even Stephen J. Belluscio, who identifies the urgent need to move beyond “the African American canon” in order to explode the “black/white racial binary” surrounding passing narratives only examines one black-to-white passing narrative written by a non-black writer, William Dean Howell’s *An Imperative Duty* (1891).<sup>56</sup> These generalisations on African American representations of passing and the “(tragic) mulatto/a,” though understandable from a political standpoint, are quite simply misleading. The most complex and unique mulatto/passing character I have discovered in my research, the hardboiled detective Wesley Farrell, is the creation of a little-known white Southern writer called Robert Skinner.

## Fictions of Law and Custom

The title of this thesis refers to Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), in which the narrator observes wryly that although Roxy's son, Chambers, is "thirty-one parts white," he is, "by a fiction of law and custom a Negro."<sup>57</sup> Twain's imaginative configuration of race as "fiction," conjuring ideas of reading, writing and authorship, in his *fin-de-siècle* tale of racial passing and cross-dressing is a useful point of departure for this thesis. Indeed, Twain's influence is perceptible in several contemporary narratives of passing, from the epigraph to Percival Everett's *Erasure*, to the yoking together of plots of passing and detection, from the playfully-named pet dog Pudd'nhead in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (161) to the nature-nurture debate revisited in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*.<sup>58</sup>

In Chapter One, I begin with a brief discussion of Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982), moving on to explore *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (2002), Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), which also draws upon *Pudd'nhead Wilson* epigraphically, and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). I argue that in these novels, the acts of passing and writing are inseparable, especially where the racial "authenticity" of the author is in question. In Chapter Two, I examine the theme of passing and the "(tragic) mulatto/a" archetype as s/he appears in detective stories, arguing that, in the novels I discuss, the passing mulatto/a emerges not as a body of evidence, but as an active, sleuthing agent – most notably in Robert Skinner's Wesley Farrell series (1997-2002). In Chapter Three, I analyse texts which are concerned with the notion of the "frontier," as a term of both ideological and geographical reference. In these texts of racial and, more especially, gender passing – Pauline Hopkins's *Winona* (1902) and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) and *The*

*Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) – the frontier represents the point at which the dichotomies of black/white/Native, male/female and Christian/heathen collapse. In Chapter Four, I discuss two novels written in the first person which purport to be their protagonists' memoirs – *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) and *Middlesex* (2002) – and a third, *Caucasia* (1998), which, though fiction, self-consciously situates itself amid an array of mixed race memoirs published around the same time. Just as the protagonists' bodies are indeterminate in certain ways, so the *form* of the novels remains ambiguous. In my Conclusion, I draw together ideas from the entire thesis, but especially from Chapters One and Four, to interrogate the current fascination with memoir, especially the memoir of *trauma*, as a literary genre, and its relationship to passing. From Hildreth's *The White Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) to Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), to recent controversies involving J.T. LeRoy and Kaavya Viswanathan, the issues of "authenticity" and "passing," as both plot device and authorial strategy, remain inextricably linked.

## Chapter One

### Bodies / Texts: Passing and Writing as Acts of Creation and De(con)struction

“These marks are his signature, his physiological autograph, so to speak, and this autograph cannot be counterfeited, nor can he disguise it or hide it away, nor can it become illegible by the wear and mutations of time.”<sup>1</sup>

— Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894).

Passing, according to Juda Bennett, no longer seems to engage contemporary novelists: “The long list of authors from the first half of the twentieth century [. . .] is hardly balanced by the short list of contemporary writers who have addressed this figure of racial ambiguity.”<sup>2</sup> The “short list” which Bennett provides consists of Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982), Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998), Ralph Ellison’s *Juneteenth* (1999) and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000).<sup>3</sup> Bennett argues that contemporary novelists, specifically Toni Morrison, evoke the passing myth “without actually representing the phenomenon of passing, and in this way Morrison decenters and deforms the passing figure.”<sup>4</sup> This new kind of fiction, Bennett asserts, “requires our participation, promising wonderful opportunities for epiphanies that are no longer about theme or character but about the reading process itself.”<sup>5</sup> Thus Morrison’s short story, “Recitatif” (1983), calls readers’ attention to their preoccupation with reading race by revealing to the reader that one of the protagonists is white and the other black, but refusing to designate which is which.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I will interact with Bennett’s claims by examining a variety of texts that engage, either directly or indirectly, with the passing theme. My

contention is that the authors employ the passing theme to reflect self-consciously upon the process of writing. I posit passing as an authorial strategy. The act of racial passing causes us to question the degree to which the passer can control (and/or transcend) his or her (raced) body and how this body is perceived by others. Passing as an authorial strategy involves the self-reflexive exploration of the extent to which the author is in control of the text that s/he produces and how it is received. Laying bare the connections between passing and writing in contemporary novels promises to offer a fresh perspective on nineteenth-century racial passing stories. In other words, when passing is viewed as *both* a plot device *and* an authorial strategy, as is evident in the contemporary novels I discuss, it becomes clear that in nineteenth-century passing fiction, the subversive potential of passing is often realised not within the internal mechanisms of plot, but in the corresponding formal transgressions undertaken by early African American novelists. Thus, the prevalence of passing and light-skinned characters in the work of William Wells Brown and Frank Webb (who authored the first two African American novels to be published, in 1853 and 1857, respectively) has nothing to do with racial self-hatred, as some have claimed. Rather, these writers see in the trope of passing the potential for a self-reflexive exploration and negotiation of the kinds of boundaries affecting them as writers, among them generic boundaries (the transition from slave narrative to novel) and the limitations imposed by readers and publishers that they concern themselves with “appropriate” subject matter. Frank Webb’s Philadelphia-set *The Garies and their Friends*, for example, does not fit comfortably in the “anti-slavery novel” category.<sup>7</sup>

In the discussion that follows, then, I am interested in identifying continuities between nineteenth-century and contemporary representations of passing, and in

arguing that these continuities are inextricably bound up with the issue of authorship and the act of writing. Indeed, from the beginnings of African American writing, the tropes of reading, authorship and passing have been interrelated. Even with respect to the etymology of the word “passing,” the acts of passing and writing are closely intertwined. The term is believed to be derived from the written pass given to slaves so that they might travel without being taken for runaways.<sup>8</sup> One of the reasons that most slaveholding states prohibited the teaching of slaves to read and write was the danger that such passes could then be forged.<sup>9</sup> For a mixed race slave, white skin could function as an additional kind of pass, enabling them to escape more easily with less risk of detection.<sup>10</sup> Given this intimate relationship between passing, reading and (fraudulent) authorship, the narrative of passing is uniquely placed to offer veiled, or not-so-veiled, insights into authorial processes.

It is for these reasons that I open with a quotation from Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* which, as I note in the Introduction, ghosts a number of contemporary tales of racial passing. Like this thesis, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is notable for its Janus face: set predominantly in 1853, but published in 1894, its plot, featuring a murder case solved by recourse to fingerprints, now appears almost prescient. Twain’s evocation of the “signature,” the “autograph” and its (il)legibility in relation to fingerprints resonates with conceptions of authorship and authenticity, and the connections between the two. A signature serves to authenticate a document, confirming the identity of its author and/or the veracity of its content. In this chapter, the novels I examine foreground such a slippage between body and text, particularly as this pertains to the idea of authorial authenticity implied by the “signature” or “autograph.”



It is no coincidence, therefore, that the novels I discuss all feature author-protagonists. I explore Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) alongside a recently-discovered nineteenth-century passing narrative, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (2002) and a contemporary black-to-white passing story, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). *Erasure*, by the prolific, but relatively little-known, African American novelist Percival Everett, tells the story of a black author, Thelonious Ellison, nicknamed "Monk," lacking in recent publishing success because, as his agent tells him, his writing is "not black enough."<sup>11</sup> Finding himself suddenly responsible for caring for his aging mother and struggling financially, he pens a satirical ghetto novel under the pseudonym of Stagg R. Leigh. As Stagg R. Leigh, Monk thus passes for black(er). Taken at face value, the novel – initially called *My Pafology* but later retitled *Fuck* – is an updated version of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and enjoys both critical and popular acclaim. *Erasure* ends on the cusp of Monk's exposure, when his novel is adjudged the winner of a literary prize by a panel of experts of whom he himself is a member. *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, which appeared in 2002, is a nineteenth-century passing narrative which has occasioned intense speculation regarding its author's racial and gender identity. Finally, *The Human Stain*, the work of the prolific and canonical Jewish American writer, Philip Roth, is the life story of Coleman Silk, a disgraced college professor forced to resign two years previous to the novel's 1998 opening for employing what was construed as a racial epithet ("spooks") in relation to two African American students. Silk, who has been presenting himself as white, and subsequently Jewish, since entering the navy as a white man in 1944, was born into a black family with whom he severs all contact after deciding to marry a Jewish woman, Iris Gittelman, in 1953.

Before continuing, it is necessary to explain precisely what I mean by some of the terms that will arise in the discussion that follows. This chapter pivots upon *Erasure* because it allows for the articulation of two under-theorised dimensions to passing. The first is the notion of passing for black(er). Phillip Brian Harper, elucidates two types of racial passing in the U.S. context – the “standard racial pass,” in which “a light-skinned person legally designated as black passes for white” and the “reverse racial pass,” in which “a person legally recognized as white effectively functions as a non-white person in any quarter of the social arena.”<sup>12</sup> The passing as black(er) in which Monk Ellison is engaged thus offers a potential solution to or, at the very least, a different perspective on, the “problem” that passing tends to re-inscribe the categories it purports to explode. By passing as black(er), he thus exposes the arbitrariness of racial categories based on physical appearance in the same way as the “standard” or “reverse” racial pass. Passing as black(er) provides an opportunity to reconsider the rigid terms in which passing itself has been conceived and enables us to assess the ways in which what Michael Rogin calls America’s two tropes in race mixing – blacking up and the tragic mulatta who tries to pass – intersect each other.<sup>13</sup>

Second, Monk’s passing as black(er) is not effected in a *physical* sense. In other words, Monk does not, initially at least, present himself in person as something other than his “true” self, as the racial passer does in conventional passing stories. His passing is carried out through the act of writing. He assumes an authorial disguise, offering Stagg R. Leigh’s novel as a text to be read in place of Monk’s own body. This is what I mean when I distinguish between “incorporeal/disembodied” versus “corporeal/embodied” passing. That Monk subsequently finds himself obliged to incarnate Stagg R. Leigh speaks volumes about the degree to which

passing is obsessed with viewing body and text as one and the same, no matter how much Monk endeavours to separate them by substituting his written text for his body.

The final detour I wish to take before embarking on my main discussion is to refer briefly to Charles Johnson's 1995 Introduction to *Oxherding Tale* (1982), the earliest example of the contemporary renaissance in passing fiction. In his Introduction, Johnson deploys corporeal analogies to describe the authorial process, a process which is, significantly, gendered male: "Incarnating the idea – making it flesh – will stretch him, technically and emotionally, and that, of course, is precisely part of the project's appeal – how the doing of it will change *him*."<sup>14</sup> In the first sentence alone, Johnson uses five masculine pronouns in referring to "the artist." It is unsurprising, therefore, that when he uses reproductive metaphors to describe the process of writing *Oxherding Tale*, they are themselves gendered male.

The book's "seeds were sown" when the author was fourteen after his initial encounter with *dhyana*, a type of meditation common in Hinduism and Buddhism. Significantly, some years later, Johnson's artistic creativity is juxtaposed with the arrival of his first child. After he presents his editor with an outline for the novel, Johnson receives no advance for *Oxherding Tale*, "though I desperately could have used one, what with my wife and I having our first baby" (xiii). Only once does Johnson use a female reproductive analogy – when he describes the novel as "a labor of love" (xix) – and this is neatly placed to distinguish what he perceives as the artistic value of *Oxherding Tale* from "protest fiction and the literature of gender and racial victimization, which was beginning to ossify by the mid-1980s" (xix). Since Johnson contrasts *Oxherding Tale* with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), published in the same year, a similar opposition is established between Johnson's

black *male* creative fecundity (“labor of love”) and the sterility of black *female* artistic endeavours (“ossify”).

If, as I suggest in the title to this chapter, passing and writing are complementary acts of *simultaneous creation and destruction*, in Johnson’s Introduction, male writers emerge as endowed with creative ability, while female writers are scape-goated for stunting textual production that is truly “artistic.” “Art” equals creativity while “sociology” equals sterility, as borne out by Johnson’s claim elsewhere that it is for “sociological reasons, more so than for artistic ones, that Walker’s novel stands at the pinnacle of women’s writing in the 1980s.”<sup>15</sup> As Johnson sees it, Walker has compromised her “art” by writing of “the” African American experience (“sociology”) because such conceptions are defined by a white readership. Johnson’s attack on Walker in the mid-1990s recalls James Baldwin’s critique of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” nearly fifty years previously. According to Baldwin, writing in 1949, *Native Son* constitutes “a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy.”<sup>16</sup> Baldwin is referring here to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s bestseller, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), published almost a century prior to the appearance of his essay. In this way, Johnson’s Introduction and, as I will show, Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, symbolically connect their disapproval of Alice Walker to Baldwin’s critique of both Wright and Stowe. They resurrect critical debates on African American authenticity, literary minstrelsy and the role played by gender in such debates from the mid-twentieth and mid-nineteenth centuries, suggesting that these issues persist in the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century.

The literary form of *Oxherding Tale* – the neo-slave narrative – was itself a deeply-politicised response to a kind of literary minstrelsy. According to Ashraf

Rushdy, the authors of neo-slave narratives were motivated by a wish “to salvage the literary form of the slave narrative from what was generally thought of as its appropriation [by white authors] in the sixties,” notably William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967).<sup>17</sup> *Oxherding Tale* is a postmodernist text, its engagement with the slave narrative an example of what Linda Hutcheon would call a “critical reworking” of the past.<sup>18</sup> A key question posed in this chapter, and indeed in this thesis, is whether postmodernism offers the nonwhite writer authorial freedoms to which the (ex-)slave author, for example, did not have access. Or does Monk Ellison, who stages a literal enactment of Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author,” find that poststructuralism can only offer a way out if his readers place as much faith as he does in its principles?

In opening this chapter with an epigraph from Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, I echo Percival Everett, who begins *Erasure* by referring epigraphically to Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, but in a slightly more oblique way: “I could never tell a lie that anybody would doubt, nor a truth that anybody would believe.” Although this is a quotation from Twain’s *Following the Equator* (1897), in that work, Twain attributes his chapter heading quotations to the fictional character, Pudd’nhead Wilson, from his own 1894 novel. Apart from succinctly capturing the novel’s preoccupation with the slipperiness of notions of truth/falsehood and authentic/fake, Everett anticipates the actual author/fictional author layering which characterises *Erasure*’s novel-within-a-novel structure. Moreover, Percival Everett’s indirect reference to *Pudd’nhead Wilson* – which is consolidated by the book jacket blurb citing Greil Marcus’s summation of *Erasure* as “a tale worthy of Mark Twain” – anticipates the ways in which *Erasure* evokes nineteenth-century passing narratives in order to

elucidate debates over black authorship that have raged in African American letters for over one hundred and fifty years.

### Searching for Hannah Crafts

The continuities between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century debates that Everett explores in his 2001 novel are most profitably considered in the context of the timely appearance of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* the following year. Believed by many to have been penned by a fugitive slave some time between 1855 and 1861, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was published by Warner Books on 2 April 2002, some fourteen months after Henry Louis Gates, Jr. acquired the manuscript at auction for eight hundred dollars in February 2001. In his introduction, Gates recounts his meticulous campaign to determine the author's race, sex and legal status (slave or free).<sup>19</sup> Written in the mid-nineteenth century, but published at the turn of the twenty-first, the novel provides an opportunity for an analysis of the degree to which the contemporary literary scene is dominated by similar concerns to those which characterised the 1850s, particularly if the novelist is, or might be, African American.<sup>20</sup>

The significance of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, as Gates would have it, is that, if authenticated as authored by a fugitive slave, the novel may represent a unique opportunity to read a nineteenth-century African American text unmediated by white editors and sponsors:

Between us and them, between a twenty-first-century readership and the pre-edited consciousness of even one fugitive slave, often stands an editorial apparatus reflective of an abolitionist ideology, to some degree or another;

here, on the other hand, perhaps for the first time, we could experience *a pristine encounter* (Crafts xxxiii, emphasis added).

Gates is referring to white abolitionists' tendency to print authenticating documents before and after the slave narrative itself. A frontispiece portrait and testimonial letters declared that the subject existed and was who he said he was. According to Raymond Hedin, in the slave narrative, such editorial intervention:

relegates the narrator's words to the status of middle, defined, as all literary middles are, by its relationship to the beginning and the end, thus creating the impression that the narrative proper is a 'means' serving its white audience's 'ends.'<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, the framework of the Gates-edited *Bondwoman's Narrative* reproduces exactly such an effect of mediation. The two-hundred-and-thirty-four-page novel is sandwiched between Gates's introduction at the start (one hundred pages) and textual annotations, Joe Nickell's report on Crafts's handwriting, Appendices and other items at the end (a further seventy-eight pages). In other words, the reader of the Gates-edited *Bondwoman's Narrative* has about as much chance of "a pristine encounter" as with any African American-authored text published in the nineteenth century. As Benjamin Soskis puts it, "Gates has, in a way, inherited the role of the white abolitionists whose introductory remarks assured the reading public as to the authenticity of slave testimony."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Gates's term "pristine encounter" is an interesting turn-of-phrase, implying that a text may be pure or indeed, impure, just as the "blood" of the passer is not, despite appearances, "pristinely" white.

*The Bondwoman's Narrative* describes the attempted escape of two mixed race women, one slave, and the other free. When Hannah, the light-skinned slave-narrator, discovers that her beautiful new mistress has black ancestry and is being

blackmailed by the ruthless lawyer, Mr. Trappe, who knows her secret, the two women flee Lindendale together. In this novel, therefore, there are two mulattas – Hannah’s beautiful mistress, the conventional “tragic mulatta,” and Hannah, a feistier, more proactive version. Born into property and privilege a free white woman, Hannah’s mistress is unable, in mind and body, to endure the prospect of being sold into slavery that attends her reversal of fortune and suffers an untimely death less than half way through the novel (Crafts 100). The slave, Hannah, on the other hand, passes up the opportunity to pass on at least one occasion (116). Not conventionally beautiful, (she is “excessively homely” [103]) Hannah can more easily deflect the lustful white male gaze. She eventually escapes to freedom, is reunited with her mother, marries and becomes a writer.

Significantly, the *plot*’s consideration of different kinds of disguise and passing is unintentionally ironic, given the contemporary preoccupation with ascertaining the racial identity of its author. If Monk sees himself as a “hermeneutic sleuth,” (Everett 31) then the publicity surrounding the publication of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* demonstrates the degree to which the author of a text may find him or herself the object, rather than the subject, of an investigation. In Warner Books’ Press Release, Henry Louis Gates is cast as a kind of sleuth by his fellow scholars.<sup>23</sup> Nellie Y. McKay says: “Once again, the field of black literature and culture is the beneficiary of Professor Gates’s incredible investigative” and David Brion Davis calls the novel a “spectacular discovery” and an “astonishing tale of meticulous research and detective work.”<sup>24</sup> Gates himself, writing in the *New York Times*, describes the time when he “began to investigate the author’s identity.”<sup>25</sup> This enquiry into the racial identity of the author as a form of sleuthing is underlined by the expertise offered by Dr. Joe Nickell, “an historical-document examiner” who



has also worked as a private investigator.<sup>26</sup> Excerpts from Nickell's report, which is appended in full at the end of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, are quoted by Gates in his introduction to the novel.

Gates also includes an essay by Nickell in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman's Narrative*. In "Searching for Hannah Crafts," Nickell reinforces the notion of the author as the subject of a criminal investigation, an idea present in the title of the collection and the almost-identical title of Nickell's essay. He offers "an updated profile of 'Hannah Crafts.' We are still looking for a female writer, who was relatively young at the time of composition, which dates from between 1855 (the escape of Wheeler's slave, Jane Johnson) and 1861 (the advent of secession and war)."<sup>27</sup> What is also fascinating about Nickell's essay, is the degree to which he personifies the manuscript of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, introducing a slippage between author and text. Gates and Laurence Kirschbaum of Time Warner Trade Publishing gave him "a wonderful opportunity to meet the mystery author when they commissioned me to authenticate the manuscript" and Nickell "lived with it for six weeks."<sup>28</sup> In the absence of the author's material body which can be read, the author's race and gender are read through his or her textual output.

In *Erasure*, Monk attempts to avoid this kind of conjecture by passing through the act of writing. Just as the protagonists of passing narratives attempt to negotiate the binaries of black and white, employing a passing plot is a strategy which reveals the author's self-reflexive attempt to (con)test the boundaries affecting him or her as a writer. The key issue for both Monk Ellison and Hannah is the relationship between the black body that *generates* a text to be read (the African American author) and the black body that, in white America, has *constituted* (and

still constitutes) a text to be read. Thus, publishers, critics and the reading public alike demand that Monk explore subjects that *they* deem appropriate to his racial affiliation because they have seen and *read* the author's photograph on one of his book jackets (49). Everett thus highlights the tendency within the publishing industry to reduce the African American author to his or her race(d body).

Monk Ellison has heretofore striven for artistic transcendence by simply ignoring race in his writing. Unfortunately, this strategy is not landing him any lucrative book deals. *Fuck* is not Monk's first attempt at writing naturalistic fiction. In 1988, he enjoyed some mild success with a "realistic" novel called *The Second Failure*, "about a young man who can't understand why his white-looking mother is ostracised by the black community" (69). After his mother commits suicide, the protagonist "realizes that he must attack the culture and so becomes a terrorist, killing blacks and whites who behave as racists" (70). Like Charles Johnson, who writes of his "misery-filled protest stories about the sorry condition of being black in America," which he "could not read [. . .] after they were done," Monk "hated writing," "hated reading" and "hated thinking about" *The Second Failure* (70).<sup>29</sup> Of course, the novel is aptly-named, for *Fuck* is nothing if not a "second failure" for Monk, a novel that exploits a *different* though equally widespread, popular and easily recognisable stereotype of black life and which, like *The Second Failure*, also sells well. Through *The Second Failure*, Everett connects the over-determination of the tragic mulatta in African American fiction to the contemporary literary stereotype comprised of Van Go Jenkins, the protagonist of *Fuck*, and his ilk. By engaging in an act of authorial (and thus invisible) passing, Monk hopes to transcend his raced body and simultaneously expose and explode the prevalence and increasing commodification of degrading racial stereotypes. In so doing, Everett explores

whether such incorporeal passing might be more liberating and perhaps empowering than the embodied passing of countless literary tragic mulattas, or whether one's textual output can ultimately be detached from its author's body.

Hannah, the narrator of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, also attempts to transcend her body through writing. For Hannah, the act of writing – which is configured as her possession of artistic vision – is a strategy for taking command of the gaze that would otherwise control her white-looking slave body. She immediately anticipates accusations that she does not have the requisite learning to attempt “to write these pages” by positing her skills at “observing things and events” (5). Instead of books, Hannah studies “faces and characters” (27). Just as the passer conceals, wittingly or unwittingly, his or her African American heritage, Hannah (in a self-reflexive nod from the author) hides the book she is using to teach herself to read (Crafts 7). What Hannah attempts to avoid *within* the text of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is the kind of speculation *surrounding* the publication of the text: the obsession with posthumously circumscribing the body of its author. Henry Louis Gates's introduction cites Joe Nickell's suspicion that the author of the manuscript “was probably a young woman who lacked a formal education, judging from her ‘serviceable’ handwriting, her ‘relative slowness’ in writing, and her ‘eccentric’ punctuation, to say the least.”<sup>30</sup> The absence of the (presumably long-deceased) author's body from the debate does not preclude his or her body being read as female through his or her handwriting. In other words, penmanship – what one might imagine to be a form of *disembodiment* – ultimately cannot be divorced from the writer's body.

The implications of the intense critical scrutiny of the author's handwriting become even more pointed when one considers the extent to which the narrator

desires to repel the gaze that would read her body and counter it by learning how to read herself. Early in the novel, Hannah juxtaposes a body-as-text motif alongside her own desire to acquire literacy. In one paragraph, she bemoans the injustice of a society that condemns those of African ancestry to a life of slavery, especially since her “complexion was almost white, and the obnoxious descent could not be readily *traced*” (6, emphasis added). Here, she posits her body’s resistance to being read as black. A few lines later, she expresses her earnest wish to learn how to read. She is thus attempting, firstly, to avoid being read as black and to shift the focus away from her body altogether and secondly, to empower herself by acquiring literacy. She wishes to be the agent and not the object of an act of reading. However, even if she is not immediately read as black, her white-looking slave body will still be read – as evidence that unsanctioned miscegenation has taken place. Or as Karen Sánchez-Eppler puts it, “the less easily race can be read from this [light-skinned] flesh, the more clearly the white man’s repeated penetrations of the black body are imprinted there.”<sup>31</sup>

Hannah’s white slave body disrupts the comfortable correspondence (black equals slave, white equals free) constructed by white, antebellum America, and exposes the fallacy that one’s race is bodily inscribed. The myth that certain physical clues – such as dark skin or kinky hair – can provide categorical evidence of one’s racial identity is a recurring motif in nineteenth-century narratives of racial passing, of which *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is an example.<sup>32</sup> The absence of such markers on the white-but-legally-black body enabled the passer to transcend his or her socially-prescribed status. In legal terms, the white-looking black body was thus conceived as a “forgery by nature.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, the passer’s apparent freedom to choose his or her race and by extension, social status, is double-edged

because in order to erase his or her legal blackness, the passing figure must always depend on the evidence of his or her physical whiteness. In other words, the body still constitutes a *text* but in order to pass, he or she relies on being read as white rather than black. The passer can thus transcend his or her social status, but can never transcend his or her body.<sup>34</sup>

Hannah's efforts to call attention to her acquisition of literacy and simultaneously deemphasise her body-as-text are reminiscent of the circumstances surrounding the production of nineteenth-century slave testimony, in which the ex-slave's *narrative* focus on his or her acquisition of literacy is counterbalanced by his or her *actual* post-publication treatment as a type of text by the reading (in both senses) public. It was not enough for the ex-slave to *describe* in writing the acquisition of literacy (and by extension, confirm his or her authorship of the text). His or her body was summoned as an additional source of evidence of the truth of the slave experiences reported. Literacy is an important skill for the slave to acquire, but it in no way guarantees the autonomy that it may, on the surface, appear to promise. This point is quite forcefully made in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, when Hannah is obliged to take down a letter dictated to her by her would-be mistress. Mrs. Wheeler is attempting to acquire Hannah at a knock-down price, so she writes to her owner and claims that he should sell her because she is tearful and over-religious and "would be likely to run away the first opportunity" (153). Hannah hesitates "to pen such a libel" on herself but although she is doing the writing, she has no control over what she is writing. Thus, any agency that the ex-slave subject acquires by producing an account of his or her life experiences is tempered, and even negated, by the reading public's repeated denial of such subjectivity through the objectification of the slave body, a seemingly required companion text to his or

her written narrative. Indeed, the importance of authenticity was not always imposed exclusively by a white sponsor. Some former slaves saw the potential for their own empowerment in the provability of their tales. James Pennington, for example, proclaims that “The facts in this case are my private property.”<sup>35</sup> Conversely, Monk Ellison is a man “without a decent lie to call my own” (Everett 58).

In fact, the treatment by abolitionists of the ex-slave body as a type of text was an effect of their fear of passing, albeit a different kind of passing: the very real possibility that black or white writers would impersonate ex-slaves by producing ersatz slave testimony. To ensure the effectiveness of their political agenda, abolitionists depended on the absolute veracity of slave narratives, for a narrative written by white abolitionists could quickly be dismissed as propaganda by slaveholders and their sympathisers.<sup>36</sup> False testimony could irreparably damage their campaign. To circumvent the risk of slave narrative hoaxes, abolitionists encouraged ex-slave authors to present themselves on the lecture circuit to be interrogated by an audience about their experiences, and to display their scarred bodies as evidence of the torture they endured as slaves.<sup>37</sup> The inhumane institution that was slavery could thus literally be read upon the bodies of fugitive slaves and their corporeal presence became the most effective means of authenticating their written tales.

Similarly, in *Erasure*, various interested parties express a desire to meet Stagg R. Leigh in the flesh. In the case of Paula Baderman, his Random House editor, Monk declines, preferring the disembodied disguise offered by the telephone. However, when Hollywood producer, Wiley Morgenstein, offers him three million dollars for the film rights to the book, he agrees to a meeting. He also appears on the

Kenya Dunston show, a thinly veiled parody of Oprah's Book Club, but is interviewed behind a screen. Despite his best efforts at authorial disembodiment, therefore, Monk finds himself obliged to incarnate Stagg R. Leigh. This culminates in the ceremony for the literary award which Monk attends as both a judge and, as Stagg R. Leigh, the winner. Of course, the necessity of the bodily presence of ex-slave authors on the lecture circuit was a situation that arose largely of the abolitionists' own making. The power of slave testimony lay in its *representative* rather than in its individual value, the message being that the institution of slavery itself is inherently wrong, not just the mistreatment of individual slaves at the hands of individual slaveholders. For this to be understood, slave narratives needed to be written in a form recognisable to and comfortable for a white readership. Thus, while the value of a slave narrative rested on its authenticity, "authenticity depended on strict adherence to a set of generic conventions."<sup>38</sup>

### Suffering Biographies

The slave narratives evidence a tension between the demand that each individual's autobiography be true and verifiable and that it also be representative of "an undifferentiated sameness of existence" under slavery.<sup>39</sup> This conflict between individuality and representative sameness persists today in the expectation that African American authors – and, arguably, all "ethnic" writers and writers of color – should at once write from personal experience (autobiography) *and* of "the" African American (or "ethnic") experience in general (sociology). In *Erasure*, these demands – and indeed, the tension between them – emerge in two ways. By evoking the Kenya Dunston show, Everett satirises the insistence that the (African American)

author write autobiography.<sup>40</sup> Through allusions to Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man* (1952), Everett dramatises the expectation that the African American author produce sociology.

In *Erasure*, the attempt to resolve the seemingly-incompatible demands of autobiography and sociology is evident in the publicity surrounding the appearance of Juanita Mae Jenkins's book, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, the novel which serves, in part, as Monk's motivation in writing *My Pafology*.<sup>41</sup> When Monk sees Jenkins on the Kenya Dunston show, she reveals that she is from neither the [rural] South nor from [urban] Harlem, the acceptable bastions of an authentic African American identity, but from Akron, Ohio (Everett 61). Her inspiration for the novel derives from having spent "a couple of days" in Harlem with relatives when she was twelve years old. But despite the fact that biographical details do not accord with "authentic" African American identity, as perceived by the reading public, this does not disqualify her from praise for writing convincingly and representatively of "the" African American experience. Thus, one reviewer extols the "verisimilitude" of Jenkins's novel, noting that "one can actually hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America" (46).

Oprah's Book Club is known for emphasising the redemptive possibilities of reading (auto)biography. Oprah, who launched the Book Club in 1995, testifies to such potential when she describes the experience of reading the first volume of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: "I was a colored girl, raised by my grandmother, living in an impoverished town just like her. Maya Angelou grew up to be Maya Angelou. It was my life – it was the possibility for *my* life."<sup>42</sup> Reading Angelou's autobiography, Winfrey appears to suggest, effected the



course of her own life story. This emphasis on factual experience is, in turn, the cornerstone for Winfrey's book club shows, applying to all, and not just the African American authors, that she chooses.<sup>43</sup> By encouraging her audience to read the novels she selects as, to some extent, autobiographical, her readers are, according to Eva Illouz, "solicited to actively incorporate the novels in their lives."<sup>44</sup> What is significant about Angelou's book, moreover, is that it is not only an autobiography but is, like the majority of novels chosen for the Book Club, what Illouz would term, a "suffering [auto]biography."<sup>45</sup> According to D.T. Max, an "Oprah-type book" is easily identifiable:

the narratives she has chosen are overwhelmingly by women – 22 out of 28.

In eight novels, young women are abused, raped or murdered. A dozen men commit adultery or act abusively toward their families. Women nurture, men threaten.<sup>46</sup>

Yet as Max subsequently acknowledges, Winfrey did not invent the kind of fiction she promotes: "Publishers have been selling it for 15 years with some success, especially since the breakthrough of 'The Color Purple.'"<sup>47</sup> Alice Walker's 1982 novel is one of Winfrey's favourite books<sup>48</sup> – indeed, she plays Sofia in Steven Spielberg's 1985 adaptation of the novel for the screen – and has been the subject of much condemnation by black male writers. For instance, in *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), Ishmael Reed indicts black women writers, such as Walker, who, he feels, allowed themselves to be conscripted to a white feminist agenda in their unforgiving representations of African American men. Interestingly, although Charles Johnson has not been slow to criticise Walker, he describes *Reckless Eyeballing* as "a novel I'd have been too chicken to write."<sup>49</sup>

Oprah's Book Club has also met with the disdain of male writers, most famously, in the furore involving Jonathan Franzen that unfolded towards the end of 2001. Franzen's novel, *The Corrections*, was Oprah's forty-third book club selection in September of that year. After registering, in several interviews, his uneasiness with his novel being branded with the "Oprah" logo and adjudging his novel unsuitable for the book club because his work belongs "solidly in the high-art literary tradition," Oprah withdrew her invitation to Franzen to appear on the show because he was "seemingly uncomfortable and conflicted about being chosen as an Oprah's Book Club selection."<sup>50</sup> Some women writers reacted with anger to Franzen's snub of the Book Club, interpreting his comments as a judgement on the artistic abilities of the (predominantly female) authors of Oprah's selections.<sup>51</sup>

However, in Franzen's essay on the controversy, in which he recounts the visit of an Oprah crew to St. Louis, Missouri, to shoot background material for the show, he attributes his impatience with Oprah's Book Club to its insistence on the autobiographical content of his novel. Although he has been living in Manhattan for twenty-four years, for the benefit of Oprah's viewers, he pretends "to arrive in the Midwestern city of his childhood [and the setting for the novel] and reexamine his roots."<sup>52</sup> He is also filmed at a local Museum of Transportation:

I have no particular fascination with trains and I've never been to the museum, but a transportation museum makes a cameo in *The Corrections*, and one of the novel's main characters is a railroad man. So my job is to stand or walk near trains and look contemplative. I do this for an hour.<sup>53</sup>

He does, however, draw the line at being filmed in front of his old family home, despite the producer's offer to obtain permission from the current owners. What the Franzen affair shows is the near impossibility of determining whether the male

author's derision is directed towards Oprah's insistence on (auto)biography over "art," or whether his disdain is a gendered response to the predominantly feminine leanings of the Book Club's authors and readers. To what extent, then, is the disapproval of Charles Johnson and Ishmael Reed (of Alice Walker), of Monk Ellison (of Juanita Mae Jenkins) and Jonathan Franzen (of Oprah's Book Club) less about art (and, in the cases of Johnson, Reed and Ellison, about race) than gender?<sup>54</sup>

The two are linked. For with "major" white male writers – such as Philip Roth – the use of autobiographical material in their fiction does not preclude their work from being considered "literary" or their themes universal. On the other hand, for those less established white male writers – such as Franzen – or, in an even more profound way, for authors who are women, "ethnic" and/or writers of color, the assumption that their work must be autobiographical stems from the conviction that marginal(ised) authors must write as an act of testimony, and their fictionalised individual experiences can never be of universal significance. When Oprah's film crew shot footage of him in the Midwest, what Franzen was objecting to, I suspect, was not that they drew attention to the autobiographical details in *The Corrections per se* (for Roth mines his own life but is "solidly in the high-art literary tradition") but the *association* of this true-life material with the "suffering biographies" of Oprah's book club.

In *Erasure*, if Monk's *My Pafology* is a reaction to Juanita Mae Jenkins's *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, it is also an updated version of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), which was itself a Book-of-the-Month selection, the first novel by a black writer to be so chosen.<sup>55</sup> That *Erasure*'s protagonist is called Thelonious Ellison, who writes *My Pafology* under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, is also of great significance.<sup>56</sup> In evoking (Ralph) Ellison and Wright, Everett refers to critical

debates from the 1950s even more explicitly than Charles Johnson in his Introduction to *Oxherding Tale*. James Baldwin's claim in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" that "literature and sociology are not one and the same"<sup>57</sup> provoked a rebuttal from Jewish intellectual, Irving Howe, who counter-argued that the sociology of a Negro's existence "formed a constant pressure on his literary work, and not merely in the way this might be true for any writer, but with a pain and ferocity that nothing could remove."<sup>58</sup> Upon the literary work of the Negro writer, Howe appears to suggest, the anguish of Negro life is indelibly inscribed. In Howe's construction, any novel by an African American author is, by definition, a "suffering [auto]biography." Howe's essay, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in turn precipitated an exchange with Ralph Ellison, who writes in "The World and the Jug" that "the question of how the 'sociology of his existence' presses upon a Negro writer's work depends upon how much of his life the individual writer is able to transform into art."<sup>59</sup>

What is particularly striking about Ellison's essay is that, on two occasions, he mentions racial passing. First, he notes that:

although the sociologists tell us that thousands of light-skinned Negroes become white each year undetected, most Negroes can spot a paper-thin 'white Negro' every time simply because those who *masquerade* missed what others were forced to pick up along the way  
[. . .].<sup>60</sup>

Quite apart from Ellison's fascinating conflation of "paper" and "passing" – once again evoking the pale-skinned black body as a type of text – his use of the verb "masquerade" is an interesting choice because Ellison's interpretation of Howe's essay is that "in addition to a hero, Richard Wright, it has two villains, James

Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, who are seen as ‘black boys’ *masquerading* as false, self-deceived ‘native sons.’”<sup>61</sup> Howe, as Ellison would have it, sees Baldwin and Ellison as “masquerading” (or “passing”) for American writers, “phonies” who are “guilty of filial betrayal” because they are “actually ‘black boys.’”<sup>62</sup> Ellison, in his second reference to passing, draws together the notions of “passing” and “masquerade” and thus turns Howe’s critique against him, indicting Jewish intellectuals (such as Howe) for “their facile, perhaps unconscious, but certainly unrealistic, identification with what is called the ‘power structure.’ Negroes call that ‘passing for white’” (173).

Everett’s invocation of these literary debates from the 1950s and 1960s is reinforced by *Erasure*’s nods to Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952). Towards the end of the novel, Monk sees a billboard saying “Keep America Pure,” echoing the Liberty Paint slogan from *Invisible Man* (Everett 272).<sup>63</sup> There are also numerous references to Ellison’s chameleon character, B.P. Rinehart (184, 238, 242, 245). Of course, *Invisible Man* is not a passing narrative, but its tropes of seeing, blindness and invisibility, along with the protagonist’s putting on masks are strongly reminiscent of the passing tradition in African American literature.

In fact, *My Pafology* recalls one of the great passing narratives and African American literary hoaxes of the twentieth century, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which was, according to Donald Goellnicht, James Weldon Johnson’s attempt “to gain credibility and a market for his text by trading on the importance of autobiography in early African American writing.” Published anonymously in 1912, complete with an authenticating preface by “The Publishers” (reminiscent of those of William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child), it purported to be an autobiographical account of a light-skinned African American man who definitively

“crosses the color line” to live as white. Many readers believed it to be a true story, what Johnson intriguingly calls “a human document.”<sup>64</sup> Reissued in 1927 with the author’s name and an introduction by Carl Van Vechten, Johnson acknowledges in his actual autobiography that his decision to write *Along this Way* was to some degree motivated by his readers’ tendency to collapse author and character, to conflate human writer with fictional document (*ATW* 239).

Given the notoriety of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and the mystery surrounding its authorship, it is unsurprising that Johnson’s novella is an important intertext for Everett. When Monk first encounters *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto* in Borders bookstore on a quest to locate one of his own books, it is described in terms of a search for his reflection in a mirror: “I went to Literature and did not see me. I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me [. . .]” (34). This episode is evocative of black-to-white passing narratives, in which the protagonist’s encounter with his or her mirror image represents a crisis of racial identity. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, after his schoolteacher publicly designates him as “non-white,” the narrator rushes home to peer at himself in the looking glass.<sup>65</sup> Monk eventually “finds himself” in African American Studies, which foreshadows his subsequent attempt to manipulate such racial and marketing categories in writing *My Pafology*.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, the opening lines of *Erasure* are overtly reminiscent of those of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in which the secret of passing and inscribing that secret become inseparable. Johnson’s narrator begins by acknowledging “I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life” (*AE-CM* 1). Meanwhile, *Erasure*’s protagonist, Monk, commences in a similar confessional tone: “My journal is a private affair, but as I cannot know the time of

my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however unfortunately, to the serious consideration of self-termination, I am afraid that others will see these pages”

(Everett 3). The association of writing with self-termination is repeated elsewhere in *Erasure*, when Monk remembers that:

Throughout my teens and twenties I had killed myself many times, even made some of the preparations, stopping always at the writing of the note. I knew that I could manage nothing more than [sic] a perfunctory scribble and I didn’t want to see that, have my silly romantic notions shattered by a lack of imagination (159).

Later still, Monk admits that *My Pafology* is not a work of art, “but more a thing to mark, a warning perhaps, a gravestone certainly” (234).

In *Erasure*, writing – an act of self-generation – is repeatedly juxtaposed with the ultimate act of self-annihilation – suicide. The permanence and indelibility of a written record thus serves to highlight the comparative fragility of the body. The notion that Monk’s journal may incriminate him or expose him after his death foreshadows the novel’s subsequent revelations regarding Monk’s father, who takes his own life some time before the novel opens. After suffering four strokes, Monk’s father (a doctor) eventually shoots himself (13). However, he leaves instructions with his wife to burn some of his papers, which turn out to be letters he received from a woman with whom he had an affair (a white nurse) while they were both serving in the Korean War. The evocation of this interracial relationship recalls the conventions of nineteenth-century passing fiction, in which the death of the heroine’s father brings about the exposure of her mixed racial heritage, the revelation that her mother had black ancestry and that her parents’ connection was thus not a legal

marriage between two white people, but unsanctioned miscegenation. The light-skinned heroine is then invariably remanded into slavery.

In the nineteenth-century stories, the mulatta's racial and legal status is determined by her father's success or failure at arranging for documentation to be drawn up during his lifetime: manumission papers for his wife, in order that his marriage license will be legally binding, a will and so on. His daughter's identity, indeed, her very body, will be defined and circumscribed according to what is contained within these papers. Significantly, the father's good intentions and genuine attempts to regulate his irregular affairs during his lifetime are often posthumously foiled by the legal establishment, which has the final say in interpreting and authenticating the documents presented.<sup>67</sup> Thus, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the aptly-named Mr. Trappe becomes executor to Hannah's mistress's father's will and, having access to his papers, discovers "some important secret" therein (34). The secret is that the beautiful mistress is the daughter of a slave. It is fitting that Trappe, a lawyer who makes his living from linguistic ambiguity, is frequently depicted as surrounded by texts (35, 45). Of course, *Erasure* is not a black-to-white passing story but this explicit reference to his father's interracial relationship is nonetheless significant because, as in the nineteenth-century narratives, Monk's discovery of his father's affair and of the existence of a half-sister is framed in terms of the sudden appearance of heretofore unseen documents. Western society's profound investment in and dependence on the power of writing to record faithfully ensures that the message contained within a document, accurate or not, is nevertheless often accorded the status of absolute truth. Under the pseudonym of Stagg R. Leigh, Monk attempts to operate in the space between a text's capacity to incriminate or exonerate, enslave or liberate.



Monk writes *My Pafology* at a moment when he is experiencing financial strain. Following the death of his sister, who has shouldered most of the family's financial responsibilities, he is obliged to take a sabbatical from his academic position in California to return to Washington D.C. and care for his mother. The "element of reversal" in nineteenth-century passing narratives – "the sudden reversal of fortune" that will topple the beautiful mulatta from the pedestal of white mistresshood to the degradation of black female slavery – is thus also evident in *Erasure*.<sup>68</sup> More than a dramatic plot device, such reversals point squarely to the centrality of class issues in black-to-white passing fiction. Debates over the passer's racial authenticity frequently conceal more salient concerns over his or her class affiliation since passing allowed the passer to gain access to a more prosperous socio-economic sphere. Even light-skinned African Americans too dark to pass or choosing not to pass were more likely to belong to the upper echelons of black society, a throwback to the slavery times when mulattos and quadroons, like Hannah in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, were preferred as house workers and darker slaves were more likely to be field hands. Because of the (often) physical whiteness of the black bourgeoisie, upper-class African Americans are frequently portrayed as symbolically white. This is certainly the case with the bourgeois Ellisons, who are fortunate enough to have a home in Washington D.C. and a beach house in Maryland. For years, they have been faithfully served by Lorraine, their black housekeeper, whom they treat paternalistically. When Lorraine finally marries in old age, Monk tells one of her new in-laws, "She's like part of the family, [. . .]. She's been with us for years, my entire life" (219). This is reminiscent of the antebellum white myth of the extended plantation family, in which slave men and women were

considered part of a multiracial family, and were thus affectionately and patronisingly called uncles and aunts.

### Literary Blackface

In its preoccupation with class, *Erasure* exists at the intersection between what Michael Rogin calls America's two tropes in race mixing – blacking up and the tragic mulatta who tries to pass. The notion that the upper class African American is merely a white person in blackface is reflected in one of the key revisions Monk makes to *Native Son* in writing *My Pafology*. In Wright's 1940 novel, Bigger Thomas takes a job working for a wealthy, white family called the Daltons. In *My Pafology*, as Bigger-surrogate, Van Go Jenkins discovers to his surprise, Mr. Dalton is a black man (98 [28]). By making the Daltons black, Everett reveals the extent to which issues of class often masquerade as racial concerns. In *My Pafology*, Penelope Dalton is a black woman and the taboo of interracial desire between Bigger and Mary evoked in *Native Son* is, in *Erasure*, subordinated to the issue of class. As a novel-within-the-novel reworking of *Native Son*, *Erasure* is indebted to blackface minstrelsy, suggesting that the mimicking of so-called black mannerisms and speech patterns and the performance of cultural stereotypes associated with blackface may equally be affected through writing as on the vaudeville stage.<sup>69</sup> In fact, when he sits down to write the novel, he is spurred on by passages remembered from Wright's novel, *The Color Purple* and, intriguingly, *Amos and Andy* (70). The explicit link established between *Native Son* and the long-running radio and television minstrel show, *Amos and Andy*, recalls James Baldwin's contention that social protest fiction like Wright's, despite its best intentions, perpetuates the very stereotypes it sets out

to undermine. That Monk sees *Native Son* and *Fuck* as reinforcing racial stereotypes – or generating new ones – is underlined by his imagining D.W. Griffith complimenting Wright on his book and Monk's subsequent claim that he "would rather have included the screenplay to *Birth of a Nation*" on the book prize shortlist than Stagg Leigh's *Fuck* (218, 266).

Stagg Leigh's novel as literary minstrelsy and its selection by Kenya Dunston reinforce the notion of the book as commodity, the sense in which the novelist's creative autonomy is inevitably compromised by the demands of the marketplace. After all, Oprah's Book Club selections have earned publishers an estimated 175 million dollars.<sup>70</sup> According to Susan Willis, blackface "is the metaphor for the commodity. It is the sign of what people paid to see. It is the image consumed, and it is the site of the actor's estrangement from self into role."<sup>71</sup> In applying metaphorical burnt cork, Monk registers his own upper-middle-class protest against the alienation he feels when he reads texts like *Native Son* and *The Color Purple*. To the characters in these novels who shout "*dint, ax, fo, screet and fahvre*," Monk wants to scream that "I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that" (70).<sup>72</sup> For Monk, *My Pafology* is a vicious satire of real and imaginary bestsellers such as *Native Son*, *The Color Purple* and, more specifically, Juanita Mae Jenkins's *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. However, although Monk resents the racist stereotyping evident in Jenkins's book as much as he would "a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars," because of his own privileged class position and Harvard education, he often succumbs to similar stereotypes himself (35). On a visit to his sister's women's clinic, he has a discussion with one of her patients about Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer. Monk is surprised at the woman's knowledge and

is forced to admit that he “had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither” (26).

### **Doctoring *Native Son***

If, in writing *My Pafology*, Monk quite literally doctors Richard Wright’s *Native Son* for a contemporary readership, then it is also true that narrative traces a perceptible shift in Monk’s depiction from writer to doctor after he pens the ghetto novel. Monk comes from a long line of doctors – grandfather, father, uncle, brother and sister – and his occupation as a writer initially sets him apart as a family anomaly. Lisa tells him he is “different” (31) and when he is still alive, his father is persistent in his claims that Monk is “an artist. He is not like us” (163). Before writing *My Pafology*, in other words, there is a clear delineation between those members of the Ellison family that (re)construct bodies, on one hand, and texts, on the other. Monk’s father, brother and sister, as doctors, are concerned with treating and transforming the body, while Monk, possessing a kind of artistic vision, has a special way of seeing things (9, 12).

Through repeated references to the family of doctors, Everett incongruously yokes (re)generation to erasure, life to death. The funeral of Monk’s father, who dies by his own hand, is attended by hundreds of people “claiming to have been delivered into this world by the great Dr. Ellison, this in spite of most of them being clearly too young to have been born while he was still practicing” (7). His life-giving abilities thus provide a counterpoint to his own self-murder. Furthermore, Monk’s sister, Lisa, is brutally murdered by Pro-Life activists because she performs

abortions at her women's clinic. The death of Monk's sister is counterbalanced by his subsequent discovery that he has another sister, albeit a half-sister (171).

Meanwhile, Monk, in writing *My Pafology*, unconsciously begins to emulate his remaining sibling, his brother Bill. A plastic surgeon in Scottsdale, Arizona, Lisa resents Bill because "he practiced medicine for no reason other than the accumulation of great wealth" (5). This anticipates Monk's subsequent abandonment of his own professional integrity to write a novel that will be a commercial hit. Bill's decision to remove the mask he has been wearing for many years, the front of heterosexuality (he is married with two children), is paralleled by Monk's adoption of the literary mask that is Stagg R. Leigh. Bill's occupation as a plastic surgeon testifies to the slipperiness of bodily inscribed signs, the capacity of modern medical science not only to treat ailing bodies but to make them new, which is exactly what Monk does in generating Stagg R. Leigh.<sup>73</sup>

With Monk's creation of this writer and his literary spawn, *My Pafology*, the dichotomy earlier established between doctor and writer collapses. Monk's literary *alter ego* and his book are depicted in terms of a medical cloning experiment; the implication being that Stagg R. Leigh cannot be divorced from Monk's body. Monk wryly refers to himself as an engineer, inferring that he has genetically engineered Stagg R. Leigh (273). As one of a panel of judges for the literary prize, he reads some five hundred novels, and proclaims himself jaded: "I was familiar with novels the way a surgeon is familiar with blood" (255). He tells the other judges, who do not know he is Stagg R. Leigh, that *My Pafology* is "a failed conception, an unformed fetus, [. . .] a hand without fingers, a word with no vowels" (289). The text-within-a-text presentation of *Fuck* within *Erasure* reinforces these gynaecological metaphors. Ultimately, *My Pafology*, as embodied by Stagg R.

Leigh, becomes Monk's grotesque offspring, his monster to Monk's Frankenstein. Such gothic import is suggested when Monk's agent, Yul, admits after reading *My Pafology*: "This thing scares me" (151). Monk decides to unmask himself at the awards ceremony because: "I had to defeat myself to save my self, my own identity. I had to toss a spear through the mouth of my own creation, silence him forever, kill him, press him down a dark hole and have the world admit that he never existed" (287).<sup>74</sup> Quite apart from the racially-inflected language of this passage ("spear-chucker"), Everett is, again, likely referring to *Invisible Man*, in which the narrator succeeds in silencing Ras the Destroyer by locking his jaws with a spear (Ellison 450).

The evocation of death, suicide and murder alongside the act of writing foreshadows Monk's subsequent fear that in masquerading as Stagg R. Leigh, he has inadvertently killed off a part of himself. This ambivalence regarding *My Pafology*, whether it represents an act of self-generation or a kind of self-murder, is characteristic of all black-to-white passing narratives, in which passing and death are always closely bound up. In the nineteenth-century narratives, the mulatta who passes invariably meets a tragic and untimely end. In subsequent stories, the death of a visibly black or mixed race parent facilitates the protagonist's decision to pass.<sup>75</sup> Alternatively, passing is imagined as symbolic death, the death of blackness as the passer melts into white society. In *The Human Stain* (2000), the passer's repudiation of his black family is portrayed in terms of matricide. As Coleman perceives it, he is "[m]urdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom!"<sup>76</sup>

The coexistence of tropes of erasing and generating is reflected in the acts of naming and unname that are undertaken by Everett, by Monk and indeed, by Stagg R. Leigh in the novel. Naming and unname is a recurring trope in African

American literature beginning with the slave narrative. For example, after becoming a free man, Frederick Douglass retains his Christian name “to preserve a sense of [his] identity” but changes his surname, from Bailey to Johnson and then to Douglass (Douglass 102-103). In so doing, he affirms at once “autonomy and identification in relation to the past.”<sup>77</sup> In naming and unnamings, the African American subject expresses his or her selfhood while registering his or her suspicion that all labels formulated by the master society are “enslaving fictions.”<sup>78</sup>

In *Erasure*, a similar ambivalence towards naming is evident, whereby the names chosen by Everett (Thelonious Ellison) and Monk (Stagg R. Leigh) seem to be richly allusive, but on closer inspection, may be empty signifiers. Everett calls his protagonist Thelonious Ellison, who goes by the moniker Monk, thus conjoining a jazz musician and a giant of African American literature. However, when one remembers Ralph Ellison is the author of *Invisible Man* (1952), “black literature’s most memorable cipher of the nameless,” it is more tempting to conclude that the name Thelonious Ellison, despite evidence to the contrary, in fact connotes absence and emptiness.<sup>79</sup> The invocation of jazz musician Thelonious Monk offers a sense of continuity between Monk’s “real” name and the pseudonym under which he writes *My Pafology*. In choosing the *nom de plume* Stagg R. Leigh, Monk is paying tribute to the mythical African American figure known as Stagolee. The subject of countless musical tributes – in ballad, blues, jazz, epic, folk song and rap – the folk anti-hero is believed to have been one Lee Shelton, a pimp, who, in 1895, shot his friend William Lyons in a saloon in St. Louis during an argument over Lee’s hat. That the Stagolee legend has survived primarily through the elusiveness of oral traditions offers an intriguing counterpoint to Monk’s ultimately unsuccessful quest for textual disembodiment.<sup>80</sup> However, the sheer profusion of versions of the

Stagolee myth (he appears variously as Stagolee, Staggerlee and Stack Lee) raises the question of whether such over-determination actually connotes a lack or absence of meaning.

From Thelonious Ellison, to Stagg R. Leigh, to Van Go Jenkins, the surname of *My Pafology*'s protagonist is a sardonic homage to Juanita Mae Jenkins, whose *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* in part inspires its composition. The choice of Van Go is most probably explained by a bizarre nightmare that occurs toward the end of the novel, in which Monk dreams of seeing Nazi soldiers lancing Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, an episode which is the culmination of numerous narrative digressions emphasising Hitler's obsession with artistic purity (283). In italicised passages throughout the novel, Everett explicitly links the myths of artistic and racial purity through the insertion of several imagined conversations between artists persecuted in Hitler's Germany in the 1930s (Paul Klee, Ernst Barlach and Kaethe Kollwitz, among others) – notes for a novel that Monk never writes, at least within the timeframe of *Erasure* (45-46).

### **“What passes for knowing”<sup>81</sup>**

When Monk searches for one of his own novels in Borders bookstore and “finds himself” in African American Studies, Everett is dramatising a situation that faces, arguably, all “ethnic” authors at some point in their literary careers. Philip Roth was not immune, early in his career, to such pigeon-holing and to critical indictment and, like Ralph Ellison, Roth found himself the object of a scathing critique by Irving Howe. Initially laudatory in his assessment of Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), Howe revised his good opinion in a 1972 article written for *Commentary*. What



prompted Howe's originally positive reaction was that the story "Defender of the Faith" led him, mistakenly, as Howe later claimed, "to assume that this gifted new writer was working in the tradition of Jewish self-criticism and satire" when Roth "has chosen to tear himself away from that tradition."<sup>82</sup> Insisting once again on the contingency of "the imagination" and "a bruising involvement with social existence,"<sup>83</sup> Howe accused Roth of not being "Jewish" enough in his writing, just as, some nine years previously, he saw Ralph Ellison's assertion of "esthetic distance" from "Negro experience" as disingenuous. Such distance is, for Howe, "a moral and psychological impossibility."<sup>84</sup>

Although *The Human Stain* spans over fifty years, its immediate concern is the widowed Coleman Silk's relationship with the much-younger, apparently-illiterate janitor Faunia Farley, and their murder at the hands of her estranged (and deranged), Vietnam-veteran husband, Lester Farley. Coleman Silk is reputedly based on Anatole Broyard, a celebrated book reviewer for the *New York Times* from the 1960s until his death in 1990, who was born into a self-identifying black family from New Orleans but subsequently passed as white. Indeed, the most compelling readings of the novel emphasise either the real-life passing of Anatole Broyard – and specifically, Henry Louis Gates's profile of Broyard that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1996 – or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) as the direct inspirations for Roth's novel.<sup>85</sup>

In this respect, the biographical ("real life") versus literary ("artistic") antecedents of *The Human Stain* would seem to clash in the sense that Jonathan Franzen appears to think is the case when *The Corrections*-Oprah controversy played out. The two interpretations are, I think, complementary. For if, as Timothy Parrish argues, "More aggressively than any other American writers that I can think of from

the past fifty years, Ellison and Roth each insisted that his ‘Americanness,’ rather than his ethnicity, constituted his true identity” and “emphasized the supremacy of literary art over the issue of racial identity,”<sup>86</sup> Gates’s article on Broyard indicates that one of the key motivating factors in Broyard’s decision to pass as white was so that “he could be a writer, rather than a Negro writer.”<sup>87</sup>

For Broyard to be a Negro writer would expose him to the kind of criticism levelled at Monk Ellison, of not being “black enough.” According to Ellen Schwamm, a friend of Broyard’s, “He felt that once he said, ‘I’m a Negro writer,’ he would have to write about black issues, and Anatole was such an aesthete.”<sup>88</sup> Henry Louis Gates suggests that the reason for Broyard’s inability to produce a novel “was that he was living it – that race loomed larger in his life because it was unacknowledged, that he couldn’t put it behind him because he had put it beneath him.”<sup>89</sup> Gates concludes that the final irony in Broyard’s life – and there were many – was that “the man wanted to be appreciated not for being black but for being a writer, even though his pretending not to be black was stopping him from writing.”<sup>90</sup>

Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of *The Human Stain*, appears to engage with Gates’s observations when he addresses the reasons why Coleman’s attempt at writing a memoir based upon his witch-hunt at the hands of the Athena College political correctness brigade was such a dismal failure: “Of course you could not write the book. You’d written the book – the book was your life. [. . .] Your book was your life – and your art? Once you set the thing in motion, your art was being a white man” (344-345). Gates and Zuckerman rightly identify the inextricability of passing and writing. However, Zuckerman’s interpretation of their relationship is far more interesting than Gates’s. Unlike Gates who, as Paul Spickard observes, “implies – without offering any evidence – that Broyard’s failure to complete a novel

was caused by his denial of his Black authenticity,” seeing the connection between passing and writing in oppositional terms, Zuckerman’s understanding of Coleman’s passing places it in a complementary relationship to writing.<sup>91</sup> For Zuckerman, Coleman’s passing is *equivalent* to an act of writing because it is, in itself, a valid act of (self-)invention. But Broyard’s passing, as Gates would have it, *prohibits* Broyard from producing a work of (literary) art.

*The Human Stain*, like several other novels in Roth’s formidable oeuvre, concerns itself with a self-conscious examination of the act of writing and the notion of authorship. What is unique about *The Human Stain*, and what connects it to *Erasure* and to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is that Roth explicitly invokes racial passing as a lens through which to scrutinise the related issues of reading, writing and authorship. Literacy and illiteracy become inextricably bound up with the performance of self, of which racial passing is one form. Like the passer who disavows, conceals or simply refuses to trumpet the existence of his or her African American kinship ties, authorship is destabilised by those who neglect to acknowledge what they have written. Like the passer, whose body defies the assumption that blackness must be visibly evident, documents and texts of all kinds prove slippery. As in *Erasure*, writing emerges at once as an act of erasure and of regeneration or reconstruction.

Like *Erasure* and *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, *The Human Stain* features an author-narrator: Coleman’s story is filtered through the narrative consciousness of Nathan Zuckerman, whom some could call Roth’s fictional *alter ego*. Zuckerman has been living a somewhat reclusive existence in upstate New York – in the vicinity of Silk’s former place of employ, Athena College – for five years prior to the novel’s opening. Coleman and Zuckerman first become acquainted when Silk approaches

the local author shortly after the death of his wife, Iris, with the request that he write the story of Silk's victimisation and vilification in the aftermath of the "spooks" controversy. By "creating their false image of him, calling him everything that he wasn't and could never be," his enemies at Athena, according to Coleman, "had killed his wife of forty years" (HS 11). From the outset, therefore, writing and death are intertwined. When Zuckerman refuses to write the story, Coleman determines to go to work on the book, entitled *Spooks*. Two years later, after completing a first draft of *Spooks*, Coleman has given up on the idea of publishing it. After two years of being "knee-deep in [his] own blood," Zuckerman is surprised to note that Coleman feels no "suicidal despair" when he realises that the book is "shit" (HS 19-20). Without the book, "he appeared now to be without the slightest craving to set the record straight; shed of the passion to clear his name and criminalize as murderers his opponents, he was *embalmed* no longer in injustice" (20, my emphasis). From this early passage, it is clear that in *The Human Stain*, the relationship of writing to death is twofold. One aspect of a text's association with fatality is that the act of writing can produce such extreme physical and psychical debility that, as a process, it may itself lead to "suicidal despair" (20). However, a written document – as evidence or testimony – can function as a means of exposing and avenging foul play which has led to death (the murder of Iris Silk, as Coleman perceives it). By the end of the novel, ironically, it is Zuckerman who seeks, through the act of writing, to "clear [Coleman's] name" and "criminalize" his murderer.

Closely allied to the capacity of the text to lay bare the crimes of others is its ability to incriminate the author of the text. Of Anatole Broyard's attempts to conceal his "true" identity, Gates writes:

He knew that the world was filled with such snippets and scraps of paper, all conspiring to reduce him to an identity that other people had invented and he had no say in. Broyard responded with X-Acto knives and evasions, with distance and denials and half-denials and cunning half-truths.<sup>92</sup>

That Broyard cut out the contributor's note to an article he wrote for *Commentary* in 1948 is interesting because cutting not only implies editing,<sup>93</sup> but is also reminiscent of the surgical analogies Monk employs in *Erasure*. Nonetheless, as Gates points out, it is a mistake:

to assume that birth certificates and biographical sketches and all the other documents generated by the modern bureaucratic state reveal an anterior truth – that they are merely signs of an independently existing identity. But in fact they constitute it.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, in *The Human Stain*, as in *Erasure*, documents and texts of all kinds that purport to comprise one's identity, many self-penned – emails, letters, diaries, internet postings, *curriculum vitas*, personal adverts, poems – proliferate.

The most significant of these is Delphine Roux's "Everyone knows" letter.<sup>95</sup> When she learns of Coleman's affair with Faunia Farley, she sends him an anonymous letter informing him that "Everyone knows" he is "sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman" half his age (38). As she composes it, writing "in big block letters," she deludes herself momentarily "that no one would recognize [the handwriting] as her own" (196). But as soon as she mails the letter, she realises that "Even after her having left it unsigned, even after her having employed a vulgar rhetoric not her own, the letter's origins are going to be no mystery to someone as fixated on her as Coleman Silk" (201). Delphine's decision to leave the letter unsigned – her doomed endeavour at "passing" through the act of writing – contrasts

with Coleman's successful racial passing, which is configured as his refusal "to accept automatically the contract drawn up for your signature at birth" (155). In other words, Delphine and Coleman are engaged in a common struggle: that of emerging from the shadow of (an) overbearing parent(s) to forge their own identities unencumbered by issues of class, race or nationality, and this struggle is symbolically wrought in terms of the signature: to sign or not to sign. What differs is their *execution* of this endeavour. Delphine's manifesto is to "go to America and be the author of my own life" (273). However, her "authorship" – her efforts at dissembling on paper and in life – is not convincing and she "winds up as the author of nothing" (273).<sup>96</sup>

Coleman realises immediately that the "Everyone knows" letter has come from his former colleague who led the campaign against him in the aftermath of the "Spooks" incident. As confirmation, he carefully compares the handwriting on the letter with samples of Roux's handwriting in documents pertaining to the "Spooks" affair. When he subsequently shows the evidence to Zuckerman, it is indisputable that Coleman "had nailed the culprit who'd set out to nail him" (39). Like Henry Louis Gates, in his efforts to authenticate the manuscript of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Coleman even travels to Boston to have a handwriting expert substantiate his claims (55). Similarly, when Coleman reads the curriculum vitae and autobiographical essay Delphine submits as a candidate for an academic job at Athena, he observes that, like Rousseau, she hides herself only for her rhetoric to give her away (189-190). Consequently, despite what she writes, Coleman can *read* through the artifice. His derisive attitude towards Delphine thus springs not from the fact that she is pretending to be something she is not, but from the fact that she fails to pretend in a credible way.

Several times in the novel, Roth invites the reader to view Delphine's relationship with Coleman as a surrogate father-daughter bond. Delphine observes that: "Something about him always led her back to her childhood and the precocious child's fear that she is being seen through; also to the precocious child's fear that she is not being seen enough" (185). Elsewhere, Coleman reveals his motives for hiring her: "At the time he thought that he was being open-minded by hiring her. But more likely it was because she was so goddamn enticing. So lovely. So alluring. And all the more so for looking so daughterly" (190). Delphine's daughterly qualities connect her with Lisa, Coleman's real daughter, and with Faunia Farley, his lover who is young enough to be his daughter. Like Delphine and Coleman, Faunia is remaking herself – as wife, mother, janitor, dairy worker – in direct opposition to the way in which she was raised, as "a rich, privileged kid. Brought up in a big sprawling house south of Boston" (28). Like Delphine and Coleman, her reinvention, and others' perception of her, is depicted through the symbolism of writing and reading – or rather, in Faunia's case, *not* reading and *not* writing, for she feigns illiteracy. Taking "willingly upon herself this crippling shortcoming all the better to impersonate a member of a subspecies to which she does not belong and need not belong" (164), Faunia is, like Coleman, posthumously "outed" when Zuckerman overhears her father and his nurse discuss the diary she left behind (297).

In *The Human Stain*, as in *Erasure*, *reading* as well as *writing* can give rise to extreme bodily reactions conceived in almost fatal terms. Monk experiences severe physical incapacity each time he is exposed to Jenkins's *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*: reading the opening paragraph, he thinks he is "going to throw up" (Everett 34). Reading a review of the novel on an airplane, the woman seated beside him is prompted to ask "Is something wrong?" (46). When he sees a copy of the book on

Marilyn Tilman's nightstand, he loses his erection (212) and he wonders why Juanita Mae Jenkins sends him "running for the toilet" (240). In *The Human Stain*, after Coleman completes his draft of *Spooks*, he spends a day "reading it through, and every page of it made me sick" (HS 19). Additionally, a letter that Coleman receives from a former lover in 1954, some four years after they part, he calls "a killing letter" (22). In a further conjunction of writing and death, immediately after Delphine Roux finally mails her "Everyone knows" letter to Coleman, Zuckerman recalls that he "saw Coleman alive only one more time after that July" (202).

The most overwhelming slippage between body and text is exemplified by Coleman's tattoo, acquired after he is almost exposed as a black man during his stint in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Slung out of a white brothel in Norfolk, Virginia after being recognised as black, he passes the night in "niggertown" (183). The "blue pigment" of the tattoo serves to remind Coleman that his "black" pigmentation almost gave him away and could have led to a court martial and a dishonourable discharge. Not only is the tattoo inscribed upon Coleman's body, but it also contains: "[t]he ineradicable biography [. . .] the prototype of the ineradicable, a tattoo being the very emblem of what can never be removed" (184).

Nathan Zuckerman begins the book that the reader is expected to believe is *The Human Stain* as part-investigative act, part-biography of an extraordinary man. When Coleman's daughter asks Zuckerman "how could all this happen?," Zuckerman can offer her no answer "other than by beginning to write this book" (304). If his efforts at acting as an "amateur detective" to aid the investigation into the deaths are repeatedly foiled (295), his novel becomes a kind of detective story, what Lester Farley subsequently calls a "whodunit" (359). However, what Michael Gilmore describes as Zuckerman's "mild genuflection to the detective form"<sup>97</sup> itself



fails, for if the trajectory of the detective story is “from chaos to solution,”<sup>98</sup> then Zuckerman’s graveside encounter with Coleman’s sister, Ernestine, only serves to make Coleman “more of a mystery” to him: “Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing” (333). His conversation with Ernestine also highlights that biography as “posthumous sleuthing”<sup>99</sup> can only, like the “human biography” that is Coleman’s tattoo, be “a tiny symbol to remind me why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong” (22). The (im)possibility of ever knowing anyone or anything definitively is, like the self-making of Delphine and the passing of Coleman, again presented in terms of the signature. Lester Farley, whom Zuckerman finally meets ice-fishing in the wilderness of the Berkshires, is “the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate’s signature on a sheet of paper. There it was, if not the whole story, the whole picture” (361).

Zuckerman’s overlapping roles as detective, biographer and fiction-writer recall Monk Ellison’s description of himself as a “hermeneutic sleuth” (Everett 31) and Henry Louis Gates’s “meticulous research and detective work” in identifying the author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*.<sup>100</sup> The next chapter turns to the emergence of the passing figure in detective fiction. In the detective stories I discuss in Chapter Two, passing and writing are deftly interwoven.

## Chapter Two

### From *Femme Fatale* to Hard-boiled Detective:

#### The Passing Mulatto/a in Crime Fiction

“The old man prides himself on being able to detect evidences of the least drop of African blood in any one.”<sup>1</sup>

– Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends* (1857).

“No, Doctor, I am not willing to live under a shadow of concealment which I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an undetected crime of my soul.”

– Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy* (1892).

“I feel that I am led by the same impulse which forces the unfound-out criminal to take somebody into his confidence, although he knows that the act is liable, even almost certain, to lead to his undoing.”<sup>2</sup>

– James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912).

“Do you trust Dot with your secrets? Is she above the law, below the law, willing to go against the law and bring you into her home? Because you are against the law, Birdie Lee. Your body is a federal offense.”<sup>3</sup>

– Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (1998).

This chapter argues that tropes of passing and detection are mutually receptive. If, as I suggest in Chapter One, detective novels reflect self-consciously on the act of storytelling, an exploration of fiction in which plots of detection and passing are deployed simultaneously promises to shed further light on the specific relationship that exists between passing and authorship. In detective fiction, as Peter Thoms argues, “the detective functions as an authorial figure, attempting to uncover the story of the crime, and the ‘case’ becomes a story about making a story.”<sup>4</sup>

Embedded in the structure of the detective novel, therefore, is the kind of narrative layering perceptible in the works already discussed, especially the novel-within-a-novel structure of Percival Everett’s *Erasure*. The detective story “contains two stories: the concealed story of the crime and the visible story of the investigation, which unfolds as the uncovering (or figurative writing) of the criminal story.”<sup>5</sup> For Peter Thoms, the power that inheres in the detective’s authorial position is ambivalent, for “his desire for authorial mastery disturbingly resembles the oppressive deeds of the criminal.”<sup>6</sup> However, in the pre-twentieth-century texts that Thoms discusses, the detectives in question are uniformly white and male. In this chapter, the detectives I discuss are black, white and mixed race, but significantly, still predominantly male. If storytelling equals power, and the detective is, essentially, a weaver of stories, can the detective story offer nonwhite detectives the opportunity of wresting narrative authority and, by extension, power, from their white counterparts? And what are the implications of this power struggle when the detective is viewed as the author’s surrogate?

As the epigraphs from a cross-section of nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives of passing indicate, racial passing has often been made analogous with crime, an infraction of the law and imprisonment. This is due in no small part to the

fact that, depending on the anti-miscegenation laws effective in a given state, crossing the color line may have translated into a *literal* transgression of the law. Meanwhile, studies of hard-boiled detective fiction and its cinematic offshoot, *film noir*, have become increasingly concerned with the genres' underlying preoccupation with race. As Maureen T. Reddy argues, the rise of hard-boiled fiction "coincides neatly with widespread anxiety about race and about the difficulties of maintaining the whiteness of the United States."<sup>7</sup> What happens, then, when the passing narrative and the hard-boiled detective novel are brought together? Does this melding of genres threaten to re-inscribe the mulatto/a's objectification as "evidence" of the crime of miscegenation? Does it render the passer's African American ancestry a "mystery" that demands "detection" from a handful of (physical) "clues" and, once "exposed," the passer's "confession" of his or her mixed racial heritage? Does it reinforce her status as the "victim" of a white man who (ab)uses her sexually, promising marriage, and then discards her? Or does the fusion of genres promise to liberate the passer, offering him or her a greater degree of agency than is usual in narratives of passing? This chapter traces the simultaneous use of plots of passing and detection. From *femme fatale*, with a limited though subversive degree of power, in Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (1901-1902) and Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), the passing mulatto/a becomes an active, sleuthing agent in the little-known Wesley Farrell series, the New Orleans-set hard-boiled mysteries of Robert Skinner (1997-2002).

In the explosion of studies devoted to literary racial passing that the past ten years has witnessed, very little attention has been paid to contemporary narratives of passing, or contemporary detective-passing stories, let alone the work of Robert Skinner. This is surprising, given the origins of literary passing in genre fiction,

notably the melodrama and the sentimental novel. There are some indications that this is starting to change. In a compelling discussion of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story, "The Yellow Face" (1893), Jinny Huh takes Maureen T. Reddy's argument regarding the rise of hard-boiled detective fiction an important step further, asserting that the emergence of detective fiction is "in direct response to the anxieties produced by a failed racial detection or [. . .] a sort of racial passing."<sup>8</sup> For Huh, the intersection of plots of passing and detection does not offer the potential for a radical revision of both. Rather, if "passing demonstrates the instability and fabricated nature of our epistemological foundations of race, detective fiction and Sherlock Holmes offer the potential to contain and master that anxiety."<sup>9</sup> In Huh's discussion, the detective who restores certainty to a world of (racial) chaos is, of course, Sherlock Holmes. What happens, then, when the detective is *himself* a figure of racial ambiguity, as is Wesley Farrell, who is of "colored Creole" ancestry, in Robert Skinner's series? The amalgamation of plots of passing and detection in U.S. culture dates at least as far back as Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). Prior to the appearance of Skinner's oeuvre, however, I have not found a single example of a detective who is also passing as white. The significance of the appearance of Wesley Farrell on the literary landscape cannot, therefore, be overstated.

In *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction*, Reddy does not even mention Robert Skinner, although she devotes a chapter to "crime novels about passing."<sup>10</sup> In a subsequent chapter on white authors of crime fiction writing about characters of color, Reddy acknowledges the considerable talents of Skinner's fellow writer of New Orleans-set mysteries, Barbara Hambly, but yet again Skinner is overlooked.<sup>11</sup> In scholarship of crime fiction more generally, the only discussion of

Skinner is one-and-a-half pages devoted to his first novel, *Skin Deep Blood Red*, in a study by Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen.<sup>12</sup> Why is it that Robert Skinner has been “passed” over in studies of racial passing, crime fiction and of both? This chapter seeks to redress this critical vacuum and point up the ways in which Skinner’s hard-boiled detective-passer revises the conventions of both the hard-boiled *and* passing genres.

Skinner’s Wesley Farrell series would not have been possible without the work of mystery-writer predecessors, Pauline Hopkins and Walter Mosley, who also deploy plots of passing and detection simultaneously. In *Hagar’s Daughter*, in a literary move that anticipates the hard-boiled tradition, Hopkins unites the tragic mulatta and *femme fatale*, bestowing an (ambivalent) agency upon the mulatta archetype that was, in 1901, without precedent. Almost a century later, Walter Mosley, following Hopkins, introduces Daphne Monet, another passer-*femme fatale*, in his novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*. However, Mosley’s work functions as an extension of Hopkins’s to the extent that Mosley emphasises the parallels between Daphne Monet and his detective, Easy Rawlins. Skinner takes these affinities one step further by amalgamating the passer and the hard-boiled detective in his protagonist, Wesley Farrell.

### *Noir-ing Hagar’s Daughter*

True to the simultaneous backwards-and-forwards periodisation of this thesis, I begin this chapter, as I begin Chapter One, with a Janus-faced novel, *Hagar’s Daughter*. If Maureen T. Reddy emphasises hard-boiled detective fiction’s underlying anxiety about race and Jinny Huh locates the intersection of plots of

passing and detection in the classical detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, then *Hagar's Daughter* confirms the significance of racial passing in both traditions. For as Stephen Soitos observes, *Hagar's Daughter* “demonstrates a familiarity with classical detective conventions while foreshadowing some elements of hard-boiled detection,” a point upon which I will elaborate.<sup>13</sup> While looking backward to the classical tradition and forward to hard-boiled detective fiction, *Hagar's Daughter* revises passing fiction more generally. Hopkins recalls William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (1853), the first African American novel of passing, at the same time that she anticipates a more active role for the mulatto/a.

Serialised between March 1901 and March 1902 in *The Colored American Magazine*, *Hagar's Daughter* has been the subject of increasing critical attention in the last twenty years, largely thanks to Hazel Carby's pioneering *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. However, existing scholarship tends to emphasise either the novel's status as the earliest African American detective novel, or its treatment of plots of racial and gender passing, without considering the ways in which these issues complement one another. Stephen Soitos does note that the theme of passing “underlies the explicit use of detective conventions in the novel.”<sup>14</sup> Yet his analysis extends only to the “mysterious-birth theme” and “hidden and mistaken identities” common to plots of both passing and detection.

I would argue that at a fundamental level, tropes of passing and detection are mutually receptive to one another. Exploiting the reciprocity of plots of passing and crime in *Hagar's Daughter* enables Hopkins to undertake three important tasks, some of which are executed with greater success than others. First, Hopkins attempts to undermine the dominant discourse of scientific racism by exploding the

relationship this discourse claimed existed between blackness and criminality.

Second, she re-imagines the concept of property acquisition with specific reference to the notion of “blood-as-property.” Third, she rewrites the conventional tragic mulatta, earlier manifestations of which, particularly in Brown’s *Clotel*, position the mulatta heroine ambivalently, as both a passive victim and an active agent of their own tragedy. The second and third issues converge in the character of Aurelia Madison.

Hazel Carby claims that Aurelia Madison recalls a female archetype found in fiction of the 1860s, “the popular figure of the ‘adventuress’: the woman who uses her sexuality for her own ends and threatens men with her ambition.”<sup>15</sup> However, the depiction of Aurelia belongs in the *fin-de-siècle* moment during which Hopkins was writing. She is an example of a *femme fatale*, a literary and visual archetype who emerges, according to Mary Ann Doane, “as a central figure in the nineteenth century, in the texts of writers such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire and painters such as Gustave Moreau and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, Rebecca Stott argues that although the *femme fatale* is not unique to the nineteenth century, “she is fabricated, reconstructed in, and apparently necessary to, the cultural expressions of the closing years of the century.”<sup>17</sup> By inserting this archetype into a detective story, Hopkins anticipates the version of the *femme fatale* subsequently popularised in the hard-boiled detective tradition and *film noir*. Of mixed race ancestry and passing as white, Aurelia Madison is the first *femme fatale* in African American detective fiction.

In his introduction to the 1988 Schomburg Library edition of Hopkins’s 1900 novel, *Contending Forces*, Richard Yarborough discusses “the often frustrating complexity of her treatment of racial heredity” and claims that some of her



characterisations “reveal an endorsement of potentially racist views of personality and behavior.”<sup>18</sup> In *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hopkins’s attitude towards racial science likewise defies easy categorisation, a situation that may be attributed to the particular strategies Hopkins employs in combating the discourse of scientific racism. On the one hand, her approach corresponds to what Nancy Leys Stepan and Sander L. Gilman call “transvaluation,” which was “to accept the terms set by the dominant discourse, but to change the valuations attached to them.” That is to say, “the significance of biological race differences was accepted, but the ‘inferior’ element in the hierarchy revalued and renamed.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hopkins strategy of transvaluation emerges as an engagement with Cesare Lombroso, whose writings were prominent in the 1880s and 1890s. According to Lombroso:

Germs of an ancestral past lie dormant in our heredity. In some unfortunate individuals, the past comes to life again. These people are innately driven to act as a normal ape or savage would, but such behavior is deemed criminal in our civilized society. Fortunately, we may identify born criminals because they bear anatomical signs of their apishness.<sup>20</sup>

With references to “apes” and “savages,” it is easy to see the connections that Lombroso and others drew between *race* and innate criminality. For example, in describing the born criminal’s inherent tolerance for pain, Lombroso states:

All travellers know the indifference of Negroes and American savages to pain: the former cut their hands in order to avoid work; the latter, tied to the torture post, gaily sing the praises of their tribe while they are slowly burnt.<sup>21</sup>

In *Hagar’s Daughter*, there are two villains – one an aristocrat (St. Clair Enson aka General Benson), the other a former slave trader (Walker aka Major Madison).<sup>22</sup>

Significantly, both villains are white. Hopkins thereby gives the lie to any purported link between blackness and innate criminality.

The problem with the strategy of transvaluation, of course, is that in the very act of revaluing and renaming, the original terms, set by the dominant discourse, are reinforced. For example, through the character of Aunt Henny, Hopkins proposes that St. Clair is a born criminal or “rascalion” (though perhaps not in Lombroso’s sense) because his mother gives birth to him after “de debbil jes’ showed he face to her an’ grinned” (63-64). Equally, the descriptions of Walker as “repulsive-looking” (8) and of “peculiar ugliness” (95) seem to accord neatly with Lombroso’s stigmata hypothesis and his “ferret-like eyes that seemed to pierce the blackness” (29) appear to affirm Lombroso’s theory of the born criminal’s “greater visual acuity.”<sup>23</sup>

At other times, however, Hopkins hints at the arbitrariness and slipperiness of physical signs, and thus their unreliability as an indication of character. The inconsistencies in Hopkins’s representation of Walker (he is “tall, lean and lank” in Part I [8], “short and stout” in Part II [95]) certainly imply this. Elsewhere, Hopkins even goes so far as to suggest that upbringing and environment have fostered St. Clair’s criminal tendencies: “Motherless from infancy, and born at a period in the life of his parents when no more children were expected, he grew up wild and self-willed.”<sup>24</sup> In these respects, Hopkins’s response to scientific racism resembles closely the more sophisticated approaches of “recontextualisation” and “creation of an ‘alternative ideology’” as outlined by Stepan and Gilman. The “often frustrating complexity of [Hopkins’s] treatment of racial heredity” thus owes itself to the contradictory strategies Hopkins deploys in challenging the theories of Lombroso and others.

### From “Tragic Mulatta” to *Femme Fatale*

Having re-raced criminality as “white” rather than “black,” Hopkins proceeds to re-imagine the literary motif of the “tragic mulatta,” itself fraught with a conflicting history of both guilt *and* innocence, and existing on ambiguous terms with the law. From its origins, passing fiction has always been concerned with the relationship of the white-looking black body to the law. This was most commonly manifested in what Jules Zanger calls antebellum reversal-of-fortune passing narratives, whereby “the heroine is suddenly reduced, by a legalism, against all evidence of the senses, from aristocratic, pampered white heiress to Negro slave – from riches to worse than rags.”<sup>25</sup> It is in this vein that *Hagar’s Daughter* begins. In Part I of the novel, Hagar and her infant daughter narrowly escape the auction block when Hagar’s villainous brother-in-law, St. Clair Enson and his accomplice, Walker, expose Hagar’s African American ancestry, of which she is heretofore unaware. Ellis Enson, a wealthy planter, after some initial wavering, resolves to stand by his wife and daughter, only to commit suicide – or so the reader is led to believe – before he has legally manumitted them, now his possessions. His property reverts to his brother, St. Clair, who immediately disposes of his sister-in-law and niece. In the scene that is most reminiscent of William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, Hagar plunges into the Potomac with her daughter rather than be sold as slaves.

From Zanger’s formulation, under the *law*, the mulatta’s *racial* ancestry (“blood”) determines what she can or cannot inherit *materially* (“property”). By passing, wittingly or unwittingly, there is a risk that she will acquire property through fraudulent means. It was for this reason that miscegenation was, according to Eva Saks, encoded in law as “a crime by people against property.” Saks argues

further that, in the transition from slavery to emancipation, American miscegenation law substituted the slave-body-as-property for blood-as-property. After the Civil War, in other words, the privileges of whiteness were encoded as the sole property of those with predominantly white “blood,” the specific fractions of black “blood” rendering a body “black” varying from state to state.<sup>26</sup> *Hagar’s Daughter* offers a critique of this situation through a thorough engagement with the concept of property, particularly as this relates to its three mixed race characters. With its bi-temporal schema, *Hagar’s Daughter* confronts the possibility of acquiring property by various means – through inheritance, enterprise and marriage – emphasising the ways in which the white-but-legally-black body has functioned as an object of exchange in such transactions. The temporal shift from Part I to Part II – from 1860 to 1882 – enables Hopkins to engage with the mulatta’s “oscillating identity between property owner and owned property” before and after slavery.<sup>27</sup>

As Eve Allegra Raimon notes, in “tragic mulatta” fiction of the 1850s and earlier, the mulatta’s beauty is described in such a way that she emerges as “exotic, sexually available, and *aristocratic* all at once.”<sup>28</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than in Brown’s *Clotel*, in which the eponymous heroine is the daughter of none other than Thomas Jefferson. The mulatta’s aristocratic connection is key because it often provides the explanation for her untimely tragic downfall. Aristocracy emphasises inheritance over self-making, and by extension, fate over free will. Thus, the mulatta’s discovery that she has “black blood” will not only ensure her material inheritance is lost, but because she has internalised white, aristocratic attitudes, she also believes herself “doomed” by her “black blood.” In *Hagar’s* reversal-of-fortune from “property owner” to “owned property” in Part I, Hopkins simultaneously implicates Hagar in the continued existence of the institution to

which she is now condemned: “Although *innocent* of cruelty to them, yet their wrongs were coming home to her in a two-fold harvest” (*MN* 56-57, emphasis added).

Aurelia Bowen, the daughter of the slave-trader Walker and his female slave – and thus born *property* – does not feature in Part I. However, Part II of the novel follows Aurelia’s attempt to reinforce her transition from “owned property” to “property owner.” In fact, Aurelia was “born about the time the war broke out” (158-159). Arriving in the world at the very moment in which the institution of slavery was about to be dismantled, she straddles the categories of slave and free even more literally than Hagar. In 1882, Hagar – now known as Estelle Bowen – is once again a property owner. However, she has succeeded in attaining this position through a risky venture – her marriage to Zenas Bowen, a white man. When General Benson suggests Aurelia try to acquire “a fortune by a wealthy marriage,” she responds: “you know too well my reasons for hesitating in such a course,” the fear that her racial ancestry will subsequently be discovered (97). Even when Benson proposes that Aurelia “fascinate” Cuthbert Sumner, so that Benson can marry Jewel Bowen (Sumner’s fiancée) and her fortune, Aurelia is unconvinced that she will achieve matrimony with Sumner, resolving only to break the engagement for long enough to allow the marriage between Jewel and Benson to take place.

Zenas Bowen, Hagar’s second husband, makes an incisive remark that is the key to understanding the relationship between the mulatta body and property in *Hagar’s Daughter*: “it’s worth while getting rich just to see how money can change the *complexion* of things” (*MN* 87, emphasis added). Unlike Hagar, for Aurelia it is not her “black blood” that is “accursed” (59), but poverty that is the “foul curse” (98), although the two are undoubtedly related. Aurelia fears that there is no greater

“crime” than poverty: “It is responsible for every crime committed under the sun” (98). While she cannot efface her African American ancestry (“change her complexion”), she can acquire property (“get rich”) by collaborating with Major Madison (aka Walker) and General Benson (aka St. Clair Enson) and thus “remove the curse of poverty” (98).

Thus, while Hagar relies on inheritance and, when this fails, marriage as means of acquiring property, Aurelia prefers to use her beauty in a more enterprising way. While Hopkins refuses to applaud Aurelia’s methods unequivocally, she certainly indicts Hagar for her complicity in preserving the institution of slavery. Moreover, it is suggested through Hagar’s relationship with her second husband, Zenas Bowen, that the route Aurelia takes (self-making) is preferable to Hagar’s (inheritance and marriage). As the novel’s exemplar of “the possibilities of individual expansion under the rule of popular government” (80), it is no coincidence that Hopkins insists on his steadfast loyalty to Hagar. Hagar knows that Zenas “would never have forsaken her, never for one instant would he have wavered from his constancy to her,” whereas her love for Ellis, her aristocratic first husband with whom she is reunited at novel’s end “could not blot out the bitter memory of the time when he had failed her” (276).

If Zanger’s formulation of the “tragic mulatta” in antislavery fiction reveals the intimate connection between blood and property, a parallel consideration of the evolution of crime fiction reveals its fundamental compatibility with the story of the “tragic mulatta” who is passing as white. An important development in detective fiction in the nineteenth century was “the romanticization of crime” which, “following the earlier model of the folk hero of Robin Hood, elaborated a heroic role for the criminal by showing him as victim of and rebel against an unjust or corrupt

regime.” The Robin Hood figure was “a good man, usually of aristocratic origin, whose rightful position had been usurped by evil and treacherous enemies using unjust laws to legitimate their depredations.”<sup>29</sup> John Cawelti’s criminal-cum-romantic hero bears a striking resemblance to the tragic mulatta of anti-slavery fiction, and both figures feature prominently in nineteenth-century melodrama. The problem with drawing this parallel, of course, is that thereby, the mulatta body itself becomes criminalised, reflecting the way in which the mixed race subject has historically been configured in American miscegenation law as “deviant and criminal.”<sup>30</sup> As Eva Saks puts it, over three hundred years of American anti-miscegenation law testifies to “the power of legal language to construct, criminalize, and appropriate the human body,” in its preoccupation with the recurring symbol of “the miscegenous body.”<sup>31</sup> As the offspring of an unlawful union, the mulatta’s body is itself conceived as illicit, especially if she decides to pass as white. In the epigraph from Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, the mulatta heroine refuses a white doctor’s offer of marriage, registering her refusal “to live under the shadow of concealment which I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an *undetected crime* of my soul” (*IL*, 419, emphasis added). By inserting the mulatta into a detective framework, Hopkins revises this problematic history. In *Hagar’s Daughter*, the mulatta body is not *inherently* criminal or dangerous. If the mulatta is implicated in a crime in any way – as Aurelia Madison is – it is because she has actively and intentionally participated in that crime.

When one considers the distinguishing attributes of this female archetype, it is not difficult to see the extent to which the *femme fatale* and tragic mulatta passing as white emerge as highly compatible. As Mary Ann Doane argues, the most striking characteristic of the *femme fatale* “is the fact that she never really is what

she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely *legible*, predictable or manageable.”<sup>32</sup> This is precisely the threat – to the racial and social order – that the passing mulatta represents because her African American ancestry is not corporeally *legible*. If the tragic mulatta invites readers “to transgress boundaries of both race and class at once,”<sup>33</sup> then this is consistent with the *femme fatale* who also “crosses boundaries of class and race.”<sup>34</sup> For John M. Reilly, the *femme fatale* is “any woman whose presence reveals the vulnerability of a man to sexual charm and thereby threatens the stability of his world.”<sup>35</sup> As Cuthbert Sumner’s first love, who persists in exerting a powerful magnetism over him, Aurelia “threatens the stability of his world” by being a living embodiment of miscegenation, a “terrible action” which he is not prepared to “countenance” (*MN* 270). Aurelia’s presence foreshadows the revelation that the woman he eventually marries, Jewel Bowen, is also of mixed race. Furthermore, Jewel Bowen herself prefigures the other female archetype identified in *film noir* – the woman as redeemer. Jewel Bowen fulfils the “tragic mulatta” stereotype, while Aurelia Madison takes a more pro-active stance and she does not die at the novel’s end as Jewel does.

As Cawelti notes, the introduction of a female betrayer was one of the innovations in the shift from the classical to hard-boiled genre of detective fiction in the early part of the twentieth century:

The hard-boiled villain is frequently disguised as a friend or lover, adding to the crimes an attempted betrayal of the detective’s loyalty and love; when revealed, this treachery becomes the climax of that pattern of threat and temptation noted earlier. To support this pattern of threatened betrayal, the hard-boiled criminal is often characterized as particularly vicious, perverse,



or depraved, and, in a striking number of instances as a woman of unusual sexual attractiveness.<sup>36</sup>

The *femme fatale* unites beauty and threat, sexuality and danger and she provokes a “fear of feminine aggression and domination” in the hard-boiled male.<sup>37</sup> As a result the *femme fatale* is often masculinised, connoting her perceived desire to usurp male power.<sup>38</sup> This is undoubtedly true of Aurelia. As Benson notes of her company, “It’s a relief to be with a woman who can join a man in a social glass, have a cigar with him, or hold her own in winning or losing a game with no Sunday-school nonsense about her” (*MN* 78). However, unlike Brown’s Clotel, who *only* becomes an active subject at those moments during which she is cross-dressing as a man, Aurelia’s “manliness” is characterised more by typical associations of masculinity than with any physical enactment or performance thereof. She is, furthermore, characterised by her ambition, which is, as Janey Place maintains, “often the original transgression of the dangerous lady.”<sup>39</sup>

The overwhelming characteristic of the *femme fatale*, however, is her dangerous beauty. Aurelia’s “voluptuous beauty” has a particular effect on men, especially Cuthbert Sumner, who eventually recognises that “Men must always be half her lovers and therein lies the secret of her power” (*MN* 129), a description that could be accurately applied to any *femme fatale*. In Aurelia’s case, this beauty is inextricably bound up with her mixed racial heritage. The beguiling (Anglo-Saxon) beauty of the mulatta brings about not only her own tragedy, but also, unwittingly, that of the man who loves her but cannot/will not be/stay with her. Horatio Green’s abandonment of Clotel in Brown’s 1853 novel is a clear example.

Indeed, Hopkins’s insistence on Aurelia’s “fascinating” beauty (92, 99, 132, 250) recalls Brown’s use of the same description of quadroon women in the opening

pages of *Clotel*. Brown depicts the women as innocent victims *and* as “*conniving* to establish liaisons with wealthy white men, in which endeavor they apparently cannot fail, since they are uniformly endowed with an essential, literally ‘fascinating,’ beauty.”<sup>40</sup> Brown’s novel thus betrays his own profound ambivalence towards the mulatta figure because it is, as Phillip Brian Harper puts it, “specifically these women’s failure to be chaste – however much that failure may derive from the corruption of the slave system – that apparently engenders the ‘immorality and vice’ that plague Southern cities.”<sup>41</sup> Even while acknowledging their victim status, Brown cannot seem to excuse unequivocally their lack of “virtue,” and this is reinforced by the account of his sister’s fate, also a mulatta, included in the autobiographical section that prefaces the novel: “But how infinitely better is it for a sister to ‘go into the silent land’ with her honour untarnished, but with bright hopes, than for her to be sold to sensual slaveholders” (Brown 49, 16). This curious mixture of agency and passivity, power and self-destructiveness is echoed in Mary Ann Doane’s description of the *femme fatale* as “an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its carrier (the connotations of disease are appropriate here).”<sup>42</sup> Hopkins’s Aurelia Madison thus does not simply prefigure the *femme fatale* of subsequent hard-boiled fiction but responds to the ambivalence that underlies representations of mulattas in fiction predating *Hagar’s Daughter*, particularly the work of William Wells Brown.<sup>43</sup>

Aurelia is *not* present in the Brown-reminiscent Part I of *Hagar’s Daughter*. She appears in Part II as Hopkins’s most significant contribution to the African American passing novel launched by Brown in 1853: the transformation of one of the novel’s mulattas from passive to (ambivalently) active subject. If, as Jean Fagan Yellin claims, the “pathos of the Tragic Mulatto rests in the contradiction between

her sincere efforts to adhere to the patriarchal definition of true womanhood and the patriarchy's insistence that she violate this norm,"<sup>44</sup> Aurelia Madison is more *femme fatale* than tragic mulatta, recognising and *deliberately* exercising the power that her allure grants her. Here is a mulatta who is calculating, intentionally duplicitous and who lives by her own moral code: "Honesty she viewed as a luxury for the wealthy to enjoy" (MN 92).

Reading Aurelia as a *femme fatale* provides the key to establishing another significant way in which Hopkins rewrites *Clotel* in *Hagar's Daughter*. As Doane notes, from her origins, the *femme fatale* "is represented as the antithesis of the maternal – sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Borde and Chaumeton, writing specifically of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*, observe that she is "[p]robably frigid."<sup>46</sup> In the context of slavery, however, remaining childless is a desirable situation for the slave woman. It represents a refusal to contribute to an economy that demands the (re)production of human capital for slave owners to (ab)use. In *Clotel*, two generations of mulatta slave women – Clotel's mother, Currer, and Clotel – are powerless to prevent the sale of their slave daughters. In *Hagar's Daughter*, however, not only is Aurelia childless but, in contrast to *Clotel*, the signature abandoned mulatta-and-child are a *white* woman character, Elise Bradford, and her son. Within six months of arriving in Washington D.C. from Kentucky, Elise Bradford has fallen "victim" to General Benson's charms (MN 158). The reader should thus view as deeply ironic the fact that Hopkins makes Elise the mouthpiece for a speech on the seductive powers of mixed race women that could have come straight out of Brown's novel. Aurelia Madison supplants Elise in Benson's affections, and thus Aurelia's effort to win the

favours of a white man is no *less* “honorably” undertaken than her predecessor’s, who, like Aurelia, “had tasted poverty” and “sickened at the thought” (158).

As Hazel Carby, Ann duCille and others have shown, nineteenth-century African American women writers “created virtuous, often light-skinned mulatta heroines, whose sexual purity reigned on the printed page as a rebuttal to the racist imaging of black women as morally loose and readily accessible.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that Hopkins does not (and could not) unequivocally endorse Aurelia’s behaviour; her separation from Cuthbert Sumner occurs “over a flirtation on her part” (92). However, although Aurelia is ultimately divested of her power, she is nevertheless treated sympathetically. As Carby notes, Aurelia exists as, but is not condemned for being, a villain.<sup>48</sup> In the end, “Nothing criminal was charged against Aurelia; in fact, no one desired to inflict more punishment on the unfortunate woman, and when she left the court room that day she vanished forever from public view” (272). In summarising in this way, Hopkins successfully negotiates the threshold between reducing Aurelia to *Clotel*-esque victimhood and condemning her supposed immorality. The traditionally virtuous mulattas survive in the form of Estelle Bowen/Hagar and Jewel Bowen, but they are less interesting than Aurelia Madison whose complexity and capacity for (self)-destruction prefigures the introspective mulattas of the Harlem Renaissance, characters such as Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929).

Aurelia and Jewel are presented as narrative doubles, so similar that their differences emerge with even greater intensity. Both are the daughters of slave women (although Jewel does not realise this until much later than Aurelia), they attend school together in Montreal, they fall in love with the same man, and both are supremely attractive, but in very dissimilar ways. While Aurelia is a “gorgeous

tropical flower,” Jewel is “a fair fragrant lily” (90). (Lilies are, of course, the flower of death and through her repeated association with them, Jewel’s tragic fate is sealed.) Some commentators have criticised Hopkins over her dichotomous portrayal of black women as either white and refined – like Hagar, Jewel and Aurelia – or black and uncultured – like Aunt Henny, Marthy and Venus.<sup>49</sup> However, such analyses overlook Hopkins’s construction of Jewel and Aurelia, who are both of mixed racial ancestry, as polar opposites. The significance of their *difference from each other* is elaborated in Michele Hunter’s discussion of biracial sisters Birdie and Cole in Danzy Senna’s 1998 novel, *Caucasia*. Hunter argues that “Birdie and Cole’s *difference from each other* undoes our traditional notions of difference in which a normative standard oppresses its corresponding deviant.”<sup>50</sup> For Hunter:

difference here is no longer tyrannically hierarchical, nor is it oppositional. Instead, the identification that occurs between Birdie and Cole captures an instance of difference that is *non-oppositional*. Because Birdie and Cole fail to uphold any normative standard precisely as a result of their outsider status, I define the relationship between them as *difference from difference*.

Difference and identity exist here not by means of negation, but possibility.<sup>51</sup>

Substitute Jewel and Aurelia for Birdie and Cole and this contention may be applied to *Hagar’s Daughter* in which Hopkins creates two characters whose differences stem not from their racial makeup – they are both mixed race and beautiful – but from the disparate opportunities which they have or have not enjoyed. Whereas Jewel has been “favoured by fortune” (73), Aurelia has to rely on her “face” as her “fortune” (125). By setting up their differences in *physical* terms throughout the novel – Jewel’s “sweet cherub” to Aurelia’s “siren charms” (91) – the subsequent revelation that both Aurelia and Jewel are biracial ensures that Hopkins’s

lesson regarding the danger of relying on biology as an indication of character resounds with even greater effect. For Suzanne Bost, Aurelia “contains the negative associations of their shared racial uncertainty, while Jewel remains ethereal and free from corporeal impurity.”<sup>52</sup> While I concur that Aurelia and Jewel allow Hopkins to “deconstruct the monolith of mulatta identity with their opposing racial and sexual embodiments,” I do not agree that Aurelia is portrayed negatively.<sup>53</sup> Rather, by retaining a virtuous mulatta in Jewel Bowen, Hopkins presents the reader with a credible embodiment of the Cult of True Womanhood, while simultaneously providing a subversive alternative, if only for a short time, in the character of Aurelia Madison.<sup>54</sup>

The novel’s preoccupation with plots of passing relates to its detective framework in one further significant way. As Stephen Knadler argues, although Hopkins ties up all the loose ends and reveals the “true” identities of her characters, “the apparent containment of the criminal other, of that which threatens to disrupt and destroy the community, Hopkins intimates, is merely an illusion, and the crime, within the community at large, still remains invisible.”<sup>55</sup> What remains unresolved for Knadler, and for Hopkins, are all those “undetected crimes against black women, hate crimes that were inseparable from the process of gendering whiteness.”<sup>56</sup> As Knadler observes, it is significant that the mechanisms of the law are only set in motion after the murder of a white woman – Elise Bradford – and it is only *through* this crime that B/Enson’s heinous crimes against Hagar, enacted some twenty years previously and which have heretofore gone unpunished, are also exposed. Until Elise Bradford is murdered, in other words, the misdeeds committed against Hagar “pass” out of the picture. To extend Knadler’s analysis, then, the “invisible” crime with which *Hagar’s Daughter* is concerned is reflected in what Joel Williamson

would call the “invisible blackness” of the novel’s mixed race female characters.<sup>57</sup>

Although their African American ancestry is revealed at the end of the novel, just as the murder of Elise Bradford is solved, their blackness remains “invisible” in the sense that it is not, and never will be, corporeally legible. It is down to the perceptive reader, then, to discern Hopkins’s hidden message.

The coexistence of plots of passing and detection operates at yet another level in *Hagar’s Daughter* and, as will become more evident in Chapter Three, in Hopkins’s *oeuvre* as a whole. As I argue throughout the thesis, plots of passing often have an authorial counterpart: the theme of passing is frequently a narrative manifestation of a strategic disguise assumed by the author. In Hopkins’s career, it is known that disguise took the form of at least two pseudonyms – Sarah A. Allen, her mother’s name, and, as Hanna Wallinger has recently discovered, J. Shirley Shadrach.<sup>58</sup> According to Wallinger, Hopkins’s use of pseudonyms enabled her to “publish more frequently, and avoid public criticism directed at herself.”<sup>59</sup> Intriguingly, there is a striking similarity between the name Sarah A. Allen and Allen Pinks, the eponymous heroine who cross-dresses in order to go undercover in *Winona* (1902) and *this* bears a distinct resemblance to the name Allan Pinkerton, founder of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, made famous in 1875 by James McParlan’s infiltration of the Mollie Maguires gang. Such connections beg the question whether Hopkins imagined herself as a kind of literary Pinkerton agent going undercover at the *Colored American Magazine*, downplaying her influence there in order to retain it.

### From Aurelia Madison to Daphne Monet

Stephen P. Knadler argues that “[b]y making the hero and villain literally blood relations, *Hagar’s Daughter* blurs the boundaries between the white male villain and the white male savior.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, because he is the villain’s brother, Hopkins also indicts H/Enson, Hagar’s husband, Jewel’s father and the novel’s principal detective, in the crimes committed. To take Knadler’s observation further, this represents another key way in which Hopkins prefigures hard-boiled fiction: she implicates the detective in the culture of violence and moral dubiety of which he is inevitably a representative as well as a detached spectator. In 1990, almost ninety years after the serialisation of *Hagar’s Daughter*, the first of Walter Mosley’s hard-boiled Easy Rawlins mysteries appeared. While Mosley’s indebtedness to hard-boiled crime fiction, in general, and to Raymond Chandler, in particular, has been amply explored by critics, Mosley’s work has not often been situated within a detective tradition that is recognisably *African American*, let alone one which includes Pauline Hopkins.<sup>61</sup>

That Mosley’s work is not considered alongside Pauline Hopkins’s is especially curious given that his union of “tragic mulatta” who is passing as white and *femme fatale* in *Devil in a Blue Dress* would appear to be directly inspired by *Hagar’s Daughter*. John Gruesser does discuss *Hagar’s Daughter* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* together, contrasting Venus Johnson, who cross-dresses in order to investigate the abduction of her grandmother and Jewel Bowen, with Easy’s “linguistic and rhetorical” disguise.<sup>62</sup> No mention is made, however, of the affinities between Mosley’s Daphne Monet and Hopkins’s Aurelia Madison. Furthermore, commentators who locate Mosley’s literary antecedents in hard-boiled crime writing



of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s dehistoricise Mosley's fiction which, published in 1990 and after, emerges as much from a profound awareness of the cultural legacy of *film noir* as from an engagement with Chandler and Hammett. My analysis of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the first novel in Mosley's Easy Rawlins series, will situate the novel in terms of both *film noir* and African American detective fiction, particularly *Hagar's Daughter*, emphasising the significance of the erstwhile "tragic mulatta" turned *femme fatale*.

Consistent with the richly suggestive connotations of the term, scholarship on *film noir* has, for some time now, included discussions of its underlying preoccupation with race. *Film noir* was dominant in the 1940s and anxieties provoked in the white consciousness by the beginnings of civil rights activism manifested themselves in what Manthia Diawara calls *film noir*'s "oppositional discourse between dark and light, underworld and above ground, good and evil, and it is through the blurring of these boundaries that characters partake of the attributes of Blackness."<sup>63</sup> In his analysis of the visual style of *Double Indemnity*, Eric Lott notes that Walter Neff's account of himself refers us "to the 'complexion' of a man so scarred by his own deceit, violence, and cunning and so fully immersed in blackened cinematic compositions that his darkness threatens to manifest itself on his very skin."<sup>64</sup> I would argue that *film noir* thus betrays an anxiety not only about blackness in general, but more specifically, about the possibility of *metamorphosis*, of converting from white to black or from black to white, a process in which the mulatto/a passing figure is directly engaged. Indeed, E. Ann Kaplan's examination of Irena – a cross between a white woman and a dark black animal – in Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* makes this very point: "The limits that Irena/monster sets in *Cat People* are especially crucial since the unconscious association in this particular

was to black/white intermixing as well. The Irena/monster becomes a metaphor for such intermixing.”<sup>65</sup>

*Film noir*’s obsession with white characters that are morally “black” and film’s disconcerting ability to render such ambiguity physically perceptible through lighting and visual composition recalls the anxieties associated with seeing/not-seeing and transformation/revelation in passing narratives. For example, in *Hagar’s Daughter*, when Hagar first learns of her African American ancestry, her slave, Marthy, immediately metamorphoses in her perception:

Hagar suddenly arose, caught her by the shoulders and turned her toward the light, minutely examining the black skin, crinkled hair, flat nose and protruding lips. So might her grandmother have looked. (MN 56)

Similarly, when Ellis Enson counters Cuthbert Sumner’s condemnation of racial amalgamation by reminding him how close he came to marrying Aurelia Madison, Cuthbert Sumner claims that, no longer a “gorgeous tropical flower” (103), the mere thought of “the grinning, toothless black hag that was her forebear would forever rise between us” (271). Thus, although *film noir* doesn’t explicitly address the issues of passing or miscegenation (in the 1940s, these matters were reserved for the 1949 “problem pictures” such as *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries*), its signature preoccupations with the *interplay* of light and dark and the blurring of boundaries render it particularly receptive to the introduction of mulatto/a passing characters.<sup>66</sup>

Following Aurelia Madison in *Hagar’s Daughter*, the *femme fatale* in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Daphne Monet, is also a mulatta passing for white. That the mulatta functions as an ongoing locus for anxieties regarding race mixing is reflected in the historical moment in which Mosley locates his novel. His first Easy Rawlins mystery is set in 1948, the year in which Harry Truman desegregated the U.S.

Armed Forces, and a moment that may be identified in terms of growing anxieties in the 1940s about increased proximity between the races.<sup>67</sup> Such anxiety is suggested by Easy's attachment to the home he has just bought in Watts. In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on *Shelley v. Kraemer* outlawed restrictive covenants barring African Americans and Asian Americans from owning property in certain areas. Until that point, according to Mike Davis, "white homeowner groups in Los Angeles had ample sanction in the law."<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the African American presence in Watts itself, which attracted tens of thousands of black workers from the Southwest during World War II, was contested by the South Los Angeles Home Owners Association.<sup>69</sup> Easy's acquisition of a house in Watts thus speaks to the declining power of white supremacists in the late 1940s and the concomitant dissolution of racial boundaries in public spaces.

In fact, Mosley's self-conscious treatment of this historical moment is signalled by the proliferation of ambiguously raced characters. In addition to Daphne Monet, who, after all, Easy – and thus the reader – believes to be white until towards the end of the novel,<sup>70</sup> Easy's former boss at Champion Aircraft is Italian: "His salt-and-pepper hair had once been jet black and his skin color was darker than many mulattos I'd known. But Benny was a white man and I was a Negro" (71). Another minor character, Zeppo, is "half Negro, half Italian" (136). When Easy goes to meet DeWitt Albright to discuss finding Daphne Monet, he encounters one of Albright's henchmen, who "looked a little like he was Chinese around the eyes, but when I looked at him again I wasn't so sure of his race" (23). Easy even inquires of Albright as to the racial origins of the "maybe-Chinese man" (25). In their subsequent negotiations, the phrase "mixed up" occurs five times in thirteen lines,

further anticipating the racial mixedness of Daphne Monet, the subject of their conversation (26-27).

In many respects, Daphne Monet conforms to archetypal representations of both *femme fatale* and “tragic mulatta.” She is sexually alluring: Easy adjudges her “worth looking for if you could get her to smile at you that way” (25); Joppy remarks: “She’s a pretty girl, Easy. Very pretty. I wouldn’t mind her bein’ my friend” (150). She is also characterised by her victimhood: she has been repeatedly sexually violated during childhood. However, as the “devil in a blue dress” of the title, with “evil in every pocket,” she is dangerous (151). True to the designation “*femme fatale*,” Daphne’s character carries inevitable connotations of death. About to embark on a sexual encounter with her, Easy feels a sense of foreboding: “I felt something deep down in me, something dark like jazz when it reminds you that death is waiting” (184). By the close of the novel, Easy is convinced that “Daphne Monet was death herself” (208).<sup>71</sup> These descriptions of Daphne accord neatly with Borde and Chaumeton’s description of the *femme fatale* in their seminal 1955 essay on *film noir*: “She is fatal to herself. Frustrated and criminally minded, half-devouring and half-devoured, uninvolved yet cornered, she falls victim to her own evil designs.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, consistent with historical depictions of the “tragic mulatta,” Daphne Monet is highly contested territory. Almost every male character is after Daphne for one reason or another: Easy Rawlins, on behalf of DeWitt Albright, on behalf of her lover, Todd Carter; Matthew Teran, the paedophile mayoral candidate (85); and Richard McGee, “a blackmailer and a homosexual pimp” (125).

If, to return to John Reilly’s definition, the *femme fatale* is “any woman whose presence reveals the vulnerability of a man to sexual charm and thereby

threatens the stability of his world,” Easy’s conception of race is not so much at stake as it is for Cuthbert Sumner in *Hagar’s Daughter*. As Theodore Mason notes “Having killed blue-eyed ‘Aryans’ and therefore unpacked the mythology of whiteness, Easy does not imagine himself inclined to reinstall the racial understandings of the 1930s in 1948.”<sup>73</sup> Rather, Daphne’s presence renders Easy’s world unstable in two ways: first, through her ability to compromise his (and other men’s) masculinity and second, because she represents the past, a past which Easy would rather leave behind but which is revisited upon him in *Devil*. These issues are inextricably linked, because Easy’s past is overwhelmingly dominated by the figure of Raymond “Mouse” Alexander, a friend of his youth, his relationship with whom has caused Easy to question – and reify – his own masculinity.

Like *Hagar’s Daughter*, *Devil* features at least two historical displacements in addition to the disjuncture between time-of-writing and setting. *Hagar’s Daughter*, published in 1901 and 1902, is set partly in 1860 and mostly in 1882. *Devil in a Blue Dress*, published in 1990, is set in Los Angeles in 1948 but with frequent flashbacks to Easy’s youth in Houston, Texas and his five years of combat in World War II. The past is thus of crucial importance to both Walter Mosley and Easy Rawlins. What better incarnation is there of the presence of the past than the mixed race woman, who has not only been over-determined in literature of an earlier period but whose very body bespeaks a history and continuing legacy of white-on-black (sexual) violence? Through the figure of the mulatta and the ways in which Mosley invokes her as a historical presence, the novel’s timeframe becomes extended to include the African American slave past, which is ostensibly absent but implicitly present in the text.

As in *Hagar's Daughter*, whose geographical setting wanders from South Carolina to Maryland to Washington D.C., with occasional references to California, historical shifts in *Devil* are reinforced by geographical shifts (L.A., Texas, the World War II locations of Africa, Japan, Italy and France). Easy's past is geographically mobile, like the figure of the mulatta who passes. Daphne, aka Ruby Hanks, is born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, brought up in Texas, and living in Los Angeles. When Easy finally meets her, she is masquerading as a French woman, and this precipitates a flashback to Easy's time in Normandy (104-105). If, in *Hagar's Daughter*, the Californian presence – in the characters of Zenas and Jewel Bowen – “complicate[s] the antonymic equation of North and South,” a conflict which assumes the Civil War as its “privileged metaphor,”<sup>74</sup> *Devil in a Blue Dress* implies – through its transplanted African American population – the extent to which its characters' Southern past remains embedded in the Californian present. Daphne Monet as mulatta-*femme fatale* is thus the catalyst for Easy's attempt to come to terms with his past, both metaphorically – as the *embodiment* of the past – and literally. Easy's arrangement with Albright to locate Daphne sets in motion a chain of events that overwhelm Easy until he eventually enlists the help of Mouse, the Houston-based friend of his youth. This literal association is reinforced when it transpires that Daphne is the half-sister of Frank Green, an L.A.-based gangster that both Mouse and Easy know from their Texan past. Mouse immediately recognises Daphne as Ruby Hanks, the mixed race sister of Frank Green whereas Easy believed her to be white.

That Easy's involvement in the search for Daphne Monet will bring about a confrontation with his past is signalled in his first encounter with DeWitt Albright: “While he talked it dawned on me that Albright was a lot like a friend I had back in

Texas – Raymond Alexander was his name but we called him Mouse. Just thinking about Mouse set my teeth on edge” (13). In their second meeting, Easy is again struck by Albright’s similarity to Mouse: “The way he smiled when he sat back in his chair reminded me of Mouse again. I thought of how Mouse was always smiling, especially when misfortune happened to someone else” (28). Easy’s fear of Mouse’s extreme violence (Easy was, unwittingly, an accessory to Mouse’s brutal murder of his step-father and -brother) is the reason why Easy eventually leaves Houston: “I hated myself. I signed up to fight in the war to prove to myself that I was a man” (54). Given the perceived similarities between Mouse and Albright, and the degree to which he feels his masculinity has been compromised by fear of Mouse, it is not surprising that Easy agrees to Albright’s proposition: “The more I was afraid of him, I was that much more certain to take the job he offered” (20).

Recalling his flight from Houston and Mouse, Easy notes that “it seemed like a lifetime had passed since then. I was a landowner that night and I was working for my mortgage” (40). If Easy’s ownership of a house bolsters the fragile sense of his own masculinity, it is deeply problematic that this property is gendered female: “that house meant more to me than any woman I ever knew. I loved her and I was jealous of her and if the bank sent the county marshal to take her from me I might have come at him with a rifle rather than give her up” (19-20). When Easy becomes sexually involved with Daphne, it is she, specifically, who becomes conflated with property. Mouse tells Easy after they are reunited: “You use’ t’be kinda scared of everything. Take them little nigger jobs like gardenin’ and cleanin’ up. Now you got this nice house and you fuckin’ some white man’s girl” (157).

Despite the seemingly simplistic power relations implied by such a correspondence, Easy is painfully aware of Daphne’s capacity to destroy manhood.

When Todd Carter tells Easy of his love for Daphne, Easy is “almost embarrassed to hear him. He wasn’t trying to act like a man at all” (123). Carter subsequently recounts how Daphne would “hold him to her breast when he was afraid and how she’d stand up for him when a shopkeeper or waiter tried to walk over him” (126). With Mouse’s help, Easy succeeds in neutralising the threat that Daphne poses. Whereas initially, Easy’s dream is “to buy more houses, maybe even a duplex” (59), Daphne lives in “a one-story duplex” (95). By the end of the novel, Daphne is forced to surrender to Easy and Mouse the money she has stolen from Todd Carter. With his ten thousand-dollar share, Easy buys a second house and his “dream” thus materialises at the expense of hers.

If DeWitt Albright reminds Easy of Mouse, his “light drawl” is also reminiscent of “a well-to-do southern gentleman” (11). This is the first in a series of instances in which Mosley gestures towards an earlier period that refers not simply to Houston in the 1930s, but also to an the Old South and race relations during slavery. Easy takes Albright up on his request to search for Daphne because he has recently been dismissed from his job at an aircraft manufacturing company and needs the money to make the mortgage repayments on his cherished house. For Easy, the administration of Champion Aircraft is not unlike the paternalistic institution of slavery, his former factory job “an awful lot like working on a plantation in the South. The bosses see all the workers like they’re children, and everyone knows how lazy children are” (69).

The most significant evocation of slavery, though not explicit, is the reference to the trade in human bodies in which Richard McGee is engaged. McGee, according to Todd Carter, “dealt in young boys” (125), of whom the boy that Easy encounters in Matthew Teran’s car is just one. What is striking is the degree to



which the boy's body recalls the slave body, as a child (reminiscent of the paternalistic treatment of African Americans under slavery) and as an object of *financial* and *sexual* (in the case of the mulatta) exchange between two powerful white men. Furthermore, Easy notes that the boy is ambiguously raced: his "almond shaped eyes spoke of China but this was a Mexican boy" (85). The most prominent ambiguously raced character in the novel, Daphne Monet, has, like the boy, been a victim of sexual abuse in childhood. Indeed, that Easy twice compares Daphne to a child points to her symbolic connection with the Mexican boy, the only actual child in the novel (97, 183). Daphne's father "fell in my bed about as many times as he fell in my mother's" (208). Thus, although Frank Green finally kills her father, Daphne's murder of Teran may be read as an act of displaced revenge against her own abusive parent:

"I went to him, to ask him to *leave me alone*. I offered him all my money but he just laughed. He had his hands in that little boy's drawers and he laughed," Daphne snorted. I don't know if it was a laugh or a sound of disgust. "And so I killed him." (207, emphasis added)

Although Daphne's plea of "leave me alone" refers to the fact that Teran has been threatening to reveal her "true" racial origins if her white lover, Todd Carter, refuses to back his mayoral campaign, the subsequent description of Teran's "hands in that little boy's drawers" makes explicit the link between past and current abuse of Daphne and the boy. Daphne's parting words to Easy are requests that he bury Frank Green – who killed her own abusive father – and "do something about the boy," whom she rescues after she shoots Teran (208).

In many ways, Mosley's depiction of Daphne reinforces historical representations of the mulatta as the passive victim of – predominantly white, but

occasionally black – men. After all, even if Easy and Mouse eventually succeed in pinning her down, she remains an elusive figure for the reader because her depiction is refracted through Easy’s first-person narration. However, Mosley’s portrayal also gestures towards a more active role for the mulatta, which is suggested through the parallels that he draws between Daphne and Easy Rawlins. Both are, as several critics note, transgressive characters: Easy, because his ownership of a house leads him to claim an equality with whites;<sup>75</sup> Daphne, because, like Aurelia Madison, she straddles gender, as well as racial, categories.<sup>76</sup> She urinates so loudly that it reminds Easy of a man; he “never knew a man who talked as bold as Daphne Monet” and considers this type of talk “masculine” (Mosley 186). Both Daphne and Easy are characterised by a dual consciousness. Explaining her bipartite Ruby Hanks-Daphne Monet identity, Daphne tells Easy “I’m different than you because I’m two people. I’m her and I’m me” (208). In fact, Daphne is wrong: this is exactly how she and Easy are similar. He is plagued by an inner voice – a double-consciousness – “which comes to [him] at the worst times” and “gives [him] the best advice [he] ever get[s]” (104).

The most significant parallel between Daphne and Easy relates to her passing and his role as investigator. As detective, “Nobody knew what I was up to and that made me sort of invisible; people thought that they saw me but what they really saw was an illusion of me, something that wasn’t real” (135). What Easy is describing could just as easily refer to the act of racial passing in which Daphne is engaged. As one critic puts it, “just as Daphne tries to ‘pass’ as a white woman, Easy does his share of passing in order to carry out the job of sleuth.”<sup>77</sup> What the act of passing shares with investigating is the notion of mobility across the color line. When DeWitt Albright hires Easy to track Daphne Monet, it is because he cannot “go in

those [Negro] places looking for her because I'm not the right persuasion" (26). DeWitt Albright sums Daphne up as "Not bad to look at but she's hell to find," thus conjoining the mulatta's fabled beauty and the passer's geographical and racial elusiveness – her ability to be white in one place, black in another (26). Mosley emphasises Easy's mobility by repeatedly situating him in relation to doors and gates. On his visit to Albright's office to discuss finding Daphne Monet, Easy first passes through "black wrought-iron gates," through a door leading to an open courtyard, through another door "at the other side of the courtyard" and yet another door, opening into a "small room" (20-23). Subsequently, Daphne represents, for Easy, "a door that had been closed all my life; a door that all of sudden flung open and let me in" (187). The potentially subversive power of passing is hinted at in the "secret glee" Easy feels to be "*acting on my own*" (134, 131, emphasis added). Passing, like detection, involves a degree of performance and, as a solitary pursuit, may enable the subject to achieve otherwise unattainable autonomy.

However, while Easy manages to balance home *and* mobility at the end of the novel – through his dual enterprises of real estate investment and private investigation – Daphne (as with the archetypal passing mulatta) has access only to *either* domestic happiness *or* independent mobility.<sup>78</sup> Mosley ultimately forecloses the possibility that he has so tantalisingly evoked. Nevertheless, to return briefly to Manthia Diawara: "Women, bad guys, and detectives in *film noir* are 'Black' by virtue of occupying indeterminate and monstrous spaces that Whiteness traditionally reserves for Blackness in our culture."<sup>79</sup> The "indeterminacy" and "monstrousness" of the passing mulatta-*femme fatale* in *Devil in a Blue Dress* thus makes "manifest what has previously been latent" in hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*.<sup>80</sup> Robert

Skinner literalises Mosley's metaphorical association between passing and detection: his private investigator, Wesley Farrell, is also passing for white.

### **From *Femme Fatale* to Marginal Man**

Written between 1997 and 2002, Robert Skinner's six crime novels, like those of Hopkins and Mosley, take place at a historical remove from the time of their composition. Set between 1937 and 1941, they follow the adventures of Wesley Farrell, a wealthy businessman-turned-sleuth. The temporal displacement is crucial, because it enables Skinner to reconsider not only the roles of passer and detective as literary figures, but also to re-imagine creatively the position of the mixed race subject in historical reality. Born around the turn of the twentieth century and raised in New Orleans, Wesley Farrell is the son of a Creole Negro woman and a white man. Abandoned (or so he thinks) by his father, his mother succumbs to an early death when he is thirteen years old and Farrell goes to live with his maternal great-aunt, Willie Mae Gautier. At sixteen, he leaves his aunt's home, passes as white and rises from obscurity to become the wealthy owner of nightclubs, brothels and gambling houses. This analysis of Skinner's *fin-de-siècle* work will emphasise its continuities with *Hagar's Daughter*, published at the turn of the twentieth century, and will focus upon the first (*Skin Deep, Blood Red*) and the fifth (*Pale Shadow*) Wesley Farrell mysteries. The first novel is significant because it introduces Farrell and several other key characters who remain important throughout the series. I also refer to the fifth in the series because, although Skinner encourages the reader to view Farrell's passing in the context of disguises deployed by other characters throughout the series, this occurs most obviously and most satisfyingly in *Pale*

*Shadow*. This novel features the villain Dixie Ray Chavez, a white man passing as an African American priest.

In the first novel, *Skin Deep, Blood Red* (1997), Farrell is blackmailed into investigating the murder of a corrupt cop by a local gangster, who threatens to reveal his racial origins if he refuses. This is consistent with Peter Thoms's observation that "[i]n many detective fictions, the offense represents an unjust assertion of authorial power as the criminal assumes control of another's story and deploys it for his own ends."<sup>81</sup> In other words, Farrell only embarks on the investigation in order to avoid having authority over his own story – passing as white – wrested from his hands by Emile Ganns. In becoming a detective figure, he thus assumes narrative power not only over his own story, but also those of others: by solving crimes, he will construct coherent stories. In *Skin Deep, Blood Red*, he repeatedly finds himself thrown into the path of Inspector Frank Casey, who is carrying out the police investigation into the murder. It transpires that Casey is Farrell's long-lost father (or depending on the viewpoint, Farrell is Casey's long-lost son) and the two team up to solve the Tartaglia murder, leaving a trail of corpses in their wake. In subsequent novels, Farrell cooperates further with Casey and with two detectives from the Negro Squad – Israel Daggett and Sam Andrews. That Skinner's work asserts itself firmly in the hard-boiled tradition is confirmed by *Skin Deep, Blood Red*'s intertextual references to that tradition. It initially reads, according to Bertens and D'haen "like a straightforward calque of [Dashiell Hammett's] *The Maltese Falcon*."<sup>82</sup> However, what makes Skinner's work unique, as Bertens and D'haen identify in passing and I explore in depth here, is "its treatment of race, and particularly 'passing.'"<sup>83</sup>

Certainly, Wesley Farrell has both real-life and literary antecedents. His role as detective in Skinner's novels recalls the kind of real-life passing undertaken by

Walter White in his position as chief investigator of lynching for the NAACP in the 1920s. Fair-complexioned White used his light skin to *disguise* his “blackness,” thus enabling him to go “undercover” in the South and expose racial injustices. White calls this type of investigative work “sleuthing.”<sup>84</sup> As a private detective, Farrell similarly succeeds in taking control of the gaze which is historically directed at the mixed race subject. Where, traditionally, the passing figure fears and suffers detection and exposure of his or her racial ancestry, with passing itself configured as a crime, in Skinner’s mystery novels, Farrell actively embarks upon detection and exposure of the crimes of others. The notion of the passing as a means of carrying out undercover investigations also has literary precursors. Light-skinned George Winston in Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and their Friends* (1857) delights at having spent a great deal of time in the company of a consummate racist who “prides himself on being able to detect evidences of the least drop of African blood in any one” (Webb 4). Werner Sollors finds George’s brand of passing “heroic”:

George, who after all passes only temporarily and shares his secret with others who appreciate it, plays the subversive trickster and spy whose successful (if dangerous) activity undermines racial thinking and exposes its adherents to ridicule.<sup>85</sup>

Reminiscent of Walter White’s passing is that of Vera Manning in Jessie Fauset’s *There is Confusion* (1924). Having passed unhappily for many years in New York, Vera eventually finds personal and professional fulfilment taking precarious trips South, passing for white, and reporting atrocities committed against black Southerners to her newspaper-employer in New York. She thus uses “her absence of color, to the advantage of her people.”<sup>86</sup>

When considered together, it becomes clear that literary depictions of the mulatto accord neatly with the cultural icon that is the hard-boiled gumshoe. Skinner unites archetypal representations of the loner detective with a shadowy past and the literary mulatto as a “marginal man,” emphasising their common “outsider-ship.”<sup>87</sup> Skinner’s remarkable achievement in the Wesley Farrell series is that, in amalgamating the hard-boiled detective and the passer, he revises conventional depictions of both literary figures. For example, hard-boiled detectives, according to George Grella, “are drawn to the outcast, the vulnerable, the miserable, often working only for what they conceive as justice.”<sup>88</sup> The detective’s “moral concerns” are complicated even further in Farrell’s case by his racial conscience, his sense of guilt for opting to pass as white. As such, he often becomes embroiled in investigations because of the empathy he feels for a former friend or acquaintance from the black community. His compassion is puzzling to most of the African Americans he encounters, who cannot understand “why he behaved in ways that were inexplicable in a white man.”<sup>89</sup> As Margaret “Jelly” Wilde asks him in *Pale Shadow*:

“Why should you care what a colored woman thinks, or whether or not a colored man lives or dies? [. . .] Oh, I know all about the stories they tell about the great white hope, Wes Farrell, who reaches down to help all the poor, helpless niggers in distress. [. . .] White people don’t help us unless there’s an angle, so what’s yours, Farrell?” (139).

### From Marginal Man to Family Man

If the hard-boiled detective is typically “without antecedents, unmarried, childless, [. . .] totally alone,” Skinner reworks this rule by allowing Farrell to emerge from the series surrounded by a multiracial family.<sup>90</sup> As Skinner puts it:

By the end of the six novels, family is what’s important to him. Nothing is as important to him as family, not even his own life. And you may notice that as each person in his life becomes more important to him, each one of them gets the opportunity to save his life at a crucial juncture and solidify that bond he has with them.<sup>91</sup>

In her discussion of *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hazel Carby addresses the ways in which Hopkins uses and adapts the convention of the detective as lone hero: “The transformation of the client-detective relationship into a familial involvement ends Henson’s days as a detective; his function in the narrative had to change, as he was renamed as landowner, husband, and eventually father.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, the restoration of ruptured familial ties – between H/Enson, Estelle Bowen/Hagar and their daughter Jewel – is Hopkins’s principal narrative project and takes precedence over Henson’s role as detective. There is every reason to suggest that in Skinner’s work, the same hierarchy of interests is at stake. However, whereas in *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hopkins is concerned with the matrilineal line, Skinner pays particular attention to father-son dynamics. This preoccupation with paternity is consistent with a general obsession with patrimony and paternal abandonment in the wider context of passing narratives.

For example, in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which features arguably the most famous male passer, the protagonist’s (ultimately unsuccessful)



quest for a “home” – black, white and mulatto – is intimately bound up with his sense of rejection and abandonment by his white father. He comes closest to finding this “home” when he briefly experiences the multi-coloured campus of Atlanta University but here, and when he finds himself seated next to his father, and his “legitimate family,” at the Paris Opera, the presence of a white father figure (the University President/his biological father) looms before him as an obstacle to ideal images of home and belonging.<sup>93</sup>

Bearing in mind that the absence of the (white) father often contributes to the passer’s extreme sense of isolation, Skinner’s work may be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim a relationship so often degraded and/or obscured in passing fiction. In *Skin Deep*, *Blood Red*, the investigation of Chance Tartaglia’s murder brings about the reconciliation between white father and mulatto son, Frank Casey and Wesley Farrell. Law is, of course, a projection of parental authority in that it regulates human behaviour and punishes deviance. American miscegenation law, in particular, has long been haunted by the spectre of the *father’s* absent presence. From 1662 onwards, when the Virginia assembly decided that mulatto/a children would follow the condition of the mother, the mulatto/a was encoded in miscegenation law as having *only one parent*, in that his or her legal status was determined by just one parent: the mother.<sup>94</sup>

Robert Skinner revises such legal discourse by writing the white father back into the mulatto’s genealogy.<sup>95</sup> Their cooperation from different sides of the law (Frank Casey as the clean cop, Wesley Farrell with his shady business interests and reputation for violence) powerfully restores equality and mutuality to a father-son relationship historically defined in grossly inequitable terms – economic and legal ownership of the son by the father. Frank’s acceptance of Wesley’s involvement

*legitimizes* his son's presence at crime scenes where he has no business being.

Casey thus extends to Farrell the recognition usually denied the mulatto son in passing fiction. Indeed, towards the end of *Skin Deep*, *Blood Red*, Casey openly acknowledges his relationship with Farrell. Asked by his corrupt boss, Gus Moroni, why Farrell would care if Casey should "get knocked off," Casey responds "Because he's my son."<sup>96</sup>

Casey fulfils a further function in the narrative and one which reveals another way in which Skinner revises the conventions of the *roman noir*. In arguing for detective fiction's fundamental commitment to reifying white heterosexual masculinity, Maureen T. Reddy elaborates upon the role of the "sharer," a character or characters with whom the detective "engages in a ritual that could be called white bonding, which is an enactment in the narrative itself of an interaction otherwise accomplished between the text and the reader."<sup>97</sup> Reddy asserts that:

While much has been made of the hard-boiled detective's solitariness, that solitariness is necessarily mitigated by the presence of a possible sharer. I say 'necessarily,' because it seems to me that readers need some model of bonding in order to recognize that achieving the detective's level of whiteness (as well as his level of heterosexuality and masculinity) is even a possibility; or otherwise, the detective might seem too singular, inimitable.<sup>98</sup>

In Skinner's novels, the "sharers" – the other men with whom the Farrell bonds – are Frank Casey, a cop and Farrell's white father, Marcel, his mixed race cousin and African American police officers, Israel Daggett and Sam Andrews. By making the sharers black, white and mixed race, Skinner disrupts the easy correspondence and identification between (the presumed) white reader, white detective and white sharer.

As will become clear, Skinner's treatment of masculinity and gender more generally is much less revisionist than his treatment of race.

The restoration of the ruptured father-son relationship between Casey and Farrell is echoed in the novel's subplot that follows the criminal exploits of Farrell's young cousin, Marcel Aristide. Marcel is rebelling against his grandmother Willie Mae Gautier, the aunt with whom Farrell lived before striking out on his own. By the novel's end, Farrell has rescued Marcel from a life of crime, given him a job and a home and is acting as a surrogate father to the young man. His newly found roles as son and father leave Farrell feeling "curiously uplifted" at the close of *Skin Deep, Blood Red* (221). Farrell has never had "a home or any people to belong to" (166). At the age of thirty-seven, Farrell acquires "a family of sorts" (221). This is in stark contrast to the paradigmatic hard-boiled detective. Of Philip Marlowe, for example, his creator notes that he "has never spoken of his parents, and apparently he has no living relatives."<sup>99</sup> Farrell's access to family and belonging provides a counterpoint to the destruction of the Tartaglia family, both literally and metaphorically. Despite the ostensibly familiar *noir* opening – the murder of a corrupt cop who "had more enemies than Carter's got liver pills" (*SD* 21) – Chance Tartaglia's death is very much a family affair. It is Chance's ex-wife, Helen, who pulls the trigger.

Frank Casey and Chance Tartaglia were once colleagues in the New Orleans Police Department and, before Tartaglia strays from the path of honour and righteousness, they are friends. Casey acts as Tartaglia's best man when he marries Helen (43) and after he loses his own wife and son, "Casey had become a kind of unofficial uncle to his best friend's child and he'd lavished some of the same affection and attention on her that he might have given to his own son" (152). Indeed, even before it is revealed that Wesley Farrell is Casey's son, Skinner draws

parallels between Farrell and Chance's daughter, Sandra. When Farrell admits to Sandra that he never knew his father, she replies "I sympathize with you [. . .] I never really knew mine, either" (57). The chance encounters between Casey-Farrell and Chance-Sandra couldn't be more different, however. Chance does not even recognise his own daughter (120) whereas Casey suspects from the first that Farrell is his son (50). In contrast to Farrell, for whom the week's events make possible a sense of belonging for the first time in his life, for Helen and Sandra Tartaglia, the homecoming to New Orleans after many years' absence is a "horror" (206).

The importance of family – in both crime and crime-fighting – is a recurrent theme throughout the Wesley Farrell series. The estrangement of father-and-child or brother-and-brother in subsequent novels is often a key motive in the crimes committed and the criminals' familial disharmony persistently draws attention to the growing intimacy between Casey and Farrell, and Farrell and Marcel. In *Cat-Eyed Trouble* (1998) and *The Righteous Cut* (2002), two men frame a cousin and a half-brother, respectively, for murders they themselves committed. *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* (1999), the third novel, sees two half-sisters independently seeking murderous revenge against their father, Jonathan Lincoln, for his cruel treatment of them and their mothers. Lincoln is himself the mulatto son of a white planter and African American woman. His intense anger towards his white father is what leads him to commit patricide in his youth. If the absence of paternal acknowledgement can lead to such a heinous crime as patricide, the series thereby underlines the magnitude of Farrell's and Casey's reconciliation.

The greatest challenge to the restored filial bond between Farrell and Casey occurs in *Pale Shadow* (2001), in which Farrell's loyalty is divided between his "real" family – Casey and Marcel – and Luis Martinez, a criminal friend from his

shady past who “treated Farrell like a younger brother” (*PS* 14). Casey, as the representative of legitimate law and order, urges Farrell to find Martinez and give him up, a proposition that Farrell does not relish: “Everything in him wanted to rebel against it, but his relationship with Casey made that impossible. They had a trust between them he would not violate” (111). Ultimately, it is Luis who betrays Farrell, and not the other way around. When Luis turns a gun on Farrell, Marcel is there to defend him. Both Farrell *and* Marcel thus pass the tests of filial duty with which they are presented. Marcel’s act of bravery is a rite of passage. He is now “all grown up” (225) and Farrell, who subsequently leaves for Cuba with Savannah Beaulieu, is confident that Marcel can “take good care of things” while he’s away (226).

### Beyond the Crescent City?

Although Farrell does go to Cuba for a time, it is significant that none of the action takes place there or, indeed, anywhere apart from New Orleans. Unlike *Hagar’s Daughter* and *Devil in a Blue Dress*, whose temporal dislocations are mirrored in their multiple geographical settings, Skinner locates the action of his novels almost exclusively in New Orleans. Indeed, one of the reasons for which Skinner terminates the series with *The Righteous Cut* is because, at the end of the novel, Farrell and his family gather around the wireless to hear that the United States has entered the Second World War. Suddenly, “New Orleans stops being a little place unto itself, the world is encroaching.”<sup>100</sup> The importance of the New Orleans setting in Skinner’s novel cannot, therefore, be overstated. Skinner himself conceives of

New Orleans in almost the same terms as he describes Wesley Farrell. For Skinner, the city is “a kind of character in the story, part good, part bad, with a lot of gray area in between.”<sup>101</sup> In *Skin Deep, Blood Red*, Farrell negotiates the muddy terrain between good and evil, legal and illegal. In his own words, he has “been skating along the edge of the law” most of his life (*SD* 216). He operates his businesses on the fringes of the law (or outside it), and he has, in the past, been arrested for gambling and murder (77). Yet the representatives of the legitimate structures of law and order, Tartaglia and Moroni, are guilty of pimping, gambling and protection. Just as in the mulatto/a literary tradition, there is neither black nor white, only racial ambiguity, in Skinner’s landscape, there is neither good nor evil, only moral ambiguity. Reflecting this, his epigraphs to *Skin Deep, Blood Red* note the “curious contiguity of good and evil” in New Orleans and ask “who are the good guys?”

In many ways, the character of New Orleans thus comes to reflect and exemplify those traits that the reader begins to associate with Wesley Farrell. Farrell’s social and cultural apartness is mirrored in “the physical and psychological geography of the city” which is “virtually that of an island, a separate place, hidden within the crescent of the treacherous, polluted Mississippi and surrounded by swampland.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, in *Pale Shadow*, one character tells Farrell: “You’re as much a part of this strange city as the river,” to which Farrell responds: “the city and I sort of belong to each other. I could never leave it entirely” (*PS* 99). Furthermore, what Kenneth Holditch calls “the New Orleans mystique” constituted of its “strong and pervasive sense of foreignness” is embodied in Wesley Farrell both literally, with his Irish and colored Creole ancestry, and metaphorically, in his indeterminate racial identity.<sup>103</sup> Often exoticised, and thus othered, in literary and filmic representations,<sup>104</sup> popular conceptions of New Orleans accord with Skinner’s

depiction of Wesley Farrell. He is a larger-than-life, almost mythical figure endowed with an unrivalled mastery of boxing, card-playing and knife-work, which recalls the Ex-Colored Man's unparalleled ease in acquiring the skills of language-learning and music-playing: "Before he left the shadows of the Negro back streets for the white world a rumor sprang up that he was descended from Basile Croquere, the nineteenth-century mulatto swordmaster. He laughed when he heard it, but he did not deny it" (*SD* 44). As the series progresses, Farrell's legend increases. In *Pale Shadow*, as he walks through a crowd, people feel a "feral quality emanating from him and stepped to the side, hurriedly dragging a companion from Farrell's path. Some recognized him and furtively whispered his name to others" (*PS* 32). His fame expands to include his young protégé, Marcel, about whom "people were already talking [. . .] in the same tones they used for his cousin" (*PS* 23).

Indeed, by emphasising the parallels between Farrell and New Orleans in terms of their shared exoticism, Skinner veers dangerously close to stereotypical representations of the exoticised mulatto body as an American anomaly. This is reinforced by Skinner's decision, in *Skin Deep, Blood Red*, to allow the reader to piece together Farrell's past gradually through italicised flashback passages. This provides a neat counterpart to the conventional murder mystery plot in that, as David Lehman maintains, both demand that the reader "extrapolate an entire scenario from a handful of clues."<sup>105</sup> However, this approach, though pleasing in its symmetry, is not unproblematic. It automatically casts the passing character in the role of "mystery man," as Sandra Tartaglia calls Farrell (*SD* 61). Like the crime he is attempting to solve, he too is a puzzle that needs to be unravelled.

Skinner's Louisiana setting fulfils an additional significant function. Until now, I have been referring to Wesley Farrell as a literary mulatto when in fact, he is

of “colored Creole” and white ancestry. If, in all narratives of racial passing, the categories of black and white are revealed to be completely arbitrary, Louisiana’s distinctive racial history further undermines them, both with its historical three-caste racial order and with the notorious slipperiness of the term “Creole.” Connoting the offspring of French or Spanish settlers in Louisiana, the word has been used to refer to both the settlers’ white *and* mixed race descendants. After the Civil War, an individual’s racial background began to take precedence over cultural commonalities such as language and religion, and white Creoles became more inclined to align themselves with the burgeoning Anglo American population in Louisiana, consigning mixed race Creoles to the category “Negro” or “colored.” However, even today, the term “Creole” persists in resisting singular meanings. As Virginia Domínguez’s models show, white Creoles perceive Louisiana’s racial structure as binary, with Creole identity as an ethnicity like any other white ethnicity. Alternatively, nonwhite Creoles conceive of their identity in different ways.<sup>106</sup> The fluidity and multiplicity of meanings of the term “Creole” over three and a half centuries, what Helen Taylor refers to as the term’s “semantic confusion,” thus testify to the ultimate meaninglessness of the racial and/or ethnic composition which it supposedly signifies.<sup>107</sup>

However, the reality of the strict Jim Crow racial dichotomy established in the aftermath of the Civil War in Louisiana is nonetheless evident in Skinner’s New Orleans of the 1930s. Mocking his aunt’s claim to possessing “one of the proudest names in this state” by virtue of her European ancestry, Farrell tells her “You can call yourself a Creole and speak French in your own neighborhood, but once you leave it, the law says you and I are nothing but a couple of niggers, and we’ll never be anything else” (*SD* 12). This point is threateningly underscored by Emile Ganns,



who points out that “even one-sixteenth Negro blood” makes Farrell “a Negro according to state statute” (32). Despite this, Skinner succeeds in undercutting this legalism. In white Creole circles, the term “quatorze carats (fourteen carats, where twenty-four is pure gold),” is employed to describe impurities of blood. Thus, there is a strong association of “tarnished ancestry with polluted blood.”<sup>108</sup> In *Skin Deep, Blood Red*, Wesley Farrell’s skin colour is repeatedly described as “pale gold” (SD 11), giving lie to these discourses of purity and complicating them by introducing a slippage between appearance and reality: although his skin is gold, he is not “pure white.”

### Masculinising the Queen City

If the portrayal of Wesley Farrell evidences strong parallels between his character and the city of New Orleans, Skinner diverges greatly from the conventional image of the city as woman. Typically feminised as “‘la grande dame in grand tenue,’ ‘courtesan,’ ‘Queen City by the River,’ and ‘mon amour,’” Farrell – and by extension, New Orleans – is, by contrast, hypermasculine.<sup>109</sup> From its origins, the passing plot has been associated with a sentimental or domestic framework in the work of a succession of writers from Lydia Maria Child, William Wells Brown and Frank Webb in the mid-nineteenth century, to Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen in the 1920s. Such novels feature protagonists who, with two or three notable exceptions, are quite overwhelmingly mulatta rather than mulatto. Socio-historical research suggests that this heavy gender bias in literary representations is historically inaccurate.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, a rapid calculation brings to mind only four well-known male passers in American novels: Clarence Garie in *The Garies and their Friends*

(1857), Tom Driscoll in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, John Warwick in Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* and, most famously, James Weldon Johnson's narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.<sup>111</sup> The passing tradition in literature is thus already overpopulated with female protagonists, and Skinner's novel offers no opportunity for *their* empowerment.

If, in Pauline Hopkins's novel, the detective team crosses lines of *gender* as well as race, no such mobility is afforded women in Skinner's work. According to Phillip Brian Harper, "the whole subtradition" of the tragic mulatto "centers on the figuration of a specific racial type in decidedly *feminine* terms."<sup>112</sup> In *Skin Deep, Blood Red*, Skinner appears to reverse this stereotype by reclaiming the masculinity that has historically been denied the literary mulatto. Philip Roth shares this agenda in *The Human Stain*: the hyper-masculinity of his passing protagonist, champion boxer Coleman Silk, powerfully revises the convention of the feminised mulatto. In both the Wesley Farrell series and *The Human Stain*, the recuperation of mulatto masculinity is achieved at the expense of the novels' female characters. In Roth's novel, this is particularly true of the unforgiving representation of Coleman's personal and academic nemesis, Delphine Roux.<sup>113</sup> In *Skin Deep, Blood Red*, Skinner asserts Wesley Farrell's masculinity in similar terms to those of Coleman Silk: he is a talented boxer, skilful with a knife, accurate with a gun.

The more pernicious aspects of the recovery of mulatto masculinity are expressed through the character of Marcel Aristide, light enough to pass (SD 40, 109) and, essentially, a younger version of Farrell (220). His rebellion against his grandmother, Willie Mae Gautier, is depicted as a boy's growth into a man, a transition that she is reluctant to accept (83). His criminal associate, Griffin O'Meara, treats him "like an equal, and not a little boy, as Aunt Willie did" (23).

Marcel's delinquent behaviour culminates in his shooting Savanna Beaulieu and he realises he is now "something far worse than a holdup man and a mugger. He was a murderer [. . .]" (157). It is extraordinary that this act, carried out by Marcel under orders from O'Meara, is given narrative precedence over his earlier committing of rape, an act which he undertakes of his own volition (90). As it turns out, Marcel is not a murderer (Savanna survives) but he is certainly a rapist (104), remorse for which is conspicuously absent when Marcel undergoes his crisis of conscience. Given that Marcel's difficulty with his grandmother is that she will not acknowledge that he has reached manhood, it is highly problematic that Marcel's masculine empowerment – striking out on his own – is achieved through the act of rape. Skinner's failure to address this is especially astonishing given the fact that Savanna Beaulieu is brutally raped in *Cat-Eyed Trouble* and the consequences of *this* rape resonate throughout the third Wesley Farrell mystery, *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*.

Farrell's mother, a light-skinned Creole Negro, is a stock tragic mulatta figure who dies, like Jewel Bowen, for the loss of love (*SD* 163). According to Farrell, "She never got over it. It killed her in the end" (54). Indeed, no female character – black or white – is permitted to embark on the kind of social ascent achieved by Farrell. Farrell overcomes the enormous social disadvantage of legal "blackness" to attain wealth and success. In counterpoint to Farrell's self-making, the novel's female characters reinvent themselves for their clients – as prostitutes. Prostitution is the only enterprise open to women in Skinner's novel. This is the means by which Helen Tartaglia supports herself and her daughter, Sandy, after the failure of her marriage to Chance: "I reinvented myself, remade myself every night, and every time I was different, better than the last time" (211). Similarly, when New Jersey-born prostitute Rose Gregorio moves to New Orleans, she changes her name

to Holly Ballou and hires a girl “to drill her in the ways of southern speech” (47). Farrell’s close friend and lover, Savanna Beaulieu (born Rosalee Ortique), owns a nightclub, but it emerges in Skinner’s second novel that she too started her professional life as a prostitute.<sup>114</sup> In *Pale Shadow*, the role is filled by Margaret “Jelly” Wilde who “had run away from home at the age of fourteen after she tired of fending off the unwanted advances of her brother and male cousins” (*PS* 62). As a light-skinned African American, “Jelly found she had an added value in New Orleans, where white men had been making mistresses of such women for over two hundred years” (63).

I insist throughout this thesis upon the importance of the coexistence and intersection of difference types of passing. As in Pauline Hopkins’s novel, the Wesley Farrell series is populated by many characters – in addition to Farrell – who are disguising their identity in one way or another. In *Hagar’s Daughter*, these identity transformations correlate with the temporal shift from Part I (1860) to Part II (1882): St. Clair Enson and Walker, the slave trader, become General Benson and Major Madison, respectively, Ellis Enson becomes Henson, Hagar becomes Estelle Bowen and so forth. In Skinner’s *Blood to Drink*, for instance, it transpires that Zootie’s lover, Violetta Dalton, is really “Jeremiah Dalton, formerly of Pass Christian, Mississippi.”<sup>115</sup> In *The Righteous Cut*, Linda Sue Mahoney passes herself off as Meredith Baker in order to avenge her fiancé’s death. She even commits two murders while cross-dressing as a man. In this way, both Hopkins and Skinner suggest that the act of racial passing – undertaken by Estelle and Aurelia in *Hagar’s Daughter* and Farrell in Skinner’s novels – cannot be considered as distinct from other kinds of identity camouflage.

This is most evident in *Pale Shadow*, in which Skinner pits Farrell against Dixie Ray Chavez, a contract killer with a chameleon quality who “has the ability to blend in wherever he goes” (*PS* 84). Chavez, like Farrell, is an almost mythic figure. He has even managed to elude almost certain death in a fire. In his depiction of Chavez, Skinner employs one of the most frequently repeated devices of the American thriller – “the motif of the magical quack. The detective’s investigations lead him to a practitioner of some sort of pseudoscientific or pseudoreligious fakery.”<sup>116</sup> Dixie Ray Chavez is cast in the role of an “evil false priest”: he darkens his skin and passes as a black, Catholic priest, Father James Maldonar.<sup>117</sup> For inspiring Chavez’s disguise, Skinner is indebted to John Howard Griffin’s 1961 memoir, *Black Like Me*.<sup>118</sup> Griffin, a white journalist, darkened his skin using drugs and ultraviolet rays from a sun lamp in order to investigate the challenges of being a black man in the Deep South. If, for Skinner, Chavez represents “the dark side of Wesley Farrell,” then their affinities are primarily indicated through Chavez’s white-to-black disguise, which counterbalances Farrell’s passing-as-white.<sup>119</sup>

A further point of intersection between *Hagar’s Daughter* and the Wesley Farrell series is their detectives’ cooperation across the color line. Henson, Venus Johnson and Uncle William Henry Jackson work together “in an alliance that crosses race and gender lines” that enables them to traverse

the mystifying dividing lines on which the villain’s success in hiding his crimes depends: lines that produce illusory separations of masculine from feminine, black from white, home from state, African American families from Euro American families, and the antebellum past from a supposedly much-improved present.<sup>120</sup>

Although Skinner's female characters, black or white, are not afforded the same mobility as Hopkins's, Farrell, Casey and the Negro Squad do collaborate across distinctions in race (Casey is white, the Negro Squad black, Farrell is black passing as white) and degrees of legitimate authority (Casey, Daggett and Andrews are legitimate police officers, Farrell is a civilian) in the pursuit of justice. The extent of this cooperation is a fictional conceit, as is the Negro Squad itself for, as Louis Vyhnanek points out, by 1930, there were no African Americans on the New Orleans police force.<sup>121</sup>

The unlikeliness of this detective teamwork confirms the extent to which Skinner is committed to inserting the mixed race literary subject into a past that is happier and more fulfilling than that which s/he has ever previously known in passing fiction, or probably in real life.<sup>122</sup> That the representation of the past is unrealistic proves this very point. Skinner is amused when reviewers refer to him as a "historical mystery writer" because, he claims, "I do no historical research at all."<sup>123</sup> Skinner, who earned his Bachelor's degree in History, claims to "know just enough history to be dangerous. I'll pick and choose what I'm going to use."<sup>124</sup> Other than the brand names and the songs and some of the street names, "there is nothing in these stories based on history at all, absolutely nothing." His decision to include authenticating devices – such as tape transcripts of oral interviews purportedly from actual New Orleans libraries – at the beginning of each novel from *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* onwards is a playful response to those who categorise him as a historical mystery writer. The lack of historical accuracy is crucial because, from the vantage point of the late twentieth century, Skinner can symbolically reunite family members in a way that would probably have been impossible in the 1930s and early 1940s. By the end of the series, Farrell's family consists of Savanna

Beaulieu, his African American girlfriend, Frank Casey, his white father, Marcel Aristide, his mixed race young cousin and Jessica Richards, his mixed race (although she is unaware of this) daughter. In the end, Skinner's reworking of hard-boiled conventions – particularly Farrell's discovery that he has a daughter – leaves him in a double bind. How can the not-so-loner-detective continue to risk his life when he has a family to consider? This is a further reason that Skinner cites for having, to date, concluded the series with *The Righteous Cut*:

I could not see [Wesley Farrell] deliberately going off and getting into trouble in the way he had in the previous five stories because suddenly, he had a different reason to live. And with family having become as much to him as it had over the course of those stories, he wouldn't want to go out and risk his life for any old idiotic reason.<sup>125</sup>

We are left, then, with the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: what happens when plots of passing and detection are united? Does this compromise both tropes? Or does it liberate them? Does it allow for a more nuanced engagement with and critique of race than is possible in the absence of the other trope? Or is this out of the question given the obvious limitations of both traditions? As Maureen T. Reddy argues, "Readers who speak of the 'guilty pleasure' of reading crime fiction generally mean the pleasure of reading less-than-literary fiction, but the far guiltier pleasure is indeed participation in a ritual that helps to perpetuate racism, sexism, and heterosexism."<sup>126</sup> Meanwhile, passing stories are charged with reinforcing the very categories they purport to contest.

I am inclined to conclude that although the fusion of mulatta/*femme fatale* in the work of Hopkins and Mosley, which evolves into the mulatto/detective in Robert Skinner's Wesley Farrell series, offers the racial passer a degree of power not often

granted him or, especially, her, the bestowal of agency on the mixed race subject is, in all three cases, ultimately ambivalent. The *femme fatale* is conventionally demystified and robbed of her power. Hopkins's Aurelia and Mosley's Daphne are no exceptions to this rule. Equally, while Skinner's transformation of the literary mulatto from object to subject and his reintegration into a utopian, multiracial family are certainly welcome modifications to the hard-boiled form, his reinforcement of the exoticism – and thus the otherness – of the literary mulatto and his refusal to extend Farrell's brand of self-empowerment to female characters in his novels are troubling. In the end, they forestall the complete realisation of the very radical potential which Skinner himself generates.

In the novels I have discussed, the passing figure is amalgamated with two of the most ubiquitous and easily recognisable archetypes in U.S. culture – the *femme fatale* and the hard-boiled detective. In the chapter that follows, I examine texts in which the passing figure transgresses upon yet another mytho-literary U.S. landscape, that of the western. Indeed, the hard-boiled detective story is itself deeply indebted to the dime novel western. As Richard Slotkin argues, the evolution of the detective story may be traced in terms of modifications applied to the dime novel western, particularly in the years between 1877 and 1900. As Slotkin puts it, “the hard-boiled detective story began as an abstraction of essential elements of the Frontier Myth.”<sup>127</sup> In Chapter Three, then, I focus on and the significance of the female-to-male cross-dresser in novels that are preoccupied, in one way or another, with the notion of the frontier and the western genre.



## Chapter Three

### The Way of the Cross(-dresser):

### Gender Passing, Race and Christianity

“The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so *are* abomination unto the Lord thy God.”<sup>1</sup>

– Deuteronomy 22:5.

“The real question comes down to whether we are godly creatures or a mass of differentiated cells. That's the ultimate identity question.”<sup>2</sup>

– Louise Erdrich, Interview with Mark Anthony Rolo (2004).

This chapter examines the enduring significance of religion as a category of identity in contemporary U.S. society, analysing the ways in which religious discourse overlaps with raced and gendered identities in tales of cross-dressing. The events of 11 September 2001 had the effect not only of shaking “the once popular faith in the inevitable secularization of ‘modern’ society,” but also of highlighting the inseparability of racism from religious persecution.<sup>3</sup> At a more fundamental level is the fact that religious belief has itself helped to produce race as a category. As Henry Goldschmidt puts it, “religion has been inextricably woven into both racial and national identities, to such an extent that ‘race,’ ‘nation,’ and ‘religion’ have each defined the others.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the suggestion that racial prejudice “can be attributed solely to bad *science*”<sup>5</sup> or that race is simply “a fiction of *law* and custom”

(*PW* 7) is to ignore the ways in which religious discourse has informed race as an abstract idea and racism as a social reality.

The persistence of the notion that certain raced and gendered identities – socially constructed or otherwise – deviate from a norm that is white and male, is widely acknowledged. Passing as a strategy, though undoubtedly problematic, with the potential to expose the artificiality of the edifices of race and gender as tools of oppression is also a given. What happens, then, when raced and gendered identities collide with religious affiliation as a third category of identification? What if the religion in question is Christianity, which has historically responded in an ambiguous fashion to, and has been deeply implicated in, racial and gender oppression? If the ascendancy is granted to those who are white, male and Christian, what happens when one belongs to the dominant caste in some respects, but the subjugated group in (an)other(s), like Agnes/Father Damien in Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles of Little No Horse* (2001)? What are the implications of a black woman writing at the turn of the twentieth century – and thus twice an outsider – employing a literary genre associated with celebrating the annihilation of another “other,” as Pauline Hopkins does in her western novel *Winona* (1902)? How is the power dynamic of white/male/Christian affected if one is a three-times othered subject: non-white, female and christianised through colonisation, as is the case with Pauline Puyat/Sister Leopolda in Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) and *The Last Report*? Does the combined weight of multiple oppressed identities increase her alienation threefold? Or, as Shirley Geok-lin Lim wonders in a different context, as “an already multiply colonized subject,” does she recognize that although these “authoritarian domains overlap each other,” they do not do so sufficiently “as to preserve the illusion of totalization”?<sup>6</sup>

By way of introduction to my discussions of *Winona*, *Tracks* and *The Last Report*, I would like first to sketch briefly the ways in which discourses surrounding racial and gender difference and Christianity have conflicted with and/or complemented one another during the historical periods explored in the novels. *Winona*, published in 1902, is set in the years 1854 to 1856, ranging geographically from Indian country in upstate New York, to a plantation in Missouri to Bleeding Kansas, culminating with John Brown's murder of five pro-slavery men at Pottawatomie Creek. *Tracks* covers 1912 to 1924, while *The Last Report* spans 1910 to 1996, on the same Indian reservation in North Dakota. It is impossible to discuss one Erdrich novel without the other for, as is the case with all of her reservation works, historical settings and characters overlap to such an extent neither novel constitutes a stand-alone text.<sup>7</sup>

### **Unholy Trinity?: Christianity and the Constructions of Gender and Race**

Several women have grappled with the seeming incongruity of being both a feminist and a Christian, given what many perceive as Christianity's – and in particular, Catholicism's – rampant misogyny. Indeed, for Sara Maitland, the "prejudices of Christianity are made plainest in the Roman Catholic Church."<sup>8</sup> Mary Daly, writing in 1968, claims that while the mother-goddess was worshipped in pagan religions of antiquity, "Judaism and Christianity represent a reaction against this."<sup>9</sup> What Daly perceives as the "enslavement" of the woman through maternity is "accomplished symbolically in the cult of the Virgin Mother of God, who is glorified only in accepting the subordinate role assigned to her."<sup>10</sup> By contrast, for Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the cult of Mary in the Catholic tradition enables Catholic

feminists “to *experience* the divine reality in the figure of a woman.”<sup>11</sup> Further, the cult of Mary “provides us with a tradition of theological language which speaks of the divine reality in female terms and symbols.”<sup>12</sup> If two Christian (or Postchristian, in one case) feminists can interpret a key aspect of the Christian tradition in such divergent ways, what are we to make of the way in which women have been constructed in Christian theology and/or the diverse means by which women have directly experienced Christianity in their own lives? In the Catholic faith, this question has acquired even greater significance since the death of Pope John Paul II in April 2005. For if, as some feminists would argue, “the traditional leanings of Pope John Paul II have done much to reverse the work of Pope John Paul and the limited progress of the Second Vatican Council, particularly in regard to the Church’s teachings about the role of women,” what will the new era of Pope Benedict XVI mean for Catholic women?<sup>13</sup>

Christianity also exists in an ambivalent relationship to the idea of race. As Richard Dyer argues, whiteness derives its power from promoting itself as a normative, non-raced, invisible state, a standard from which the bodies of all people of colour are deemed to deviate. Christianity is directly implicated in the construction of whiteness in this way because it “is founded on the idea – paradoxical, unfathomable, profoundly mysterious – of incarnation, of being that is in the body yet not of it.”<sup>14</sup> Christianity “maintains a conception of a split between mind and body, regarding the latter as at the least inferior and often as evil.” Hence, by reducing non-white individuals “to their bodies and thus to race,” white people become, by contrast, “something else that is realised in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal, or racial.”<sup>15</sup>

This view of Christianity as a belief system that has helped to produce “race” as a category – as distinct from whiteness which is not a “race,” but the “norm” – is certainly supported by apologists for the American system of slavery. Justification for keeping Africans in bondage was provided by appealing to their status as heathens, thereby rendering them subhuman. The Curse of Ham, in particular, offered biblical sanction for the enslavement of those with dark skin.<sup>16</sup> However, as Adam Lively observes, another Christian tradition existed alongside the Hamite curse “that pictured the Negro’s blackness as the ‘accidental’ cloak (albeit an ugly one, and one perhaps with its own connotations of sinfulness) for the white soul.”<sup>17</sup> The slave can thus be “redeemed from his blackness by conversion”; he is “liberated from his slavery, from the shackles of his physicality and hence his sins. He becomes free, Christian – and white.”<sup>18</sup> Seizing on this idea, anti-slavery campaigners who were evangelical Christians argued that keeping Christian slaves in bondage would thus imperil the salvation of slaveholders’ souls. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), most memorably, Tom is a Christ figure who dies to redeem all.<sup>19</sup> In short, Christian beliefs have been employed both to justify and to condemn slavery, its iconography invoked both to emphasise non-white otherness and to assert the humanity of non-whites through their common status as Christians.

### **Theorising the Cross-dresser**

So, where does cross-dressing fit into all this? In this chapter, I restrict myself to discussions of female-to-male cross-dressing because it occurs less frequently in cultural representations and, consequently, has received less critical attention than male-to-female transvestism. Indeed, female-to-male cross-dressing is perceived as

potentially *less* radical because western society has established and valorised the masculine as the normative standard: “Women wanting to be men can be seen as engaging in an understandable project of upward mobility.” Conversely, male-to-female transgenderists, who intentionally move down in the system, may constitute “a threat to the principles on which the hierarchy itself is based.”<sup>20</sup>

Is cross-dressing a form of passing? For Judith Halberstam, writing on female masculinity:

the notion of passing is singularly unhelpful. Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully; at various moments, the successful pass may cohere into something akin to identity. At such moments, the passer has become. What of the biological female who presents as butch, passes as male in some circumstances and reads as butch in others, and considers herself not to be a woman but maintains distance from the category “man?”<sup>21</sup>

I quote Halberstam at length because I believe she underestimates the typical passer, who may operate with a greater level of self-consciousness than she gives him/her credit for. Often, the *passer* does not necessarily believe s/he “really” belongs in a group other than the one into which s/he is (tres)passing, but recognises that *society* views him or her in that way. Because, as Halberstam sees it, “female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire,” she focuses in her book on “queer female masculinity almost to the exclusion of heterosexual female masculinity.”<sup>22</sup>

From Halberstam’s remarks and the work of other theorists, it seems clear to me that within Gender and Sexuality Studies, a hierarchy has been established which accepts that certain manifestations of gender ambiguity are *more* subversive than

others: male-to-female cross-dressing is more subversive than female-to-male transvestism; queer subjects are more subversive than heterosexual subjects. Those who subscribe to such assumptions could learn from the work of a growing body of critics of passing, who recognise the redundancy of the subversive v. non-subversive debate and wonder what *else* passing could signify in the contexts in which it occurs. Indeed, even Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble* many have credited with conferring on drag its supposed subversive status, questions in a subsequent book “whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms.”<sup>23</sup> In a field so concerned with the deconstruction of binaries and with advocating multiplicity in all its manifestations, it is remarkable that the transgendered subject remains locked in exclusively queer interpretations.

In her comprehensive study of tranvestism, Marjorie Garber warns against restricting discussions of cross-dressing “to the context of an emerging gay and lesbian identity.” For Garber, this is “to risk ignoring, or setting aside, elements and incidents that seem to belong to quite different lexicons of self-definition and political and cultural display.”<sup>24</sup> However, since Butler identified drag as a cultural practice that “reveals the distinctness of those aspects of the gendered experience which are falsely naturalized through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence,” the temptation to interpret incidents of cross-dressing or female masculinity as significant only in so far as they appear to denote queerness has been too great for many commentators to resist. For Leslie Feinberg, this correlation between the cross-dresser’s gender and sexuality “is based on the fact that uni-gender lesbian and gay cross-dressers were socially visible and organized at a time when most bi-gender, heterosexual cross-dressers were isolated or members of

‘underground’ organizations.”<sup>25</sup> Ignoring Garber’s advice, most theorists – including Halberstam – have followed Butler in emphasising cross-dressing as a process that relates almost exclusively to queer, at the expense of heterosexual, subjects.<sup>26</sup>

Butler’s analyses of drag, cross-dressing and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities are only marginally useful for my discussions of *Winona* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. The female-to-male cross-dressing protagonist of *The Last Report* is a priest who remains celibate for most of his/her vocational life, apart from a brief period during which s/he enjoys an affair with a fellow (male) priest. Thus, the significance of the gender passer in this context is more complex than a strictly queer interpretation will allow. Instead, my readings of *The Last Report* and *Winona* draw heavily upon Marjorie Garber’s observation that:

the apparently spontaneous or unexpected or supplementary presence of a transvestite figure in a text (whether fiction or history, verbal or visual, imagistic or ‘real’) that does not seem, thematically, to be primarily concerned with gender difference or blurred gender indicates a *category crisis elsewhere*, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin.<sup>27</sup>

This chapter, then, following Garber, is written in response to Leslie Feinberg’s rhetorical question: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could all support the understanding that gender expression does not determine sexuality, and then open up a discussion between our communities?”<sup>28</sup>



For Marjorie Garber, the cross-dresser represents a “third term” which “questions binary thinking and introduces crisis.” Three “puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> Some critics take issue with Garber over this “third term.” Judith Halberstam, for example, argues that Garber’s “insistence that there is ‘a third space of possibility’ occupied by the transvestite has closed down the possibility that there may be a fourth, fifth, sixth, or one hundredth space beyond the binary.”<sup>30</sup> Halberstam’s concern that “Garber’s third space tends to stabilize the other two” is certainly salient.<sup>31</sup> However, to apply Garber’s formulation to the Christian construction of the Blessed Trinity – the possibility of three as one – is, I believe, to avoid the pitfall of the “third” reinforcing existing categories. In the texts I explore in this chapter, the category in crisis is Christianity. Subject to internal conflicts between Old and New Testaments, the external appropriation of Christian myths to support widely divergent ends and overlapping with apparently contradictory faiths, Christianity is the belief system that is constantly threatening to collapse.

### **“Passing” into America’s Eden: Pauline Hopkins’s *Winona***

The malleability of Christianity – its susceptibility to appropriation in support of opposing political goals – is both overtly and subtly explored in Pauline Hopkins’s *Winona*. Indeed, the religious tensions which *Winona* foregrounds, and which remain largely unresolved, may explain in part the lack of critical attention the novel has received relative to the rest of Hopkins’s long fiction.<sup>32</sup> The presence of John Brown as a character in the novel attests to these tensions for opinion is still divided as to whether Brown was a Christian martyr or a religious maniac, which in turn

rests upon determining whether his “crusade” against slavery was divinely-directed.<sup>33</sup> The novel, published serially in the *Colored American Magazine* between May and October 1902, opens in upstate New York in the 1850s, describing the idyllic family life of White Eagle, an Englishman who has, for reasons which subsequently become clear, chosen to live as an Indian. A widower, his adoptive African American son, Judah, his “quadroon” daughter, Winona, and their mixedblood Indian housekeeper, Nokomis, comprise the multiracial household.<sup>34</sup> When White Eagle is murdered, Judah and Winona are remanded into slavery in Missouri. Aided by an English lawyer, Warren Maxwell, the two escape to Kansas, join John Brown’s group of guerrilla fighters, along with Ebenezer Maybee and Parson Steward, and are present when the Pottawatomie murders take place. Part-historical novel, part-detective novel, it is subsequently revealed that White Eagle was an aristocrat wrongfully accused of murder in England. By the close of the novel, his name is posthumously cleared, the real culprits are exposed, Winona is restored to her birthright in England and is headed for marriage to Warren Maxwell. If the apparently clear-cut opposition between the forces of Right and Wrong in *Winona* is, according to Martha Patterson, at best “murky,” then the malleability of Christianity is at the heart of this murkiness.<sup>35</sup> In *Winona*, Hopkins is fighting a war on two fronts. She is attempting to refute the religious apology for slavery and racial oppression which would cite supposed Negro inferiority as justification for holding them in bondage, while celebrating those who engaged in a Holy War against slavery and racial oppression as being on the side of Divine Right. In other words, she is trying to both affirm and undercut religion.

Compounding this problem is the fact that, as Elizabeth Ammons observes, “the dominant cultural form it most obviously employs – the western – cannot be

reconciled with the slave narrative or the racialized protest novel, the two other genres most important to Hopkins in *Winona*.<sup>36</sup> In terms of both form and content, then, *Winona* appears to be wracked by internal conflicts. The two are, of course, related and Hopkins's reason for the western framework makes sense in the context of the imbrication of religious and racist discourses at the turn of the twentieth century. Hopkins, as I note in Chapter Two, was writing at a time during which scientific racism was receiving widespread credence. In order to "raise the stigma of degradation from [her] race,"<sup>37</sup> it was imperative for her to combat the racist propaganda emerging from proponents of the "science" of race. Specifically, *Winona*, appeared in the same year as Charles Carroll's *The Tempter of Eve*. Carroll's book was deeply embedded in ethnologist thought – originating in the 1840s – which Mason Stokes describes as offering "scientific sanction for a Biblical theory of slavery at a time when the tension between science and religion was on the rise."<sup>38</sup> The tension between Christianity and the scientific theory of slavery derived from the theory of polygenism, which claimed that races had different origins and they are thus, different species. It thereby "clashed with a central tenet of biblical Christianity – the belief that all humans are descended from Adam and Eve."<sup>39</sup>

Mason Stokes argues that Carroll's book represents the "zenith of the pre-Adamite/tempter theorizing,"<sup>40</sup> a key tenet of ethnologist thought from 1860 onwards, according to which the serpent in the Garden of Eden, who is the instigator of the Fall, is replaced by an African American. Substituting a black man for the serpent performed the dual function of scapegoating African Americans for Adam and Eve's Fall from Grace, thus justifying their enslavement, while, through Eve's interaction with the serpent, simultaneously playing on fears of amalgamation between white women and black men. Carroll's book adapted the theory by

exchanging the African-American-man-as-serpent for an African-American-woman-as-serpent. Thus, if the malevolent interloper in the Garden of Eden was, in contemporary racist depictions, alternately represented as an African American man or woman, then Hopkins's choice to set *Winona* in the West – the American Garden of Eden, in the popular conception – is a highly political move.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, when the novel opens, Winona's home on an island in Lake Erie is described in Edenic terms:

The white clouds chased each other over the deep blue sky. The dazzling sunshine wearied the eye with its gorgeousness, while under its languorous kiss the lake became a sapphire sea breaking into iridescent spray along the shore. (*MN* 290)

The intruders into this paradise-on-earth, occupied almost exclusively as far as the reader is concerned by Judah and Winona, are not African American, but white: Colonel Titus, a degenerate British aristocrat and Bill Thomson, his sidekick, who are responsible for all the nefarious deeds that are subsequently related.

Furthermore, *Winona* is not simply a “western,” but is heavily influenced by a particular manifestation of that form – the dime novel western. Both Hazel Carby and Claudia Tate draw attention to dime novels as important source material for Hopkins's magazine fiction.<sup>42</sup> However, despite the fact that, as Marcus Klein argues, “[t]he story of the Wild West is so infused with post-Civil-War American history,” the period during which Hopkins was writing and with which she was directly concerned, the significance of the specific context of the dime novel western for *Winona* has not, I think, been adequately explored.<sup>43</sup> Consistent with countless dime novel examples, *Winona* features a corrupt British aristocrat whose role is “namely and precisely to be a disgrace” for “true aristocracy” is what this tale, and several others, is about.<sup>44</sup> However, Hopkins alters the dime novel western

blueprint, in which Western heroes such as Buffalo Bill are revealed to be of superior birth, by having this disclosure pertain to a woman who is ambiguous in terms of her race and culture.<sup>45</sup> Of mixed African American and white aristocratic heritage, Winona has been raised as Indian.

Through Winona's ambiguous position as culturally Indian and racially mixed and, to a lesser degree, Nokomis's, Hopkins exposes the limitations of the representation of the mixedblood Indian character in dime novel westerns.

According to Harry Brown, the mixedblood:

emerges in the nationalist fiction of the later nineteenth century as the dark double of the frontier hero, bearing the significant traits of Lombroso's criminal man: the dark skin and, darker still, the sadistic and "irresistible craving for evil for its own sake"<sup>46</sup>

Hopkins thus rewrites the dime novel western model of criminality on two fronts. Not only is Winona the "true aristocrat," initially displaced by, and eventually, in turn displacing Colonel Titus who is disqualified by his ignoble deeds, but it is the white – and not the mixed race characters – who are criminals. Moreover, and contrary to Elizabeth Ammons's claim that the "incredibly virtuous but almost invisible heroine" is "a staple in the western," the dime novel western represented a framework in which female subjectivity and agency could be (and were) explored.<sup>47</sup> As Marcus Klein observes, women were the protagonists of dime novel westerns "with some considerable frequency," and further "were likely to be armed and were likely also to be self-appointed agents of good order," points that coincide neatly with the eponymous heroine's role in *Winona*.<sup>48</sup>

The dime novel western is comparable to other manifestations of the form, however, for, as Klein has discovered, "among all the multitudes of the authors of

the fiction of the West, low and high, there were few who discovered that the Indians presented even a significant presence.”<sup>49</sup> It is in this respect that I am obliged to agree with Elizabeth Ammons’s assertion that, through its combination of literary genres – western, sentimental romance, detective story and sensationalist adventure<sup>50</sup> – *Winona* “reiterates empire’s script.”<sup>51</sup> Ammons is correct, I think, in objecting specifically to the grafting of the western onto the slave narrative. What reinforces the problematic deployment of the western form is, I would add, the novel’s sentimental framework. For while black feminist literary critics have convincingly argued for the political value of sentimentalism to nineteenth- and turn-of-the-twentieth-century African American women writers such as Hopkins, the origins of sentimentalism among literary white women ought not to be ignored. To do so is to forget what Laura Wexler terms sentimentalism’s “expansive, imperial project” whereby:

it aimed at the subjection of different classes and even races who were compelled to play not the leading roles but the human scenery before which the melodrama of middle-class redemption could be enacted, for the enlightenment of an audience that was not even themselves.<sup>52</sup>

In *Winona*, Native Americans are indeed, the “human scenery”: the sole Indian character is the “half-breed” housekeeper, Nokomis (MN 290). Through the introduction of Indianness in *Winona*, Hopkins succeeds in problematising whiteness and blackness. Her representation of Native Americans does not, however, transcend the imperialist tendencies of the western form.<sup>53</sup>

### Judah and Warren: Revising the Christian Martyr Figure

Martha Patterson claims that “Hopkins links the fates of Winona and Judah to the Seneca tribe because both races are witnessing the erasure of their history as they suffer a diaspora, the possibility of cultural and racial genocide, and pressures to assimilate.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, *Winona* appears at a historical moment in which the dominant white discourse was emphasising the *differences* between African Americans and Native Americans. With the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890, which usually signals the end of the military conquest of Native America, Native peoples no longer posed a threat to white civilisation and, as Shari Huhndorf observes, they thus began to play a more ambivalent role in the American cultural imagination. Whereas Native Americans were increasingly represented as benign through their status as Vanishing Americans, the perception of emancipated African Americans – especially African American men – as a malevolent force was gaining greater momentum.

The contrasting, though both troubling, representations of Native Americans and African Americans are evident in the “emblematic event” that was the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.<sup>55</sup> The depiction of Native Americans in exhibits, as well as in Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous frontier speech given at the Exposition, “positioned Indians both as an enemy of civilization and as the predecessor of contemporary Anglo-Americans.”<sup>56</sup> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, Indians “came to be regarded as *disembodied* symbols (and, ironically, symbols of white American identity).”<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, the racial difference of African Americans from whites, as expressed through the materiality of African American bodies – especially the perceived sexual threat to white women by black men – was an obsessive concern in white racist discourse of the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. Where Native Americans were hypervisible at the Exposition, albeit in problematic ways, no African American was appointed a commissioner, or a member of an important committee, or even a guide or guard on the Exposition grounds.<sup>58</sup> Frederick Douglass, writing the introduction to a pamphlet entitled “The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World’s Columbian Exposition,” juxtaposes the period of slavery and the contemporary moment not only “to show the moral depths, darkness and destitution from which we are still emerging, but to explain the grounds of the prejudice, hate and contempt in which we are still held by the people.”<sup>59</sup> Hopkins, writing in 1902, sets *Winona* in the 1850s for the same purpose.

Given the historical moment in which she was writing *Winona*, therefore, it would have been tempting for Hopkins to represent black male subjectivity as emasculated, and by implication, non-threatening to white womanhood. Alternatively, in depicting black male agency, she could have followed in the tradition of certain abolitionist writers, who made the rebellious male slave’s lack of contentment at his condition contingent upon his mixed race-ness. The logic of this was, presumably, that the “all-but-white” slave will necessarily feel his degrading condition more acutely than the “full-blooded” black slave because of his greater proximity to white masculinity.<sup>60</sup> Instead, Hopkins presents the reader with Judah, a complex black male character who does not balk at using violence to achieve his goals. A radical black male hero, she necessarily tempers the implications of his forcefulness, firstly, by emphasising his “Indianness” and secondly, by drawing explicit parallels between Judah and Jesus Christ.

Judah is symbolically “griffe,” a point underscored by the fact that Hopkins deliberately avoids specifying Judah’s racial ancestry: the reader never knows who



or what, racially speaking, his parents were, apart from the fact that his mother was a slave.<sup>61</sup> Whereas his adoptive mother is a “mulattress,” his adoptive sister, a “quadroon,” White Eagle, a white man, and Nokomis a “half-breed,” Judah is described only as a “mite of humanity whose mother had died during the hard struggle to reach the land of Freedom” (*MN* 290). Elsewhere, Hopkins observes that Judah “might have been mistaken for an Indian at first glance” (289) and indeed, Judah identifies as Indian (296). Given that *Winona* was published in 1902, when Indians were looked upon with increasing nostalgia, Hopkins’s portrayal of Judah as an “Injun-nigger” enables her to represent radical black male agency while toning down his military prowess somewhat by allying Judah with a defeated race (310).

In emphasising her African American hero’s Indianness, Hopkins is perhaps paying tribute to and drawing inspiration from the interracial quartet of what John Stauffer calls “radical abolitionists” – comprising James McCune Smith, Gerrit Smith, Frederick Douglass and, of course, John Brown – who, throughout the 1850s, the historical setting for *Winona*, “identified with the Indian as a symbol of the savage fighter par excellence” in order to “dismantle the almost unquestioned cultural dichotomy of savagery and civilization.”<sup>62</sup> Stauffer is quick to point out, however, that the quartet’s admiration was for “symbolic Indians,” who “knew how to fight and did so,” rather than “real ones,” who negotiated with the white establishment, “accepted their treaties, and compromised their freedom.”<sup>63</sup> In *Winona*, however, Hopkins cleverly passes her proud black male hero off as a “symbolic Indian,” concealing his radical potency behind the mask of a Vanishing American.

As well as emphasising Judah’s Indianness, Hopkins moderates Judah’s potency further by establishing him as a Christ-like figure. The construction of

Judah as a Black Christ centres on the scene in which he is subjected to a symbolic crucifixion as punishment for proving Bill Thomson wrong by carrying out the seemingly impossible task of breaking in a horse that Thomson was on the point of shooting. In this episode, Hopkins's unites her strategies for moderating Judah's radical potential. Not only does Judah emerge as a Black Christ, but his ability to overcome the horse is explicitly linked to his Indianness. He does so by using the "power of the hypnotic eye" which "was known and practised among all the Indian tribes of the West" (324).

The taming scene is a powerful indictment of slavery, in which humans and animals could both be bought and sold, and were both viewed as in need of "breaking in."<sup>64</sup> Slaves, in other words, were only considered non-animal in the extent to which their monetary value exceeded that of animals. Hopkins makes this connection conspicuous when Bill Thomson, who plans to sell the untameable horse, refuses to allow Judah to try his luck with the horse for fear he will end up "fifteen hundred dollars more out of pocket by the onery brute" (322). Judah is eventually permitted to do his best and significantly, he "breaks in" the horse, while he himself refuses to be "broken in" by Bill Thomson. The respect he earns from the white male onlookers gives him the impression of moving "as a free man amidst his fellows" (323). If the horse's "rolling eyes and grinning teeth" recall degrading stereotypes of slaves in nineteenth-century white-authored fiction, Judah is, by contrast, a "noble figure of a man [. . .] a living statue of a mighty Vulcan" (323). With the horse safely broken in, the humiliated Thomson vows to have Judah "broken in; he knows too much" (326). Judah is strung up "to a cross-beam" and repeatedly whipped (327). When he subsequently recounts the tale of his torture to Warren Maxwell, to emphasise his story, he seizes "the young white man's hand

pressed it gently over the scars and seams stamped upon his back” (334). In the Christian tradition, this image is deeply suggestive of the resurrected Christ bidding Doubting Thomas to place his fingers in his wounds in order to prove that he is, indeed, Christ.

Hopkins’s portrayal of Judah as Christ-figure is a strategy which allows her to moderate the more radical aspects of Judah’s character by appealing to a trope long-associated with abolitionist writing. The representation of the slave as a Black Christ enabled abolitionists to emphasise a slave’s Christian virtues while also rendering them passive and impotent. Unlike Uncle Tom, however, Judah does not have to die in order to enjoy (celestial) freedom. He survives, emigrates to England and enjoys a successful military career. For his “daring bravery and matchless courage,” he is knighted, has “honors and wealth heaped upon him, and finally marrie[s] into one of the best families of the realm” (435). In allowing Judah to emerge triumphant from *Winona*, Hopkins refuses “the system of belief that undergirds Stowe’s enterprise” in which, as Jane Tompkins argues, “dying is the supreme form of heroism.”<sup>65</sup> Instead, Hopkins offers the reader a black character who is both heroic *and* manages to survive.

Jennifer Putzi argues that in her first novel, *Contending Forces*, “Hopkins transforms her heroine, Sappho Clark, into a magnificent female Christ-figure who *bridges* the corporeal and the spiritual.” In *Winona*, Hopkins offers the reader two alternative male Christ figures, one black (Judah) and one white (Warren Maxwell).<sup>66</sup> Well before he suffers severe abuse at the hands of Bill Thomson’s men, Hopkins writes that both Judah and Winona “looked upon Warren Maxwell as a god” (313). Indeed, Hopkins renders Maxwell’s arrival in upstate New York at the very beginning of the novel in terms that are playfully evocative of the Nativity.

Travelling in poor weather conditions, Maxwell decides to stop at Ebenezer Maybee's establishment, hoping that "Whoever dwells there will not refuse me shelter on such a night" (300). However, instead of a holy, miraculous birth, the dismal night is marred by a death – the murder of White Eagle. Furthermore, when Maxwell subsequently travels to Kansas to rescue Judah and Winona from slavery, Judah assures Maxwell that he trusts him "next to God. I knew you would be here soon; I dreamt a year ago that I saw you coming toward me out of a cloud of intense blackness" (336). Judah's fervent declaration is reminiscent of the role of dreams in bible stories, in which God often appears in dreams to warn of some imminent danger, or as an encouragement to the sceptic dreamer to believe in him. For Winona, Maxwell is "a cherished, never forgotten memory; but whom in bodily form she was never to see again" (355-6), which is evocative of God's status as a non-visible, though omni-present, spiritual figure.

The Christ-like affinities become even more pointed following Maxwell's capture by pro-slavery agitators. He is tried and sentenced to death by Gid Holmes, depicted as a Pontius Pilate figure. He is subsequently taken to the "cross-roads" to be hanged and burned alive (367). Indeed, Hopkins makes the parallels with Christ's Passion yet more explicit when she reports that Maxwell realises "all the Immortal Son must have suffered on His way to Golgotha to die a shameful death through the ignorance and cruelty of a heartless world" (369). Maxwell, through the ironic intervention of Bill Thomson, is given a reprieve and languishes in a prison until his rescue by John Brown's men, his delivery to safety imagined as taking Warren "out of the hands of the Philistines" (379). For Ebenezer Maybee, Maxwell's arrival back at the camp is a cross between the return of the Prodigal Son and Christ's Resurrection: "This, my son, was dead and is alive again" (395). Like Christ,

Maxwell bears the stigmata to prove his ordeal: "The burns were not yet healed, and great red scars disfigured his face in spots; he still wore his arm in a sling; starvation, physical weakness and lack of cleanliness had done their worst" (395). Ultimately, then, Hopkins demands narrative martyrdom from neither Judah nor Warren Maxwell. The presence of John Brown as a character in the novel enables her to retain the Christian martyr figure without sacrificing either Judah or Warren. For any reader of *Winona* in 1902 would have known that although John Brown survives Bleeding Kansas, he will be subsequently executed following the raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859.

### Cross(-dress)ing the Color Line

By cross-dressing as a male nurse, Allen Pinks, Winona is able to gain access to the prison in which Warren is being held and is instrumental in orchestrating his rescue. She thus intervenes in what might otherwise have been Warren's Passion. Claudia Tate argues that through the depiction of her magazine fiction heroines, Hopkins's "seems to have silenced the discourse of female agency, which was a very important feature of the 1890s domestic novels."<sup>67</sup> Tate singles out Jewel (from *Hagar's Daughter*), Winona and Dianthe Lusk (from *Of One Blood*) as examples of heroines who "abandon the woman-centered discourse of female development."<sup>68</sup> However, Tate's position ignores the important roles of Aurelia Madison and Venus Johnson in *Hagar's Daughter*. In particular, Venus's cross-dressing in a bid to rescue her grandmother and Jewel may be usefully compared with Winona's gender disguise in Hopkins's second magazine novel because in both cases, dark skin is of a distinct advantage. Unlike Ellen Craft and her fictional imitators, whose *white* appearance is

a prerequisite for their cross-dressing as gentlemen, Winona blacks up in order to pass as Allen Pinks (*MN* 396).<sup>69</sup>

Of these runaway slave cross-dressers in anti-slavery fiction and slave narratives, with its prison setting, Winona's gender disguise recalls most vividly that of Mary, the daughter of *Clotel* in William Wells Brown's 1853 novel of the same name. Mary and her beloved, George, exchange clothing in order that George, who participated in a slave uprising, can escape from prison and avoid the hanging to which he has been sentenced. George is an example of the rebellious slave whose "zeal for the cause of his enslaved countrymen" is contingent upon his possessing light skin (Brown 201). As the narrator explains, the fact that George is "often taken for a free white person" makes his condition "still more intolerable" (201).<sup>70</sup> When the ruse is discovered, Horatio Green, who is George and Mary's master, and Mary's father, informs Mary that she "will have to suffer in [George's] stead," to which she confirms her willingness "to die if [George] could live" (216). Consistent with the exchange of clothing and the substitution of George for Mary in prison, Mary is prepared to lay down her life for George. In the end, this is not necessary and Mary does not die. However, George's freedom – he successfully escapes from slavery – is achieved at the expense of Mary's, whose punishment for taking George's place in prison is that she be sold "to a Negro trader, and taken to the New Orleans market" (209). Unlike her mother, however, Mary does not meet with a tragic fate. Many years later, she and George are reunited and marry in France.

Like Mary, Winona vows "to save [Warren's] life at the sacrifice of her own" (*MN* 356). Yet the differences between the cross-dressing prison scenes in *Winona* and *Clotel* reveal Hopkins's refusal to countenance Winona's giving up her life for Warren's. Winona's presence as a cross-dresser in the prison is supplementary to,

not instead of, Warren's. In fact, it forms a neat counterpart to the earlier episode in which Warren is instrumental in helping Winona and Judah to escape from slavery. Far from the passive "tragic mulatta" who will die for her white lover, then, Winona's disguise as Allen Pinks is representative of an exchange in the sense of reciprocity rather than sacrifice.

Winona's simultaneous cross-dressing and blacking up as Allen Pinks represents what I wish to call "cross-passing." The noun "passing" is rarely qualified beyond the inclusion of the adjective "racial" because it is understood that one will always pass "up," from a subjugated group to a dominant group (black-to-white). This is borne out by the fact that when white-to-black passing occurs, it is not simply called "passing," but "reverse passing." In *Winona*, the eponymous character passes "up" in terms of gender (female-to-male) but "down" in terms of race ("near white"-to-black). Winona's cross-passing is the most obvious example of Hopkins's refusal to underwrite her eponymous heroine as a conventional "tragic mulatta." As a young, mixed race woman whose father's death results in her being remanded into slavery, Hopkins constructs *Winona* as an archetypal "tragic mulatta" story. However, Hopkins sets up this situation only to dismantle it. Where the near-white Winona *could* have been the stock protagonist of such a story, instead Hopkins transforms her into an active subject whose agency becomes most apparent when she has *dark* skin. To reinforce this, Hopkins carefully reminds the reader – through Judah's not-so-disinterested brotherly concern – of the fate that could await Winona were she a classic "tragic mulatta" heroine: "he knew the worth of a white man's love for a woman of mixed blood; how it swept its scorching heat over a white young life, leaving it nothing but charred embers and burned-out ashes" (357-8).

Moreover, instead of black or mixed race femininity emerging as the overwhelming determinant of misfortune, *white* femininity is in *Winona*, as with Elise Bradford in *Hagar's Daughter*, associated with impotence. After all, Winona's young, white mistress – the daughter of Colonel Titus – wishes she had been a boy: "Maybe I could have helped him [her father]. But I'm only a girl and a cripple at that" (319). As a young white woman, Lillian is literally, as well as symbolically, paralysed and her feebleness provides a counterpoint to Winona's agency, which is rendered all the more ironic by Winona's status as Lillian's slave. As she does in *Hagar's Daughter*, then, Hopkins reserves for a white female character the position usually occupied by the "tragic mulatta" in anti-slavery fiction. Furthermore, in Christian terms, as Elizabeth Fox Genovese observes, the concept of the tragic mulatta "uncomfortably evoked the concept of Original Sin – literally the sin of the parents bequeathed to the innocent child."<sup>71</sup> In *Winona*, as Colonel Titus is painfully aware, Lillian's body, and not Winona, the mulatta's, is the site upon which the Colonel's "evil deeds" have been revisited (318), her affliction "a great cross" to the Colonel (317).<sup>72</sup>

Of course, it could be argued that cross-dressing is a compromised form of agency. How can one be described as enacting feminine agency if such agency is expressed in terms of normative masculinity? After all, Ebenezer Maybee, observes that Winona has "the pluck of a man." She doesn't "whimper but jes' saws wood an' keeps to her in-structions" (348), a statement that problematically equates courage with masculinity while simultaneously praising Winona for passively following her "in-structions" as one would expect an obedient young woman to do. However, it is not only while cross-dressing that Winona demonstrates her will to act. Toward the end of the novel, after the Pottawatomie massacre, Winona is



overcome “by the restless fever within” and determines “to risk all in an endeavor to obtain news of her friends – of Warren” (421).

In readings of Winona’s cross-dressing, some critics are tempted “to look *through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser, to turn away from a close encounter with the transvestite, and to want instead to subsume that figure within one of the two traditional genders,” interpretations which Marjorie Garber warns against.<sup>73</sup> Such analyses are persuasive because Hopkins indeed appears to emphasise that Allen Pinks is “really” female. Warren Maxwell believes him to be “the prettiest specimen of boyhood he had ever seen” (*MN* 388). His being “fascinated” with his nurse (388) recalls the earlier description of his senses being fascinated with “the sound of [Winona’s] sweet voice, soft but not monotonous” (359). Indeed, the tones of Pinks’s voice are as “soft and low as a woman’s” (389). As Elizabeth Ammons argues, the scene is “constructed so that we suspect but do not know that Allen is ‘really’ Winona, the boy is ‘really’ a girl; we have a hunch that gender is straight (pun intended), but we cannot know.”<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile Siobhan Somerville takes such descriptions of Pinks to be evidence of *Winona* as a queer text.<sup>75</sup>

Instead, I would argue that Winona’s cross-dressing must be viewed in the context of the other apparent opposites which are being constantly revisited and negotiated in the novel, particularly as these relate to Christianity: formal boundaries between slave narrative and dime novel western, thematic concerns such as Christian martyrdom versus agency, whiteness versus blackness versus Indianness, Christianity as an apology for slavery or as a “dynamic inspiration for change.”<sup>76</sup> Additionally, as Martha Patterson observes:

If Warren Maxwell and Winona are the embodiment of a New Testament theology of forgiveness, while John Brown and Judah represent an Old

Testament God of Wrath, then Hopkins seems to be mandating a combination of the two - a kind of religious socialism devoted to the material and spiritual.<sup>77</sup>

So if Winona's power "inheres in her blurred gender, in the fact of her cross-dressing" and "not in *either* of her gendered identities,"<sup>78</sup> the power(s) of Christianity similarly lie(s) in the permeability of its ostensibly rigid boundaries and their consequent susceptibility to being moulded at will by ideologically-opposed factions.

### **Beyond the Veil: Passing from Nun to Priest**

For inspiration for her fictional episode of cross-dressing in the American West, Hopkins may have been indebted to reports of Babe Bean, a woman arrested in Stockton, California in 1897 for masquerading in men's clothing. Stories of the "Trousered Puzzle" reached newspapers in Boston, where Hopkins was based.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, when Bean wrote out her tale for reporters, she described the extent to which the convent in which her mother placed her to tame her rebellious nature constrained "that freedom I dreamed of [. . .] how often I wished I could enjoy the liberty that the world sees fit to allow a boy."<sup>80</sup> In Babe Bean's construction, the convent emerges as a stifling, oppressive space for a young woman. Add to the issue of gender that of race, the convent – and by extension, Christianity – would seem to offer even less to the non-white female subject. Yet although black agency and Christianity have often seemed at odds in American literature in the sense that through prayer, the African American subject defers to an omnipotent and absent God to decide his or her fate,<sup>81</sup> Hopkins hints at a more subversive role for Christian

prayer in black female subjectivity. After news reaches John Brown's camp of Warren's capture by Bill Thomson's men, Winona heads for the woods, "not to weep, but to think. She leaned against a tree and her hopeless eyes gazed down the darkening aisles; she prayed: 'Help me to save him!'" (380). The woods, with their "darkening aisles," are a metaphorical church. "Thinking" and "praying," meanwhile, become synonymous acts of agency that contrast with "weeping."

By extension, it could be inferred that female communities of prayer – such as Catholic convents – could, at the moment during which Hopkins was writing, offer a greater level of agency to the women that live within their walls, than to those living beyond them. This is certainly supported by historical accounts of American women religious. According to Sara Maitland, because Catholic sisters eschewed marriage, children and domesticity – excelling as nurses and educators – they succeeded in escaping "the Victorian feminine stereotype."<sup>82</sup> It was not until 1917, with the codification of canon law, that the autonomy of the apostolic orders was finally circumscribed, the duties of the sisters restricted and a certain degree of enclosure enforced.

What, then, of the depiction of women religious and the space of the convent in *Winona*? While, at first glance, it may appear that Winona's attitude toward the convent is one of unequivocal distaste, a close reading of the text reveals that Winona's – and perhaps Hopkins's – view is more-or-less ambivalent. Early in the novel, Judah teases Winona with the threat that she will be sent away to be educated at a convent, to which Winona responds: "I do not want to leave papa and you for a lot of nuns and strange girls who do not care for me" (293). Having mapped out Winona's home as a pastoral idyll, Hopkins seems to suggest that the convent is indeed an unfavourable alternative. For Winona is "queen of the little island, and her

faithful subjects were her father, Judah and old Nokomis" (290). Hopkins thereby implies that by substituting the convent for her island life, Winona would be divested of the power which she clearly exerts in a familial environment that is integrated by gender, as well as by race. Perhaps this is the case, but if Hopkins is denying the potentially-empowering aspects of belonging to an all-female community, she subsequently contradicts this position when she reveals that Warren sees little of Winona in John Brown's camp following his rescue because "she kept with the women" (402), a group in which "every woman carried a rifle in her hand and was prepared to use it" (409).

When Winona and Warren discuss the possibility of her marrying, Winona tearfully declares that she will not find a suitable partner because her aristocratic class position (inherited through her father) does not accord with her racial identity (the legacy of her African American mother). She thus posits becoming a nun as her only option (406, 407). Indirectly, therefore, Hopkins hints that the convent may represent a space in which class and racial differences are unimportant. In the end, of course, Winona does not take the veil because she and Warren reach an understanding that they will marry. However, as Siobhan Somerville argues, Hopkins is "less than enthusiastic about a heterosexual resolution to the novel"<sup>83</sup>:

They made no plans for the future. What necessity was there of making plans for the future? They knew what the future would be. They loved each other; they would marry *sooner or later*, after they reached England, with the sanction of her grandfather, old Lord George; that was certain. (435, emphasis added)

Somerville attributes such "indifference" to Hopkins's reluctance to use the marriage plot to resolve the narrative of a character who so fully represented mobility across

lines of gender and race.”<sup>84</sup> For Somerville, Hopkins’s disinclination towards providing heterosexual love, marriage and domestic life for Winona supports a queer interpretation of the novel. The “lack of urgency” is indeed remarkable, and, I believe, renders Winona’s seeming aversion to *another* alternative to domestic life – such as becoming a nun – somewhat less certain.

Despite Winona’s profession to “hate nuns” (293), the abhorrence of the prospect of education in a convent or becoming a nun is never convincingly drawn in *Winona*. In fact, on the strength of evidence from *Contending Forces* (1900), it could be inferred that Hopkins actually admired Catholic nuns, specifically the Sisters of the Holy Family, an African American community founded in New Orleans in 1842. It is remarkable that Hopkins, writing in 1900, was even aware of the community for, as Tracy Fessenden notes, “neither the order nor its cofounder, Henriette Delille, whose canonization would make her the first native-born African American woman saint, is mentioned in most histories of American Catholicism or African American religious life.”<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, when Will Smith visits his sister, Dora, in New Orleans, Dora recommends he attend mass at the Sisters of the Holy Family (although the Smiths are not Catholic) for the “Easter service is divine” (*CF* 170). It is there that he is reunited with Sappho Clark who, with her illegitimate son Alphonse, has been living with the nuns since her departure from Boston.

Interestingly, in Hopkins’s depiction of the space of the convent in *Contending Forces*, a slippage is introduced between brothel and nunnery. When Luke Sawyer recounts the tale of Mabelle Beaubean (Sappho Clark), he notes that she is educated in “the Colored Sisters School in the city of New Orleans.” After a school trip, Mabelle disappears with her father’s white half-brother, is seduced by him, abandoned, and is subsequently found “a prisoner in a house of the vilest

character [. . .] – a poor, ruined, half-crazed creature” (109). Luke places Mabelle in the care of the Sisters of the Holy Family, where she is delivered of her baby. The space of the convent school, in other words, quickly shifts to the brothel, and back to the convent. This slippage between nun and (mixed race) woman-as-sexual-commodity is reinforced by the fact that the Sisters of the Holy Family purchased in 1881, as the site for their community, the Orleans Ballroom, in which the infamous quadroon balls had been held for many years.<sup>86</sup>

In its dramatisation of the slippage between nunnery and brothel, Hopkins’s novel is perhaps making reference to a particular genre of nineteenth-century anti-Catholic literature – the escaped nun’s tale. The most famous of the escaped nuns’ narratives, Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hôtel Dieu Nunnery* (1836), was the bestselling book in the United States prior to the appearance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. *Awful Disclosures* purported to be a “true” account of the author’s abuse at the hands of cruel nuns and priests, one of whom fathers the baby to whom she gives birth after her escape from the Hôtel Dieu convent in Montreal.

*Contending Forces* racialises this association between convent and brothel. Reports of Henriette DeLille’s life suggest that one of the community’s co-founders would herself have been destined for *plaçage* had she not decided to take the veil.<sup>87</sup>

Becoming a nun thus provided African American women with an alternative to *concubinage*. Nevertheless, the Sisters of the Holy Family faced a great deal of racism, which undermined its potential as a safe haven for beautiful, light-skinned women.<sup>88</sup> Such ambivalence is reflected in an Alice Dunbar-Nelson story that is roughly contemporaneous with *Contending Forces*. In “Sister Josepha” (1899), while the convent offers the eponymous protagonist a refuge from the sexual

advances of white men “fascinated” with her light-skinned beauty, it also circumscribes her own sexual desires.<sup>89</sup>

The salacious, titillating tales of convent life which began to appear in the 1830s – in which convents are depicted as “essentially priests’ brothels”<sup>90</sup> – are deeply embedded in a more general “othering” of Catholicism throughout United States history.<sup>91</sup> In particular, the appearance of escaped nuns’ tales coincided with a sharp increase in the number of predominantly-Catholic German and Irish immigrants to the United States. This ambivalence toward the convent and women religious is thus reflective of the ambiguous position occupied by Catholicism, as opposed to other Christian denominations, in the United States. For while Catholicism has undoubtedly performed a colonising function in its mission to christianise Native Americans, it has itself always been considered “other” in the United States through its association with various immigrant groups. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Catholic Germans and Irish arrived in great numbers, succeeded by Italians and Poles, and today, by Hispanics.<sup>92</sup>

The escaped nuns’ tales evince not only anxieties about the growing influence of Catholicism in the United States in the nineteenth century, but also about the changing role of women in society, particularly with respect to American religious life. As Susan Griffin observes, it is significant that the protagonists of the nuns’ narratives were young Protestant women who had converted to Catholicism and become nuns. With men and women operating in increasingly “separate spheres” in the nineteenth century, Protestantism “played an important role in shaping the idea of the true woman.”<sup>93</sup> With the consequent “predominance of women in Protestant churches and new theological interpretations of a nurturing and self-sacrificing Christ,” Protestantism was, in the nineteenth century, seen to be

becoming more and more “feminized.”<sup>94</sup> In a period during which there was some concern about women’s growing power in religious matters, Griffin argues very persuasively that the escaped nun’s story functioned to undercut her possible authority by illustrating the “young [Protestant] woman’s incapacity to be trusted: her testimony is essential to unveiling the truth, but it also proves her vulnerability and fallibility.”<sup>95</sup> The Catholic nun persists as a locus of fears regarding gender, or as Sara Maitland puts it: “Nuns, precisely because they do not belong – as daughters, wives or mothers – to any individual man, can be used safely as a projection of a misogyny which is far more general.”<sup>96</sup>

The nun thus emerges from nineteenth-century cultural representations as a vexed figure in terms of race, gender and Catholicism, and indeed, slavery and colonialism. After all, Henriette DeLille belonged to the class of *gens de couleurs libres*, themselves often slaveholders, and DeLille herself was no exception: she owned a slave, Betsy, whom she inherited from her sister Cecile.<sup>97</sup> If American convent captivity narratives such as Monk’s are, according to Nancy Lusignan Schultz, “connected to the older, more established genres of the gothic, Indian captivity narratives and a long European tradition of anti-Catholic literature,” they also look forward to more recent versions of the convent story.<sup>98</sup> Schultz cites Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1998) as a contemporary example of the convent story.<sup>99</sup> To this, I would add the reservation novels of Louise Erdrich. Schultz’s observation regarding the nuns’ tales indebtedness to Indian captivity narratives is interesting because it relates the othering of Native Americans to that of Catholics through their perceived violence and brutality. As James R. Lewis argues further, a majority of Puritan captivity tales were set in the French and Indian War, “causing Indians and Catholics to become associated with each other in the Puritan mind.”<sup>100</sup> It is not



surprising, given this historical context, that Erdrich draws upon – sometimes seriously, sometimes playfully – the escaped nuns’ tales in her novels, playing on the legacy of the literary nun as a vexed figure.

This is most apparent in the postulant Marie Lazarre’s encounter with the brutal Sister Leopolda in Erdrich’s first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984). Like the Protestant girls in the nineteenth-century stories, Marie is seduced by the iconography and symbolism of Catholicism, imagining herself becoming a saint “carved in pure gold. With ruby lips. And my toenails would be little pink ocean shells, which they would have to stoop down off their high horse to kiss.”<sup>101</sup> That a Native girl might be so devout echoes *Awful Disclosures*, in which Monk claims that “Many of the Indians were remarkably devoted to the priests, believing everything they were taught.”<sup>102</sup> At the convent, however, Leopolda, who is Marie’s mother although Marie does not know it at this time, subjects Marie to relentless abuse in the name of holiness – pouring boiling water on her back and stabbing her with a fork. Having failed to “run back down the hill” after the first violent incident, Marie finally decides to “Rise up and walk!”, escaping the nun and the convent (*LM* 49, 56). In *The Last Report*, Erdrich also recalls the conflation of convent and brothel in the nineteenth-century nuns’ tales. When Sister Cecilia (Agnes DeWitt) leaves the convent and arrives at Berndt Vogel’s farm, Berndt thinks at first that the stranger “must be a loose woman, fleeing a brothel.”<sup>103</sup>

The references to the escaped nuns’ stories in Erdrich’s novels reflect the enduring potential of the figures of the nun and priest, and the space of the convent, to function as a locus for anxieties and/or desires regarding the imbrication of race, gender and Catholicism. In *Tracks* and *The Last Report*, therefore, Erdrich makes the Catholic clergy the starting point for her interrogation of Catholicism. The texts

question whether Catholicism's colonialist function necessarily distances it irreconcilably from Native beliefs, or if the two might, in some contexts, prove compatible. In this respect, *Tracks* and *The Last Report* take up ideas of religious syncretism that are only hinted at in *Winona*. As Judah and Winona frolic in their idyllic surroundings, they disagree over "the faint pink stems of the delicate, gauzy Indian-pipes" (MN 291). Winona claims that they turn black when you touch them, information passed on to her from Nokomis. Judah dismisses this theory, however, claiming that Nokomis is "a silly old Indian squaw" and that when Winona goes to convent school the following winter, "the nuns will teach [her] better" (292).

Erdrich's exploration of the potential and/or inadequacies of Native-Christian interactions are mapped upon the bodies of two women who "pass" in order to take up their Catholic vocations. Pauline Puyat, a mixedblood who passes as white in becoming a nun, is one of two narrators in *Tracks* (1988).<sup>104</sup> She also features as a conspicuous absent presence in *The Last Report*, the story of Father Damien Modeste, or Agnes DeWitt, who is cross-dressing as a priest. Once again, then, the act of passing becomes an appropriate metaphor for the subjects' (in)ability to negotiate what are, apparently, opposing categories which are, in this case, Native versus Christian beliefs. Central to Erdrich's interrogation of Christianity, therefore, is her construction of Agnes DeWitt/Father Damien Modeste and Pauline Puyat/Sister Leopolda as narrative doubles. Like Pauline Puyat, who becomes Sister Leopolda, Agnes also begins her religious life in a convent as the novice nun Sister Cecilia. Recalling the conventions of many passing narratives, both Pauline and Agnes undergo symbolic deaths in undertaking their Catholic vocations, their rebirths demanding changes of nominal and physical identity. Pauline becomes Sister Leopolda and has her hair "chopped from [her] head with a pair of shears."<sup>105</sup>

Agnes assumes the name Father Damien Modeste, and a masculine identity. Agnes keeps Leopolda's "secret" (that she murdered Napoleon Morrissey) in order that her own secret identity will not be revealed. A section of the novel entitled "Leopolda's Passion" (336-341) is followed directly by a chapter called "Father Damien's Passion" (342-351). The identities of Father Damien and Sister Leopolda are thus intimately bound up with one another. By offering the reader two alternative – one "positive," one "negative" – embodiments of Native/Christian alliances, Erdrich's view of religious syncretism emerges as ultimately ambivalent.

In *Tracks*, two narrators – Nanapush and Pauline Puyat, who becomes Sister Leopolda – chart the decline of the Ojibway way of life on a North Dakota reservation through the combined forces of Old World diseases, harsh winters and the General Allotment (Dawes) Act of 1887.<sup>106</sup> *The Last Report's* sympathetic portrayal of Father Damien – a minor character in *Tracks* – could be seen as a response to the (self-)destructiveness of Sister Leopolda. Spanning the years 1910 to 1996, *The Last Report* traces through flashbacks the life of Agnes DeWitt. After a brief and unsuccessful spell as Sister Cecilia, a postulant in a Minnesota convent (1910 to 1912), Agnes embarks on a romantic relationship with farmer Berndt Vogel, who is subsequently killed while attempting to rescue his lover from bank robbers who have taken her hostage. Following Berndt's death, Agnes takes the place and the name of Father Damien Modeste, a Catholic priest who dies in a flood while en route to the Indian mission of Little No Horse. Agnes lives as Father Damien, dispatching regular epistles to the Pope on various matters of importance to reservation life, until her suicide by drowning in 1996.

In *The Last Report*, therefore, historical settings are juxtaposed with a contemporary story, reflecting the growing fascination with Native/Christian

syncretism over the past twenty years or so. Indeed, Dennis Walsh asserts that the clear opposition Erdrich draws between Catholicism and shamanic religion in *Love Medicine* yields to a perceptible blurring of the two in *Tracks*, published four years later. I take Walsh's hypothesis even further to argue that the cross-dressing priest in *The Last Report* represents the ultimate crisis in the categories of Native versus Christian.<sup>107</sup> Francis Cree, former Tribal Chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewas in North Dakota, of which Louise Erdrich herself is a member, confirms this when he observes in a 1991 interview that "the Catholic spirituality, looking back, is beginning to understand what they dropped." Most of the Catholic people "are turning here, back to their traditional ways, those that's part Indian. Even some of those that are not Indian. They're looking back and saying 'Look, by gosh, there is something there. There is something in the native spirituality. We see it.'"<sup>108</sup> The combination of *Tracks* and *The Last Report* can thus be read as a timely intervention into debates on "a new evangelism" emerging from the Roman Catholic Church, which is "no longer so concerned with the Christianization of Indians as with the Indianization of Christianity."<sup>109</sup>

The contemporary (1996) narrative concern of *The Last Report* is to establish the now-deceased Sister Leopolda's suitability for sainthood based upon the miracles she allegedly performed during her lifetime. This inquiry into Leopolda's blessedness, undertaken by Father Jude Miller, a priest sent from the Vatican, is a process in which Father Damien establishes himself as a "crucial witness" in order to refute the "miracles" (LR 50-51). *The Last Report's* preoccupation with miracles is significant because the Christian miracle is, historically, one of the issues which blurred the distinction between Native and Christian beliefs. If, according to David Murray, "[p]rimitive religions saw the gods at work in nature as an integral part of it,

and therefore saw them as capable of being induced to make things happen,” then the Judeo-Christian God “was seen as absolute, sovereign and outside of, and prior to, nature.” In this construction, which opposes “Primitive” and “Judeo-Christian” traditions, Christian miracles, which imply that God could be influenced directly through prayer, emerge as deeply “problematic.”<sup>110</sup>

The “report” of the novel’s title, then, is Damien’s final attempt to set the Vatican straight regarding the falseness of Leopolda’s “miracles” and her consequent ineligibility for sainthood. The struggle that is wrought between Leopolda (posthumously) and Damien over the miracles reflects a deeper conflict which stems from the fact that they experience the encounter between Christianity and Native beliefs in widely divergent ways. In this conflict, the body is the principal battleground. In Catholic teaching, of course, the body emerges as a site of profound ambivalence. On the one hand, it appears to be preoccupied with circumscribing and delimiting the body; on the other, it seems to affirm the possibility of transcending one’s body.

### **The Theology of the Body**

The Catholic hierarchy – intervening through Canon Law and papal encyclicals – seeks to regulate the body, sex and reproduction, issues that in some other Christian religions are considered matters of individual conscience. The Church’s opposition to and prohibition of pre-marital sex, artificial methods of contraception, abortion and homosexuality, are well known. In fact, the basic symbol of Christianity, the cross, is “the shape of an object whose significance is the body that was nailed to it.”<sup>111</sup> This image is remarkable for evoking the body as a fixed, immobile entity –

contained by and within the cross shape – and is thus an effective metaphor for the Catholic Church’s attempts to impose bodily boundaries. Father Jude Miller is the mouthpiece for some of these views when he claims that “Intercourse outside the boundaries of marriage hurts the order of things. Creates disorder. Breaks traditions, vows, families. Creates such...problems” (LR 135).

Agnes’s cross-dressing as Father Damien thus appears to contravene several key tenets of Catholic dogma. Most obviously, she assumes the role of priest, a vocation still denied to Catholic women. Formerly a novitiate nun, Agnes’s decision to cross-dress as a priest in 1912 coincides roughly with the circumscription of the autonomy of the women’s orders in 1917. Indeed, Agnes, in her priest’s garb, immediately notices that Kashpaw, who meets her off the train to take her to the reservation, “treated her with much more respect as a priest than she’d ever known as a nun” (LR 62). The Catholic Church’s persistent refusal to ordain women, even as other Christian Churches do, is one of the reasons for which many feminists find the Church inherently misogynistic. Interestingly, the Church’s justification for refusing to ordain women is predicated not only upon its assumption that Christ is male, but also, by implication, upon its disapproval of homosexuality:

It is *the Eucharist* above all that expresses *the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom toward the Church the Bride*. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest *acts ‘in persona Christi,’* is performed by a man.<sup>112</sup>

If the Eucharist were performed by a woman priest, this would be equivalent to a union of two feminine entities – the Church and the priest.

The issues of priestly celibacy, the ordination of women and homosexuality become interlinked in *The Last Report* when Father Damien enjoys a brief affair

with Father Gregory Wekkle. Before he learns that Damien is biologically female, Gregory fears he is “one of those whom the Church darkly warned against, the ones who lay with men as with women.” For Gregory, homosexual intercourse is akin to the “sin of murder, one of those sins crying out to heaven for vengeance” (LR 200). While the Catholic Church is undoubtedly opposed to homosexuality, in nineteenth-century anti-Catholic discourse, Protestants’ mistrust of celibacy in the clergy focused upon the supposed “spiritual marriage” between the priest and Christ which, for Protestants, contained a “barely veiled theme of homoeroticism.”<sup>113</sup> Where the Church’s disapproval of homosexuality is now considered deeply *conservative*, in a specific U.S. climate of anti-Catholicism, one of the ways in which the Church’s *subversive* potential was depicted was in terms of the homoeroticism of priestly celibacy. In *The Last Report*, then, the cross-dresser’s queerness – uniting the issues of homosexuality, priestly celibacy and the ordination of women – functions as yet another indication of the ambivalence with which Catholicism has been viewed in the United States.

In ostensible contradistinction to this obsession with containing the body as symbolised by the crucifix, in English language usage, *cross* and *crossing* often evoke the very opposite connotations of bodily mobility and transgression. Furthermore, Catholicism embraces a non-essentialist conception of the self that is not contained *in* or *by* the body. The “self” in Christianity is intangible, indefinable, and is usually called “the soul.” It is the soul that accedes to eternal life after the earthly body has expired. In *The Last Report*, it is this more liberating politics of the cross that (in Agnes’s case) Erdrich seeks to explore, privileging the receptiveness of Christianity – specifically Catholicism – to notions of bodily transformation and finding therein the potential for reconciling Agnes’s lifelong gender disguise with

her Catholicism. Of course, disguise is far from anathema to the Catholic faith. In reminding adherents that God is omnipresent and to encourage them to see God in all his creatures, Catholicism teaches that God may appear in many guises. For Agnes, Mary Kashpaw, her long-time, faithful housekeeper, is such a figure (*LR* 123).

The coexistence of these apparently incongruent conceptions of the body enables Erdrich to interrogate Christianity, and the potential for a melding of Christian and Native beliefs, through the bodies of Sister Leopolda and Father Damien. A war is waged over the extent to which each can exert corporeal control, master their bodies, become subjects rather than objects. Leopolda's marriage of the two belief systems leads to paralysis; Damien's to mobility. Leopolda's conversion to Catholicism is accompanied by attempts at bodily mortification; Damien's Catholicism enables bodily transformation. Leopolda ultimately strives for bodily containment, Damien for bodily transcendence; while Leopolda wishes for visibility – to be seen, Damien wants vision – to be able to see.

### **Damien and Leopolda: Passing between Native and Christian Beliefs**

As in all passing narratives, the passer's ambiguously gendered or raced body is often presented in terms of his or her mobility between places, races, genders and cultures. If Damien is "welcome where no other white man was allowed" (*LR* 276), Pauline is aware that if she never sees Nanapush, Fleur or the Kashpaws again, they will not miss her (*Tracks* 196). Damien's association with mobility is evident from his very first appearance in *Tracks*. Ravaged by disease and cold weather, Nanapush appears to suggest that the Ojibway people have become fixed in a historical moment, relics of an almost-forgotten past. Although he saves Fleur, Nanapush fails



to revive the other members of her family, “quiet forms” that are “stone cold” (3). During the harsh winter of 1912, Fleur and Nanapush almost become frozen statues themselves: “the slivers of ice began to collect and cover us. We become so heavy, weighted down with the lead gray frost, that we could not move” (6). Significantly, the pair are liberated from their immobility by the arrival of Father Damien, who bursts through their cabin door, “causing that great crack of light to interfere with death” (*LR* 80). By contrast, Pauline Puyat is associated throughout with immobility, which is similarly wrought in terms of congealing, particularly after she enters the convent. During a cold winter spent there, her blood “never thawed,” which she views, however, as something of an achievement which enables her to grow strong (*Tracks* 136). When Nanapush tempts her with hot, sweet tea in an effort to force her to urinate and thus violate her self-imposed twice-a-day rule, she tries to resist by making herself “into a block of ice” (150).

Elsewhere in *Tracks*, her immobility takes the form of paralysis, notably when she witnesses Fleur’s rape at the hands of the men with whom they both work (26). After their return to the reservation and Fleur, pregnant with her second child, enters premature labour, Pauline again undergoes a type of paralysis, claiming that “the Lord overtook my limbs and made them clumsy,” ensuring that she cannot “work my arms, my hands properly, my fingers” (157). In contrast, when she is inflicting violence on others, she is finally able to overcome her paralysis. In strangling her former lover, Napoleon Morrissey, “the only things left of intelligence” are her hands: “What I told them to, then, they accomplished” (202).

While Pauline is all “angles and sharp edges, a girl of bent tin” (71), she longs for the fluidity that marks the bodies of the lovers, Fleur Pillager and Eli Kashpaw, who “swelled and shrank” in relation to each other (72). Pauline greatly

envies Fleur's mobility and the power that accompanies it. In mediating between Misshepesu, the water monster, and the people, Fleur is "the one who closed the door or swung it open" (139). Pauline hopes that through converting the Ojibway people to Christianity, she will fulfil a similar intermediary function: "There would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it, same as she closed the Argus lockers" (139). But if Fleur is the "hinge" (139) then Pauline is merely "a piece of wall," attempting to shore up boundaries rather than sidestep them (76). By contrast, Agnes's mobility between genders and cultures is most explicitly depicted through Damien's friendship with Nanapush, named for the Ojibway trickster.<sup>114</sup> Agnes's cross-dressing – which becomes a metaphor for her ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers (her command of the Anishinaabe language, her bonds with the Native people) – recalls the trickster's "transformational powers to escape from difficult situations" and his/her "control over [. . .] physical boundaries."<sup>115</sup>

Pauline, despite her best efforts, appears to be completely alienated from her body and powerless to master it. As Nanapush observes, "once Pauline's mouth started it couldn't stop. It was as if she took the first drink and from then on the drinks took her" (52). During her pregnancy with Marie, her attempts at a crude abortion are foiled by Bernadette Morrissey (who believes abortion is a sin), but also, Pauline believes, "because Napoleon's seed had too strong a hold" (131). Powerless, she watches as changes take place on her own body: "Yet I continued to expand, a risen loaf that birth would punch down. I hoped, I prayed to be delivered" (134). While she is in labour, the armistice bells ring out signalling the end of World War I. But for Pauline, who is fighting a losing battle with her own body, the bells bring "no peace" (134). Such lack of command over her female body is a sharp

counterpoint to Agnes, who actually succeeds in stopping her menstruation once she becomes a priest (*LR* 78).

To gain some mastery over her body, Pauline imposes limits upon herself and engages in punishing acts of bodily mortification. One of the many forms of penance which Pauline performs involves plunging her arms into boiling water. As they are recovering and she is having the bandages changed, she “shed[s] a skin with the dirty wrapping. Every few days I shed another, yet another” (*Tracks* 195). Pauline does not move easily in her own skin, and thus attempts to shed it by whatever available means. In contrast, although there are “times that she missed the ease of moving in her old skin,” Agnes slips relatively effortlessly into the skin of the dead priest (*LR* 65).

Even Pauline’s acquisition of spiritual acuity is depicted in terms of violence inflicted on the skin. As God reveals himself to her, “Skins were stripped from [her] eyes” (*Tracks* 137). As in all passing narratives, *Tracks* and *The Last Report* are preoccupied with the interrelated concepts of seeing, not seeing and being seen, *hypervisibility* and *invisibility*. “I have never seen the truth,” Damien tells Jude Miller, “without crossing my eyes” (*LR* 135). In his last note to the Pope before committing suicide, Damien claims that “All I ever wanted to do is see” (344). As Rita Ferrari argues, “invisibility signifies cultural oppression but can also signify access to the transcendent when invisibility inverts and expands into vision.”<sup>116</sup> Thus, while Damien’s “true” gender identity is invisible, he achieves the transcendence of vision: he *sees* (by crossing his eyes). By contrast, Pauline merely *watches*, unable to transform her invisibility into vision, opting instead for voyeurism. Angry with Fleur’s lover, Eli Kashpaw, for rejecting her romantic advances, Pauline wreaks revenge on him by procuring a love medicine that will lead

him to seduce her adopted cousin, Sophie Morrissey. In an ironic twist, Pauline thus wields control over these external bodies while remaining incapable of ruling her own. She experiences vicarious sexual pleasure by watching the two engage in intercourse, but her own sexual encounters with Napoleon Morrissey are totally unfulfilling. In *The Last Report*, after she confesses to the murder of Napoleon, she reveals that she has been spying on the priest and thus knows his secret: "I have waited outside your window after the ox, Mary Kashpaw, is snoring in the ironing shack. I've seen you undress" (LR 274).

This scene from *The Last Report* depicts Pauline's attempts to wrest power from Damien in two ways, first, by the act of looking itself (taking control of the gaze) and second, by telling Damien about it (the act of speaking), both of which reflect Pauline's struggles in *Tracks*, in which neither Pauline's voyeurism nor her narrative voice translate into a corresponding level either of mastery over herself or influence over others. It is significant, moreover, that this confrontation takes place in the context of Catholic confession because, as Chris Weedon argues, paraphrasing Michel Foucault, Catholic confession illustrates the profound limitations of speaking: "To speak is to assume a subject position within a discourse and to become *subjected* to the power and regulation of the discourse."<sup>117</sup> To interpret the sections Pauline narrates in *Tracks* as her confessions, spoken to those who have the authority to judge and chastise her for her transgressions, Pauline emerges as impotent even though she narrates. On the other hand, Damien subverts the traditional gender power relations of confession, power relations that inhere in the fact that the hearer is always male while the speaker may be male or female.<sup>118</sup> It is notable that "[m]ore than any other blessed sacrament, Father Damien enjoyed hearing sins, chewing over people's stories, and then with a flourish absolving and

erasing their wrongs, sending sinners out of the church clean and new” (LR 5).

While in *Tracks* Pauline may have the ability to construct a story, in *The Last Report*, Damien has the power to change it or undo it.

In *Tracks*, Pauline’s voyeurism is her attempt to take control of the gaze under which she has always been invisible. The erasures that Nanapush describes in the opening of *Tracks* – the diminishing Ojibway population due to disease and exile, the end of the traditional way of life, the loss of Ojibway land – are subsequently symbolically enacted upon Pauline’s mixedblood body, thus consigning her to an object status which belies her narrative voice. Although he tells Lulu that she is “the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared” (*Tracks* 1), it is in fact Pauline who is “invisible” (15).<sup>119</sup> In the subsequent section, Pauline remembers her father’s reaction upon her decision to leave the reservation for the nearby town of Argus. He warns her: “You’ll fade out there,” reminding her that she is lighter than her sisters. “You won’t be an Indian once you return,” a prospect that initially appeals to her (*Tracks* 14). However, her light skin actually serves to render her invisible: she “blends” into walls, “fades” into a corner, “melts back to nothing” (16, 19). She is a “moving shadow” (22), “unnoticeable” (39).

In an effort to acquire visibility and, by extension, subjectivity, Pauline decides to become a nun, which demands she pass for white. The order will not admit any Indian girls so Pauline conveniently reports that God tells her in a dream that “despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white” (137). However, the black habit of the nuns only serves to make her “more invisible than ever” (75). Indeed, Pauline’s association with absence and erasure is compounded by her job assisting Bernadette Morrissey in washing and laying out the dead and she comes to cut a Grim Reaper figure: “when people saw me walking

down the road, they wondered who was being taken, man, woman, or child" (75). Bernadette's daughter, Sophie, calls Pauline "death's bony whore" (86). Pauline's association with death is reinforced by her affinities with crows, described in *Tracks* (54) and *The Last Report* (54, 318), a medieval Christian symbol signifying a bad omen and a bringer of misfortune and death.<sup>120</sup> The transition from Pauline Puyat to Sister Leopolda is described in terms of her symbolic death as an Ojibway and rebirth as a white Christian. After falling asleep in a tree, with her head "tucked [. . .] beneath the shelter of [her] wing" (the Ojibway bury their dead in trees), Pauline awakes knowing she is different: "I became devious and holy, dangerously meek and mild" (*Tracks* 68-69).

As part of her campaign of mortification, Pauline deprives herself of food, wears her shoes on the wrong feet and denies herself daytime urination. Despite this, she is still incapable of exercising any self-control. In one episode, she describes how she halves her bread allowance every time she sits down to eat (*Tracks* 147). Subsequently, she pays a visit to Fleur's cabin and hungrily devours the food generously offered to her before realising that Margaret and Fleur deny themselves in order that their loved ones, Nanapush and Lulu, do not go without (145). In these early years of Father Damien's life at Little No Horse (1912 to 1924) the ideal of transcending one's body is all the more elusive and coveted because the reservation is wracked by disease and food shortages. Ironically, Pauline nurses the sick and appears to be immune to illness, yet she cannot curb her hunger when she visits Fleur's cabin. In contrast, the priest derives, or imagines he derives, actual nourishment from the Eucharistic bread and wine: "Did their part of the sacrament transubstantiate in real as well as metaphorical terms? Had the dry thin consecrated

Host turned into a thick mouthful of raw, tender, bloody, sweet-tasting meat in the mouths of the sisters? And the wine to vital blood?" (LR 69)

Ultimately, Pauline's quest for corporeal control manifests itself in violence directed at others. Unable to establish any self-mastery, she (mis)directs her force at external targets. Significantly, her victims are those people (Napoleon Morrissey, her former lover, and Marie Lazarre, the child she bears as a result) who manage, at one time or another, to penetrate her body. Just as she frequently provides divine justification for her actions (she kills Napoleon, she claims, because he was "the devil in the shape of the man" [LR 273]), the nature and instruments of her violence betraying the extent to which she has distorted the trappings of Catholicism: she strangles Napoleon Morrissey with a rosary made of barbed wire (*Tracks* 201-202, LR 163). After stabbing Marie Lazarre with a fork, she claims that the stigmata were miraculously bestowed upon Marie (LR 136, LM 55-56). Damien, on the other hand, reserves acts of violence for his own body: to avert the danger of posthumous exposure, he exerts the definitive form of bodily control (in gross violation of Catholic doctrine, of course) by taking his own life.<sup>121</sup>

Damien's at-oneness with his ambiguously gendered body and Pauline's alienation from her racially mixed body are reflected in the ways in which they fuse Catholic and Ojibway traditions. While Damien begins to practise a mixture of faiths, discovering that "*The ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ*" (LR 49), Pauline can only substitute one for the other. For Damien, Ojibway and Christian figures can coexist with no apparent difficulty: "*Saint Augustine, Nanabozho, whoever can hear me, give me a little help now*, he prayed" (266). For Pauline, by contrast, this is an uneasy alliance, signalled by her attempt to dispel her nightmares

by hanging a Native American dreamcatcher alongside the crucifix above her bed. But this “only spun the dreams through, thicker, faster, until I ceased to sleep at all” (*Tracks* 66). Pauline sees Native and Christian beliefs in completely oppositional terms, claiming that “Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous who lived in trees, the bush, or spirits of animals” and they should thus turn to the Lord (*Tracks* 139).

Her rejection of Ojibway practices in favour of Christianity is symbolically evoked when she shoots a bear who invades Fleur Pillager’s cabin while Fleur is giving birth to her daughter, Lulu (60). Among the Ojibway, “[b]ear hunting was conducted according to complex religious procedures.” Treatment of the bear “approached the level of veneration.”<sup>122</sup> Although she does so to protect the inhabitants of Fleur’s cabin, in shooting the bear, Pauline fails to respect the procedures by which Ojibway bear-hunting rites ought to be conducted. Significantly, Father Damien, en route to Fleur’s cabin to baptise Lulu, encounters the banished bear and by instinct, splashes it with holy water (*LR* 183). Performing the ritual of baptism, an important Christian ceremony for initiating infants into God’s community, Damien (somewhat comically) registers his respect for the bear, and by extension, Ojibway customs.

The most obvious and effective way in which Erdrich reveals the compatibility of Christian and Native traditions is through Damien’s embodiment of the cross-dresser-as-spiritual-leader. When Kashpaw first encounters Damien, he mistakes the priest for a (male) berdache<sup>123</sup>:

The priest was clearly not right, too womanly. Perhaps, he thought, here was a man like the famous Wishkob, the Sweet, who had seduced many other



men and finally joined the family of a great war chief as a wife, where he had lived until old, well loved, as one of the women. (*LR* 64)

In fact, none of the Native American characters in the novel is ever convinced by Agnes's passing. Mary Kashpaw, Damien's faithful housekeeper, eventually discovers the priest's secret when he spends a month in a coma and fails to grow any facial hair in that time. Damien eventually realises that Fleur Pillager, too, "had known his secret from the beginning, and it hadn't mattered" (263-4). Similarly, Nanapush perceives that Father Damien is "oddly feminine" (*LR* 91). Many years later, in a strategic attempt to distract Damien from their game of chess, he asks: "Are you a man priest or a woman priest?" (230) It is not so much that these characters are complicit with Damien (with the possible exception of Mary Kashpaw, who prevents his posthumous exposure by ensuring that the dead priest's female body is buried at the bottom of a lake) as that her sex is irrelevant to them. Only Leopolda threatens to write to the bishop and expose "*Sister* Damien" (273).

Of course, rather than the more well-known male-to-female role in certain Native traditions, Father Damien recalls, more accurately, the existence of a female cross-gender role in at least thirty-three Native American tribes.<sup>124</sup> What is interesting about this role is the extent to which it mirrors the priest's duties and responsibilities in Catholicism, including priestly celibacy and its concomitant childlessness. Female berdaches eschewed marriage and, like a priest, cross-gender females did not bear children once they assumed their masculine occupations: "Their kin considered them nonreproductive and accepted the loss of their childbearing potential, placing a woman's individual interests and abilities above her value as a producer."<sup>125</sup> Most significantly, the role of the female berdache often comprehended a spiritual element. Cross-gender females "were inspired by dreams

or visions, had shamanic powers, or were sanctioned by tribal myths.”<sup>126</sup> For Protestant missionaries, for whom Natives and Catholics were both Other, “the greater use of ritual and ritual objects on the part of the Catholics made them seem more like shamans.”<sup>127</sup> Like the shamanic female berdache, Agnes’s call to the priesthood occurs in a dream. She claims to have been nursed back to health after the flood by a man whom she believes to be Christ: “*Be thou like as me, were His words, and I took them literally to mean that I should attend Him as a loving woman follows her soldier into the battle of life, dressed as He is dressed, suffering the same hardships*” (LR 43-44).

Significantly, this passage is as evocative of the Catholic tradition of female-to-male transvestite saints as it is of the female berdache that figures in certain Native cultures, echoing the words of Saint Jerome that a woman who “wishes to serve Christ more than the world ... will cease to be a woman and will be called man.”<sup>128</sup> The most celebrated of these is, of course, Saint Joan of Arc (1412-1431). Indeed, it was for transvestism, not for heresy, that Joan was put on trial by the Inquisition.<sup>129</sup> There was even, according to legend, a ninth-century female pope. Pope Joan, whose real name is believed to have been Agnes, was exposed as a woman when she gave birth during a papal procession.<sup>130</sup> Thus, although such transformations were acceptable only in the sense that it was believed that the status of manhood was closer to God than womanhood, these saints are nevertheless remarkable for their “destabilization of gender identity” in “a tradition usually seen to cast gender in fairly fixed and dualistic terms.”<sup>131</sup>

Erdrich constructs Damien’s mobility between his own Catholic faith and that of the Ojibway people by evoking imagery, incidents and characters that are meaningful – indeed common – to both belief systems. For instance, Agnes

becomes Father Damien after a flood, one of the great apocalyptic images in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Swept away atop her grand piano, Agnes encounters a dead priest – killed in the flood – whom she knows to have been en route to an Indian mission. Interestingly, the dead priest is “hanging from a branch” (*LR* 44), which is evocative of the Ojibway custom of burying their dead in trees. Assuming his clothes and his name, Agnes is reborn as Father Damien Modeste and makes her way to Little No Horse to take his place. In the centrality of flood imagery, Erdrich echoes Ojibway folklore, in which the woodland trickster Nanabozho is credited with making the world new after a great flood.<sup>132</sup> Indeed, while Damien, through his female-to-male cross-dressing, is reminiscent of the shaman in Native traditions, “the most provocative cosmological symbol in Ojibway shamanism is the character of Nanabozho.”<sup>133</sup> The friendship that develops between Father Damien and Nanapush – named after Nanabozho – thus highlights the complementary nature of their respective roles as spiritual leaders. The Ojibway woodland trickster, Nanabozho, “served as the intermediary between the power spirits and the people, and, as such, had the power to transform himself at will in order to perform his tasks.”<sup>134</sup> A priest carries out a similar kind of intermediate function between God and the devout and in Agnes’s case she actually transforms herself into a man in order to do this.

Although Erdrich never completely exonerates Damien for his early attempts to impose Christian morality on the Native population (the priest’s disapproval of polygamy leads to the break-up of the Kashpaw family and the dispersal or deaths of Kashpaw and his four wives), his acknowledgement of his own complicity in “the passing of sacred traditional knowledge” through the Christian conversion project clearly encourages the reader to think him more enlightened than Leopolda (*LR* 239). Erdrich’s disapproval of conversion is reflected in its association with theft in both

novels: "A god who enters through the rear door," according to Nanapush, "is no better than a thief" (*Tracks* 110). Father Damien, "whose task it was to steal even the intangible about the woman beside him," is himself no better than a thief (*LR* 100).

The association of priests and theft is suggested early in the novel when Agnes, living with Berndt Vogel at the time, is taken hostage by bank robbers. The ringleader, whom Agnes subsequently describes as the devil "disguised in a rumpled cassock," masquerades as a priest (*LR* 35). A woman passing as a priest, Father Damien is "both a robber and a priest. For what is it to entertain a daily deception? Wasn't he robbing all who looked upon him? Stealing their trust?" (77). Though Damien is a thief, he is clearly not a malevolent one. Agnes "becomes" Father Damien on the Feast of Saint Dismas, 25 March 1912 (*LR* 65). Saint Dismas is the Good Thief crucified with Christ, remembered as "good" because he repents of his crimes before dying and subsequently accompanies Jesus to paradise. His last-minute conversion is echoed in *The Last Report* when the aged priest undergoes a reverse conversion to the Ojibway faith. Because there is no one he wants "to visit except in the Ojibwe heaven," Damien decides to convert, becoming "at long last the pagan that [he] always was at heart" (310). On the contrary, Leopolda zealously pursues the ideal of conversion, with Christ's blessing, or so she reports: "He gave me the mission to name and baptize, to gather souls" (*Tracks* 141-2). Pauline's assumption of the name Leopolda upon taking her vows is significant, likely referring to the Leopoldine Society, founded in Vienna in 1829 for the purpose of aiding Catholic missions in North America.<sup>135</sup> In *The Last Report*, her devotion to and success at soul-fetching is one of the reasons cited as qualifying her for sainthood.

Through Pauline's and Damien's diametrically-opposed interpretations of their shared religious affiliation, Erdrich configures Catholicism as a permeable membrane through which subjects of different gender, racial/ethnic and cultural identities may "pass." For Pauline, the incorporation of the trappings of Catholicism leads to violence. After all, she strangles Napoleon Morrissey with a rosary made of barbed wire (*Tracks* 201-202, *LR* 163) and convinces her fellow nuns that the fork wounds she has inflicted on Marie are the stigmata (*LR* 136, *LM* 55-56). However, the sympathetically-drawn Father Damien suggests that Catholicism and Ojibway beliefs may be fused in a healthy, rewarding manner. Louise Erdrich thus emerges as one of several writers who, according to Jeana DelRosso, "address the conflicts between Catholicism and their individual cultures with an internally divided attitude [. . .] that is informed in part by the fact that Catholicism was imported into those cultures through colonialism."<sup>136</sup> The unforgiving portrait of Catholic/Ojibway syncretism that appears in *Tracks* yields, thirteen years later in *The Last Report*, to a sympathetic portrayal of Father Damien. Across Erdrich's oeuvre as a whole, therefore, her view of religious syncretism emerges as ultimately ambivalent.

### **Cross-dressing Pocahontas: Authorship in *Winona* and *The Last Report***

If, as I argue throughout this thesis, passing strategies are as deeply embedded in authorial processes as they are in plot, then the cross-dressing women in *Winona* and *The Last Report* may offer an insight into what authorship means for Pauline Hopkins, a black woman writing at the turn of the twentieth century, and Louise Erdrich, a contemporary woman writer of German American and Ojibway ancestry. For instance, *Winona*'s gender disguise could be a reflection of Hopkins's waning

influence at the *Colored American Magazine*. In 1904, Hopkins was displaced by an editor more sympathetic to the views of Booker T. Washington. According to William Stanley Braithwaite, writing in 1947, “Miss Hopkins regarded herself as a national figure, in the company of Charles W. Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar and as such felt free to impose her views and opinions upon her associates in the conduct of both the book and magazine publications.”<sup>137</sup> One of Hopkins’s failings, as Braithwaite would have it, was that she considered herself on *equal* terms with her black male literary contemporaries. To hold such an opinion, if indeed Hopkins did, is itself a kind of gender transgression comparable to Winona’s fictional cross-dressing. Assuming male garb is one of the few strategies available to Winona to enact feminine agency. It is no coincidence that Winona assumes the name Allen Pinks in cross-dressing, just as Hopkins herself often wrote under the pseudonym Sarah A. Allen, her mother’s name. As I suggest in chapter two, the similarity between the name Allen Pinks and Hopkins’s pseudonym suggests the extent to which Hopkins was obliged to employ authorial subterfuge in order to continue as a prolific writer for the *CAM*. Moreover, in the issue of the *CAM* that followed the Allen Pinks instalment of *Winona*, Hopkins’s other pseudonym, J. Shirley Shadrach, appeared.<sup>138</sup> According to Hanna Wallinger, the name was likely a tribute to a fugitive slave, Shadrach Minkins, who would have been famous in Boston in the 1850s. The connections between this authorial persona, which conjures a fugitive slave like Winona/Allen Pinks and which “mixes male and female elements,” like Winona/Allen Pinks, invites speculation as to whether Shadrach/Pinks represents a deliberate, though veiled, comment on Hopkins’s own increasingly-circumscribed position as editor of and featured author in the *CAM*.<sup>139</sup>

Through the red, white and black family unit in *Winona*, Hopkins posits an alternative genealogy for Americanness than one in which whiteness is the most fundamental prerequisite.<sup>140</sup> This counter-myth of origins is reinforced by drawing parallels between her eponymous heroine and the mythical “mother” of all Americans, Pocahontas. With “a head held with all a princess’ grace” (359) and her “queenly gesture[s]” (377), Winona is depicted in metaphorical terms as an Indian princess. As is the case with Pocahontas, Hopkins suggests that Winona does not merely assume the status of nobility upon her marriage to a British nobleman, but already qualifies for the aristocracy through her inherited royal blood ties. Pocahontas is, after all, already an Indian princess and Winona has inherited “blue blood” through the paternal line. Furthermore, Warren’s love for Winona is both “as to a darling, irresistible child” and “as to a young goddess far beyond him” (404). Thus, his attraction to Winona as a “childwoman” (404), her “blend of nubility and nobility,” is characteristic of popular conceptions of Pocahontas.<sup>141</sup> Like Pocahontas, Winona is prepared to lay down her own life to save her beloved. As John Smith tells it, Pocahontas “hazarded the beating out of her owne braines to save” his.<sup>142</sup> Winona, meanwhile, vows to be Warren Maxwell’s “guardian angel” and “to save his life at the sacrifice of her own” (356). She is true to her word when, disguised as a boy, she is instrumental in his rescue from imprisonment by Bill Thomson’s men. Also reminiscent of the Pocahontas myth is Winona’s marriage to Warren Maxwell, a British aristocrat, and their departure for England, where Winona is “worshipped” (435). Like Pocahontas, Winona is “a noble woman” in both senses of the word – in blood as in nature (435).

What Pocahontas additionally shares with Winona, a literary mulatta, is her over-determination in the American cultural imagination. As Mary Dearborn

observes, Pocahontas has achieved her status of favourite American heroine only through representations.<sup>143</sup> For Dearborn, the scarcity of fiction by American Indian women “is perhaps best reflected in the ironic fact that our most famous Indian woman, and a favorite heroine of American culture, Pocahontas, left no authentic record of herself.”<sup>144</sup> If Pocohontas was not an author, Dearborn asks, then “what can this tell us about gender, ethnicity, and authorship?”<sup>145</sup> These issues are deeply present, both explicitly and obliquely, in the work of Louise Erdrich. Of German American and Ojibway heritage, Erdrich and her formidable body of work substantiate Jonathan Brennan’s claim that “Mixed race (multiple heritage/culturally hybrid) literatures” are often authored by individuals who are “culturally mixed race themselves.”<sup>146</sup> If *Winona* appeared less than a decade after Frederick Jackson Turner announced the closing of the frontier and, by implication, the final defeat of Native peoples, Louise Erdrich’s work belongs to the redefined frontier explicated by Louis Owens, “the zone of the trickster, a shimmering, always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question.”<sup>147</sup> By “inhabiting both sides of the frontier plus the middle,” the mixedblood is the ultimate embodiment of this reclaimed frontier.<sup>148</sup> For Owens, then, “the frontier space of the trickster and the shifting space of mixedblood identity” are complementary.<sup>149</sup>

In *Tracks*, of course, the mixedblood and trickster narrators – Pauline and Nanapush – are deeply antagonistic towards one another. However, this is not to say that Erdrich does not at least flirt with identifying herself, as author, with Pauline. After all, the dedication of *Tracks* reads:

Michael,

The story comes up different



every time and has no ending

but always begins with you,

a passage lifted almost *verbatim* from one of Pauline's sections of the novel: "It comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning. They get the middle wrong too. They only know they don't know anything" (31).

Nanapush, meanwhile, is the most obvious trickster character and is overwhelmingly associated with the oral tradition. For Nanapush, speaking denotes life and the living, boasting curative powers. When Nanapush and Fleur Pillager are discovered alive by Father Damien after the particularly harsh winter of 1912, Nanapush holds forth because: "The sound of my own voice convinced me I was alive" (*Tracks* 7). After the deaths of his wife and child, Nanapush gets "well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged and traveled on" (46). If, for Nanapush, talking is life-giving, for Pauline Puyat, it is this property of the oral that threatens her very sanity. Having witnessed Fleur's rape in Argus, and suffered nightmares as a result, Pauline returns to the reservation, where the dreams stop "until I made the mistake of talking aloud and bringing the whole of what had happened back to life" (65).

Meanwhile, written documentation is associated with loss, death and erasure. *Tracks* opens with the juxtaposition of snow storms, "a storm of government papers" and Ojibway deaths (1). It closes with Ojibway land forever lost to lumbering, the felling of trees to generate more paper for the government, the Ojibway becoming "a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-space documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees" (225). Even the name "Nanapush" is "a name that loses power every time that it is written and stored in a government file" (32).

Damien shares the powerlessness of the Ojibway people to effect any changes in the

face of such monolithic bureaucracies as the Vatican or the Government – with their omniscient, faceless, sometimes nameless figureheads. Nevertheless, he places his faith in writing. He sends letters to successive Popes on various issues from the time of his arrival in March 1912 without ever receiving a reply, and by 1996, his frustration is evident:

Apparently, one couldn't hope for a reply, oh no, that would be all too human, wouldn't it! An actual response from the Pope after a lifetime of devoted correspondence. Or could he call it that, implying as the word did some reciprocity, at least the semblance of an exchange? (LR 3)

Faced with any crisis, such as the loss of Nanapush and Pillager land because of their failure to pay taxes, Damien embarks on a campaign of frenetic and ultimately futile letter-writing, targeting – among others – the mythical and powerful John James Mauser. A local tycoon who becomes wealthy by buying up land forfeited by Indians through non-payment of taxes, his “actual person, if not identity, is mysterious” (LR 106). A disembodied presence, he appears “not in person but in the persons of others – in the local commissioner and the tax collector general” (185). Although Damien achieves corporeal transcendence, there is a sense in which this is ultimately superseded by various forms of disembodiment, especially disembodiment in the form of the textual.

The status of the text is thus ambivalent in *Tracks* and *The Last Report*. Although Damien feels disempowered by writing, an authoritative text can, of course, wield the power to constitute one's identity in a positive or negative way. Thus, Sister Leopolda threatens to write to the bishop to inform him of Damien's sex (LR 274). Nanapush is falsely named as Lulu's father on her birth certificate, but this loophole grants him the authority to remove her from the government school in

which she is placed after Fleur leaves the reservation (*Tracks* 225). Similarly, when the ineffectual sleuth, Jude Miller, tells Damien “I know your secret” (*LR* 332), Damien fears he will, after all this time, be exposed. However, Miller has merely discovered Lulu’s birth certificate, on which the young priest mistakenly wrote his own name twice – as both priest and father (184, 330).

Perhaps, as in the interaction between Native and Christian beliefs, the interplay between the oral and the written is most evident in the friendship between Nanapush and Damien. Their relationship is one of reciprocity rather than coercion, mutual respect despite their differences. Nanapush, the consummate talker, finds himself snared by his own trap when Father Damien tries to convince him to take a government job: “He used everything I’d showed him about talking, did not let me get a word in, let no thought sink into my brain. I had taught him well” (*Tracks* 185). Reciprocally, Nanapush subsequently concedes that Damien is right “in that I should have tried to grasp this new way of wielding influence, this method of leading others with a pen and piece of paper” (209). If both Nanapush and Damien are trickster figures grappling with the relative merits of the oral and the written, then so too is Louise Erdrich, author. As Rita Ferrari argues, her work characterised by “the paradox of employing and glorifying the oral tradition and its culturally cohesive function by inscribing this tradition.”<sup>150</sup>

Significantly, several commentators emphasise the importance of tricksters in Erdrich’s work without addressing the ways in which tricksterism might be informing the actual *production* of this work. This is remarkable given that the same critics eloquently explicate the trickster’s famous ability with language.<sup>151</sup> For Mary Dearborn, adopting the persona of a trickster represents a potentially radical, though

not unproblematic, device for the ethnic woman writer attempting to assert her authorship:

the ethnic woman writer who wrote as a trickster could gain some relief from her feelings of anonymity or powerlessness within the dominant culture and could wage assault against it by subverting authority within her text, passing along to alert readers messages of strategies for protest.<sup>152</sup>

The authority that Erdrich (playfully) subverts in *The Last Report* is her own, flanking the narrative with disavowals of her authorial authority, at times identifying with Nanapush, at times with Damien. She attributes the epigraph to Nanapush, implying that the words are unoriginal, derived from a source other than her own imagination. In her End Notes to the novel, she conspicuously distances herself from the work she has just produced. Melding fact and fiction by quoting a fax received by Damien from the Vatican, she passes Damien's letters off as "real": "Who is the writer? Who is the voice? Sometimes the script is familiar – the careful spidery flourish of a hand trained early in the last century. At other times – I am sure, I am positive – it is my own" (358).

This slippage between fictional character (Damien) and actual author (Louise Erdrich) in this framing section raises the question of whether Erdrich ultimately identifies with this frustrated writer-of-letters. The displacement of her own authorial authority onto the fictional character can thus be read as a kind of "passing," a disavowal of her "real" identity as author, for that of a fictional character. This would certainly support an analogy drawn between cross-dresser-character and authorial berdache.<sup>153</sup> Damien's transgression of gender boundaries may also reflect Erdrich's refusal, throughout a literary career that already spans over two decades, to submit to all sorts of behaviour expected of writers of fiction –

the notion of the autonomous, individual artist and, indeed, of the coherent, stand-alone text.<sup>154</sup> The assumed lack of certainty – as to where Damien’s letter-writing leaves off and her own fiction-creating takes over – is as close as Erdrich comes to self-consciously expressing the tensions that critics see as endemic in her work. However, she follows this section with “The Story of Little No Horse (Told by Nanapush to Father Damien),” thus giving the last word in *The Last Report*, as she does the first, to the more conventional trickster figure. The kind of self-conscious blurring of fictional character, authorial persona and actual author in which Erdrich engages becomes even more pronounced in Chapter Four, in which the authors of the three novels I examine capitalise on the slipperiness of the literary categories of memoir and fiction. In two of these texts, the novels purport to be their first-person narrators’ memoirs; the third exploits the contemporary vogue for mixed race memoirs. In all three cases, the authors toy with readers’ assumptions regarding the autobiographical content of their work and, not coincidentally, all three novels might be considered narratives of passing.

## Chapter Four

### (W)Rites-of-Passing: Shifting Racial and Gender Identities in Contemporary Fictions of Adolescence

Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are we expected to settle down to being what we really are: white once more.<sup>1</sup>

– Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (1964).

Despite his problematic assumption of a uniformly white “we,” Leslie Fiedler’s hypothesis is relevant to this chapter because it yokes together the notion of racial mobility and the process of a child’s journey towards maturity. Indeed, the protagonist of Pauline Hopkins’s *Winona* appears as an almost uncanny predecessor to Fiedler’s claim. Born white(-looking), she grows up thinking of herself as Indian until a change in her circumstances, during her adolescent years, results in her being renamed as “black.” If *Winona* dramatises the collapse of all sorts of categories – Christianity, race and gender – then a further indication of this is the liminal space in which Winona exists in terms of her age. As an adolescent girl, she is a “childwoman” (MN 404). In fact, Warren’s attraction to her is based largely on her ability to combine the best qualities of both childhood and adulthood. She is “innocence personified and yet so deliciously womanly” (404). This chapter examines contemporary first-person novels in which the protagonists’ adolescence, as an in-between stage that is *not* childhood and *not* adulthood, is inextricably bound up with other indeterminacies mapped upon their bodies, especially those of race and

gender. These combined indeterminacies are themselves reflected in the ambiguity of the novels' form.

*Winona* is a particularly valuable example with which to begin this chapter because it appeared at the turn of the twentieth century, just as the term "adolescence" was entering into common usage and the concept itself was generating widespread discussion.<sup>2</sup> This was largely due to the publication, in 1904, of G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence: Its Psychology, and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. Hall proposed that if (white) adolescent boys purged their "primitive" instincts during the period of adolescence, they could avoid becoming effete, neurasthenic men in adulthood. Between 1894 and 1904, according to Gail Bederman, Hall subscribed to the theory of recapitulation.<sup>3</sup> Anticipating the idea Fiedler articulates some sixty years later, this theory maintained that "the [white] child passes in succession through the various historical epochs already traversed by man," and the adolescent thus becomes "a kind of noble savage."<sup>4</sup> For Hall, the adolescent in question was necessarily a white male, for the "lower races simply did not have the white races' advanced final stages, so their adolescence was far shorter and there was no point prolonging it."<sup>5</sup> However, after the theory of recapitulation began to be discredited, Hall turned his attention to nonwhite adolescent boys. From 1903 to 1911, "Primitive races themselves, who embodied savage traits more fully and completely than the racially recapitulating adolescent could ever do, temporarily became Hall's hope for human perfection in the distant future."<sup>6</sup> That the first and most influential theorist of adolescence was deeply preoccupied with what Bederman calls the "racially mutable" adolescent boy is significant because it could be argued,

therefore, that from its very origins, the concept of adolescence in the United States has borne with it connotations of *racial* transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Given that the idea of adolescence – and, by extension, the novel of adolescence – is uniquely a product of the twentieth century, this chapter will be structured differently from the others in this thesis. Rather than considering texts published during two *fin-de-siècle* moments, here I focus exclusively on fictions of adolescence published in the last ten years. This enables me to bring the thesis right up to date, to anticipate the very contemporary (2005 and 2006) debates on passing, authenticity and authorship that will be discussed in the Conclusion. This chapter concerns itself with analysing three contemporary novels, which appeared in 1996 (*The White Boy Shuffle*), 1998 (*Caucasia*) and 2002 (*Middlesex*), which invoke the alienating experience of adolescence as a lens through which to refract their protagonists' always already "othered" bodies, two in terms of their indefinite racial identity, and one in terms of his/her ambiguous gender.

Before I begin my analysis of the three novels, it is necessary first to outline briefly what exactly I mean by the term "fictions of adolescence." As Barbara White observes, critics "usually associate the novel of adolescence with either the *Bildungsroman* or the initiation story."<sup>8</sup> Although the novel of adolescence is heavily indebted to the *Bildungsroman*, it may introduce some key variations on this traditional form. According to White, in the novel of adolescence:

Plot elements from the *Bildungsroman* may be put to a different use; for instance, the journey, which in the *Bildungsroman* is a vehicle for vertical development, may become in the novel of adolescence an oscillation from side to side. Instead of progressing from *A* to *B*, the hero vacillates between *A* and *A'* and never gets to *B* or, perhaps, rejects the idea of *B*.<sup>9</sup>



A similar point is made by Gina Hausknecht in the contrast she elucidates between what she calls “the Girls’ story” and “the Girl’s own story.” For Hausknecht, “the Girls’ story” features such staple elements as “triumph over the various adversities associated with adolescence; acquisition of self-knowledge; assertion of control over character defects (often having to do with not being socially graceful, popular, or feminine enough); and getting the boy” whereas the “the Girl’s own story” relates “how it feels to encounter such imperatives and definitions. The latter reveals the former as a bewildering script that a Girl cannot enact without the surrender of her own self-image and self-imaginings.”<sup>10</sup> By definition, then, the novel of adolescence rejects the linear progression that is typical of the *Bildungsroman*. This makes it particularly receptive to the introduction of a passing plot, which is also non-linear, frequently involving multiple journeys back and forth across the color line, and sometimes featuring multivalent typologies of passing (racial, gender, sexual), all of which impinge upon and intersect one another.<sup>11</sup> While *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* are fictions of adolescence, *The White Boy Shuffle* is a mock *Bildungsroman*, more obviously setting up the conventions of the genre in order to subvert and parody them. For example, it spans a greater period in the life of its protagonist than either *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* does, tracing Gunnar’s development into adulthood rather than stopping in adolescence. Nevertheless, all three texts position themselves critically in relation to the standard narrative of *Bildung*.

In two of the novels, adolescent girlhood, or what is ostensibly “girlhood,” is depicted, and for this reason, these two novels will be discussed comparatively. Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998) is a contemporary novel of racial passing while Jeffrey Eugenides’s novel, *Middlesex* (2002), is not “about” gender passing in the strictest sense for its protagonist is intersexed. However, examining *Caucasia* in

conjunction with *Middlesex* foregrounds the constructedness of the one-drop rule. Just as Calliope Stephanides in *Middlesex* is neither *and* both male and female, Birdie Lee in *Caucasia* is neither *and* both black and white. In other words, the very term “passing” accepts and reinforces the racial hierarchy instituted by the one-drop rule. One can only be passing *for* something (white) if one is “really” something else (black). According to the one-drop rule, the child of one white and one African American parent is “really” black. For this reason, Birdie Lee – and indeed, this is true of any story of racial passing – can no more accurately be described as passing than can Calliope Stephanides, an intersexed individual – a chromosomal male with 5-alpha-reductase deficiency – raised as a girl until the age of fourteen.<sup>12</sup> Spanning time periods before and after, the narratives of both novels pivot crucially upon the mid-1970s. In particular, the turbulent years from 1967 to 1975, which witnessed race riots and school desegregation, are central to both novels. *Caucasia* opens shortly before the disintegration of Birdie’s parents’ interracial marriage in 1975, when Birdie is eight years old. *Middlesex*’s Calliope Stephanides is born twice, first as a baby girl in 1960, then “as a teenage boy, in an emergency room nearly Petosky, Michigan, in August of 1974.”<sup>13</sup>

The third novel I consider is Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), another first-person narrative, which traces Gunnar Kaufman’s late childhood, adolescence and early adulthood in Santa Monica, Los Angeles and Boston. In contrast with *Middlesex* and *Caucasia*, which chart a geographical movement from mid-west and east to west, Gunnar Kaufman embarks on the reverse trajectory: from California to Boston. Equally, *The White Boy Shuffle* retains a contemporary, 1990s setting whereas in *Middlesex* and *Caucasia*, the action is displaced to earlier periods. The kind of passing portrayed in Beatty’s novel, moreover, is very different to the

typologies present (or *not* present) in the novels by Senna and Eugenides. In those novels, the ambiguities of race and gender are mapped upon the *bodies* of the protagonists, while in *The White Boy Shuffle*, the protagonist's racial indeterminacy is cultural rather than physical. When thirteen-year-old Gunnar and his younger sisters, raised in predominantly white Santa Monica, tell their mother that they do not wish to attend an all-black summer camp because "they're different from us,"<sup>14</sup> Brenda Kaufman moves the entire family to a West Los Angeles ghetto called Hillside in an attempt to furnish them with "her vaunted 'traditional black experience'" (50). Gunnar's adolescent rite-of-passage, therefore, is to pass – to become "black." In fact, leaving my discussion of *The White Boy Shuffle* until the end of the chapter enables me to illuminate the affinities between Beatty's novel and Percival Everett's *Erasure*. In this way, I will demonstrate that the chapter progression of this dissertation need not and must not be considered linear. Instead, by making its cyclical nature evident, I reveal that the texts under discussion throughout the thesis, though they may be discussed in different chapters, interlock and intersect in endlessly fascinating ways.

Despite the obvious differences that exist between Beatty's novel and those of Senna and Eugenides, all three works share key similarities. For instance, Beatty also deploys "real" racial strife as the backdrop for the action of his novel, specifically, the Los Angeles riots that occurred in April 1992. Equally, even if racial ambiguity, in two cases, and gender ambiguity, in the third, are the primary forms of indeterminacy, in *Caucasia* and *The White Boy Shuffle*, non-normative gender and sexual identities accompany the subjects' racial in-betweenness while in *Middlesex*, indeterminacy of sexual orientation and ethnicity go hand in hand with the protagonist's ambiguously-gendered body.

Crucially, in all three novels, the protagonists engage, with varying degrees of commitment and success, in the act of creative writing, which serves to reflect back inevitably upon the authorship of the novels themselves. If the novel of adolescence, like the *Bildungsroman*, tends to be heavily autobiographical, *Caucasia*, *Middlesex* and *The White Boy Shuffle* toy with this convention.<sup>15</sup> *Middlesex* and *The White Boy Shuffle* purport to be their protagonists' "memoirs" while *Caucasia* plays into the contemporary publishing phenomenon that is the mixed race memoir (Eugenides 19, Beatty 2). The three works discussed in this chapter thus challenge the reader to (re)consider boundaries of genre and of form – memoir, after all, exists in the interstices between fiction and autobiography – as well as those of the race and/or gender of their protagonists.

### **“Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom”: Geographies of Body and Nation**

Covering the years 1975 to 1982, *Caucasia* juxtaposes the incendiary political situation of the desegregation of Boston's public schools with the simultaneous disintegration of an interracial family. White-skinned Birdie Lee and her older sister, darker-complexioned Cole, are the children of a white activist mother and a black academic father, whose marriage crumbles shortly after the novel opens. When their mother, Sandy, is suspected of storing guns in the basement of their house, the children – who have heretofore been living with their mother – are separated according to their skin colour. Deck takes Cole to Brazil; Sandy and Birdie go on the run for four years.<sup>16</sup> Finally settling in New Hampshire, Sandy and Birdie change their names and pose as the widow and daughter of an invented Jewish academic called David Goldman. Two years later, Birdie flees New Hampshire in

search of her father and sister, and finds them, at last, in California. *Middlesex* has a much more broad geographical and temporal scope. From a contemporary vantage point, forty-one-year-old Cal, currently living in Berlin, narrates his life story.<sup>17</sup>

Books 1 and 2 cover 1922 to 1960, describing Cal's grandparents' (who are brother and sister) escape from Smyrna in Asia Minor in 1922 amid Greco-Turkish conflict, their successful emigration to Detroit, Michigan and the marriage of their American-born son, Milton, to a fellow Greek American and distant cousin, Tessie Zizmo.

Books 3 and 4 span Calliope's birth in 1960 to her discovery, in 1974, that she is intersexed, to her running away when faced with the prospect of "corrective" surgery, to his eventual return – as Cal rather than Callie – some months later upon learning of the death of his father.

As is the case with several passing narratives, the act of passing in *Caucasia*, which was historically undertaken to achieve social mobility, is metaphorically conceived in terms of geographical mobility. In practical terms, it is much easier to reinvent oneself as "white" in a place which affords the passer a degree of anonymity. Consequently, in passing narratives, the symbolic "crossing of the color line" is often accompanied by geographical displacement.<sup>18</sup> By extension, in *Caucasia*, whiteness and blackness, racial and interracial relationships are imagined as actual places. Accordingly, both Sandy and Deck make reference to "the land of miscegenation" (Senna 111, 114). Even during the heyday of their marriage, they never say "I love you" to each other, but instead "I miss you," incongruously registering their affection in terms of geographical distance (19). As the section, and indeed the British title of the novel, *From Caucasia, With Love* implies, whiteness itself is configured as a geographical location. Equally, the section entitled "Negritude for Beginners" – evocative of a language-learning tutorial or textbook –

constructs blackness as a geographical space with its own unique tongue. Cole and Birdie even invent their own language which they use to communicate between themselves. Elemeno, Cole tells Birdie, isn't "just a language, but a place and a people as well" (7). After Birdie reinvents herself at school, she proclaims, "There was no way I was going back to the never-never land of my old self" (65).

Given that racial passing is bound up with geographical mobility, it is unsurprising that modes of transport, and their relationship to Birdie's body in particular, assume great significance in *Caucasia*. After Birdie and Sandy go on the run, they change cars several times over the course of four years in order to cover their tracks. However, their last vehicle before settling in New Hampshire they have had for two years:

It had once been yellow. I could tell because some of the paint was left on the interior, a nice buttery chrome yellow. Now it was no color at all; the color of something stripped clean for the sake of starting over. (142-143)

The van's fadedness reflects Birdie's own situation as she and her mother are on the threshold of settling in New Hampshire. Yellow is, of course, the symbolic "colour" of racial ambiguity, or mixed-ness.<sup>19</sup> Whiteness, on the other hand, derives its representational power from the fact that "white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything – white is no colour because it is all colours."<sup>20</sup> The description of the van anticipates Birdie's fear that geographical stasis will fix her into a white identity that she does not want. Whereas four years of constant flux is a comfort to Birdie, allowing her the "sense that as long as we kept moving, we could go back to what we had left behind" (137), the prospect of settling provokes the anxiety that once "we had stopped moving, allowing our new selves to bloom, it seemed the old had to disintegrate" (188).

For Birdie's father, the M.B.T.A. subway lines in Boston are "racial codes," each one leading to areas inhabited by different racial and ethnic groups – Jews, Italians, Irish, African Americans (296). Significantly, Birdie has "a thick blue vein like a subway line etched in [her] forehead" (297). Boston's racially segregated neighbourhoods are thus mapped upon Birdie's mixed race body, where black and white are irrevocably united.<sup>21</sup> Predictably enough, given the importance of school desegregation within the narrative, the school bus becomes, arguably, the most symbolically-charged mode of transport. In her new home in New Hampshire, Birdie first encounters Samantha, another mixed race girl, while staring at her through a school bus window: "The girl was black like me – half, that is. I could spot another one immediately" (223). Identifying with her, Birdie senses that the facts about Samantha – which she learns from her classmates – may "hold clues to my own disappearance" (225). Through Samantha, Birdie feels a renewed connection with her sister Cole: Samantha is "the color of cinnamon" (226), Cole, "cinnamon-skinned" (5); like Cole, Samantha has "ashy" knees (49, 226). Samantha's presence reminds Birdie of Cole's absence, and spurs Birdie in her quest to find her lost sister. In exercising her agency, Birdie registers her refusal "to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else" (321). This is an important reversal of the conventional trajectory in most passing narratives – and indeed, that of *Caucasia* prior to Birdie's decision to run away and find her sister – in which the passing mulatta is sought out and relentlessly pursued. Unlike Daphne Monet in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, who is unmasked and demystified when she is finally pinned down, Birdie takes control of her own self-definition, choosing to out *herself* in the process.

At the close of the novel, after Birdie and Cole are reunited in California, she spots another “cinnamon-skinned girl” through another school bus window:

For a second I thought I was somewhere familiar and she was a girl I already knew. I began to lift my hand, but stopped, remembering where I was and what I had already found. Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion. (413)

The “yellow and black” of the *moving* school bus contrasts with the yellow-faded-to-“no color” of the (symbolically, at least) *stationary* van that “served as our home” before Sandy decides to settle indefinitely in New Hampshire (143).<sup>22</sup> Although Birdie has “found” what she sought, the literary mulatta, Senna seems to suggest, will perpetually be in a state of reinvention and reinterpretation. After all, when Birdie flees New Hampshire, she takes a bus to Boston and reflects “that this was where I felt most safe – on a moving vehicle, rolling toward some destination but not quite there” (293).

Similarly, in *Middlesex*, the potential to remake oneself endlessly is bound up with geographical mobility. Just as Cal’s grandparents’ passing as French enables them to gain passage aboard a ship and hence escape smouldering Smyrna in 1922 (Eugenides 61), Callie refuses the surgery recommended by Dr. Luce by running away from her parents and transforming herself into the boy she now believes herself to be: “Every jolt in the road dropped my Adam’s apple another notch in my neck” (449). Geographical movement, it would seem, offers Cal the opportunity of, if not transcending, at least mastering his own body. He starts living as male, he and his mother move from Michigan and he has “been moving ever since,” his job in the Foreign Service enabling this constant motion (106). The forty-one-year-old



narrator of the novel, describing the trip around the world he takes after college, observes that he “tried to forget my body by keeping it in motion” (320).

Significantly, although Cal, the adolescent, eventually returns to the bosom of his family after several months’ absence on the road and in California, Cal, the forty-one-year-old adult, is permanently exiled in Germany. The symbolic choice of Germany – which was divided after World War II only to be reunified in 1990 – is reinforced by the fact that Cal lives in Berlin. Although the city was, geographically, located in East Germany, it was itself split into East and West. As Cal notes, “This once-divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for *Einheit*. Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred, I feel hopeful here in Berlin” (106). The symbolism of a unified east and west is compounded by Cal’s somewhat awkward courtship of Julie Kikuchi, whom he meets in Berlin. In Julie, the apparent polar opposites of east and west are married. She is “Asian, at least genetically,” and therefore “eastern” (41), but American, and thus “western.” Raised in northern California, on the western seaboard, she is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of design, on the east coast of the United States (107).

In both novels, the protagonists’ flights terminate in California. In Oakland and Berkeley, Birdie is reunited with her father and sister. In San Francisco, Cal lives rough for a while with Deadheads, subsequently taking a job performing in an erotic show. California emerges, in *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* alike, as a place of possibility for infinite shapeshifting. In other words, these destinations are not really “ends” because California holds the potential (paradoxically, given its location at the end of the continent) for permanent mobility. After all, as Sandy tells Birdie, in California “even the ground moves” (Senna 383). Indeed, the deferral of identity evoked by Birdie on the bus could, arguably, be applied to California for many have

claimed, following Theodore Roosevelt, that California is “west of the west.”<sup>23</sup>

California offers both Birdie and Cal the opportunity to come to terms finally with their bodies. California is “not so whitewashed” as New England (332). Meanwhile, Cal – *en route* to California – evokes the mythology of the Gold Rush as he masturbates: “Half-paying attention, while I watched Johnny Carson, my hand prospected” (Eugenides 453).

Although Birdie and Cal travel to California, they end up in places that are conspicuously *not* Los Angeles. Perhaps for Eugenides, San Francisco is an appropriate destination for Cal not only because it is a mecca for queer people, but because its very topography supports an analogy with Cal’s body, which only becomes problematic when s/he begins to grow up. Built on a peninsula, as David Fine and Paul Skenazy observe, “San Francisco did not have much space to grow. Los Angeles, by contrast, could, and did, spread across a vast basin.”<sup>24</sup> According to Fine and Skenazy, because California “is populated still for the most part by people from elsewhere who bring with them their pasts as they seek new futures,” much writing about San Francisco “features a past-future dialectic that takes a pronounced geographical form, a turning in two directions. The past is somewhere else, the future is at the edge of water.”<sup>25</sup> San Francisco thus provides a geographical complement to the novel’s, and the protagonist’s, Janus face. Cal is at once a product of what has gone before, the victim of a recessive gene, and also undeniably representative of the future. As Zora, a fellow hermaphrodite performer in San Francisco, tells Cal: “we’re what’s next” (Eugenides 490).

By establishing their narrators’ bodies as mobile entities between various spaces and places, both Senna and Eugenides effectively yoke the public to the private, the political to the personal, the national to the domestic. In *Caucasia*, amid

the turbulence of the Boston busing crisis, in which public schools became highly contested territories along racial lines, Senna creates a corresponding familial war zone. Thus, the racial politics of the busing crisis encroach both literally *and* metaphorically on the Lee family. For example, while the *attic* of their Columbus Avenue house is the space in which Cole and Birdie while away their carefree days, playing children's games and speaking their own private language, the *basement* of the family home, where Sandy and her activist friends store guns, becomes the site in which such domestic tranquillity is disrupted. Cocooned in their attic haven, Birdie, who is eight in 1975, as yet registers no differences in skin tone between herself and her older sister, Cole. The basement, on the other hand, is "grown-up land" (Senna 8). Downstairs, the racial violence of the outside world is rapidly invading their home. The conjunction of domestic space and nation is explicitly invoked when Lucas, one of the political fugitives to whom Sandy offers sanctuary, is arrested and taken away. Lucas's reaction is surprise, "as if he had expected more from our country, as if he had expected more from our house" (39).

Throughout *Middlesex*, the history of Callie's recessive gene – which is responsible for her conflicted body – is juxtaposed with contested local, national and international spaces. Her grandparents flee an area over which Greeks and Turks have been vying for control for centuries. Detroit, where they end up, was "a fort fought over by the British and French until, wearing them out, it fell into the hands of the Americans" (79). While the Stephanides family initially settle in Detroit's east side, they move to the west side, and eventually, out of the city altogether. The mid-western location of Michigan lies between the continental poles of New York and California, in which Cal also spends time. As in *Caucasia*, the occupation of domestic spaces is inextricably bound up with the segregation of bodies within

public space, which in turn reflects back inevitably upon the body of the protagonist as a site of conflict. When Milton Stephanides's restaurant on the east side of the city is destroyed in a fire at the height of the Detroit race riots in 1967, the resulting insurance payout enables Milton to move the family from their home on the increasingly racially-mixed city to the mostly white suburb of Grosse Pointe. This episode demonstrates the extent to which Calliope is in-between in terms of her ethnic background as well as her gender. For while black-white racial tensions facilitate the Stephanides's "white flight," the estate agent who sells them their new home evidently does not consider them quite white enough for Grosse Pointe:

*Let's see. Southern Mediterranean. One point. Not in one of the professions. One point. Religion? Greek church. That's some kind of Catholic, isn't it? So there's another point there. (255)*

She sells them their unusual Hudson Clark-designed house because she realises that only an "*Italian or a Greek*" (256) will buy it and because Milton, like the one Jewish family who live in the neighbourhood, pays for it in cash (262). Its location on Middlesex Boulevard is, of course, deeply symbolic. As Cal subsequently realises, the house is "a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world. I couldn't help feeling, of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me" (Eugenides 529).

In 1971, domestic space and the cityscape, familial and political disputes are again yoked together. As Callie and her brother bicker (over Chapter Eleven's acne and Callie's wish for a bra), they assume their father's roar of "Goddamn it!" is his attempt to quieten them (290). In fact, he is responding to a television news item reporting Judge Roth's decision to desegregate Detroit's public schools and introduce the busing of white students from the suburbs to the city. As the siblings

quarrel over their adolescent bodies, segregated white and black bodies are thus conjoined. Callie's parents react to Roth's order by removing her from the public school system and enrolling her in an all-girls' private institution. As such, Callie's adolescent body is segregated within the public space of the school by gender as well as by race. In this way, the problematic bodies of the protagonists become localised sites upon which national conflicts are played out.

By the same token, political subversives – dangers to national security – are conceived in terms of sexual dangers to the bodies of Callie and Birdie as children. In *Middlesex*, for instance, when seven-year-old Callie befriends Marius, a member of the Black Panthers and a customer at her father's restaurant, Milton orders him to "stay away from her" and tells Callie to "stay away from people like that" (231). As Milton perceives it, the threat of black nationalism and the imagined sexual menace posed to his daughter by an older, black man are fundamentally the same. Similarly, in *Caucasia*, black activism and sexual menace are united in the figure of Redbone, a light-skinned, red-haired associate of Birdie's mother who eventually betrays her cohort and "sold [them] down river" (Senna 175). It is never clear whether the threat posed by Redbone is sexual or political, as is borne out when he shows eight-year-old Birdie two rifles. The phallic connotations of the guns are laid bare when Deck comes upon them and demands "What the fuck do you think you're doing holding my daughter over those guns?" (16). Sandy warns Birdie not "to talk to anyone except your school friends. You understand? There are perverts, crazies, dirty old men, and they want little girls like you" (66), but the only man who approaches Birdie at school is Redbone, who asks if he may take her photograph (109). The link is made most explicit when Birdie returns to Boston as a teenager and "imagined red-haired rapists dressed like Feds, waiting for me in the bushes" (359). What

Redbone's character illustrates, and the entire novel confirms, therefore, is that the sexual is inextricable from the political, the protagonist's body ineluctably bound up with the nation.

### **"Passing" from Childhood to Adulthood**

Like the protagonist of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* who is first educated at home and subsequently attends public school, Birdie is alternately home-schooled by her mother and educated at a mainstream school. However, unlike in Johnson's novella, in which the shift from home to public school precipitates a confrontation with his racial identity and his concomitant "otherness," Birdie and Cole are othered even in their home-school environment. Their mother specialises in teaching "special children" who are "dyslexic, retarded, or simply bad-natured" (137). A slippage is thus introduced between the "otherness" of her regular pupils and that of her own children. As Birdie observes: "When my mother wasn't teaching those disturbed and delayed children, she taught me" (137). Sandy's own mother, who disapproves of the girls' being home-schooled, tells Sandy that she is "wonderful with those mongoloids" but "normal children are simply not [her] specialty" (105). The term "mongoloid" in this case functions as a pejorative description of a person with learning difficulties. However, "Mongoloid," with a capital "m," also bears racial connotations. Specifically, it recalls Deck Lee's view of his own marriage as an experiment in miscegenation. A photo of his wedding day marks a page in his encyclopaedia delineating "the three racial phenotypes of the world – Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid" (30). The labels "Mongoloid" – as neither "Negroid" nor "Caucasoid," like Cole and Birdie – and "mongoloid" thus

serve to reinforce the association between Sandra's overlapping roles as teacher and mother to children who are "different."

Ironically, given what occurs in the basement of their Boston home, Sandra favours home-schooling her children "to keep [them] safe from the racism and violence of the world" (26). Although the girls are "othered" through their home-schooling, the school functions as the space in which they are initiated into their racial difference. However, unlike *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in which the narrator learns of his mixed-ness when he is designated as "nonwhite" or "other" by a schoolteacher (*AE-CM* 7), white-looking Birdie attends an all-black school and as such, her fellow students ask: "What you doin' in this school? You white?" (Senna 43). In a scene reminiscent of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Birdie is cornered in the school toilets by a girl who threatens to cut her hair. In *Clotel*, the mixed race heroine is ordered to cut off her long hair by her mistress, Mrs. French, who is jealous of her beauty (Brown 129). Because "the glossy ringlets of her raven hair" (Brown 93) are what Phillip Brian Harper calls "a prime signifier of European beauty," the actual and threatened cutting of *Clotel*'s – and Birdie's – hair represents an attempt by Mrs. French and Maria, respectively, "to 'Africanize' their appearance" and thus render them less alluring to both white and black men.<sup>26</sup> For, as Maria asks Birdie, "You think Ali's gonna like you when you don't got no hair?" (47)<sup>27</sup>

In *Middlesex*, Calliope is alerted to her own difference by the pubescent changes taking place upon her peers' bodies. Shortly before her twelfth birthday, on the first day of sixth grade, a classmate arrives at school "wearing a slight but unmistakably self-satisfied smile. Below this smile, as if displayed on a trophy shelf, were the new breasts she had gotten over the summer" (282). As Jane Blunt's

thighs “get a little bit longer every week” and a “patch of light brown hair” appears when Beverly Maas raises her hand (285); as Peter Quail’s voice deepens by two octaves over the course of a month (286), Calliope “in the second row, is *motionless*, her desk *stalled* somehow, so that she’s the only one who takes in the true extent of the metamorphoses around her” (286, emphasis added).

Thus, in *Middlesex*, metaphors of stasis and fixity in time and place evoke Callie’s *pubescent* body just as metaphors of travel and movement reflect the possibility of her mobility between genders. In other words, Birdie’s and Cal’s journeys, and their bodies’ relationships to spaces and places, cannot be viewed independently of their status as adolescents. Their bodies are ambiguous not only because they are in-between in terms of race and gender, respectively, but also because of their age. Both *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* are, essentially, novels of adolescence, structured by tropes such as stealing and running away that appear in the majority of such works.<sup>28</sup> Birdie takes various items belonging to her mother and Jim, her new boyfriend, notably, a postcard on which her aunt Dot’s address in Boston is written (241). This clue will become the starting point for Birdie’s search for her father and sister. Callie steals three hundred dollars from her father to help her on her journey away from New York and Dr. Luce (438). In other words, the conventions of the adolescent novel are particularly receptive to the stories of Birdie and Cal, except that the peculiarities of these protagonists’ bodies multiply the adolescent experience of alienation one-hundred fold.

For example, as Barbara White observes, the adolescent heroine often “feels torn between her mother and her father.”<sup>29</sup> This is certainly true of Birdie Lee, but her experience is complicated and compounded by the fact that her mother is white, her father black, and she, mixed race. In the same way, if “in novels of female



adolescence conflict over gender identity is the major theme,” Calliope’s dramatic confrontation with the “truth” about *her* gender far surpasses the average adolescent’s experience.<sup>30</sup> According to White, “many adolescent protagonists clash with society over their reluctance to undergo a lengthy period of low status wherein they are separated from children and adults and denied the privileges of either.”<sup>31</sup> Because of their problematic bodies, Birdie and Cal will encounter great difficulty *ever* overcoming the “low status” – the status of Other – to which all adolescents are relegated for a period in their lives.

Poised in an intermediate zone between childhood and adulthood, the protagonists’ quests for selfhood are complicated even further by their indeterminate bodies. Because of her nomadic lifestyle, Birdie feels herself “to be incomplete – a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping toward completion – half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked, not quite ready for consumption,” which refers as much to the process of growing up as it does to her ambiguous racial identity (137). Reflecting on the nomadic life that she leads for four years, Birdie recalls waking up in a new place and having no idea:

which city we were in, which day of the week it was, even where we had been just the day before. I felt somehow more lucid in that half-waking state, as if that place of *timelessness* and placelessness and forgetfulness was the only space one could possibly inhabit. (155, emphasis added)

Evidently, Birdie appreciates the suspension of time and age – and, by extension, the postponement of “growing up” – as much as she does her racial liminality. The inextricability of Birdie’s pubescent body from her mixed race-ness is also reflected in her friends’ efforts to make her over. Just as Maria, Birdie’s best friend at Nkrumah turns Birdie’s “straight hair [. . .] curly,” thus symbolically “blackening”

her (69), so Mona, her best friend in New Hampshire teaches her “how to be a girl [. . .] how to apply lipstick properly, how to stick in a tampon, how to stuff your bra with shoulder pads ripped right off a department store mannequin” (227).

Meanwhile, Cal’s escape from an unambiguously female identity – his refusal to undergo surgery to align his genitalia with his upbringing as a girl – is inextricable from his experience as a typical adolescent longing for the somewhat mundane privileges of adult life: “I was free now to let my teeth rot or to put my feet up on the backs of seats” (Eugenides 450). However, these benefits are, naturally, accompanied by adult worries:

Suddenly I had to pay attention to things I’d never paid any attention to. To bus schedules and bus fares, to budgeting money, to *worrying* about money, to scanning a menu for the absolutely cheapest thing that would fill me up [. . .]. (445)

While Cal could never accurately be described as passing as a male or female, he does “pass for older” (445), informing those that pick him up as a hitchhiker that he is on his way to California to commence his undergraduate studies at Stanford. Cal’s status as the classic adolescent runaway – rather than the particular circumstances of his flight – are emphasised when the narrator notes that: “Long before my naked body appeared in medical textbooks, my face appeared on bulletin boards and in windows across the nation” (467). He subsequently claims – again conflating bodily change and geographical travel – that his “change from girl to boy was far less dramatic than the *distance* anybody travels from infancy to girlhood” (520, emphasis added). Eventually reunited with his aging grandmother, Desdemona, back in Detroit, she asks her granddaughter-turned-grandson: “What happened to you?” to which he responds: “I grew up” (520).

In both novels, the milestones of female adolescent experience take on a deeper political significance because of the ways in which the protagonists' bodies are always already yoked to national history and politics. Consequently, when Birdie sexually experiments with Nicholas Marsh, the son of her New Hampshire landlord and landlady, Senna explicitly evokes the history of the systematic rape of black women that occurred during slavery. Nicholas boasts of his encounter with a black prostitute in Amsterdam in terms which inevitably recall the sexual relations that existed between white men and black women at that time: "I heard that black girls were supposed to be good, anyway, so we *bought* this one" (199, emphasis added). After deciding not to engage in sexual intercourse with Nicholas, Birdie leaves the Marshes house, "racing through the woods, as if there were dogs at my heels" (208), an image that is evocative of a slave runaway chased by bloodhounds and reinforced by the fact that Sandy and Birdie live in a cottage – as distinct from "the big house" – on the Marshes land (147). Furthermore, the rite-of-passage that is the adolescent's first sexual experience represents an irrevocable break with childhood. Thus, after her sexual encounter with Nicholas, she avoids the Marshes for several weeks, instead reverting "to childish games" (209). For Birdie, sex with Nicholas would involve not simply making a transition from childhood to adulthood, but from an indefinite racial identity to a *white* one (274).

In *Middlesex*, Calliope's sexual encounter with the Obscure Object's brother precipitates her confrontation with the complexity of her adolescent, gender and sexual identities. As Callie engages in intercourse with Jerome, she watches the Object and Rex Reese fumble on the other cot in the same room. She then realises that she "wasn't a girl but something in between. I knew this from how natural it felt to enter Rex Reese's body, *how right it felt*" (Eugenides 375). Quite apart from the

fact that not being a girl, and being “something in between,” can just as easily refer to the state of adolescence and the transition from childhood to adulthood, the mature narrator of *Middlesex* makes Callie’s self-realisation about her gender contingent upon her sexual desire for the Object. Obviously, it does not follow that because Callie is sexually attracted to women that she is necessarily male. Accordingly, both *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* play out the slipperiness of identity by multiplying the simplistic terms in which it is typically conceived, and revealing the contingency of these terms – race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age – upon one another.

The “hardest adjustment” which Cal undergoes in his transition from adolescent girl to boy is switching from the use of women’s restrooms to men’s rooms (451). As Marjorie Garber and Judith Halberstam observe, the “bathroom problem”<sup>32</sup> is a recurring trope in tales of ambiguously-gendered subjects because “it so directly posits the binarism of gender (choose either one door or the other) in apparently inflexible terms, and also (what is really the same point) because it marks a place of taboo.”<sup>33</sup> For Halberstam, “men’s rest rooms tend to operate as a highly charged sexual space in which sexual interactions are both encouraged and punished” whereas “women’s rest rooms tend to operate as an arena for the enforcement of gender conformity.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Cal’s experience is the direct reverse of this. The women’s toilet stall at his old school had once “been a haven for [him]! That was all over now” (451). In the basement bathroom, the stalls are covered with graffiti: “Sketched in blue ink were little men with gigantic sexual parts. And women with enormous breasts. Also various permutations: men with dinky penises; and women with penises, too. It was an education both in what was and what might be” (329). The “subterranean realm” is thus a space in which “people wrote down what they couldn’t say” (329). Rather than acknowledge “their

most shameful longings” as the women do (329), in the men’s room, the men at urinals look “straight ahead like horses with blinders” (451).

In texts that interrogate gender, sexuality automatically and inevitably becomes an issue. The risk of too closely identifying indeterminate gender with fluid sexuality is discussed in Chapter 3 and is confirmed in *Middlesex*, in which Calliope’s sexual orientation remains stable while his/her gender changes. Julie Kikuchi fears that Cal is a closet gay for whom an Asian woman is his “last stop” before coming out, as female Asian bodies are perceived as being boyish (184). Cal reassures her, however, that he has “always liked girls. I liked girls when I *was* a girl” (513). In *Caucasia*, Birdie’s adolescent experimentation with her burgeoning sexuality is at times same-sex-oriented. In fact, her first sexual experiences are with Alexis, a girl whom she meets while she and her mother are living at Aurora, a women’s commune in upstate New York. While she is experimenting sexually with Nicholas Marsh, Birdie recalls having done “some strange things” with Alexis at Aurora: “Some nights, on the mattress we shared, I had straddled her in a game we called ‘honeymoon.’ She would say, ‘You be the guy, and I’ll be the girl. Pretend you have to hold me down. Pretend you’re the boss’” (199). By conjuring the spectre of lesbianism, Senna continues the long tradition of passing narratives in which miscegenation is simultaneously evoked (by the protagonist’s mixed race body) and, curiously, contained by displacing the phantom of miscegenation onto other sexual practices considered deviant or illicit, such as homosexuality, prostitution and incest.<sup>35</sup>

It is no coincidence, then, that Birdie’s “coming out” – her flight from New Hampshire to Boston and, thus, from the white identity into which she has been passing – is juxtaposed with a homosexual coming-out: that of Ronnie Parkman, a

former friend of Deck's and the father of Birdie's childhood boyfriend, Ali. When she returns to Boston, she seeks out Ali, hoping that, through his father, she will be able to acquire information as to the whereabouts of Deck and Cole. But Ali tells Birdie that his own father is "missing too" and thinks he "might be dead" (327). Ali employs euphemisms historically invoked by the African American community when describing a family member who had passed as white to avoid telling her that, since he last saw Birdie, his father has come out as gay. The link is reinforced when Ronnie, whom Birdie subsequently meets and who provides her with Deck's address in Oakland, describes Ali's shame about his father's homosexuality in terms that are explicitly reminiscent of the seminal moment in racial passing narratives, in which the passer denies a close member of his or her family in order not to give away his/her "true" racial identity: "He ignored me. He looked right past me as if he didn't know me from Adam" (350).<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, though, Senna reverses the usual dynamic of this scenario. Here, it is *Ali* who is cast in the role conventionally occupied by the passer: the character who feels his own selfhood threatened by a relative who openly and obviously belongs to a subjugated group. By extension, it could be inferred that Ali is the one concealing something about his past. Meanwhile, Ronnie – who, for many years, passed as straight – and Birdie – who, for a couple of years, passed as white – are both out.<sup>37</sup>

Birdie's and Cal's ambiguously raced or gendered bodies foreground a concomitant concern not only with sexuality, but also with other identity categories. Accordingly, Cal's problematic gender identity is intimately bound up with her Greek American identity. In describing her transformation from a girl into a teenage boy, Cal feels "like an immigrant, putting on airs, who runs into someone from the old country" (471). Indeed, Cal's ethnicity is deeply implicated in the specific form

of pseudohermaphroditism which he is experiencing. According to Doctor Luce, Cal's "rare genetic condition" is known to express itself in the populations of "the Dominican Republic, Papua New Guinea, and southeastern Turkey. Not that far from the village [Milton's] parents came from. About three hundred miles, in fact" (428).<sup>38</sup> Cal's grandmother, Desdemona, corroborates this link when, confronted with her granddaughter-turned-grandson, she recalls her mother telling her: "In the village, long time ago, they use to have sometimes babies who were looking like girls. Then – fifteen, sixteen, they are looking like boys!" (526). Just as Cal's hermaphroditic body and his Greek ancestry are inseparable, Birdie's racial liminality is reinforced by her gender ambiguity. Staring at the bathroom mirror, Birdie sees "a twelve-year-old girl who might be a boy if it weren't for the scraggly ponytail falling down her back" (180). To escape the notice of pursuing Federal agents, Birdie aims for an identity that is not only white – and thus, inconspicuous – but also gender-ambiguous so that agents will have to ask themselves: "*Was the child a boy or a girl? They can't quite remember*" (177). Furthermore, when Nicholas Marsh tells Birdie she has a moustache that "makes [her] look dirty, like [he] could lick [her] clean" (200), there is a clear association between her (racial) darkness ("dirty") and masculinity ("mustache").

American fictions of adolescence have often been interpreted as state-of-the-nation novels and the ways in which Eugenides and Senna interweave their adolescent protagonists' bodies with national history and politics certainly supports this view.<sup>39</sup> However, the historical setting of the novels – at some twenty-five or thirty years' remove from the time of their composition – begs the question whether the authors are, in fact, drawing parallels between the 1970s and present-day concerns. Significantly, the appearance of *Caucasia* in 1998 and *Middlesex* in 2002

coincided with the increasingly politicised Multiracial and Intersex movements in the late 1990s and at the turn-of-the-twenty-first century. Characters in both *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* express a kind of optimism that their protagonists' ambiguous bodies will not be considered "abnormal" in the future, beyond the 1970s. Deck Lee tells Birdie of her maternal grandmother: "She'll be gone soon. She's a dying breed. You're the future" (Senna 365). Meanwhile, Cal's friend Zora predicts: "we're what's next" (Eugenides 490).

From the vantage point of the *fin de siècle*, however, these predictions do not ring true. Jeffrey Eugenides admits to perceiving a shift from when he grew up in "the unisex 1970s, when everyone was sure that gender role was just environmentally conditioned" and now, when this situation is "completely reversed." *Middlesex*, he claims, "tries to open up a space for free will again in human nature."<sup>40</sup> Danzy Senna, meanwhile, worries that in the new millennium, "people will assume that we've somehow got distance on the past, and on what happened in the twentieth century" and warns of "the proximity of the past."<sup>41</sup> Thus, when she writes of the "Mulatto Millennium" – referring to the contemporary celebration of multiracial identities – she jokes that her new driver's license now reads "quadroon" instead of "black."<sup>42</sup> She thus suggests that the multiracial movement risks reverting not only to the essentialist definitions of blackness prevalent during the height of the Black Power era – the setting for her novel – but might also precipitate a resurgence of the racial classifications associated with slavery. There is a fine line, Senna implies, between *reclaiming* terms previously applied pejoratively by the dominant group (as "Queer Studies" has done) and merely reviving them in reverse.



### Ex– marks the spot

The parallels between *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* are manifold. What, then, are the differences? How significant is it that *Caucasia* is a tale of passing and *Middlesex* is not? Or, if *Caucasia* is a narrative of racial passing, could *Middlesex*, using the same criteria, be interpreted as a story of gender passing? After all, when she reaches puberty, Calliope passes for a pubescent girl in that she practises deception upon others in order that they believe her to be undergoing the physical changes typically associated with female adolescence when, in fact, she is not. As her Y chromosome begins to manifest itself during puberty, her voice breaks and she grows tall and thin (Eugenides 303). To disguise this and to accentuate her feminine features, she grows her hair. Faced with the unpalatable prospect of being examined by a gynaecologist, she fakes menarche (359) and subsequent periods, her endeavours cleverly juxtaposed with Richard Nixon's contemporaneous dishonesty: "With Nixonian cunning, Calliope unwrapped and flushed away a flotilla of unused Tampax. I feigned symptoms from headache to fatigue" (361). These scenes of Calliope's dishonesty recall the condemnation to which the passer has often been subjected for practising deception on others. Recent studies of intersex, however, reveal that it is the medical profession that practices deception, in propagating false models of gender dimorphism.<sup>43</sup>

Does it make a difference that Callie is, at this time, unaware of her status? In nineteenth-century abolitionist stories, the unwitting passer was a favourite political device, generating pathos through the tragic mulatta's sudden reversal-of-fortune. Ignorance, then, does not disqualify Callie from being defined as a passer, if an unwitting one. Does it change matters that Callie "suffers" from a recognised

medical condition in the way that a mixed race person does not? But as Suzanne Kessler demonstrates, “The belief that gender consists of two exclusive types is maintained and perpetuated by the medical community in the face of incontrovertible physical evidence that this is not mandated by biology.”<sup>44</sup> Just because doctors choose to pathologise Callie’s body – in that her genitalia appear to contradict her chromosomal makeup – does not mean that it did not develop in a perfectly natural way, just as the potentially white appearance of a mixed race individual evolves naturally without recourse to physical artifice, disguise or surgery.

Could it be, then, that *Middlesex*, the story of an intersexed individual, captures most eloquently the paradox of “complicitous critique” that Linda Hutcheon claims characterises postmodernism, and I would apply to passing?<sup>45</sup> In other words, examining *Middlesex*, which does not belong in the passing tradition, alongside *Caucasia*, which relies heavily upon tropes long-associated with narratives of racial passing, lays bare the paradox of passing: its radical potential counterbalanced by its inherent conservatism. The notion of “complicitous critique” is best elucidated through the complex and often-contradictory power relations that exist between seeing and not seeing, the simultaneous *hypervisibility* and *invisibility* of the body that is indeterminate in terms of race or gender. *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* foreground the paradox that the hybrid body can, at once, be objectified and thus lack agency and, at the same time, function as a radical, *invisible* disruption to the status quo. In both novels, the paradoxical nature of seeing/not seeing, hypervisibility and invisibility are inextricably bound up with writing as an act symbolic of both agency and powerlessness.

In *Middlesex* the paradox of power(lessness) and seeing is, appropriately enough, evoked through the narrator’s identification with the Greek mythological

figure of Tiresias. Calliope even assumes the role in a school production of Sophocles's *Antigone*: "My wild hair suggested clairvoyance. My stoop made me appear brittle with age. My half-changed voice had a disembodied, inspired quality. Tiresias had also been a woman, of course" (Eugenides 331). In the most famous account of Tiresias, as is the case with Cal's ambiguous body, sex-changing is intimately bound up with Tiresias's subsequent blindness *and* powers of prophecy.<sup>46</sup> Tiresias's loss of sight is counterbalanced by his ability to "see" into the future.

The "sightseeing suggestions" offered by two visiting doctors while Cal is undergoing assessment by a specialist in New York are ironic because, of course, by observing Cal's unconventional body, it is the doctors who are really "sightseeing" (420). As a pseudohermaphrodite, Cal's photograph has appeared in a medical textbook "standing naked beside a height chart with a black box covering my eyes" (3). Although the black box is superimposed over Cal's eyes presumably to protect his anonymity, it also functions as a blindfold, symbolically preventing Cal from returning the gaze directed upon him by curious readers of *Genetics and Heredity*. Cal's looked-at-ness points to his objectification in scientific writing. The opening lines of *Middlesex* challenge the "specialized reader" to recall having "come across me in Dr. Peter Luce's study, 'Gender Identity in 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites,' published in the *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology* in 1975" (3). "Guinea-pigged" (3) by the medical profession, Cal is "a living experiment" (408) for them, "a body of research material" (412).

However, the impotence implied by Cal's being the object of the gaze of the medical profession and, by extension, his figurative blindness is, at times, challenged by the protagonist's own assumption of narrative authority. Dr. Luce, who carries out the assessment of Callie in New York, requests that she write what the doctor

calls a “Psychological Narrative.” Luce uses this document to judge the extent to which Callie has been socialised as a girl in order to determine what should be done about her genitalia. But what the doctor does not know is that Callie discovers that “telling the truth wasn’t nearly so much fun as making things up” and so she fabricates most of what she writes, “pretending to be the all-American daughter my parents wanted me to be” (418). Having read Callie’s narrative, Luce concludes that Callie’s genitalia should be “normalized” to complement her feminine upbringing. By making Luce’s decision on Callie’s condition contingent upon her “Psychological Narrative” – which is fiction – Eugenides demonstrates that medical discourse is not objective, as it purports to be, but is itself a discourse that borrows from and relies heavily upon pre-existing narratives.

The invented “Psychological Narrative,” which is embedded in the text of *Middlesex* (435-437), represents the micro-level at which Cal’s narrative agency exists. For Cal, as the narrator of his own memoirs, claims an omniscience that is close to Tiresias’s soothsaying. Recounting his father’s death – which occurred when Cal was thousands of miles away in California – Cal’s voice intervenes in the narrative, self-reflexively penetrating the consciousnesses of the individuals involved: “...And now I have to enter Father Mike’s head, I’m afraid” (509). Of his father’s dying thoughts, he claims: “I have to be honest and record Milton’s thoughts as they occurred to him” (511). By writing his memoirs, Calliope – whose emblems are, significantly, a stylus and wax tablets – interweaves knowledge and supposition, honesty and pure invention. According to William Gass, an “honest autobiography is as amazing a miracle as a doubled sex, and every bit as big a freak of nature.”<sup>47</sup> Eugenides literalises Gass’s analogy by passing *Middlesex* off as the autobiography of a hermaphrodite.

The notions of (prophe-)seeing, writing and monstrosity thus become intimately bound up in the form of the novel, which is a novel passing for a memoir. Indeed, it took Jeffrey Eugenides nine years to write the fictional memoir that is *Middlesex*, a period that witnessed “the triumph of the memoir” as a publishing phenomenon.<sup>48</sup> Having read the memoirs of a “real” intersexed individual, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, Eugenides admits to feeling frustrated by the “19<sup>th</sup> century convent-school prose -- very melodramatic, evasive about the anatomical details and really unable to render the emotional situation in any regard” and thinking: “I’d like to write the story I’m not getting from this book.”<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, Eugenides makes Cal, his fictional narrator, the mouthpiece for words to this effect. Of Herculine Barbin, Cal observes: “(Her memoirs, which end shortly before her suicide, make unsatisfactory reading, and it was after I finished them years ago that I first got the idea to write my own)” (19). In so doing, Eugenides introduces a slippage between author-protagonist and actual author. Just as supposition, speculation and invention inform Cal’s memoir, a fictional framework – or mantle – offers Eugenides the opportunity to evade the constraints of (auto)biography and to transcend its demands of veracity. *Middlesex* thus toys with generic boundaries that are perhaps imaginary, but nevertheless, rigidly policed.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, however, authorship emerges – like passing and seeing – as an ambivalent form of agency. Significantly, Cal remains an outsider, though a self-exiled one, to the agenda of the increasingly politicised U.S. Intersex Movement. He does not participate in the activities of the Intersex Society of North America (I.S.N.A.), although he is a member (106, 319). Cal thus finds that:

Writing my story isn't the courageous act of liberation I had hoped it would be. Writing is solitary, furtive, and I know all about those things. I'm an expert in the underground life. Is it really my apolitical temperament that makes me keep my distance from the intersexual rights movement? Couldn't it also be fear? Of standing up. Of becoming one of them. (Eugenides 319)

For Cal, then, the act of writing is a way of "passing" unnoticed by his fellow hermaphrodites, even when associating with them might result in political gain for all.

According to Alice Dreger, there is "significant value in listening to intersexuals' autobiographies. As in the personal histories of 'interracial' people, in intersexuals' stories we can hear first-hand what it is like to live on one of the great cultural divides."<sup>51</sup> That Dreger explicitly yokes together intersexual and multiracial testimony is significant because *Caucasia*, too, is deeply embedded in the 1990s vogue for memoirs. It appeared at a time during which mixed race memoirs and edited collections of mixed race testimony were proliferating. Indeed, Senna herself has contributed an autobiographical piece to one of these collections.<sup>52</sup> *Caucasia* is a work of fiction but the interviews that Danzy Senna gave, coupled with the novel's first-person narrator and the obvious biographical parallels between Birdie and Senna (Senna was a biracial girl growing up in Boston during the desegregation crisis of the mid-1970s) suggest that its success may have been due, in part, to what Paul Spickard calls the "1990s boom in biracial biography."<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, two of the few critical explorations of *Caucasia* would appear to support this link between the novel and mixed race memoirs. Senna's novel is discussed alongside roughly contemporaneous memoirs – Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice* (1993) and James McBride's *The Color of Water* (1996).<sup>54</sup>

The permeability of memoir/fiction is further reflected in the fact that Rebecca Walker's memoir, *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001), published three years after *Caucasia*, bears striking similarities to Senna's novel. For instance, Walker invests with historical significance her birth in 1969 as a child of mixed racial ancestry. She "was born in November 1969, in Jackson, Mississippi, seventeen months after Dr. King was shot."<sup>55</sup> By invoking the assassination of Martin Luther King, Walker explicitly connects her racially-contested body with contemporary racial politics and violence, just as Senna does with Birdie in *Caucasia*.<sup>56</sup>

In *Caucasia*, as in *Middlesex*, the tropes of seeing v. blindness, writing v. reading are intimately interconnected. When Birdie and Cole join the Black Power school in Roxbury, Birdie's new classmates speculate as to her racial and/or ethnic identity. As they try to read her race ("She a Rican or something?" [Senna 43]), Birdie attempts to read the graffiti on her desk. Feeling lumps of dried bubble gum underneath, she moves her fingertips over them "as if I were trying to read Braille" (44). This scene is crucial because it can be read in two ways which illustrate powerfully the paradoxical relationship between power(lessness), seeing and writing. Birdie's objectification under the gaze of her classmates precipitates her own metaphorical blindness and/or tracing the dried bubble gum underneath her desk is a means of combating the stares of her classmates in the form of covert writing.

To her black classmates, Birdie is hypervisible because of her white skin. However, Birdie also feels invisible on several occasions, and such invisibility is accompanied by "the thrill of anonymity" (13), the potential to be "a spy in enemy territory" (269). The condition of the literary mulatta – simultaneous *hypervisibility* and *invisibility* – is most evident in the relationship between Birdie and her father.

After the breakdown of his marriage, when he meets his daughters on Saturday mornings, “he never seemed to see [Birdie] at all” (55). When Deck does “see” Birdie, it is from the vantage point of an academic, watching her “the way a scientist looks at an amoeba through a telescope” (388). To Birdie, Deck is a kind of Frankenstein, and she, his monster: “He was the same father who had started me, who had begun but never finished me” (393). This image of Birdie as Frankenstein’s monster recalls the blue vein on her forehead: “Alexis had told me once that it made me look like Frankenstein. I had liked that image of myself as a monster, an unfinished creation turned against its maker” (297).<sup>57</sup> Deck uses both his daughters as research material, having them take a racial IQ test for his book *Wonders of the Invisible World* (27). Ronnie Parkman calls Deck and Sandy “great mad scientists” whose interracial marriage is a “marvellous, ambitious experiment” (349). In support of his theories of race, Deck creates a chart of famous “tragic” mulattoes throughout history. On the last column, he includes photographs of his daughters and their birthdates but “where the others had their fates written, there was a blank space” (393).

For Birdie to assert herself in that blank space by depicting herself would involve her in a double bind, for the mulatta has been over-determined, for a century-and-a-half, by both whites and African Americans in U.S. print media. Thus, to rewrite such narratives is, ineluctably, to perpetuate the mythology that they have instituted. For Senna, as for Eugenides, authorship is an ambivalent form of agency. On the one hand, producing a text is undoubtedly preferable to having one’s body constitute a text. After all, Birdie’s determination not to end up like Samantha is based upon what Birdie perceives as Samantha’s inability to transcend her body-as-text. Samantha’s eyes are “a dark charcoal gray, the color of slate, of dirty



blackboards" (225), which recalls Birdie's earlier feeling "like such a blank slate" when her mother confers upon her a Jewish identity and decides to settle in New Hampshire (130).

On the other hand, in Birdie's own efforts at authorship, her narrative choices further entrench her in the ethno-racial essentialism she detests. When Birdie, as part of her home-schooling, is required to write a novel, her mother provides her with "a black-and-white marbled composition book" and tells her the novel can be "anything I chose" (171). Birdie, too, with her "black-and-white," but ostensibly "white" body, can choose to identify herself, ethno-racially speaking, in any number of possible ways.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, in the characterisation of her story, Birdie subscribes to the very kinds of stereotypes to which one would imagine she would be sensitive, given her own experiences. Her narrative describes a Mexican family, featuring "a religious, perpetually pregnant mother; a banjo-playing, sombrero-donning papa; and their teenage son, the main character, Richie Rodriguez, who is a bad seed looking for a way out" (171-172).

Birdie's dilemma – how to write oneself into the "tragic mulatta" tradition without collaborating with such depictions – is thus the writer's own, for Senna is herself a writer of mixed racial ancestry with an avowed "obsession with passing."<sup>59</sup> Senna offers only a symbolic resolution to this double bind. When Birdie finally reaches her father's home in Oakland, she notices that: "A page sat in the typewriter, blank and ready. I typed in the name 'Birdie' and sat staring at the word for a moment" (385). Birdie attempts to counterbalance textual over-determination and silence by registering her resistance on the page with one written word only. Rather than continue to have her "body fill in the blanks," Birdie prefers to fill in the blanks with a written word, by becoming an author (1). This contrasts with Samantha's

anonymity and, by extension, lack of authorial agency that, as in *The Human Stain*, is presented in terms of the unidentified “X”. Birdie once catches Samantha “wetting a finger, drawing a wet line in the dust that coated her, drawing what turned out to be an X there on her gray knee, the way you sign your name through the steam of fog in a car window” (226).

However, the ambivalence of authorship, as a paradoxical act of “complicitous critique,” ghosts the word that Birdie types on to the blank sheet of paper: her first name. As in *Erasure*, the fact that Birdie has been subjected to relentless naming and unnamings all her short life reflects the dual creative and destructive aspects of authorship. At birth, her mother wishes to call her “Jesse” after her Suffragette grandmother. Her father prefers Patrice, for Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese liberator (Senna 19). As a consequence, her birth certificate reads only “Baby Lee,” suggesting that, paradoxically, such a profusion of names (or identities) can ultimately signify no name (or identity). She is christened Birdie by her sister, Cole, and this is the name to which her parents finally acquiesce. Carmen, her father’s girlfriend, registers her profound disinterest in Birdie by getting her name wrong and calling her “Bernie” (112). As a member of the “Brown Sugars” at Nkrumah, she is called “Le Chic” (65). As the daughter of a deceased Jewish academic, she becomes Jesse Goldman (128). Most interestingly, Nicholas Marsh calls her, alternately, Pocahontas (192, 203, 214) and Jesse James (170, 205), thereby conjoining the earliest narrative of miscegenation in American history and an infamous outlaw, a coexistence echoed in one of Birdie’s subsequent inner musings: “you are against the law, Birdie Lee. Your body is a federal offense” (303).

### Gunnar's American Dilemma

The issue of authorship is explored even more explicitly in *The White Boy Shuffle* than in *Caucasia*, for its protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman, is a published poet. Beatty's novel thus operates as a *Künstlerroman* as well as a mock *Bildungsroman*. As in *Caucasia* and *Middlesex*, the in-betweenness of the novel's form, invoked by all three works' relationship to the vague literary category of memoir, echoes the racial ambiguity of its protagonist. If Birdie's and Cal's bodies are deviant according to scientific and legal standards, then the authoritative discourse in *The White Boy Shuffle* in determining one's racial status – which is revealed to be just as unreliable – is that of black authenticity. A novel passing as the “memoirs” of its poet-protagonist, Beatty invites readers to consider the point at which autobiography leaves off and fiction begins (2). Is Beatty suggesting, in other words, that the discourse of black authenticity to which Gunnar is subjected is something with which he himself, as an African American poet and novelist, also must grapple and negotiate in his literary career?

White subjects, according to Leslie Fiedler, pass their adolescence as “imaginary Negroes.” Is it possible, I wonder, for a *black* subject to “pass” his or her adolescence as an “imaginary Negro”? For the purposes of this section, in other words, the term “imaginary Negro” presents itself as a useful configuration of the myth of black authenticity – imaginary in the sense that it is intangible and elusive but also, it would seem, meaningful to a large number of people, regardless of racial background. If *The White Boy Shuffle* is a tale of passing, then it provides, like Percival Everett's *Erasure*, an example of passing for black(er). After the Kaufmans move to the West Los Angeles ghetto of Hillside, Gunnar befriends a basketball-

playing schoolmate, Nicholas Scoby, who, assessing his speech patterns and general behaviour, tells him, “You dark as fuck for someone with Teutonic blood” (73).

Here, Beatty is invoking the blood quantum of racial discourse common to narratives of standard racial passing. That Nicholas “sees through” Gunnar’s darkness to his supposed “whiteness” – and thus, by implication, accuses Gunnar of passing as black – is significant, because Gunnar observes elsewhere that Nicholas has a particular aptitude for spotting “passers,” if the other way around. As Gunnar reports, Nicholas has “the power to tell if someone had a drop of Negro blood in his gene pool.

Nicholas claimed he could smell a passing octoroon from a block away” (132).

Gunnar’s supposed possession of “Teutonic blood” is reinforced by the first names and surname that Beatty playfully attributes to his protagonist and to his forebears, most of them (Swen, Franz von, Wolfgang, Ludwig, Rölf) stereotypically Germanic or Nordic.<sup>60</sup>

The trope of racial passing, which is here black-to-black rather than black-to-white or white-to-black, offers Beatty the perfect framework for a satirical investigation of the discourse of black authenticity in *The White Boy Shuffle*. For stories of racial passing have, for obvious reasons, always fore-grounded the issue of black authenticity. Returning once again to Stephen J. Belluscio’s two cultural notions of passing – the first emphasising the erasure of one identity and the substitution of another, the second rejecting the notion of a stable identity altogether – reminds us that both notions position themselves in relation to the issue of authenticity, either by accepting it unquestioningly or rejecting it wholeheartedly. As in *Caucasia*, moreover, the protagonist’s racial ambiguity serves to call into question both his gender and sexual identities. In this respect, Beatty’s novel confirms Phillip Brian Harper’s argument that “racial identity – ‘authentic’ African-

American identity in particular – can be, or effectively *is*, gendered.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, the discourse of black authenticity has a particular investment in establishing certain gender and sexual behaviours as appropriate to an “authentic” black identity. According to Harper, black authenticity is “fundamentally weakened whenever masculinity appears to be compromised.”<sup>62</sup> And, of course, wherever masculinity is compromised, there is an often an automatic assumption of homosexuality.

*The White Boy Shuffle*’s engagement with the notion of racial passing is confirmed by its several intertextual references, first, to W.E.B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk* and second, to famous narratives of black-to-white passing. In the novel’s opening, Gunnar claims that he is not the typical protagonist of the African American novel because “fate shorted me by six brothers and two uncles.” Gunnar is most decidedly *not* “the seventh son of a seventh son of a seventh son” (5). This phraseology recalls DuBois’s assertion in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world.”<sup>63</sup> Through the first intertextual reference to DuBois, Beatty inevitably invokes the more well-known and oft-quoted second: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asian and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (DuBois 9). The appearance of *The White Boy Shuffle* at the end of the twentieth century thus confirms the accuracy of DuBois’s foresight: “the color-line” is indeed still a “problem,” though, in *The White Boy Shuffle*, perhaps differently to the way in which DuBois imagined it in 1903.

Equally, the novel makes important allusions to Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). An ancestor of Gunnar’s, Franz von Kaufman, is the pet slave of Compton

Benjamin Quentin Tannenberry. Like Tom Driscoll and Chambers in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, who are born on the same day, Compton and Franz von are born within days of each other and share "the same crib and nipples" (17). The reference to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* functions to set up Beatty's intervention in the infamous nature-nurture debate staged in Twain's novella, but, as I will show, the nature of this intervention remains as obscure as it does in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Gunnar claims that "[e]ven in infancy Franz von's subservience was evident" (17). In Twain's novella, the often-frustrating ambiguity with which the author treats the nature-nurture debate is predicated on the fact that Chambers's slave mother, Roxy, has switched the slave and aristocrat babies at birth. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, however, no mention is made of Compton and Franz von having been switched, which serves to render the deferred resolution to the issue in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* even more elusive in Beatty's novel. The Franz von Compton anecdote is also, of course, a clever reference to William Faulkner, and his interest in genealogy, the interrelated issue of fate versus free will and, in *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), with racial passing, whether by accident or design. Quentin Compson, who features in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is also a key character in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). In *The White Boy Shuffle*, his given name is amalgamated with that of his "idiot" brother, Benjy, and Compson becomes Compton, the name of a predominantly black area of East Los Angeles.

### "Passing" into the Ghetto

Like Senna and Eugenides, Paul Beatty deploys metaphors of geography to illuminate his protagonist's alienation not only from his new environment, but from

his whole identity. The family's literal move from predominantly-white Santa Monica to predominantly-black Hillside forces Gunnar to pass as black. He experiences his new neighbourhood as both alien (he feels "like some lost intergalactic B-movie spaceman who has crash-landed on a mysterious planet") and foreign: "I stepped into a world that was a bustling Italian intersection without the Italians" (49). For Gunnar to be considered black demands that he, literally, "pass" certain tests to prove his legitimacy. He is overjoyed, for example, the first time Nicholas Scoby calls him "nigger" (73). At first, his attempts are unsuccessful. His inability "to walk the walk or talk the talk" leads to a series of almost daily drubbings (57). He and his fellow victims from Manischewitz Junior High take refuge at each others' houses, exchanging computer downloads. Interestingly, the "computer was the only place where we had true freedom of assembly," testifying to the potentially liberating aspect of cyberspace, in which one is not bound by physical appearance or acceptable codes of walking, talking and dressing (70). In cyberspace, arguably, anybody can pass.<sup>64</sup>

Made to feel inadequate by his largely black contemporaries, Gunnar experiences his own body as freakish. Like Calliope, who ends up performing in an erotic show in San Francisco, Gunnar observes that if he "had walked up the streets with a carnival barker to promote my one-by sideshow, I could have made some money" (57). Like Birdie and Cal, Gunnar feels monstrous. Because of his inability to "saunter or bojangle my limbs with rubbery nonchalance," he feels as if he has "Frankenstein's autonomic nervous system" (57). Initiation into his new environment and a "black" identity is akin to an adolescent rite-of-passage: "If I wanted to come correct, I'd have to complete some unspecified warrior vision quest. The gods of blackness would let me know when I was black enough to be trusted"

(58). Gunnar's faith in the existence of "gods of blackness," implying omnipotence, but invisibility, reveals the paradoxical power that inheres in the very vagueness of the discourse of black authenticity.

Gunnar's new ghetto home thus emerges as the site of an "authentic" black identity which, as a location, is distinguished by its implication in the nature-nurture debate. In the ghetto, as Nicholas Scoby points out, "Fate picks your friends, and you choose your family. Everybody starts out an orphan in this hole" (96). As Gunnar subsequently confirms, "living out there was like being in a never-ending log-rolling context. You never asked why the log was rolling or who was rolling the log. You just spread your arms and kept moving, doing your best not to fall off" (113). The discourses of black authenticity and racial passing are thus linked in *The White Boy Shuffle* via the opposition set up between fate and free will, a concept with which racial passing has always engaged on ambivalent terms. To choose to pass – to refuse to allow one's African American ancestry to determine one's economic and social status – is, ostensibly, an act of free will. However, to paraphrase Gayle Wald, since the decision to pass may be due to fundamental inequalities in the law and society, passing can only ever, at best, be considered a Solomon's choice.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, a recurring fear in passing narratives is that of "atavism," literally, "great-grandfather-ism," a descendant's "surprising resemblance to grand-parents or more remote ancestors rather than to parents," an occurrence over which the passer has no control.<sup>66</sup> Even when the passer wilfully decides to pass, therefore, his or her actions may yet be circumscribed by external forces. *The White Boy Shuffle*, like *Middlesex*, toys with the contemporary fascination with the scientific discourse of genetics and struggles to find a middle ground between destiny and free will. The fact that the novel passes itself off as Gunnar's "memoirs" reflects this quest. For if,



as William Gass claims, (auto)biographers “are almost always desperate determinists,” the literary form of the memoir blurs the straightforward determinism of autobiography.<sup>67</sup>

By outlining at the outset Gunnar’s genealogy, comprised of ancestors who are each inauthentically “black” in some way, Beatty intimates provocatively that Gunnar’s own black inauthenticity is *inherited*. As Gunnar puts it, he has been “[p]reordained by a set of weak-kneed DNA to shuffle in the footsteps of a long cowardly queue of coons, Uncle Toms, and faithful boogedy-boogedy retainers” (5). For example, Gunnar describes the ambitions of one of his forebears, a free man called Swen Kaufman, to become a serious dancer. In pursuit of this dream, he migrates from Boston to antebellum North Carolina. Watching slaves at work in the fields of a tobacco farm, “the rise-and-fall rhythms of the hoes and pickaxes and the austere urgency of the work songs” inspire him to compose a “groundbreaking dance opera” (14). “Entranced with the possibilities,” Swen joins the slaves at work and thus becomes “the first person ever to run away into slavery” (13). For Beatty, then, the quest for authenticity is itself a kind of bondage, for in his desire to gain access to “real” African American experience, Swen quite literally jumps over “the wooden fence that separated the slave from the free” (14). Interestingly, when Gunnar asks his mother for money to buy some basketball shoes, she suggests he “buy some tap-dancing shoes instead” because “no one would shoot you for your tap-dancing shoes,” implying a link between Gunnar’s pursuit of black authenticity in playing basketball and his dancer-ancestor Swen’s attempts to create a dance-opera based on “real” slave experience. A further link with Swen is established via Gunnar’s own inability to dance in an authentically “black” way, his steps configured as “the white boy shuffle” of the novel’s title (136).

Not surprisingly, black authenticity is, at times, metaphorically linked to skin tone. Gunnar's "shameful history" continues with the story of his great-uncle, Wolfgang Kaufman, which he recounts to his fellow classmates "to the rustle of brown paper bags" (20). This reference recalls subtly the "brown paper bag test" which decreed that if one's skin was darker than a brown paper bag, one was "black." Wolfgang Kaufman provides suggestions for Amos 'n' Andy to improve their show. Wolfgang's son, Ludwig, manages white bands such as Gladys White and the Waitress Tips who rip off the success of motown, itself a type of whiteface minstrelsy. So inauthentically black and anti-heroic are Gunnar's ancestors that they actually live out some of the most deeply-held racist myths in American history and culture. At high school, for instance, his own father emulates Noah in a real-life reenactment of the Curse of Ham: "My father drank so much he passed out. He came to naked, his entire body spray-painted white, his face drool-glued against the trunk of the swing-low tree. He ran home under the sinking Mississippi moon, his white skin tingling with assimilation" (25). According to the racist myth, the genealogy of the African race owes itself to the curse of black skin placed by Noah on his son, Ham, as punishment for mocking him in his naked, drunken state. In Gunnar's retelling of the story, Gunnar is equally "cursed" by his (fore)father(s), but with a legacy of black inauthenticity rather than with a physical transformation from white to black.

At every stage of Gunnar's story, the role of fate is emphasised. It even infuses Gunnar's view of the marriage that his friend, Psycho Loco, arranges for him. Initially angry with Psycho Loco for committing him to wedding a Japanese mail-order bride, his friend tells him: "you don't even have an alarm clock, so don't give me no bullshit that I've altered your destiny" (182). After meeting Yoshiko,

Gunnar decides to go through with the wedding because “Sometimes the inevitable just seems right” (184). When Gunnar considers which college to attend on basketball scholarship, he is impressed with the representative from Boston University. His mother likes the idea of Gunnar going to university in Boston because he will be ““following in the footsteps of your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Euripides. It’s as if the Kaufman legacy has come full circle’” (179). Thus, even Gunnar’s *choice* of university is infused with an air of destiny.

In ostensible contradistinction to this preoccupation with fate, Gunnar’s ability alternately to perform blackness and whiteness as different situations demand seems to imply that race is *learned* through the exercise of free will, a notion supported by the emphasis on Gunnar’s schooling throughout the novel. His adolescence is, he claims, “like going to clown college” (57). The pedagogic metaphor is significant because, as in several other narratives of racial passing, notably Johnson’s *Autobiography*, the protagonist finds that the various educational environments in which he finds himself are spaces in which he is initiated into his racial difference. Similarly, in *The White Boy Shuffle*, when Gunnar’s third-grade Santa Monica teacher, Ms. Cegeny, wears a tee-shirt celebrating the common humanity of all races, “she seemed to pay special attention” to Gunnar and to the two other students of colour in the class (32). In homeroom on his first day at Manischewitz Junior High, his first school in Hillside, the raucous atmosphere is the catalyst for Gunnar’s discovery that he is “a cultural alloy, tin-hearted whiteness wrapped in blackened copper plating” (69), a realisation borne out by Nicholas Scoby’s judgment on Gunnar’s “fusion” musical tastes as a “little black style with weepy bland white sedative sensibilities” (73).

After becoming involved in stealing a safe during the L.A. riots that ensued after the Rodney King decision, his parents insist on his switching schools to attend El Campesino Real High, “an elite public school in the San Fernando Valley” (169). His parents hope that “the reinfusion of white upper-class values” will discourage him from committing further felonies (169). At El Campesino, Gunnar employs his skills at performing, alternately, “whiteness” – or “ethnic obfuscation” (170) – *and* “blackness” – or “rubbing burnt cork over our already dusky features and taking the stage as the blackest niggers in captivity” (170). As a predominantly white school, Gunnar imitates his peers’ way of speaking: “you never forget how to raise your voice a couple of octaves, harden your r’s, and diphthong the vowels: ‘Deeeewuuuude. Maaaaiin. No waaaaaeey’” (169). Interestingly, whiteness appears to be easier to simulate than blackness, for even after living for more than a year in Hillside, Gunnar’s failure to completely assimilate is evident in his speech: “I still said ‘ant’ instead of ‘awwwnt’ and ‘you guys’ rather than ‘y’all’” (105). Gunnar’s unconvincing attempts at black vernacular indicate not only racial inauthenticity, but also a fundamentally compromised masculinity. For, as Phillip Brian Harper observes, “a too-evident facility in the standard white idiom can quickly identify one not as a strong black man, but rather as a white-identified Uncle Tom who must also, therefore, be weak, effeminate, and probably a ‘fag.’”<sup>68</sup> By emphasising the difficulty with which Gunnar deploys the black vernacular, Beatty demonstrates his familiarity with the imperatives of gender and sexual orientation that accompany authentic blackness.

However, at El Campasino, at times, it is of strategic value to perform “blackness” as an excuse for non-completion of homework: “Mistah Boss, sir. I’z couldnst dues my homework ‘cause welfare came and took my baby brother to the

home and he had all the crayons" (170). By exploiting white assumptions about blackness, Gunnar succeeds in manipulating his teachers. At Boston University, on sports' scholarship, Gunnar experiences the drawbacks of his ability to sashay back and forth across the "color line" – the alienation that inheres from belonging to neither group. In his creative writing class, confronted with classmates who discover he is *the* Gunnar Kaufman, originator of their favourite poetry, he feels "like I'd been outed and exposed by my worst enemies, white kids who were embarrassingly like myself but with whom somehow I had nothing in common" (197).

Echoing Jeffrey Eugenides, Gunnar observes that although the saying goes that "the fruit never falls far from the tree," he has "tried to roll down the hill at least a little bit" (27). Beatty thereby hints that destiny and free will need not be conceived in completely oppositional terms. The ambivalence with which the fate versus free will debate is treated is exemplified in Gunnar's relationship with his father, who works for the L.A.P.D., which, in *The White Boy Shuffle*, functions to symbolise the racism of white society.<sup>69</sup> When the L.A.P.D. pay Gunnar, newly-arrived in West Los Angeles from Santa Monica, a visit in the spirit of "preventative police enforcement" (53), Gunnar notes that they are "dressed to oppress" (50). His father works as a sketch artist for the L.A.P.D. rather than as cop. He is thus both *part of* but not *of* the L.A.P.D. Gunnar's father himself features as something of an absent presence, for his parents are divorced and Gunnar sees little of him. This simultaneous absence and presence reflects the ambivalent way in which ancestry is treated in the novel more generally, as both oppressive and irrelevant.

### **Raced Pastimes: Basketball and Poetry**

Arguably, the only school at which Gunnar is truly comfortable with his racial identity is Phillis Wheatley High, which he attends before El Campasino. While attending Phillis Wheatley High, Gunnar distinguishes himself as both a basketball star and budding poet. The school, of course, is named after the first African American to publish a book of poetry. Significantly, Gunnar's coach is Motome Chijjiwa Shimimoto, who acts as a mentor to Gunnar not only on the basketball court but also, as his art teacher, by nurturing his aesthetic sensibility (127). Thus, Gunnar's abilities at basketball are juxtaposed throughout with his growing poetic sensibility. Confessing to Scoby, on his *début*, that he has never played a game of basketball in his life and that he "ain't no ballplayer," Nicholas responds: "I know you ain't. I seen you looking at those sonnets, drool dripping out of your mouth" (79). Very soon afterwards, he informs his mother of his wish to be a poet (86). The blurred distinction between nature and nurture becomes especially evident in Gunnar's talent for playing basketball. Despite never having played before, he slam dunks the ball on his first attempt (81). When his mother leaves him money to buy "basketball paraphernalia," he wonders "if it was enough to change [his] fate" (97).

In contrast to Nicholas Scoby who, according to Tracy Curtis, "has no public persona outside basketball," Gunnar "cultivates two public personae at once" – basketball star and poet – affording him an "alternative to basketball that serves his neighbours' needs."<sup>70</sup> On the surface, then, the basketball-poetry combination seems to offer a potentially positive answer to Gunnar's self-proclaimed status as "cultural alloy," the sport dominated by African American practitioners, the realm of poetry more readily associated with an Anglo-European tradition.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, two of

Gunnar's forebears – Wolfgang and Ludwig – are named for famous European composers of classical music, Mozart and Beethoven. However, not only are basketball and poetry *raced* as black and white, respectively. They are also *gendered* male and female, respectively. In his discussion of the reactions that greeted reports that Max Robinson, an ABC news anchor, and Magic Johnson, a basketball star, were suffering from AIDS, Harper observes that “because sports and athletic competition constitute a primary context in which masculine identity is forged,” the need “to ensure that male athletes actually possess the heterosexual orientation supposed to found masculinity is particularly great.”<sup>72</sup> If basketball is by far more authentically “black” than poetry, it follows that basketball is also more readily associated with masculinity and poetry, with femininity and, by implication, with homosexuality. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Nicholas Scoby responds to Gunnar's confession that he cannot play basketball with the quip, “You either a poet or a homosexual” (79). Scoby's rejoinder is interesting because Beatty thereby connects poetry-writing to homosexuality, thus rendering Gunnar's own sexual orientation ambiguous, consistent with his racial indeterminacy. One could read Scoby's remark to mean Gunnar is a poet and by extension, according to the either/or logic of Scoby's statement, most definitely *not* a homosexual. Conversely, by yoking together poetry-writing and homosexuality, Scoby's observation could equally suggest that Gunnar is *both* a poet *and* a homosexual.

Gunnar's role as neighbourhood bard is ultimately as externally circumscribed and regulated as his status as basketball star. Gunnar's task is to compose poems lauding neighbourhood gang leaders, which demands he “say enough scholarly bullshit to keep from getting my head chopped off” (116). Furthermore, just as Gunnar's basketball performances transform him into a

“commodity,”<sup>73</sup> so he becomes “a human Hallmark card” through his composition of epithalamia and panegyrics (116). Pursued to his home by adoring Creative Writing classmates at Boston University, his teacher asks if they can keep the clothes Gunnar has discarded “as mementos” because “they might be worth something some day” (199). Professor Edelstein arranges for Gunnar’s poetry to be published in a collection entitled *Watermelanin*, which sells 126 million copies (1).<sup>74</sup> Thus, Gunnar’s sporting prowess and creative writing are both commodified, which is foreshadowed early in the novel when, in a bid to locate his (“black”) soul, he starts “playing Thoreau in the Montgomery Ward department store [. . .] turning its desolate sporting goods department into a makeshift Walden” (59).

The distinction between basketball-playing, ostensibly focused on the body, and poetry-writing, seemingly associated with the text, is blurred even further by the specific poetic context in which Paul Beatty is writing the novel. Beatty is himself a poet, having published two collections of poetry – *Big Bank Take Little Bank* (1991) and *Joker, Joker, Deuce* (1994) – prior to the appearance of *The White Boy Shuffle*, his first novel, in 1996. Beatty’s verse is associated with the spoken word urban poetry scene of the 1990s, which became the subject of both a documentary, *Slam Nation* (1998) and a fictional film, *Slam* (1998).<sup>75</sup> In 1990, Beatty won the first annual Grand Slam contest at the Nuyorican Poets’ Café.<sup>76</sup> The spoken word poetry of the slams is itself a hybrid form, which borrows liberally from the Beats (one of Beatty’s creative writing tutors was Allen Ginsberg),<sup>77</sup> Amiri Baraka’s signifyin’ thereupon, black stand-up comedians such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy and hip-hop music. Bryan Dexter Davis’s claim that “Slam is rather like an Olympics of poetry” is interesting for its sporting metaphor: the *performance* is equally as important as the content of the slam poem.<sup>78</sup> Thus, although Gunnar’s poetry would



seem to represent a more solitary, writerly pursuit than basketball, once again, it is the *performance* thereof that is essential. That this performance may involve a metaphorical change in physical identity is suggested in the byline of a *Newsweek* article on slamming: "A new Beat Generation tries on its goatee."<sup>79</sup> Although he does not participate in any poetry slams, Gunnar certainly performs his poetry, most notably at the funeral for Gun Totin' Hooligans' gang leader, Pumpkin.

### Writing / Passing

The hybridity of spoken word poetry is repeated at every level in the text. The seemingly bizarre union between Gunnar and a Japanese mail-order bride, Yoshiko, whom he has never met before his wedding day is perhaps explained by Gunnar's preferred poetic form, which is the haiku-rap. Originally Japanese, adapted by (white) imagist poets such as H.D. and Ezra Pound, and subsequently, by Gunnar, his interracial marriage to Yoshiko and the birth, in the final pages, of their daughter Naomi, reflects the hybridity of the poetic form which he chooses to deploy. The physical and familial ties between racialised figures in the novel thus come to represent textual hybridity.

Even the form of the novel itself is a hybrid. The novel professes to be Gunnar Kaufman's "memoirs" (2). It is, however, a satirical novel. According to Darryl Dickson-Carr, "If the etymology of "satire" begins with the Latin *satura*—a mix—then the satirical novel sits atop the generic mountain, mixing everything below it."<sup>80</sup> It could be argued that the satirical novel is a form particularly receptive to the critique of race offered by passing because, by definition, it is concerned with exposing the absurdity of its subject matter, in this case, racial categories. However,

as Darryl Dickson-Carr argues, the danger with satire is that it tends to “call for conformity to a normative morality, that it is restrictive and narrow” and can thus seem “rather old-fashioned and conservative.”<sup>81</sup> This is certainly borne out by the first foray into a satirical interrogation of racial boundaries, the *Miscegenation* pamphlet authored by David Croly Goodman and George Wakeman in 1864.

The ambivalence of the satirical novel as a form is reflected in the protagonist’s view of writing in general. Both the young adult narrator, Gunnar, and the adult Cal in *Middlesex* grapple with the seeming futility of literary endeavour, the paradox that although writing is a creative act, it is ultimately passive. Politically, they find, it achieves nothing. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, the L.A. riots provide Gunnar with a key lesson regarding his art: “The day of the L.A. riots I learned that it meant nothing to be a poet” (146). Unlike Psycho Loco, Gunnar’s gang-leader friend, whose violence has a “semblance of closure and accomplishment,” Gunnar realises that the American poet is “a tattletale, a whiner, at best an instigator” (146). This is a significant moment in the novel because it provides one of the few occasions during which Beatty’s own views on authorship may be speculated upon. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty’s satire “instigates” debates and, arguably, “whines” about a number of issues without offering any suggestions for their resolution. As Richard Bernstein notes in the *New York Times* review of *The White Boy Shuffle*, whenever the novel “seems about to adopt a position, Mr. Beatty pulls it into parody.”<sup>82</sup> Is Beatty’s refusal to take an either/or stance on nature/nurture, basketball/poetry, body/text, analogous with Gunnar’s strategic mobility across both sides of color line: transforming himself into “white” or “black” as expediency demands? In other words, is it a coincidence that racial passing features as a significant plot device in Beatty’s first novel, which represented a substantial

transition in literary form (poetry to novel) for “one of the premier bards of hip-hop”?<sup>83</sup>

That Beatty’s concerns regarding the discourse of black authenticity are salient and of ongoing relevance is borne out by the observations made in Bernstein’s review of the novel. According to Bernstein:

when Mr. Beatty draws on his actual experience growing up sharp-eyed and black in Los Angeles, his novel reaches its heights. When he attempts a kind of inner-city magical realism, the less successful product falls somewhere in the vague zone between the Swiftian absurd and kvetchy political posturing.<sup>84</sup>

For Bernstein, the deployment of what he sees as a “magical realist” mode represents a transgression into literary territory unsuited to the African American novelist (although commentators on Toni Morrison’s work might disagree). The best passages in *The White Boy Shuffle* are, for Bernstein, those “that sound genuinely experiential.”<sup>85</sup> Paul Beatty is, at least in Bernstein’s review, appreciated only for those aspects of his work that are deemed appropriately “black.” For Henry Louis Gates, the impossibility of an African American author ever being quite “authentic” enough – either by white or by black standards – may be traced back to the experience of Phillis Wheatley, the first African American to publish poetry, for whom, significantly, Gunnar’s high school is named: “Too black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century,” Wheatley is “considered too white to interest black critics in the twentieth.”<sup>86</sup>

In *The White Boy Shuffle*, as in *Erasure*, the response to this double bind emerges in the depiction of the act of writing as simultaneously creative and degenerative. Indeed, the act of writing is configured from the outset as a form of

physical debilitation. Gunnar speculates that poems “are like colds” and that, feeling a poem coming on, his “chest would grow heavier, [his] eyes watery; [his] body temperature would fluctuate, and a ringing in [his] ears would herald the coming of a timeless verse” (87). Threatened with violence if he does not write the “right” words about his gang member subjects, Gunnar’s poetry becomes a matter of life and death, quite literally. Eventually, Gunnar’s status as bestselling poet affords him a platform from which to speak to the African American masses. Hailed as a new black leader at a Boston University rally, Gunnar’s speech endorses self-murder as the definitive form of racial protest, or “the ultimate sit-in” (2), spurring a number of African Americans across the country to commit suicide, but not before forwarding their suicide notes – or “death poems” (222) – to Gunnar. The act of writing becomes bound up with self-murder, erasure, the annihilation of the self. However, like the other apparent binaries in the text, Beatty is reluctant to completely dismiss artistic endeavour in this way. In the end, rather than death predominating, birth and death are juxtaposed. Although Gunnar’s father, Rölf, eventually commits suicide, Gunnar’s wife Yoshiko gives birth to a baby girl, Naomi, to whom Gunnar passes on the stories of her Kaufman forebears. The novel ends as it begins, therefore, reminiscent of the cycle of life.

Contrary to Richard Bernstein’s claim that Beatty’s failure “to adopt a position” is symptomatic of the novel’s absurdist form, the ambivalence of *The White Boy Shuffle*’s conclusion – a *mélange* of, on one hand, inescapable nihilism and, on the other, an unflagging creative impulse – represents the most *realistic* ending one could possibly imagine. For the juxtaposition of degeneration and creation recalls the first cultural notion of passing articulated by Stephen Belluscio – the *erasure* of one identity to order to *invent* oneself anew. Passing, according to

Juda Bennett, no longer seems to engage contemporary novelists.<sup>87</sup> As is evident in my discussion of *Caucasia*, *Middlesex* and *The White Boy Shuffle*, however, contemporary authors continue to be fascinated with the idea of racial and gender passing or *not* passing. The fact that Beatty's novel has been followed by at least two narratives of passing for black(er) with similar concerns – Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000) and Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) – attests both to the ongoing demands placed on African American artists, in particular, to adhere to a particular concept of authenticity and the potential of passing to provide an incisive, if limited, critique of such demands.<sup>88</sup>

## Conclusion

### “Passing” Fads?:

#### Recent Controversies of Authenticity and Authorship

I feel that none of the slight liberties I took in writing my memoir really affect the overall work, but nonetheless, you should know a few things:

I am not, in fact, black.

Nor am I, to the best of my knowledge, a woman. Anything in my book that suggests otherwise is the result of a typographical error. That this error was compounded by my decision to pose for my author photo and bookstore appearances in drag and blackface is, I will acknowledge, unfortunate.

The portions of my book dealing with Depression-era Ireland are, I have been reliably informed, copied verbatim from Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*. I can only conclude that I accidentally confused my manuscript with my notes for my memoir in which I copied large portions of other writers’ works, just to see how they were structured. In hindsight, the fact that I was born 40 years after the Depression should have been a tip-off.<sup>1</sup>

– Tim Carvell, *New York Times* (2006).

I quote extensively from Tim Carvell’s satirical response to the controversies involving J.T. LeRoy and James Frey because it recalls in comic fashion the key issues which I rehearse throughout the thesis. First, he makes explicit the connections between the acts of passing and writing. This is due in no small part to the fact that the visual economies of race and gender are transliterated onto the book jacket he describes in the form of an author photograph, just as, in *Erasure*, Monk

Ellison's readership expects him to treat of certain themes in his writing because, as they can see from his photograph, he is African American. Second, Carvell identifies a further and crucial link between the fraudulence of fabrication and that of plagiarism, between passing fiction off as autobiography and passing off as one's own the work of another. This connection is of paramount importance in this concluding section.

In Chapter Four, I explore two novels of adolescence that pass as their protagonists' memoirs. Here, I conclude by interrogating two very recent controversies of authorship. In these cases, the inextricability of the contemporary fascination with the theme of passing from issues of fraudulent authorship becomes glaringly evident. The first is the exposure of the author J.T. LeRoy as a "fake," the second, the alleged plagiarism committed by Harvard undergraduate, Kaavya Viswanathan, in her debut novel *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life*, published in April 2006. In the main body of this thesis, I start with the *theme* of passing and describe the ways in which the treatment of passing *within* the text often reflects the writers' engagement with issues of authorship *beyond* the text. In this concluding section, I reverse my methodology, beginning with the issue of authorship, and working my way back to the content of the novels in question. Whichever way the narratives are read, the symmetry is not coincidental, though it may or may not be deliberate on the part of the authors in question.

### **When the Memoir Was in Vogue**

The last ten years has witnessed an explosion of memoirs in the United States, a publishing phenomenon which shows no signs of abating. At the end of his March

2005 article in the *New York Times*, William Grimes lists no fewer than twenty-eight recently-published memoirs.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, the trend has been greeted with a great deal of debate culminating in, most recently, the cases of J.T. LeRoy and James Frey. For instance, Frank McCourt's bestselling, Pulitzer-Prize-winning memoir, *Angela's Ashes* (1996), met with hostility in Irish and Irish American circles over McCourt's alleged exaggeration of poverty in Limerick and his cruel treatment by the Christian Brothers of the city.<sup>3</sup> That the objections to *Angela's Ashes* as a memoir are inextricable from the more immediate sagas involving J.T. LeRoy and James Frey is evident in the frequency with which McCourt's comment has been sought in reports about these two recent cases.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even the deployment of the term "memoir" or "memoirs" can prove contentious. In 2001, Mineko Iwasaki filed suit against Arthur Golden, author of the bestselling *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997), for breach of contract. Iwasaki, a former geisha, claimed that Golden promised to protect her anonymity, which, in naming her in the book's acknowledgements, Golden failed to do. According to the *New York Times*, "many in the geisha community said they found the novel troubling because it is written so convincingly in the first person that many readers have come to regard it as fact."<sup>5</sup>

In the cases of McCourt and Golden, the criticism of the books arises from their perceived blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction. The one, a "real" memoir, deploys too much fiction at the expense of fact; the other, a novel passing as a memoir, too much fact at the expense of fiction. By "exaggerating" his autobiography, McCourt "fictionalised" aspects of *Angela's Ashes*. By using the description "memoirs" in the title of his novel, Golden "passed" fiction off as autobiography. That this mobility is possible in both directions – from novel to memoir and from memoir to novel – is suggested in Brent Staples's defense of the



genre of memoir. He maintains that that “writers who once would have couched personal histories as fiction have stopped dissembling.”<sup>6</sup> For Staples, it is not that memoir has become too fictionalised but rather that novels have, all along, included a good deal of autobiographical content.

The memoir, with its permeable boundaries which allow fiction and (auto)biography to overlap and coexist, would appear to qualify as the quintessential postmodern literary form. Linda Hutcheon argues, for example, that in postmodern literature, “[t]he borders between literary genres have become fluid” and that “the most radical boundaries crossed [. . .] have been those between fiction and non-fiction and, by extension, between art and life.”<sup>7</sup> This is, presumably, one of the reasons for which “creative nonfiction” – an umbrella term deployed by James Wolcott to cover the confessional modes of “personal writing” and the “crisis memoir” – has been embraced by some academic institutions, for the academy has been criticised in certain quarters for its ongoing love affair with postmodernism.<sup>8</sup> I would argue, however, that the principal reason for which the memoir has become contested literary territory is not so much that it is a paradigmatic postmodern genre, but because, like passing, it embodies, and thus foregrounds, some of the most contentious aspects of literary postmodernism. Most intriguingly, the popularity of memoirs, and the debates that arise when they veer into “fiction,” reveals the ever-widening gap between the academy and the general public, for whom postmodernist principles persist only in their apparent irrelevancy.

That memoir exists in the interstices of fiction and autobiography, and is exceedingly difficult to pin down is borne out by the seeming impossibility of defining the category. Mary Karr’s attempted distinction between “novelist” and “memoirist” – “the novelist creates events for truthful interpretation, whereas the

memoirist tries to honestly interpret events plagiarized from reality” – is poetic, but unhelpful.<sup>9</sup> What is particularly striking about Karr’s formulation, however, is her use of the term “plagiarized,” implying, intentionally or not, that the memoirist is always already engaged in fraudulent authorial behaviour. William Gass observes that:

[a] memoir is usually the recollection of another place or personality, and its primary focus is outward bound [. . .]. Even when the main attention of the memoir is inward, the scope of the memory tends to be limited (how I felt at the first fainting of the queen), and not wide enough to take in a life.<sup>10</sup>

This does shed more light on the issue, but only in distinguishing the memoir from other forms of life writing – diary, notebook, journal – rather than from fiction.

Intriguingly, in true poststructuralist fashion, both Karr and Gass can only classify memoir in relation to *other* literary genres. Memoir, it seems, does not have any intrinsic characteristics but only acquires meaning when placed next to other kinds of texts with which it can be compared.

It is, as James Atlas insists, “a democratic genre,” which embraces indiscriminately the voices of the old and the young, the famous and the obscure, the crazy and the sane.<sup>11</sup> Brent Staples concurs, noting in 1997 that the “market is teeming with tenderfoot memoirs by ordinary Janes and Joes, many of them scarcely out of their 30’s.”<sup>12</sup> William Grimes, writing almost a decade later, describes the memoir phenomenon as “more a plain than a mountain, a level playing field crowded with absolutely equal voices, each asserting its democratic claim on the reader’s attention.”<sup>13</sup> Such polyphony is consistent with postmodernist claims both to pluralism and to the effacement of boundaries, what Fredric Jameson calls “the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular

culture.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, far from confirming the “death of the author,” the memoir is a literary genre, according to Grimes, that restores the “unstable authorial ‘I’ that came under assault in English departments across the land during the 70’s and 80’s” to “center stage.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of “the death of the subject,” memoirs tend to affirm rather than challenge the notion of a coherent, stable self, albeit a self whose unity may have been achieved only after undergoing and writing about a series of traumatic experiences from the author’s past.<sup>16</sup>

Memoir, it would appear, tests the limits of postmodernism. Paradigmatically postmodern in some respects, it is hopelessly un-postmodern in others. What happens, then, when the author *is* revealed to be literally dead or, at least, non-existent? But if the exposure of this non-existent author is greeted with public outcry and charges of deception, where does that leave postmodernism? The reaction to the LeRoy hoax reveals the unbridgeable chasm that has opened up between the academic celebration and the public reception of postmodern playfulness.<sup>17</sup> As one commentator puts it:

One could try to defend the deception as a postmodern game in which the author’s identity becomes part of the art, but that feels like more charity than the case deserves. The revelations can only leave Leroy’s fans disappointed and his works diminished. If it is a game, it’s the readers who lose.<sup>18</sup>

On 17 October 2005, *New York Magazine* published a piece in which Stephen Beachy suggested that cult novelist J.T. LeRoy did not exist and that his books were penned by Laura Albert, an outreach worker who supposedly rescued J.T. from the streets and brought him to live with her and her husband, Geoffrey Knoop. A subsequent article reports that Knoop and Albert separated in December 2005 and that, according to Knoop, Albert did indeed write the books attributed to J.T.

LeRoy.<sup>19</sup> The *New York Times* revealed that the “public role of JT LeRoy is played by Savannah Knoop, Geoffrey Knoop’s half sister, who is in her mid-20s.”<sup>20</sup> The case of J.T. LeRoy, then, is the most perfect symmetry imaginable between passing and authorship, for it turns out that the person who appeared in public as the author of texts fundamentally and persistently concerned with gender b(l)ending was, in fact, a cross-dressed woman.

### Deceitful Above All Things?

J.T. LeRoy first came to prominence in 1997, when a piece called “Baby Doll,” published under the pseudonym “Terminator,” was included in an anthology entitled *Close to the Bone: Memoirs of Hurt, Rage and Desire*.<sup>21</sup> The piece subsequently appeared in his collection of interconnected short stories, *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), which was adapted for the screen in 2004. In the interim, LeRoy, whose initials stand for Jeremy Terminator, published *Sarah* (2000) and, in 2005, *Harold’s End* appeared. LeRoy’s work draws upon his own (supposed) traumatic childhood experiences, which include being introduced to heroin and pimped out as a cross-dressed teenage prostitute by his own mother. Although “packaged as fiction,” as Mary Karr notes, LeRoy’s books were “alluded to as fact.”<sup>22</sup> Karr’s observation identifies a key distinction because it emphasises the complicity of LeRoy’s readers in his passing and the role of the spectator in the act of passing more generally. In other words, it confirms Amy Robinson’s point that “it is the spectator who manufactures a successful pass, whose act of reading (or misreading) constitutes the performance of the passing subject.”<sup>23</sup> That LeRoy’s

books were “alluded to as fact” is an act of *misreading* on behalf of LeRoy’s readers, which positions LeRoy as a passer, a fraud, a huckster.

If the semi-autobiographical content of his work is borne out by the inclusion of “Baby Doll” in a collection expressly called “memoirs,” the slippery nature of the category of “memoir” becomes evident in Michiko Kakutani’s *New York Times* review of *Close to the Bone*. Kakutani maintains that although each of the narratives is written in the first person, “they all have the faintly stylized feel of fiction; indeed in another age – even five years ago, say – such works would have probably been published as short stories.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, another reviewer notes that “Baby Doll” is “as vivid as fiction, and even reads as though it has been embellished for fictional effect.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, LeRoy’s “Baby Doll” reveals the mobility of memoir across literary categories. What might have been a short story in 1992 becomes a memoir in 1997 and a short story again in 2001. What is fascinating about “Baby Doll” is not only that it reveals the contiguity and interchangeability of memoir and fiction, but that its *content* so mirrors uncannily the boundary-crossings that take place at a formal level. Mary Karr, whose *The Liar’s Club* (1995) is credited by many as having launched the memoir craze, contends that “Mr. Leroy’s whole enterprise was predicated on the tenets of drag – lots of veils and subterfuge.”<sup>26</sup> With hindsight, it is difficult to conceive of the “real” J.T. LeRoy as doing anything but audaciously defying his readers to unmask him by persistently telegraphing references to drag, veils and subterfuge in his writing and, indeed, in his interviews. Almost a year before the appearance of the Beachy article, LeRoy spoke about his reasons for hiding behind a wig and sunglasses in public appearances, claiming that years of therapy have enabled him to shed his image of himself as inherently evil: “It’s been really recent that I could take off the mask.”<sup>27</sup>

In the story “Baby Doll,” the narrator’s sadistic mother, Sarah, convinces her son, Jeremiah, that his penis is “evil” and burns it with a cigarette lighter.<sup>28</sup> Jeremiah, who longs for the intimacy that exists between Sarah and her new boyfriend, Jackson, subsequently glues his penis back between his legs, cross-dresses in Sarah’s lingerie and seduces Jackson, only to be discovered by his mother. However, Jeremiah’s cross-dressing is not the only, or indeed the first, form of disguise that appears in the story. Towards the beginning, the young protagonist watches his mother apply foundation to cover the freckles on her face. When he asks her to cover his own, she appraises his features, noting his prominent nose: “Somebody fucked their nigger slave, and you got the nose to prove it” (118). Sarah is referring to the phenomenon of “atavism,” a common fear in narratives of passing. In effect, Sarah is accusing her son of passing as white, his “nigger nose” evidence of African American ancestry which, with the aid of her make-up brushes she helps him to “camouflage” (118). She also claims that if he got the nose, she “got the lips” and goes about thickening his mouth (119). After Sarah completes her makeover of Jeremiah, which complements the long hair she refuses to let him cut, she tells him “I told you you were meant to be a girl” (120). What starts out as an act of *racial* camouflage, then, becomes one of *gender* disguise. The text insists, as so many passing narratives do, upon the slippage between racial and gender masquerade. It is significant, moreover, that in a narrative concerned with multilayered “category crisis”—especially gender b(l)ending—the story *begins* with a nod to the ultimate form of American disguise—racial passing—for J.T.’s authorial ruse exists in intimate relation to the thematics of his work.

The racial implications of LeRoy’s oeuvre have, I would argue, even greater resonance in its depiction of poor whites, and link directly with two key questions

regarding the public appetite for memoir. First, why does the contemporary reading public have a morbid fascination with lurid tales of sexual abuse, incest, drug addiction, AIDS and so on? And second, why does the reading public want, even need, these stories to be true? For this voyeuristic trend is not only perceptible in the vogue for memoir but also in the immense popularity of true crime novels over the last twenty years.<sup>29</sup> If, in the early twentieth century, the narrative of racial passing examines the extent to which race and class intersect, I would argue that, at least in the case of Jeremiah/J.T. LeRoy, the voyeurism evident in the memoir craze betrays an underlying fascination with a demographic which, for the mainstream reading public, embodies both racial and class otherness – “white trash.” As Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz remind us, the term “white trash” itself is both “racialized (i.e., different from ‘black trash’ or ‘Indian trash’) and classed (trash is social waste and detritus).”<sup>30</sup> Equally, Allison Graham argues that

the centrality of the “cracker” to our understanding of American racism cannot [. . .] be overestimated. More than simply a scapegoat, he has functioned in popular culture as a signifier of racial ambiguity, with his class-bound vulgarity consistently representative of contaminated whiteness. As the personification of sullied purity, he is racial debris, white trash.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, Jeremiah – and by extension, J.T. – is coded as “white trash.” He comes from West Virginia, or “cracker country” in the popular imagination. He and his mother live in a trailer, when they live anywhere at all. Her parents are bible-bashing, religious zealots. Uncomfortable reading though it may be, LeRoy’s work ultimately allows a mainstream, white readership to have all their stereotypes concerning poor, rural whites confirmed. The act of reading J.T. LeRoy’s work is not a process of identification, but of distancing,

a safe space in which white, middle-class fascination with and fears regarding poor whites may be satiated, their remoteness from white trash otherness affirmed. The white, middle-class reader feels – or perhaps *felt* – in control when reading LeRoy. Is this why s/he reacted so strongly when LeRoy was exposed as a fake? When it turned out that Albert/LeRoy was, in fact, manipulating the reader all along?

Audacious though it may be, and true to the demands of postmodernism, the ruse is not even original. As Beachy notes, it bears a striking resemblance to the case of Anthony Godby Johnson, the inspiration behind Armistead Maupin's novel, *The Night Listener* (2000). In 1993, Johnson published a memoir entitled *A Rock and a Hard Place: One Boy's Triumphant Story*, in which he described being sexually abused as a child, his rescue by a woman called Vicki Johnson, and his battle with AIDS. Befriended by Maupin, among others, Johnson carried out long telephone conversations with a series of psychologists, authors, publishers, with very few ever managing to meet Johnson in person. In May 1993, Michelle Ingrassia wrote a piece in *Newsweek* entitled "The Author Nobody's Met," which, through its claim that Tony's soprano voice "could belong to a woman as convincingly as to a boy," suggested that Vicki Johnson was playing the part of Johnson.<sup>32</sup>

As Beachy observes, Albert could easily have read Ingrassia's piece and drawn inspiration from it in creating J.T. LeRoy. Like Anthony Godby Johnson, LeRoy succeeded in enlisting the help of several published authors, among them Mary Karr, who receives an acknowledgment in *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*.<sup>33</sup> He also had several celebrity-admirers, including Courtney Love, Winona Ryder and Bono. Could Albert – in creating the fiction that is J.T. LeRoy – have been engaged in a "critical reworking" of the story of Anthony Godby Johnson?<sup>34</sup> What is original about J.T. LeRoy is that s/he made public appearances. Like



Johnson, who conducted most of his relationships over the telephone, LeRoy did not appear in public until 2001. From that point, he, or evidently Savannah Knoop masquerading as LeRoy, did show up for readings, although the reading was generally by celebrity friends, and to conduct interviews in person. It is as if Albert/LeRoy was attempting to push the boundaries of his deception to their limit and to test exactly how much s/he could get away with. How Albert and Knoop must have laughed when they read interview articles describing LeRoy's "waifish demeanor" and his "quiet, girlish voice,"<sup>35</sup> his "androgynous disguise" and "diminutive" stature.<sup>36</sup>

Following hot upon the heels of the J.T. LeRoy story was the case of James Frey, whose memoir *A Million Little Pieces* was chosen as an Oprah's book club selection in December 2005. The memoir recounts Frey's time in a rehabilitation centre in Minnesota battling his addictions to drugs and alcohol. It sold six hundred thousand copies in the first week after its selection and became the second bestselling book of the year.<sup>37</sup> On 8 January 2006, an investigative website called *The Smoking Gun* published a report disputing many of the events Frey recounts. Among the more choice embellishments were the extent of Frey's involvement in the death of a friend in a train accident and a three-month stint in prison, which turned out to be a few hours in a police cell. Initially, Oprah defended Frey, even phoning in when Frey appeared on Larry King Live to reiterate her support. However, she subsequently did an about-turn, invited Frey, a representative of his publisher's and several prominent members of the U.S. media onto her show, apologised publicly for her defence of Frey and mounted an assault on Frey and the Doubleday representative. Editions of *A Million Little Pieces*, still marketed as a memoir, are now prefaced with "A Note to the Reader" in which Frey acknowledges having

“embellished many details about [his] past experiences, and altered others in order to serve what [he] felt was the greater purpose of the book.”<sup>38</sup> Oprah followed her Frey selection with Elie Wiesel’s *Night* in January 2006, presumably because it is a memoir whose veracity is deemed indisputable, describing the author’s experiences during the Holocaust, the trauma to trump all others.

The connections between embodied (Knoop/LeRoy) and disembodied (Albert/LeRoy) disguise, are less obvious in the Frey situation because his exploitation of the slipperiness of memoir/fiction does not have an immediate counterpart in the persona of the author himself. Nonetheless, the controversy bears mentioning not only because it is often discussed alongside that of J.T. LeRoy and, even more recently, Kaavya Viswanathan, but more pertinently, the Frey commentators find it impossible to discuss Frey without deploying metaphors of passing, especially cross-racial masquerade. As Steve Almond of the *Boston Globe* puts it, Frey “apes the swagger and vocabulary of hip-hop stars”; he is “the Vanilla Ice of American letters.”<sup>39</sup> For Almond, Frey is a whiteface minstrel. Furthermore, Almond argues that Frey’s deception and exposure vindicate Jonathan Franzen’s objections to what I would call the memoirification of his novel when a film crew visited his hometown to shoot a segment for an Oprah’s Book Club show dedicated to *The Corrections*. In a further use of racially-inflected language, Franzen was, in Almond’s words, “tarred and feathered.”<sup>40</sup> Equally, a *Newsweek* article byline wonders: “When James Frey embellished his rap sheet in his best-selling memoir, did he cross the line into fiction?”<sup>41</sup> “Crossing the [color] line” is, of course, a phrase synonymous with passing as white and provides further evidence of the recourse to passing tropes in cases of fraudulent authorship.

### How Kaavya...

In April 2006, the début novel of Indian American Harvard sophomore, Kaavya Viswanathan, was published by Little, Brown as part of a two-book deal reputedly worth half a million dollars. A few weeks later, the *Harvard Crimson* published an article which compared passages from Viswanathan's novel with excerpts from two Megan McCafferty books, *Sloppy Firsts* (2001) and *Second Helpings* (2003).<sup>42</sup> From these beginnings, the controversy escalated, culminating in her publishers' recalling of the book and cancelling plans to publish a revised edition or a second novel. Viswanathan appeared on the *Today* show with Katie Couric, but maintained her innocence, claiming that all references to McCafferty's novels were "unconscious." I focus here upon Viswanathan's novel because of the ways in which its theme – describing its protagonist's assumption of a "fraudulent" identity – so mirrors intriguingly the breach of trust that Viswanathan committed in apparently copying large sections of the novel from works by Megan McCafferty, Sophie Kinsella, Meg Cabot and even Salman Rushdie. I call this section "How Kaavya..." because an overwhelming number of responses to the affair – especially in online articles and postings – have unconsciously recognised these parallels by riffing upon the title of Viswanathan's novel, *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life*. Entering "How Kaavya" into a Google search yields nearly twenty-one thousand results, of which some choice examples are "How Kaavya got rich, got caught, and got ruined," "How Kaavya Viswanathan Got into Harvard, Got a Book Deal, Got Into Trouble," "How Kaavya Viswanathan Got Everything, Got Illegal, and Got What was Coming To Her" and "How Kaavya Viswanathan Got Caught, Got Recalled and Got a Ruined Career."

*How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life* explores the dilemmas faced by Opal Mehta, a very academically-minded seventeen-year-old student who, in her interview for early admission to Harvard, is stumped by the Dean's question: "what do you like to do for fun?"<sup>43</sup> Her Indian parents, who have been assiduously implementing their HOWGIH (How Opal Will Get Into Harvard) plan since their daughter's birth respond by coming up with a new plan, HOWGAL (How Opal Will Get A Life), which they hope will lead to Opal's successful admission to Harvard on her second attempt. The remainder of the narrative explores Opal's Gatsby-like transformation into a popular high school student and the subsequent exposure of her parents' elaborate HOWGAL plan. Like *Middlesex*, the novel draws upon the traditions of both the *Bildungsroman* and the ethnic assimilation narrative, with Harvard configured as an Ellis Island-esque barrier between insider and outsider, immigrant and American. This point is made explicitly by Opal, who claims that "[e]ver since [her] family moved to New Jersey from Chennai, India, [she] had known that [she] was meant to attend Harvard" (6). From the outset, then, entry to the United States as an immigrant and admission to Harvard are yoked together. Opal imagines Dean Anderson congratulating her on getting in to Harvard, saying "You seem to be a wonderful *fit* for Harvard," which recalls attempts to establish the fitness of immigrants to the U.S. Harvard represents a very particular *kind* of Americanness, a bastion of Old Worldness and blue-bloodedness in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I would argue that Viswanathan's novel is a passing narrative, in which many of the typical struggles characteristic of paradigmatic passing stories are revisited. In particular, the novel recalls Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bum* (1928), with the highly-regulated American high school substituting for the racist New York cityscape

navigated by Fauset's protagonist Angela Murray/Angèle Mory. After all, Opal observes that "the Woodcliff High cafeteria was as highly regulated as the Hindu caste system" (78). The novel features a classic denial scene of almost biblical proportions, in which the protagonist ignores a member of his or her kin group while s/he is passing, as in *Plum Bun*. Angela pretends she doesn't know her own sister, Jinny, when they meet in a train station in New York (*PB* 158-159). Opal, who prior to the drafting of HOWGAL, was a member of the Geek Squad at school, forsakes them in favour of popular girls, the HBz (Haute Bitchez). Natalie, Opal's former lab partner, beckons her over to their table at lunch but Opal ignores her and rushes after the HBz (80).

This is not the only denial scene in the novel. The ringleader of the HBz is Priscilla Ming, a childhood friend of Opal's who abandons her once they start high school. When Opal attempts to strike up a conversation with Priscilla in front of her HB minions, she waits "breathlessly for Priscilla to respond. Surely she would acknowledge me. I knew we hadn't spoken in years, but she couldn't just pretend I didn't exist" (82). That the second denial scene follows so swiftly upon the first emphasises their similarities and raises an interesting question. Is Viswanathan implying that *everyone* is passing, or is it only non-white subjects that can or *need to* pass? For like Opal, Priscilla is a person of color. By giving herself the nickname "Asian Sensation," the novel implies, Priscilla has sold out in her attempts to be popular and cool (i.e. "assimilate") (25). "People actually call her that," Opal observes, "And they're not being ironic" (25). Priscilla's passing thus serves to forewarn the reader of what awaits Opal if she persists with HOWGAL. Significantly, it is Priscilla who "outs" Opal. When she accidentally picks up Opal's BlackBerry at a party, she discovers the details of HOWGAL and emails them to the

entire school, exposing Opal's plan to get into Harvard. However, because Priscilla is also passing, Opal manages to wield some influence over Priscilla's actions.

When she discovers Priscilla using differential equations to map out her DJ mixes – which would not fit with her übercool HB image – Opal blackmails her into doing a favour (284).

Of course, the denial scene is not just a feature of the passing narrative, but is a staple of high school-set teen movies. Indeed, Malcolm Gladwell argues that the fact that Viswanathan's novel is genre fiction ought to exempt it altogether from charges of plagiarism: "These are novels based on novels based on novels, in which every convention of character and plot has been trotted out a thousand times before."<sup>44</sup> However, where Viswanathan more-or-less self-consciously acknowledges the teen movies to which she is indebted – *She's All That*, *10 Things I Hate About You* (115), *Drive Me Crazy* (53), *Mean Girls* (178) and so on – integrating them into the narrative as required viewing on Opal's HOWGAL plan, no mention is made of Megan McCafferty or Sophie Kinsella.

A further point of comparison with *Plum Bun* is remorse for passing and attempts to make amends to those wronged which culminate in both women characters passing up prestigious scholarships. In *Plum Bun*, Angela, passing as white, initially shakes off the friendly overtures made by Miss Powell, an African American woman in her art class, for fear that her white boyfriend, Roger, will "see her on familiar terms like this with a coloured girl" (148). Both women subsequently win prizes that enable them to go to the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts in Paris. However, when the School returns the passage money to Miss Powell on the basis that the "enforced contact" on the boat would prove "unpleasant" for the (white) students travelling to France, Angela rushes to her home and declares her

own African American ancestry to a roomful of journalists interviewing Miss Powell about the story (347). In Viswanathan's novel, Opal and Natalie Chernyak are former lab partners and rivals for the Science Scholarship, which is absolutely necessary for Natalie if she wishes to attend her college of choice. Put to a vote of all the school's science students, the result is a tie. However, Opal, who ultimately wins on the basis of her higher grades, magnanimously gives up the scholarship for Natalie.

Opal's selfless act reveals one important way in which Viswanathan's novel differs from most stories of passing, and that is in its treatment of class. In most passing stories, there is a correlation between being white and being middle class. Historically, of course, black-to-white passing was a means of improving one's *economic* situation, promising access to a better job and more money. Even in *Erasure*, the Ellison family are portrayed as symbolically white because of their bourgeois background. Whereas in *Plum Bun*, Angela's passing for white is a means to attain "money and influence" (88), Opal does not undergo her transformation in order to improve her class position but rather the transformation is effected precisely *because* of her upper-middle-class situation. In other words, Opal is more mobile in terms of (re)forming her identity because she has a great deal of money at her disposal. For instance, a key step in HOWGAL is Opal's physical makeover. Unimpressed with the boutiques and beauty parlours in their home town in New Jersey, her mother takes Opal on a trip to Manhattan, where she has her hair cut at an exclusive salon (57), buys expensive makeup at Bloomingdale's (59) and has a personal shopper pick out her outfits in Bergdorf Goodman (59). The implication is, of course, that in deploying HOWGAL, Opal is not "really" passing – in the sense of assuming a (class) identity to which she has no rightful claim – because her class

position already accords “authentically” with the demographic of those attending Harvard.

This is a problematic treatment of a nexus of complex and interrelated issues –race, class, passing and university admission – rendered all the more troubling because Viswanathan refuses to address it directly. In a tale of a rich Indian American girl who passes in order to be accepted into an Ivy League university, the issue of affirmative action is not mentioned. In fact, it is completely “passed” over. The relationship of passing to affirmative action was anticipated by Doris Black in a 1972 article for *Sepia* magazine in which Black contends that “in a new era when highly visible blackness has become important in management and executive employment,” being a light-skinned African American able to pass as white is “a handicap.”<sup>45</sup> Describing passers who moved from whiteness back to blackness, Black asserted that, “Today the longtime traditional pattern of passing has changed drastically. Now the only passing that is prevelent [*sic*] is from white to black.”<sup>46</sup> Sixteen years after Black’s prophecy, twin brothers Paul and Philip Malone were fired from the Boston Fire Department after it emerged that they passed as black in the late 1970s in order to benefit from the City’s affirmative action guidelines.<sup>47</sup> Two years earlier, the movie *Soul Man* (1986) depicted Mark Watson (C. Thomas Howell) masquerading in blackface in order to win an affirmative action scholarship to attend Harvard Law School. In *Soul Man*, however, the white equals rich, black equals poor correspondence is retained. Watson’s family are upper middle class, and he passes as black only because they refuse to support him financially. Meanwhile, his African American classmate, Sarah (Rae Dawn Chong), at whose expense Mark receives the scholarship, works in a university cafeteria to help fund her studies and take care of her young child.



In its treatment of class, Viswanathan's novel recalls the ways in which opponents of affirmative action endeavour to subsume race under the sign of class in order "to symbolically position Asian American students on the 'white' side of the color line."<sup>48</sup> By race-ing Asian Americans as white, Gayle Wald asserts, proponents of so-called "race blind" admissions policies attempt to claim that "the middle-class status of certain racial-ethnic minority applicants [make] them inappropriate targets of affirmative action."<sup>49</sup> Wald argues that by pitting symbolically "white" Asian Americans, as the model minority who benefit the least from affirmative action policies, against "others" on the "black" side of the color line, advocates of "race blindness" have ironically succeeded in racialising affirmative action itself, and thereby caused "the interests of those unmarked by race and/or gender to 'pass' out of the picture."<sup>50</sup> These are all issues which Viswanathan chooses not to address. Her "blindness" or, more precisely perhaps, the blinkers she puts on in relation to affirmative action, imply that it is totally irrelevant to Opal Mehta's struggle to get into Harvard. Viswanathan's elision of the issue thus points, accurately or otherwise, ironically or otherwise, to her complicity with anti-affirmative-action activists for whom Opal Mehta would, as the Indian American daughter of two medical doctors, be symbolically white.

I do not mean to suggest that because Opal Mehta is Indian American, Viswanathan *must* confront the issue of race, as if that is *the* sole and primary concern in any novel by a nonwhite author featuring a nonwhite protagonist. To do so would be to yield to and to reinscribe the very discourses I critique throughout this thesis, especially since the autobiographical parallels between the novel and the author's own life have been emphasised in reviews. According to one report, in Viswanathan's own bid to get into Harvard, her parents hired Katherine Cohen,

founder of IvyWise, who charges between ten and thirty thousand dollars for college preparation services.<sup>51</sup> Rather, that Viswanathan raises affirmative action so obviously but fails to meet it head on serves to invite speculation as to her position on affirmative action.

What the column inches dedicated to J.T. LeRoy, James Frey and Kaavya Viswanathan show is the continuing relevancy and importance of “authenticity” – in terms of the author’s racial or gender identity, of his or her professed life experiences and of the words he or her puts down on the page – to the contemporary reading public, no matter how much the academy may insist upon its redundancy. The gap between the perceptions of the scholarly community and the reading public takes us right back to the two cultural notions of passing alluded to in the Introduction. The first emphasises authenticity, the assumption of a fraudulent identity, the substitution of a “black” identity for a white one. The second evinces a mistrust of any sense of a stable self, instead advocating a self that is always already in flux, and an identity that is constituted solely of performance rather than essentialisms. In the words of Stephen Belluscio:

while the latter notion of passing carries more critical currency in the postmodern era, we as critics cannot forget that many passing narratives written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are governed by the logic of the first cultural notion, and our readings must be ever aware of this.”<sup>52</sup>

The literary controversies of 2005 and 2006 thus remind us of the importance of returning to nineteenth-century passing stories for it is “the logic of the first cultural notion” that characterises the public reception of and reaction to LeRoy, Frey and Viswanathan. Equally, these controversies confirm that passing will remain both a

symptom of and a strategy for negotiating any set of circumstances that insists upon the impenetrability of irreconcilable opposites.

## Notes to Introduction

<sup>1</sup> TWIZ TV, *The L Word* Transcripts, 26 May 2006 <<http://www.twiztv.com/cgi-bin/thelword.cgi?episode=http://www.l-word.com/transcripts/tx/1x08listenup.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Bette's question is remarkably similar, for example, to light-skinned Angie's query of her mother in Claude McKay's 1932 story, "Near-White." Angie asks: "But if some colored people are light enough to live like white, mother, why should there be such a fuss? ... Why should they live colored when they could be happier living white?" *An Anthology of Interracial Literature: Black-White Contacts in the Old World and the New*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York UP, 2004) 568.

<sup>3</sup> "Listen Up," *The L Word*, Showtime, 7 Mar. 2004.

<sup>4</sup> I place "passing" in quotation marks in this first instance to indicate the scepticism with which I view the term. "Passing" is a misnomer which depends on completely arbitrary designations of categories supposedly being transgressed. For ease of reading, however, I do not use quotation marks throughout this thesis, but ask that they be taken as read.

<sup>5</sup> Some other recent examples of popular culture engagements with and variations upon the trope of racial and/or gender passing include the films *The Associate* (1996) and *White Chicks* (2004), and the FX reality TV show, *Black. White.* (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Color Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 23.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn Norment, "Who's Black And Who's Not?: New ethnicity raises provocative questions about racial identity," *Ebony* March 1990, 136.

<sup>8</sup> Norment 136.

<sup>9</sup> According to Leon E. Wynter, in her starring role in *Flashdance* (1983), "the nominally black actress Jennifer Beals passed for white," *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America* (New York: Crown, 2002) 167.

<sup>10</sup> Although the writers of *The L Word*, and not Beals, must be given some credit for the complexities of the Bette-Yolanda exchanges, Beals herself reports that after agreeing to play Bette, she requested that show creator, Ilene Chaiken, write biraciality into Bette's character, which Chaiken did. Pam Grier's character, who was originally written as Bette's friend, was rewritten as Bette's half-sister. Adam Sternbergh, "Back in a Flash," *New York Magazine* 21 Feb. 2005, 27 May 2006 <<http://newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/tv/11057/>>.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah McDowell's claim that *Passing* is "passing" as a tale of racial passing and that it is a veiled exploration of lesbian desire sparked a long-overdue renewal of interest in Larsen's neglected novella. "'It's Not Safe. Not Safe at All': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Ana Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 616-625.

Subsequent episodes of *The L Word* also contest definitions of gender, particularly as this relates to sexuality. The character played by another member of the regular cast, Katherine Moennig, sports an androgynous look to match her gender-ambiguous name, Shane. Yet another main character Alice (Leisha Hailey) dates a biological male who calls himself Lisa and who self-identifies as a lesbian. Meanwhile, Kit Porter (Pam Grier), Bette's heterosexual half-sister, is courted by drag king, Ivan A. Cock. In the third season, a new regular cast member – the transgender Max/Moira, played by Daniela Sea – is introduced.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Robinson, "It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest," *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (1994) 715.

<sup>13</sup> Michael T. Gilmore, *Surface and Depth: The Quest for Legibility in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003) 176.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2003), Mar Gallego, *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: An Alternative Concept of African American Identity* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2003), Carlyle Van Thompson, *The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) and Stephen J. Belluscio, *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Juda Bennett, *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* (1997) 1.

<sup>16</sup> Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 247.

<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Bost, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005) 6.

- <sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002) 17.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Leon Jaroff, "The Gene Hunt," *Time* 20 March 1989, 63.
- <sup>20</sup> Eve Allegra Raimon, *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004) 1. Raimon joins Suzanne Bost in emphasising the contemporary fascination with mixed race identities, evidenced most particularly in the 2000 census, in which individuals were permitted for the first time to tick more than one box in identifying their race. I do not elaborate on this, or other manifestations of the current fascination with mixed race identities, because this territory has already been thoroughly covered by Bost in *Mulattas and Mestizas*.
- <sup>21</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991) 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford UP, 1967) 97.
- <sup>23</sup> Kermode 9.
- <sup>24</sup> Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, "Introduction," *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle*, ed. and introd. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 3, 2.
- <sup>25</sup> David Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002) 16.
- <sup>26</sup> Ledger and McCracken 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Ledger and McCracken 1.
- <sup>28</sup> Ledger and McCracken 1.
- <sup>29</sup> Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (New York: Pantheon, 2003) 285.
- <sup>30</sup> I place "tragic" in parentheses because the writers I explore in this thesis consistently challenge the convention of having tragedy befall their mulatto/a characters.
- <sup>31</sup> Wald 187.
- <sup>32</sup> Belluscio 9.
- <sup>33</sup> Belluscio 9.
- <sup>34</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics* 10.
- <sup>35</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics* 1-2.
- <sup>36</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics* 2.
- <sup>37</sup> Amy Robinson, "Forms of Appearance of Value: Homer Plessy and the Politics of Privacy," *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996) 237.
- <sup>38</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, "Passing for what? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility," *Callaloo* 21.2 (1998) 382.
- <sup>39</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler, "Passing: Narcissism, Identity, and Difference," *differences* 6:2-3 (1994) 213.
- <sup>40</sup> Wald 15.
- <sup>41</sup> Belluscio 9-10.
- <sup>42</sup> See, for example, Leslie Marmon Silko's review of Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* (1986). "Here's an Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf," *Studies in American Indian Literature* 10.4 (1986) 179, 1 July 2004 <<http://oncampus.richmond.edu/faculty/ASAIL/SAILns/104.html>>.
- <sup>43</sup> See Sollors, *NBNWYB* 255. Written in the first person, "[t]he book's acceptance as autobiography has been so complete that it has been discredited as false slave narrative; even twentieth-century critics have felt it necessary to point out that it is fiction. Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York UP, 1972) 92.
- <sup>44</sup> Sollors, *NBNWYB* 247.
- <sup>45</sup> Wald 14.
- <sup>46</sup> Curiously, the only attempt to integrate discussions of racial, gender and other forms of passing in a single-author study occurs in the very earliest, Juda Bennett's *The Passing Figure* (1997). Bennett gives over a chapter to examining "the contemporary obsession with gender passing" and "its relation to issues of race and racial passing" (Bennett 2). While Bennett's is the first full-length study of passing, earlier studies on the literary mulatto and miscegenation also deal with the subject of passing. See Judith Berzon, *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York

UP, 1978) and James Kinney, *Amalgamation!: Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1985).

<sup>47</sup> Belluscio 2.

<sup>48</sup> Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture Through A Transatlantic Lens* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2001) 91.

<sup>49</sup> Wald 166.

<sup>50</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> This is true of studies by Gayle Wald, M. Giulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2001), Kathleen Pfeiffer, Carlyle Van Thompson and Stephen J. Belluscio. Edited collections on passing, however, do feature essays which interrogate both racial and other types of passing: Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) and María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds, *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York UP, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) and Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

<sup>53</sup> Bost 17 and 22.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Slavery, Race, and the Figure of the Tragic Mulatta, or, The Ghost of Southern History in the Writing of African-American Women," *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1997) 469.

<sup>55</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 197-198, n.52.

<sup>56</sup> Belluscio 1-2.

<sup>57</sup> Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894; New York: Dover, 1999) 7. Hereafter abbreviated to *PW*, subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>58</sup> Danzy Senna, *From Caucasia, with Love* (1998; London: Bloomsbury, 2001) 161. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main body of the text. In the interests of succinctness, I will refer to Senna's novel, throughout, by its shorter, original title, *Caucasia*.

## Notes to Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> *PW* 115.

<sup>2</sup> Juda Bennett, "Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative," *African American Review* 35.2: (2001) 205.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, "Toni Morrison" 214, n.1.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, "Toni Morrison" 205.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, "Toni Morrison" 214.

<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison, "Recitatif," *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Nina Baym et al (1983; New York: Norton, 1998) 2078-2092.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Reid Pharr, Introduction, *The Garies and their Friends* (1857; Maryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997) viii-ix.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett, *Passing Figure* 36.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass recounts how he wrote passes for himself and four other slaves for their intended escape, which was subsequently foiled. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Random, 2000) 84. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most famous autobiographical account of such passing is *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) which describes how Ellen Craft executed her real-life 1848 escape from slavery by disguising herself as a white gentleman, with her darker-complexioned husband, William, playing the part of her black slave. The Crafts' flight, which

was widely reported in newspapers at the time, may, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have inspired the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* to take the pseudonym "Crafts" in honour of the runaways. Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, ed. and introd. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (London: Virago, 2002) xxii. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>11</sup> Percival Everett, *Erasure* (2001; London: Faber and Faber, 2004) 49.

Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the body of the text. There are indications that a greater degree of attention is being paid to Percival Everett, at least in African American literary criticism. *Callaloo* dedicated a special issue to Everett and his work in Spring 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Harper, "Passing for What?" 382.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Melting Pot* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998) 29.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Johnson, *Oxherding Tale* (1982; New York: Plume, 1995) ix. Hereafter abbreviated to OT, subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Johnson, "Novelists of Memory," *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999) 105.

<sup>16</sup> James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998) 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 6.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000) 4.

<sup>19</sup> In a Gates-edited collection of essays on *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the baton is taken up, respectively, by Nina Baym and Katherine E. Flynn, who pursue the two possible lines of inquiry initiated by Gates, one leading to Hannah Vincent, the other to Jane Johnson. Nina Baym, "The Case for Hannah Vincent," 315-331 and Katherine E. Flynn, "Jane Johnson, Found! But Is She 'Hannah Crafts'? The Search for the Author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*," 371-405, in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Hollis Robbins, eds., *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman's Narrative* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> The controversy surrounding the authorship of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was followed, in February 2005, by a debate on the racial identity of Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, author of *Megda* (1891) and *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895). In an article published in the *Boston Globe*, Holly Jackson provides evidence that Kelley-Hawkins was not actually black at all. See Holly Jackson, "Mistaken Identity," *Boston Globe* 5 Feb. 2005, 27 Oct. 2006 <[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/02/20/mistaken\\_identity/?page=>](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/02/20/mistaken_identity/?page=>)>.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Hedin, "Strategies of Form in the American Slave Narrative," *The Art of the Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*, ed. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (Macomb: Western Illinois UP, 1982) 25.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Soskis, "Freedoms and Fictions," *New Republic* 3 June 2002, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Gates's credentials as a literary sleuth must surely have been enhanced by his successful authentication in May 1982 of a long-forgotten autobiographical novel, *Our Nig* (1859), as the earliest novel published by an African American woman, Harriet E. Wilson, and the first African American novel to be published in the United States. The quest for African American literary firsts continues with the publication in October 2006 of Julia C. Collins's novel, *The Curse of Caste*, originally serialised in the *Christian Register* in 1865. The editor and eminent critic, William Andrews, puts forth Collins's work as the first novel published by an African American woman, displacing *Our Nig* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* because of their autobiographical content.

<sup>24</sup> Time Warner Press Release, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, 22 November 2004 <[http://www.twbookmark.com/books/48/0446530085/press\\_release.html](http://www.twbookmark.com/books/48/0446530085/press_release.html)>.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Borrowing Privileges," *New York Times* 2 June 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Crafts 284.

<sup>27</sup> Joe Nickell, "Searching for Hannah Crafts" in Gates and Robbins 414-415.

<sup>28</sup> Nickell 406.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson *Being and Race* 5.

<sup>30</sup> Crafts xxxi.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and The Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 32-33.

<sup>32</sup> Later writers of passing stories retained a fascination with the body-as-text motif. For example, in the great narrative of unresolved racial ambiguity, *Light in August* (1932), the protagonist, Joe Christmas, is repeatedly described as "parchmentcolored." William Faulkner, *Light in August* (1932; London: Picador, 1993) 28, 91, 94, 113, 208.

<sup>33</sup> Eva Saks, "Representing Miscegenation Law," *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford UP, 2000) 73.

<sup>34</sup> The fact that the very coinage of the term "miscegenation" in 1864 was bound up with a controversy of authorship adds yet another twist to the construction of the miscegenous body as forgery. David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman – journalists at the quasi-Copperhead newspaper, the *New York World* – authored an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Miscegenation*, which advocated interracial marriage and was in wide circulation from early in 1864. Until the appearance of this pamphlet, amalgamation was the term used to describe interracial sexual relations. Purportedly originating from the Republican, anti-slavery camp, the fraud was an attempt to damage Abraham Lincoln's re-election campaign. Neither man ever acknowledged responsibility for his role in the hoax. Sidney Kaplan, "The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864," *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford UP, 2000) 219-265.

<sup>35</sup> James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington* (1849), quoted in Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000) 79.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000) 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> See Fabian 84-112.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass recounts how his "overseer had written his character on the living parchment of most of their [slave] backs, and left them callous" (130). As a free man, Douglass is introduced as "a graduate from a peculiar institution" with "my diploma written on my back," Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. and introd. John David Smith (1855; New York: Penguin, 2003) 130.

<sup>38</sup> Browder 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo* 32 (1987) 497.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, several commentators have been tempted to equate Percival Everett with Thelonious Ellison and to see *Erasure* as a fictionalised autobiographical piece. For example, the subtitle to an interview with Everett reads: "His new novel satirises ghetto culture and white attitudes – but Percival Everett's books still end up on the Black Fiction shelf." Sean O'Hagan, *Color Bind: Interview with Percival Everett*, *The Observer*, 16 March 2003, 11 August 2005 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,914871,00.html>>. Everett's own playfulness has (probably intentionally) contributed to such interpretations: the paper delivered by Monk at the *Nouveau Roman* Society conference was published under Everett's name in *Callaloo* in the winter of 1999. Percival Everett, "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel," *Callaloo* 22.1 (1999) 18-23.

<sup>41</sup> Juanita Mae Jenkins's novel is itself likely referencing *Push*, a 1996, award-winning novel by Ramona "Sapphire" Lofton. *Push* is the story of Claireece Precious Jones, HIV-positive and the mother of two children by her own father at the age of seventeen. Like Stagg Leigh, whose novel earns him a large advance from Random House, Sapphire received a \$500,000 dollar-advance from Alfred A. Knopf. William Powers, "Sapphire's Raw Gem; Some Say Her Novel Exploits Suffering. She Says They're Reading It All Wrong," *Washington Post* 6 Aug. 1996: B1-4. The parallels between *Push* and *The Color Purple*, are striking, and indeed Sapphire cites Alice Walker's 1982 novel and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) as major influences on her work. Sapphire, "Sapphire's big push" interview with Mark Marvel, June 1996, 31 October 2004 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1285/is\\_n6\\_v26/ai\\_18450196](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_n6_v26/ai_18450196)>.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in D.T. Max, "The Oprah Effect," *The New York Times Magazine* 26 Dec. 1999, 39.

<sup>43</sup> For example, in the show devoted to Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* – which describes protagonist Astrid's adolescence in multiple foster homes after her mother is



imprisoned for murdering her lover – the four guest readers of the novel were two women who had grown up in troubled homes, one foster-care parent and one social worker. Chris, the foster-care parent, asserted: “All the self-help books and books on foster care I’ve read in my whole life didn’t do it for me.....I can’t believe this book is fiction (qtd. in Max 39).

<sup>44</sup> Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003) 143.

<sup>45</sup> Illouz 103.

<sup>46</sup> Max 37-38.

<sup>47</sup> Max 40.

<sup>48</sup> Max 38.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *Being and Race* 58. Interestingly, Johnson’s study *Being and Race*, tends to reinforce the real or imagined antagonism between African American men and women writers by segregating his discussions of “Black Writing Since 1970” by gender, in chapters titled simply “The Men” and “The Women.”

<sup>50</sup> “Oprah’s Book Club 43rd Selection *The Corrections*,” 22 October 2001, 28 July 2005 <[http://www.oprah.com/obc/pastbooks/jonathan\\_franzen/obc\\_user\\_communication.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/obc/pastbooks/jonathan_franzen/obc_user_communication.jhtml)>.

<sup>51</sup> See for example, “The idea of the home as a safe place is lost to us now – in the US [*sic*] more than in other places,” Sue Miller interview with Angela Long, *Irish Times*, 18 Mar. 2002. Like Franzen, Sue Miller has written autobiographically of her father’s struggle with Alzheimer’s and her sixth novel, *While I Was Gone*, was an Oprah’s Book Club selection in May 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *How to be Alone: Essays* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002) 259.

<sup>53</sup> Franzen 270.

<sup>54</sup> African American literary critics have also been divided along gender lines. As a faculty member in the Department of English at the University of Southern California who teaches courses on creative writing, American Studies and critical theory, I think it is reasonable to assume that Everett is familiar with a particular moment in the 1980s during which African American men and women critics clashed over the deployment of post-structural theory in readings of works by black authors. African American women commentators claimed that the use of post-structural theory dehistoricised texts by black women which could only fruitfully be read and appreciated with reference to their historical context. Interestingly, the “tragic mulatta” played a key role in such disputes. In his introduction to *Workings of the Spirit*, for example, Houston A. Baker takes issue with the preponderance of mulattas in turn-of-the-century black women’s fiction because such characterisation represents “an implicit approval of white patriarchy inscribed in the very features of the mulatto character’s face” (25). Creating an analogy between the turn-of-the-century authors and the “historical majority” comprising African American women critics, Baker casts non-theorising women critics as latter-day tragic mulattas, who “worry, worry, worry about the approbation of a white other” (19). Houston A. Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991).

<sup>55</sup> Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 119.

<sup>56</sup> The burden of the name of Everett’s fictional protagonist has its real-life counterpart in Ralph Ellison’s own name, Ralph Waldo Ellison, after the preacher-philosopher Emerson. According to Kimberly Benston, Ellison, “having struggled against the ‘trouble’ caused him by social rituals of self-declaration,” followed “Emerson’s call for ‘self-reliance’ and ironically contracted his middle name [. . .] to the singular letter, ‘W’.” This minor gesture of un(naming) was Ellison’s private act of naming, “‘I yam what I yam: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American literature,” *Black Literature and Literary History*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Methuen, 1984) 159. Emerson, of course, appears as a character in *Invisible Man*. He is the last of the prospective employers to whom the narrator presents himself in New York, although he only sees the younger Emerson, who reveals the actual content of Bledsoe’s letter of introduction.

Interestingly, Ellison is known to have signed letters as B.P. Rinehart, the chameleonic character from *Invisible Man* (1952). See Timothy L. Parrish, “Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” *Contemporary Literature* XLV.3 (2004) 436.

<sup>57</sup> Baldwin 15.

<sup>58</sup> Irving Howe, *A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics* (New York: Horizon, 1963) 100.

<sup>59</sup> Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995) 159

<sup>60</sup> Ellison, *Essays* 171, emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup> Ellison, *Essays* 156, emphasis added.

<sup>62</sup> Ellison, *Essays* 160.

<sup>63</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 16.

Subsequent references will be contained in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>64</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) 238. Hereafter abbreviated to *ATW*, subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>65</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912; New York: Dover, 1995) 7-8. Hereafter abbreviated to *AE-CM*, subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>66</sup> Incidentally, the packaging of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Erasure* respectively aptly illustrate the tools used to market these novels. John Bloom notes that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was designed "to exude authenticity," with a cover "made to look like someone's idea of a yellowed, frayed-edge manuscript tied with twine," "Literary Blackface? The mystery of Hannah Crafts" in Gates and Robbins 431. Similarly, Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman observe that such a cover encourages the reader to "[c]ut the string, [. . .] open the book, and release Hannah from her symbolic bondage," "The Bondwoman's Narrative: Text, Paratext, Intertext and Hypertext," *Journal of American Studies* 39.2 (2005) 150.

Meanwhile, the Faber and Faber editions of *Erasure*, both hardcover and paperback, silhouette the title of Stagg Leigh's novel, *Fuck*, against the title of Everett's novel, *Erasure*, with the common "u" acting as the point of overlap. On the paperback cover, there is a photograph of a young African American boy holding a gun to his head, anticipating the novel's preoccupation with suicide. In the American Hyperion edition, the title *Erasure* appears alongside the novel's page numbers, with the letters comprising *Erasure* crossed out. The preponderance of Xs in this edition suggests, appropriately, both erasure and intersection.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana* (1859; New Jersey: Literature House, 1970). See also Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy. Three Classic African-American Novels*, Ed. and introd. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Random, 1990) 304. Hereafter abbreviated to *IL*, subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>68</sup> Jules Zanger, "The 'Tragic Octoroon' in Pre-Civil War Fiction," *American Quarterly* 18.1 (1966) 67.

<sup>69</sup> This confirms W.T. Lhamon, Jr.'s supposition that "the minstrel show has seeped well beyond its masked variants into vaudeville, thence into sitcoms; into jazz and rhythm 'n' blues quartets, thence into rock 'n' roll and hip hop dance; into the musical and the novel, thence into radio and film" and so on. W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998) 56.

<sup>70</sup> Max 37.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Willis, "I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?" *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing By Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (London: Routledge, 1990) 189.

<sup>72</sup> Many critics have argued that blackface has always been inflected with concerns over class. W. T. Lhamon, Jr. notes that in its very early manifestations, disempowered young white workers applied blackface as an act of social protest, "as a defiant measure of their own distance from those arguments among enfranchised interests. Youths in blackface were almost as estranged from the bourgeois inflections of the slavery quarrel as were the blacks whom they therefore chose to figure their dilemma and emphasize their distance" (43). David Roediger, Eric Lott and Michael Rogin also foreground the issue of class in their studies of blackface performance.

<sup>73</sup> According to Sander L. Gilman, "The model of 'passing' is the most fruitful to use in examining the history and efficacy of aesthetic surgery. Taken from the history of the construction of race, not gender, it provides the most comprehensive model for the

understanding of aesthetic surgery." *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1999) 22.

<sup>74</sup> In these passages, Everett is referring to and engaging with the theories of Roland Barthes. Everett problematizes Barthes' advocacy of "the birth of the reader" at the cost of "the death of the Author" by making Monk's readership a racist one. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* (London, 1977) 29 Oct. 2004 <<http://faculty.smu.edu/dfoster/theory/Barthes.htm>>.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929).

<sup>76</sup> Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000; London: Vintage, 2001) 138. Hereafter abbreviated to *HS*, subsequent references will be contained in parentheses within the body of the text.

<sup>77</sup> Benston 153.

<sup>78</sup> Benston 151.

<sup>79</sup> Benston 159.

<sup>80</sup> Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003) 8.

<sup>81</sup> Roth, *HS* 209.

<sup>82</sup> Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1986) 79, 80.

<sup>83</sup> Howe, "Philip Roth" 75.

<sup>84</sup> Howe, *A World* 114.

<sup>85</sup> Timothy Parrish and Michael T. Gilmore, convincingly, I think, read *The Human Stain* in relation to *Invisible Man*. Both emphasise certain structural similarities between the two novels – the importance of the words "spooks" and "invisible," and the centrality of boxing in both books. Michael T. Gilmore, *Surface and Depth: The Quest for Legibility in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003): 174-177. For reviews of and articles about *The Human Stain* citing Anatole Broyard as Roth's inspiration for Coleman Silk, see Michiko Kakutani, "Confronting the Failures Of a Professor Who Passes," Review of *The Human Stain*, *New York Times*, 2 May 2000, 9 Jan. 2002 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A02E0B1239F931A35756C0A9669C8B63>>, Lorrie Moore, "The Wrath of Athena," Review of *The Human Stain*, *New York Times Book Review*, 7 May 2000, 9 Jan. 2002 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9806EEDC1E30F934A35756C0A9669C8B63>>, Ross Posnock, "Purity and danger: On Philip Roth," *Raritan* 21.2 (2001) 11, Brett Ashley Kaplan, "Reading Race and the Conundrums of Reconciliation in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, ed. Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2005) 175 and Elaine B. Safer, "Tragedy and Farce in Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Critique* 43.3 (2002) 213.

<sup>86</sup> Parrish 425.

<sup>87</sup> Henry Louis Gates's article on Broyard first appeared under the title "White Like Me" in the *New Yorker* on 17 June 1996. I quote from the version reprinted in Gates's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Passing of Anatole Broyard," *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random, 1997) 184.

<sup>88</sup> Gates, "Passing" 203.

<sup>89</sup> Gates, "Passing" 198.

<sup>90</sup> Gates, "Passing" 203.

<sup>91</sup> Paul Spickard, "The Subject is Mixed Race: The Boom in Biracial Biography," *Rethinking 'Mixed Race.'* Ed. David Parker and Miri Song (London: Pluto, 2001) 81.

<sup>92</sup> Gates, "Passing", 181.

<sup>93</sup> David Matthews, who recounts his decision to pass in the 1980s, discusses the "selective editing" of his life story. Brooke Kroeger, *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (New York: Perseus, 2003) 13.

<sup>94</sup> Gates, "Passing" 207-208.

<sup>95</sup> The centrality of this letter is underscored by its appearance, scroll-like with "Everyone knows" partially visible and partially obscured, on the book jacket of the novel.

<sup>96</sup> In his non-fiction, Roth overtly links letter-writing and fiction-writing. In a discussion of Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), Roth observes that "times are tough for a fiction writer when he takes to writing letters to his newspaper rather than those complicated, disguised letters to himself, which are stories." Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Random, 2001). Incidentally, Mailer's infamous essay, "The White Negro," is collected in *Advertisements for Myself*. In his analysis of *The Human Stain*,

Ross Posnock distinguishes between the "racial primitivism" of a Mailer-esque Jewish appropriation of a black identity, and Coleman's black-for-Jewish passing, which is "a practical solution to his quest for self-invention" (Posnock 95).

<sup>97</sup> Gilmore 176.

<sup>98</sup> Catherine Nickerson, *The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by Women* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998) 57.

<sup>99</sup> G. Thomas Couser, "Genome and Genre: DNA and Life Writing," *Biography* 24.1 (2001) 187.

<sup>100</sup> Time Warner Press Release.

## Notes to Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends* (1857; Maryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997) 4. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> AE-CM 1.

<sup>3</sup> Senna 303.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Thoms, *Detection and Its Designs: Narrative and Power in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Detective Fiction* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1998) 1.

<sup>5</sup> Thoms 151, n.1.

<sup>6</sup> Thoms 2.

<sup>7</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2003) 18.

<sup>8</sup> Jinny Huh, "Whispers of Norbury: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Modernist Crisis of Racial Un(Detection)," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.3 (2003) 554.

<sup>9</sup> Huh 554.

<sup>10</sup> Reddy 80.

<sup>11</sup> Reddy 183-187. Set in antebellum New Orleans, Hambly's Benjamin January series is noteworthy for its detective-protagonist's *inability* to pass: January is a dark-skinned free man of color.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen, *Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001) 188-189.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 65.

<sup>14</sup> Soitos 65.

<sup>15</sup> Hazel Carby, Introduction, *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xxxix.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 1.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1992) viii.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Yarborough, Introduction, *Contending Forces* (1900; New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xxxiv-xxxvi.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Leys Stepan and Sander L. Gilman, "Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism," *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. and introd. Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 91-92.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (London: Penguin, 1996) Gould 155.

<sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Gould 155.

<sup>22</sup> The aristocratic villain's name is perhaps a reference to the benevolent slaveholder, Augustine St. Clare, in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Hopkins thereby suggests that even "good" masters were engaged in crimes against humanity.

<sup>23</sup> Gould 159.

<sup>24</sup> Pauline Hopkins, *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*, ed. Hazel V. Carby (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 20. Hereafter abbreviated to MN, subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>25</sup> Zanger 67.

<sup>26</sup> Saks 68

<sup>27</sup> Saks 62.

<sup>28</sup> Raimon, 76, emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976) 56-57.

<sup>30</sup> Saks 63.

<sup>31</sup> Saks 62-63. Maryland enacted the first miscegenation statute in 1661. The *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision (1967) invalidated individual States' miscegenation laws.

<sup>32</sup> Doane 1, emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Raimon, 76, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Stott viii.

<sup>35</sup> John M. Reilly, "Femme Fatale," *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, ed. Rosemary Herbert et al (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 155.

<sup>36</sup> Cawelti 147-148.

<sup>37</sup> Cawelti 154.

<sup>38</sup> Carby, Introduction xxxix. According to Carby, Aurelia "is an example of the masculinized female character first found in popular fiction in the 1860s."

<sup>39</sup> Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan. (London: British Film Institute, 2000) 56.

<sup>40</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) AWNM? 106, emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> Harper, AWNM? 106. The revealing passage to which Harper refers may be found in William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* in Gates, *Three Classics* 48-49. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>42</sup> Doane 2.

<sup>43</sup> As Eve Allegra Raimon has convincingly shown, *Clotel* is itself a composite of "tragic mulatta" literary antecedents. Brown refers to and rewrites Lydia Maria Child's fiction, notably her 1842 story "The Quadroons" (65-66).

<sup>44</sup> Yellin, *Women* 72.

<sup>45</sup> Doane 2.

<sup>46</sup> Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, "Toward the Definition of Film Noir," trans. R. Barton Palmer, *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996) 62.

<sup>47</sup> See Carby, *RW* 23-34 and duCille 31.

<sup>48</sup> Carby, *RW* 148.

<sup>49</sup> For example, for Houston A. Baker, subjecthood in nineteenth-century fiction by African American women "comes to mean an implicit approval of white patriarchy inscribed in the very features of the mulatto character's face" (25).

<sup>50</sup> Michele Hunter, "Revisiting the Third Space: Reading Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*," *Literature and Racial Ambiguity*, ed. Teresa Hubel and Neil Brooks (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002) 304.

<sup>51</sup> Hunter 304.

<sup>52</sup> Bost 76.

<sup>53</sup> Bost 75-76.

<sup>54</sup> For an opposing view of Jewel, see Anne Goldman, who argues that through Jewel, a gun-toting western girl, "Hopkins enlivens the pale portrait of the mulatta, and, by framing Jewel's 'fire' as regional rather than a raced characteristic, avoids recirculating disabling representations of women of color as licentious." *Continental Divides: Revisioning American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2000) 101.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen P. Knadler, *The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2002) 71.

<sup>56</sup> Knadler 72.

<sup>57</sup> Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1980) 98.

<sup>58</sup> Hanna Wallinger, *Pauline E. Hopkins: A Literary Biography* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005) 7.

<sup>59</sup> Wallinger 62.

<sup>60</sup> Knadler 60.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Gilbert H. Muller, Roger A. Berger and Liam Kennedy, who all identify the opening of *Devil in a Blue Dress* as an explicit reference to and reworking of the opening scene in Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* (1942). Gilbert H. Muller, "Double Agent: The Los Angeles Crime Cycle of Walter Mosley," *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Essays*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1995) 292, Roger A. Berger, "'The Black Dick': Race, Sexuality, and Discourse in the L.A. Novels of Walter Mosley,"

*African American Review* 31.2 (1997) 283-286, Liam Kennedy, "Black Noir: Race and Urban Space in Walter Mosley's Detective Fiction," *Criminal Proceedings: The Contemporary American Crime Novel*, ed. Peter Messent (Chicago: Pluto, 1997) 51.

Where Mosley has been situated within an African American detective tradition, he is most likely to be compared with Chester Himes. Muller calls Himes and Mosley "transcontinental twins" who use the crime genre "to explore the black urban experience in New York and Los Angeles respectively" (293). See also Robert Crooks, "From the Far Side of the Urban Frontier: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley," *College Literature* 22.3 (1994) 68-89.

<sup>62</sup> John Cullen Gruesser, *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005) 64.

<sup>63</sup> Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," *African American Review* 27.4 (1993): 525.

<sup>64</sup> Eric Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," *American Literary History* 9.3 (1997) 543.

<sup>65</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, "'The Dark Continent of Film Noir': Race, Displacement and Metaphor in Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942) and Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948)," in Kaplan 191.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries*, see Wald 82-115.

<sup>67</sup> Kaplan 186, Lott 550.

<sup>68</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990) 162.

<sup>69</sup> Davis 164.

<sup>70</sup> Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990; London: Serpent's Tail, 2001) 205.

Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>71</sup> Mosley's second Easy Rawlins mystery, *A Red Death*, underlines this association between Daphne, passing and death. Recounting the events of five years previously, Easy recalls his search for Daphne Monet: "I found her, but she wasn't exactly what she seemed to be, and a lot of people died." *A Red Death* in *The Walter Mosley Omnibus* (1991; London: Picador, 1996) 203.

<sup>72</sup> Borde and Chaumeton 62.

<sup>73</sup> Theodore O. Mason, Jr., "Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins: The Detective and Afro-American Fiction," *The Kenyon Review* 14.4 (1992): 179.

<sup>74</sup> Goldman 86, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Easy's house is, for Theodore Mason, "an emblem of transgression" (179).

What Easy finds in Daphne, Marilyn C. Wesley claims, is "the transgression of the status quo," "Power and Knowledge in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*," *African American Review* 35.1 (2001) 111.

<sup>76</sup> Mason 180.

<sup>77</sup> Alison D. Goeller, "The Mystery of Identity: The Private Eye (I) in the Detective Fiction of Walter Mosley and Tony Hillerman," *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction*, eds. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003) 178.

<sup>78</sup> Susan Gubar describes the trajectory of the tragic mulatta as "one of homesickness: Beginning in a state of dis-ease at her confining black origins, she ends up after her traffic in an invalid white culture sick over her inability to return to those origins." *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 104.

<sup>79</sup> Diawara 525.

<sup>80</sup> Berger 292.

<sup>81</sup> Thoms 65.

<sup>82</sup> Bertens and D'haen 188.

<sup>83</sup> Bertens and D'haen 188.

<sup>84</sup> Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1949), 41.

<sup>85</sup> Sollors, *NBNWYB* 263.

<sup>86</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, *There is Confusion*, (1924; New York: Boni and Liveright, 1974) 274.

<sup>87</sup> According to Judith Berzon, depictions of the mulatto have always been united "by the concept of 'marginality': the mulatto is defined in terms of his marginal position within the culture" (13).

Robert Skinner, e-mail from the author, 16 Mar. 2004.

<sup>88</sup> George Grella, "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel," *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 108.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Skinner, *Pale Shadow* (Arizona: Poisoned Press, 2001) 139. Hereafter abbreviated to PS, subsequent references will be contained in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>90</sup> Grella 110.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Skinner, Personal interview with the Author, 16 Mar. 2005.

<sup>92</sup> Carby, RW 150.

<sup>93</sup> Although it is not, strictly speaking, a passing narrative, Charles Chesnutt's story "The Sheriff's Children" from his collection *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899) is interesting from the point-of-view of paternity and deploys the trope of (mis)recognition common to the racial passing story. In this short story, the eponymous white sheriff finds himself protecting a mulatto prisoner accused of murder from a lynch mob. It turns out that the prisoner, who is innocent of the crime, is actually the sheriff's illegitimate son.

<sup>94</sup> Williamson 8. The relationship between American miscegenation law and the notion of parental authority is multifaceted. The 1662 Virginia law broke from English custom, and thus could be interpreted as a rebellion against the parent country. For an explanation of how miscegenation law enabled Southern states to assert their independence from Federal courts, see Eva Saks.

<sup>95</sup> Anthony G. Barthelmy argues that the famous Susie Phipps case in 1982 merely follows the trend established in previous challenges to Louisiana's system of racial classification whereby "white male dominance created and promoted a patriarchal system in which men would not be accountable for their actions" and thus, in each case that he cites, "the source of the [racial] alarm is matrilineal." "Light, Bright, Damn Near White: Race, the Politics of Genealogy, and the Strange Case of Susie Guillory," *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, ed. Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2000) 266.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Skinner, *Skin Deep, Blood Red* (New York: Kensington, 1997) 197. Hereafter abbreviated to SD, subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>97</sup> Reddy 10.

<sup>98</sup> Reddy 11.

<sup>99</sup> Tom Hiney and Frank McShane, eds., *The Raymond Chandler Papers: Selected Letters and Non-Fiction, 1909-1959* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000) 157.

<sup>100</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>101</sup> Robert Skinner, Interview with Kent Westmoreland, *Plots with Guns*, 2001, 2 February 2005 <<http://www.plotswithguns.com/skinner%20interview.htm>>.

<sup>102</sup> Ralph Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the U.S.A.* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 121.

<sup>103</sup> W. Kenneth Holditch, "Latter-Day Creoles: A New Age of New Orleans Literature," *Literary New Orleans in the Modern World*, Ed. Richard S. Kennedy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1998) 137-138.

<sup>104</sup> Lewis P. Simpson argues that after the Civil War, New Orleans became fixed in "that form of nineteenth-century literary exoticism known as local color" to the extent that "it was virtually impossible for the imagination to transcend it" and asks: "Is New Orleans ever to be redeemed from its imprisonment in the exotic mode?" *Literary New Orleans: Essays and Meditations*, ed. Richard S. Kennedy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1992) 80-83.

<sup>105</sup> David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003) xx.

<sup>106</sup> Virginia R. Domínguez, *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1986) 150, 152.

<sup>107</sup> Taylor 93.

<sup>108</sup> Domínguez 153.

<sup>109</sup> Violet Harrington Bryan, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1993) 7.

<sup>110</sup> Reflecting on 1910 statistics, John Mencke concludes: "It seems likely that among those mixed-bloods who were of the lightest complexions, men would have been more likely to leave the Negro race in favor of becoming white. Not only would men have

been more mobile in terms of occupation, residence, and associates, but they would also have married outside the race somewhat more easily, thereby insuring their identification as white." John G. Mencke, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images, 1865-1918* (USA: UMI Research P, 1979) 27.

<sup>111</sup> Carlyle Van Thompson's study is the only one to deal exclusively with male passers. As well as the novels by Chesnutt and Johnson, Van Thompson examines William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) which, he argues, is a narrative of racial passing. In addition to these examples, there are some male passers to be found in short fiction. See, for example, Louisa May Alcott, "M.L.," *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery*, ed. and introd. Sarah Elbert (1863; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997) 3-28, Pauline Hopkins, "The Test of Manhood: A Christmas Story," *Colored American Magazine* Dec. 1902: 113-119 and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "The Stones of the Village," *Centers of the Self: Short Stories by Black American Women from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, ed. and introd. Judith A. Hamer and Martin J. Hamer (1910; New York: Hill and Wang, 1994) 46-66.

<sup>112</sup> Harper, *AWNM?* 103.

<sup>113</sup> Incidentally, I don't believe Roth *entirely* dispenses with the convention. The inner turmoil over his/her own identity, which is the feminised mulatto's defining dilemma, is displaced on to Coleman's son, Mark Silk.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Skinner, *Cat-Eyed Trouble* (New York: Kensington, 1998) 31.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Skinner, *Blood to Drink* (Arizona: Poisoned Pen, 2000) 187.

<sup>116</sup> Grella 114.

<sup>117</sup> Grella 114.

<sup>118</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>119</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>120</sup> Eugenia DeLamotte, "'Collusions of the Mystery': Ideology and the Gothic in *Hagar's Daughter*," *Gothic Studies* 6.1 (2004) 70.

<sup>121</sup> Louis Vyhnanek, *Unorganised Crime: New Orleans in the 1920s* (Lafayette: U of Southwestern Louisiana, 1998) 30.

<sup>122</sup> For a discussion of actual incidences of passing in New Orleans, see Arthé Anthony's article, which is based upon interviews carried out with members of the African American community born between 1885 and 1905, roughly contemporaneous with Farrell's birth around 1900. Arthé A. Anthony, "'Lost Boundaries': Racial Passing and Poverty in Segregated New Orleans," *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, ed. Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2000) 295-316.

<sup>123</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>124</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>125</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>126</sup> Reddy 38.

<sup>127</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998) 217.

### Notes to Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments* (Cambridge: 1800) 185. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale Group, 6 Feb. 2006 <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>>.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Erdrich, interview with Mark Anthony Rolo, *The Progressive* April 2002, 2 July 2004 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1295/is\\_4\\_66/ai\\_84866888](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1295/is_4_66/ai_84866888)>.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Goldschmidt, "Introduction: Race, Nation, and Religion," *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas*, ed. Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister (New York: Oxford, 2004) 3. The American Religious Identification Survey, carried out among adults in 2001, found that eighty-one percent of those surveyed consider that they have a religious affiliation. Of this number, seventy-seven percent identified Christianity as their religious affiliation. "American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS): Key Findings," 20 Dec. 2005 <[http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_briefs/aris/key\\_findings.htm](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/key_findings.htm)>.

As further evidence that the United States is far from secularised, I would point to the phenomenon of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which grossed \$370,614,210 at the U.S. box office and was the third highest grossing film of the year after



Shrek 2 and Spider-Man 2. See "Top Grossing Movies for 2004 in the USA," 1 December 2005 <<http://www.imdb.com/Sections/Years/2004/top-grossing>>.

<sup>4</sup> Goldschmidt 5. In refuting the notion that religion has been supplanted by race and nation, Goldschmidt refers to George W. Bush's rhetoric in the aftermath of 9/11, calling for "a 'crusade' against terrorism, to protect the 'civilized world' from 'barbarians' and 'evildoers'" (4). More recently, it has been reported that Bush informed Palestinian ministers that God told him to invade Iraq. BBC Press Release 6 October 2005, 1 December 2005 <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10\\_october/06/bush.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10_october/06/bush.shtml)>.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Lively, *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (London: Vintage, 1999) 4.

<sup>6</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Asians in Anglo-American Feminism," *Changing Words: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Routledge, 1993) 244.

<sup>7</sup> As I write, Erdrich's reservation novels are: *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994) and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Sara Maitland, *A Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 118.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 61. From her book's first publication in 1968 to its reissue in 1975, Daly undergoes a "dramatic/traumatic change of consciousness from 'radical Catholic' to postchristian feminist" (5). From thinking that the Church (capital 'c') could be reformed in 1968, Daly comes to believe that "a woman's asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan" (5-6).

<sup>10</sup> Daly 61.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision," *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992) 139.

<sup>12</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza 139.

<sup>13</sup> Jeana DelRosso, *Writing Catholic Women: Contemporary International Catholic Girlhood Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 172.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1999) 14.

<sup>15</sup> Dyer, *White* 16, 15.

<sup>16</sup> According to Thomas F. Gossett, "The account in Genesis tells of Ham's expressing contempt for his father because Noah had become drunk and was lying naked in a stupor. Noah's other sons had covered their father's nakedness, averting their eyes so as not to witness his shame, but Ham had not averted his eyes. Noah blessed the descendants of Shem and Japheth, his other sons, but cursed the descendants of Ham." Defenders of slavery adapted the story, claiming that the "curse" was that of black skin, a suggestion that is nowhere present in Genesis. *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 5.

In a self-published 1905 pamphlet, Hopkins revises the story of Ham, claiming that Shem, Ham and Japheth, all of different complexions, went their separate ways after the confusion of tongues at Babel. Ham, the swarthiest of the three, settled in Africa, which accounts for his African descendents' dark skin. She thus attributes the division of mankind into races to geographical dispersal rather than a "curse," *A Primer of Facts* (Cambridge: P.E. Hopkins, 1905) 6.

<sup>17</sup> Lively 24. Lively's words demonstrate that even the more "positively" infused Christian views of people of colour are problematic.

<sup>18</sup> Lively 84.

<sup>19</sup> It was not uniquely white abolitionist writers that deployed the "Black Christ" figure in their writings. In his 1845 narrative, when Frederick Douglass describes his seven-mile journey to Master Thomas's store in order to report his mistreatment at the hands of Mr. Covey, he does so in terms explicitly reminiscent of Christ on the Road to Calvary. Douglass reports falling down (Jesus fell three times) and finally arrives at his master's store "covered in blood" and "torn in sundry places with briars and thorns" (*Narrative* 71).

<sup>20</sup> Judith Shapiro, "Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex," *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991) 270. Marjorie Garber concurs. See *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1993) 215.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998) 21.

<sup>22</sup> Halberstam 28.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 125.

<sup>24</sup> Garber 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (Boston: Beacon, 1998) 27.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990) 137.

<sup>27</sup> Garber 17. It should be noted from the outset that although my readings of *Winona* and *The Last Report* are deeply indebted to Garber, I restrict my use of the term "cross-dressing" to incidents of full gender disguise – whether temporary, like *Winona's*, or permanent, like Father Damien's. I do not, in other words, use the term "cross-dressing" to denote "the synecdochic quotation of transvestism" – such as the wearing of necklaces or earrings by men – as Garber does (275).

<sup>28</sup> Feinberg 27.

<sup>29</sup> Garber 11.

<sup>30</sup> Halberstam 26-27.

<sup>31</sup> Halberstam 26.

<sup>32</sup> Even combined discussions of all three magazine novels are heavily weighted in favour of *Hagar's Daughter* and/or *Of One Blood*. See Carby's Introduction to *The Magazine Novels* xxix-1, Tate 193-201 and Augusta Rohrbach "To Be Continued: Double Identity, Multiplicity and Antigenealogy as Narrative Strategies in Pauline Hopkins's Magazine Fiction," *Callaloo* 22.2 (1999) 483-498.

<sup>33</sup> Almost one hundred years after the publication of Hopkins's *Winona*, Michelle Cliff's novel *Free Enterprise* (1993), also featuring John Brown as a character, appeared. Like *Winona*, *Free Enterprise* confronts the imbrication of racial and religious discourses in the nineteenth century, particularly in one memorable scene in which Mary Ellen Pleasant and John Brown argue over what Pleasant sees as Christianity's tendency to view African Americans as mere abstractions. Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (New York: Dutton, 1993) 147-151.

<sup>34</sup> Throughout this piece, the term "mixedblood" will be used to denote subjects of mixed white and American Indian ancestry, unless I am quoting from the texts, because it is preferable, I think, to the alternatives: "half-blood" or "half-breed."

<sup>35</sup> Martha H. Patterson, "'Kin' o' Rough Jestice Fer a Parson': Pauline Hopkins's *Winona* and the Politics of Reconstructing History," *African American Review* 32.3 (1998) 451.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, "Afterword: *Winona*, Bakhtin, and Hopkins in the Twenty-first Century," *The Unruly Voice: Rediscovering Pauline Hopkins*, ed. John Cullen Gruesser (Urbana: U of Illinois P) 215-216.

<sup>37</sup> Pauline E. Hopkins, Preface, *Contending Forces*, *Digital Schomburg: African American Women Writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 15 Jan. 2006 <[http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/www97247/@Generic\\_\\_BookView](http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/www97247/@Generic__BookView)>. Subsequent references to *Contending Forces* will be taken from the X Press edition, retitled *A Love Supreme*, and will be included in parentheses, with the abbreviation CF, in the body of the text. Pauline Hopkins, *A Love Supreme* (1900; London: X Press, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> Mason Stokes, "Someone's in the Garden with Eve: Race, Religion, and the American Fall," *American Quarterly* 50.4 (1998) 719.

<sup>39</sup> Lively 13. In *A Primer of Facts*, Hopkins makes clear her own resistance to the theory of polygenism, claiming in the very first sentence that "Man began his existence in the creation of Adam, therefore all races of mankind were once united and descended from one parentage" (5).

<sup>40</sup> Stokes 726.

<sup>41</sup> On the American West as Eden, see, for example, Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (London: Paladin, 1968) 30.

<sup>42</sup> Carby, Introduction xxix, Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 200.

<sup>43</sup> Marcus Klein, *Easterns, Westerns, and Private Eyes: American Matters, 1870-1900* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994) 74.

<sup>44</sup> Klein 95.

<sup>45</sup> Klein 74.

<sup>46</sup> Harry J. Brown, *Injun Joe's Ghost: The Indian Mixed-Blood in American Writing* (Missouri: U of Missouri P, 2004) 123.

<sup>47</sup> Ammons 216. It is likely that Ammons is drawing upon Jane Tompkins's *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) as her source for this claim. According to Tompkins, "Westerns either push women out of the picture completely or assign them roles in which they exist only to serve the needs of men" (39-40). However, Tompkins restricts her discussion to western movies and does not specifically discuss dime novels.

<sup>48</sup> Klein 101.

<sup>49</sup> Klein 94.

<sup>50</sup> Patterson 447.

<sup>51</sup> Ammons 214.

<sup>52</sup> Laura Wexler, "Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform," *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 15.

<sup>53</sup> The ambivalence of *Winona* – its successful deconstruction of the black-white binary that nonetheless reinforces the western form's imperialist tendencies – is even more pointed in Hopkins's third and final serialised novel, *Of One Blood* (1902-1903). From the domestic imperialist context of *Winona* (the American West), Hopkins turns her attention to Africa, focusing upon Reuel Brigg's "discovery" of a Hidden City on an expedition to Africa. Although her Afrocentric tale celebrates the ancient civilisation of Ethiopia, Hopkins's Christian commitment to a "civilizing mission" blinds her to the explicit imperialism of Reuel Briggs's decision to remain in Ethiopia to teach "his people all that he had learned in years of contact with modern culture" (MN 621). As Kevin Gaines argues, *Of One Blood* thus betrays the problematic similarities between the ideologies of racial uplift and American imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. "Black Americans' Racial Uplift Ideology as 'Civilizing Mission': Pauline E. Hopkins on Race and Imperialism," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 433-455.

<sup>54</sup> Patterson 448.

<sup>55</sup> Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 22. For Huhndorf, the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition are "emblematic events." The first occurred in the same year as the Battle of the Little Big Horn, the last Native American military victory, and the second took place some three years after the Wounded Knee massacre. The expositions thus "expressed critical changes in the place Native peoples occupied in the American cultural imagination" (22).

<sup>56</sup> Huhndorf 59.

<sup>57</sup> Huhndorf 61, my emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Reconstruction and After*, Vol. IV (New York: International, 1975) 556, n.52.

<sup>59</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Introduction to the Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition," in Foner 472.

<sup>60</sup> See Nancy Bentley, "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," *American Literature* 65.3 (1993) 501-522.

<sup>61</sup> In the racial discourse of the day, the term "griffe" connoted a person of mixed African American and American Indian ancestry.

<sup>62</sup> John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002) 183.

<sup>63</sup> Stauffer 189.

<sup>64</sup> It is also likely a reference to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, in which Simon Covey sends Douglass out with a team of "unbroken oxen" in order to fetch a load of wood. When he twice loses control of the oxen, Covey punishes him with a "severe whipping" (*Narrative* 64).

<sup>65</sup> Jennifer Putzi, "Raising the Stigma": Black Womanhood and the Marked Body in Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*," *College Literature* 31.2 (2004) 3.

<sup>66</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 127.

<sup>67</sup> Tate 208.

<sup>68</sup> Tate 208.

<sup>69</sup> The simultaneous racial and gender passing in which Ellen Craft engaged in 1848 – and described in the Crafts' own story, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) – inspired comparable fictional escape scenes in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853). The flight of the Crafts is actually anticipated in an episode in Richard Hildreth's *The Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836), in which Archy and Cassy plan their escape – which is subsequently foiled – based upon their passing as white and having Cassy “adopt a man's dress, and accompany [Archy] in the character of a younger brother” (1836; New Jersey: Gregg, 1968) 62-63.

In contrast to these examples, but in common with Winona, light-skinned Harriet Jacobs recounts blacking and cross-dressing as a sailor in her bid for freedom. See *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in Appiah 247.

<sup>70</sup> I refer here to the 1853 edition of *Clotel*. In a subsequent edition of Brown's novel (1864), it should be noted, George becomes Jerome, a man “of pure African origin” and “perfectly black.” See M. Giulia Fabi for a discussion of the three versions of *Clotel* 7-28, especially 24-25.

<sup>71</sup> Fox-Genovese 468.

<sup>72</sup> This recalls Claude McKay's story “Near-White” (1932) in which the white features of the protagonist, Angelina Dove, possess “no trace of the stigmata of Africa” (565).

<sup>73</sup> Garber 9.

<sup>74</sup> Ammons 217.

<sup>75</sup> Somerville claims that through Winona's disguise, Hopkins “introduces the specter of homosexuality into her text,” *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 101.

<sup>76</sup> Maitland 16.

<sup>77</sup> Patterson 453.

<sup>78</sup> Garber 6.

<sup>79</sup> Babe Bean emerged again as Jack Garland, a lieutenant who served during the Spanish-American war, and, interestingly, though Hopkins could not possibly have predicted it, as a male nurse in San Francisco in 1906. San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “‘She Even Chewed Tobacco’: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women in America,” *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990) 189-192.

<sup>80</sup> San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project 189.

<sup>81</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom* is the most obvious and vivid example of this.

<sup>82</sup> Maitland 58.

<sup>83</sup> Somerville 109.

<sup>84</sup> Somerville 109.

<sup>85</sup> Tracy Fessenden, “The Sisters of the Holy Family and the Veil of Race,” *Religion and American Culture* 10.2 (2000) 190.

<sup>86</sup> Fessenden 192.

<sup>87</sup> According to Fessenden, Delille's sister followed this course (191).

<sup>88</sup> Fessenden outlines the various forms of racism to which the Sisters were subjected. During their early years, Antoine Blanc, archbishop of New Orleans, refused them permission to wear a habit or to make public vows (188).

<sup>89</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “Sister Josepha,” *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*, rpt. *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*, Vol. 1, ed. Gloria T. Hull (1899; New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 155-172.

<sup>90</sup> Susan M. Griffin, “Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale,” *PMLA* 111.1 (1996) 95.

<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, this “othering” of Catholicism has, in some cultural contexts outside the United States, taken the form of a preoccupation with cross-dressing nuns, priests and monks. For instance, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Gothic novels, and novels inspired by the gothic form, the “notorious deployment of gender travesty in a religious context provided not only titillating shock value but also a ‘reading’ of Catholicism as hypocritical and erotic, something to be unmasked” (Garber 218). The significance of the religious transvestite figures in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), respectively, is, according to Marjorie Garber, “as much England/France and Protestant/Catholic as it is male/female: the phantom appearance of the transvestite, once again, marks a category crisis *elsewhere*.”

<sup>92</sup> According to the 2001 ARIS, Catholics represent almost twenty-five percent of those Americans declaring a religious affiliation. Paula M. Kane notes that in 1900, there were about 12 million Catholics in America, which represented about 16 percent of the national population. Kane further reports the projection that "by 2020 Spanish will be the native tongue of more than 50 percent of American Catholics, a marked shift from the domination of Catholic polity by Irish and Euro-Americans." "American Catholic Culture in the Twentieth Century," *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Peter W. Williams (Malden, Blackwell, 1999) 390.

<sup>93</sup> David G. Hackett, "Gender and Religion in American Culture," *Religion and American Culture* 5.2 (1995) 129.

<sup>94</sup> Hackett 129.

<sup>95</sup> Griffin 104.

<sup>96</sup> Maitland 51.

<sup>97</sup> Fessenden 196.

<sup>98</sup> Nancy Lusignan Schultz, "Introduction," *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth Century Convent Tales* (Indiana: Purdue UP, 1999) xix

<sup>99</sup> Schultz xxvii.

<sup>100</sup> James R. Lewis, "'Mind-Forged Manacles': Anti-Catholic Convent Narratives in the Context of the American Captivity Tale Tradition," *Mid-America: An Historical Review* 72.3 (1990) 158.

<sup>101</sup> Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (1984; New York: Bantam, 1987) 40. Hereafter abbreviated to *LM*, subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>102</sup> Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* in Schultz 47.

<sup>103</sup> Louise Erdrich, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (London: Flamingo, 2001) 13. Hereafter abbreviated to *LR*, subsequent references will be contained in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>104</sup> Few critics state categorically that Pauline passes for white in order to become a nun. However, Nancy J. Peterson, *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 2001) 28 and Sheila Hassell Hughes, "Tongue-Tied: Rhetoric and Relation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *MELUS* 25.3/4 (2000) 109-110, are two that do.

<sup>105</sup> Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988) 205. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses within the text.

<sup>106</sup> The Dawes Act "divided reservation lands into allotments of 160 acres and 80 acres which were assigned, respectively, to the heads of families and other individuals over the age of eighteen." The Act was designed "to hasten the integration of Indians into American society by promoting the growth of commercial agriculture on reservations. Allotted lands were held in trust for a period of twenty-five years, during which it was hoped that Indians would learn to become efficient farmers and acculturate to white ways through converting to Christianity and pursuing formal education at off-reservation schools." Helena Grice, Candida Hepworth, Maria Lauret and Martin Padget, *Beginning Ethnic American Literatures* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001) 41.

<sup>107</sup> Dennis Walsh, "Catholicism in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25.2 (2001) 107-127.

<sup>108</sup> James McKenzie, "'Sharing What I Know': An Interview with Francis Cree," *North Dakota Quarterly* 59.4 (1991) 106.

<sup>109</sup> Theresa S. Smith, "The Church of the Immaculate Conception: Inculturation and Identity among the Anishnaabeg of Manitoulin Island," *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lee Irwin (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2000) 146.

<sup>110</sup> David Murray, "Spreading the Word: Missionaries, Conversion and Circulation in the Northeast," *Spiritual Encounters: Interactions between Christianity and Native Religions in Colonial America*, ed. Nicholas Griffiths and Fernando Cervantes (Birmingham: U of Birmingham P, 1999) 50.

<sup>111</sup> Dyer, *White* 15.

<sup>112</sup> Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997) 481.

<sup>113</sup> Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and American Culture* 9.1 (1999) 102.

<sup>114</sup> Several critics have discussed Nanapush's affinities with the mythical trickster. See, for example, Sheila Hassell Hughes (91).

<sup>115</sup> Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 73-74.

<sup>116</sup> Rita Ferrari, "Where the Maps Stopped": The Aesthetics of Borders in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, *Style* 33.1(1999) 144. See also Peterson 145.

<sup>117</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 116.

<sup>118</sup> DelRosso 21.

<sup>119</sup> Lulu is the daughter of Fleur who is, in fact, one of the most visible characters in Erdrich's reservation novels, although she has not yet appeared as a narrator. She is present in: *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) and *Four Souls* (2004).

<sup>120</sup> July 14 2004 <[http://www.heraldryunlimited.com/Symbolism/symbolism\\_p\\_r.htm](http://www.heraldryunlimited.com/Symbolism/symbolism_p_r.htm)>.

<sup>121</sup> According to Pope John Paul II, suicide "represents a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death, as proclaimed in the prayer of ancient sage of Israel: 'You have power over life and death; you lead men down to the gates of Hades and back again' (Wis 16:13; cf. Tb 13:2)" (545).

<sup>122</sup> Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (California: Wadsworth, 1982) 117.

<sup>123</sup> I use the term "berdache" because it is the most commonly-used and accepted anthropological term. However, some critics, such as Paula Gunn Allen, understandably take exception to the application of this term, because its Arabic etymology connotes "sex-slave boy." *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1992) 199.

<sup>124</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, "Sexuality and Gender in Certain Native American Tribes: The Case of Cross-Gender Females," *Signs* 10 (1984) 29. Will Roscoe calls this figure a "female berdache," which he defines as "anatomical females occupying a named social status involving cross- or mixed- gender economic and social behavior, sometimes partial and/or occasional cross-dressing, and sometimes relationships with (non-berdache) women." *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St. Martins, 1998) 73.

Although I am only concerned with Father Damien's berdachism here, Julie Barak notes these kind of crossovers in many other Erdrich characters, "Blurs, Blends, Berdaches: Gender Mixing in the Novels of Louise Erdrich" *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 8.3 (1996) 49-62.

<sup>125</sup> Roscoe 73, Blackwood 31.

<sup>126</sup> Roscoe 73.

<sup>127</sup> Murray 52.

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Garber 214.

<sup>129</sup> Garber 215.

<sup>130</sup> Garber 215.

<sup>131</sup> Elizabeth Castelli "I Will Make Mary Male": Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991) 47.

<sup>132</sup> *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*, 14 July 2004 <[http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/naind/html/na\\_024700\\_nanabozho.htm](http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/naind/html/na_024700_nanabozho.htm)>.

<sup>133</sup> John A. Grim, *The Shaman: Patterns of Religious Healing Among the Ojibway Indians* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1987) 85.

<sup>134</sup> Connie A. Jacobs, *The Novels of Louise Erdrich: Stories of her People* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 73.

<sup>135</sup> "The Leopoldine Society," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2 Feb. 2005 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/16052a.htm>>.

<sup>136</sup> DelRosso 75.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in Patterson 447.

<sup>138</sup> Wallinger 64.

<sup>139</sup> Wallinger 64.

<sup>140</sup> See Ammons 214.

<sup>141</sup> Harry J. Brown 53. 1 December 2005 <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uon/Doc?id=10069595&ppg=53>>.

<sup>142</sup> Qtd. in Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) xv.

<sup>143</sup> Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 12.

<sup>144</sup> Dearborn 9.

<sup>145</sup> Dearborn 9.

<sup>146</sup> Jonathan Brennan, Introduction, *Mixed Race Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002) 6.

<sup>147</sup> Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998) 26.

<sup>148</sup> Owens 40.

<sup>149</sup> Owens 39.

<sup>150</sup> Ferrari 144.

<sup>151</sup> Sheila Hassell Hughes notes that the trickster's doubleness of speech "works simultaneously to undermine the power of the privileged oppressor and to appeal for his or her realignment on the side of the oppressed" (87). Jeanne Rosier Smith provides an exhaustive analysis of tricksterism in *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, *The Beet Queen* and *The Bingo Palace*, 71-110.

<sup>152</sup> Dearborn 29.

<sup>153</sup> Julie Barak suggests that the close cooperation between Erdrich and former husband, Michael Dorris, represents a type of authorial berdachism: "Through their play with authorial gender and the gender blending of their authorial selves in their shared labor they create the exchange and transformation Erdrich sees as necessary in gendered relationships" (50). Michael Dorris committed suicide in 1997, amid accusations of sexual and physical abuse from two of their adopted children. Erdrich and Dorris were estranged by then, having separated in 1995.

<sup>154</sup> As Rita Ferrari puts it, Erdrich's novels "defy containment as they construct and transgress boundaries within discrete texts and across novels – since they deal with the same place and many of the same characters, with different emphases," (160, n. 2). Furthermore, Erdrich published an expanded version of her 1984 novel, *Love Medicine*, in 1993, an act that "challenges the primacy of first editions and questions the authenticity of all proposed 'beginnings'" (Hassell Hughes 113, n.9).

## Notes to Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (New York: Stain and Day, 1964) 134.

<sup>2</sup> According to Joseph F. Kett, "An abundant and systematic literature on adolescent guidance did not exist in America before 1900. The word 'adolescence' appeared only rarely outside of scientific literature prior to the twentieth century." "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Family in History: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg (London: Harper and Row, 1973) 97.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 92.

<sup>4</sup> Kett 95.

<sup>5</sup> Bederman 106.

<sup>6</sup> Bederman 110-111.

<sup>7</sup> Bederman 111.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara E. White, *Growing up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1985) 3.

Geta Leseur provides a useful definition of the *Bildungsroman* form: "The bildungsroman is a novelistic form of German origin. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, published in 1795, served as a model for the form as it was later seen in France, England, other parts of the European continent, and the United States. The form has been defined in various ways: the novel of development, novel of education (the literal translation of *bildungsroman*), 'apprenticeship' novel, autobiographical novel, novel of childhood and adolescence, and the novel of initiation. The word came into use in the late nineteenth century outside Germany and became popular in England in the early Victorian era." *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1995) 2-3, n.1.

<sup>9</sup> B. White 13.

<sup>10</sup> Gina Hausknecht, "Self-Possession, Dolls, Beatlemania, Loss: Telling the Girl's Own Story," *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*, ed. Ruth O. Saxton (London: Macmillan, 1998) 22.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in a recent study of African American and Jewish American *Bildungsromane* by Martin Japtok, two of the three African American novels discussed – *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and *Plum Bun* (1928) – are also narratives of racial passing. *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa: U of Iowa P, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> According to Alice Dreger, 5-alpha-reductase (5-AR) deficiency is "one of the most striking forms of hermaphroditism because it results in an apparent female-to-male transformation at puberty. During fetal development the 'male' child's testes produce testosterone. But in order for the developmental 'message' of the testosterone to be 'heard' in the child, the tissues must have the enzyme 5-alpha-reductase, which converts the testosterone 'readable' dihydrotestosterone. If it is lacking, as it is in cases of 5-AR deficiency, the fetus will develop female-like genitalia. Therefore 5-AR individuals are born with feminine-looking genitalia, including generally a short vagina and apparent labia and clitoris. At puberty, however, the testes of these individuals produce more testosterone, and for the pubertal changes to occur the body doesn't need the converting work of the 5-AR enzyme. So now the testosterone messages are read, and 'masculinizing' puberty occurs. The body grows taller, stronger, more muscular, usually with the addition of significant body and facial hair but with no breast development, and the voice drops. Often at this time the testes descend into the assumed-labia, and the penis/clitoris grows to look and act more like a penis." Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998) 39.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (2002; London: Bloomsbury, 2003) 3. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle* (London: Minerva, 1996) 41. Subsequent references will be contained in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>15</sup> White 3, Japtok 22, Leseur 26.

<sup>16</sup> It is significant that Deck Lee chooses Brazil as the destination for himself, Carmen and Cole. As Ronnie Parkman subsequently tells Birdie, Deck thinks of Brazil as a "Xanadu, this grand Mulatto Nation" (355). Deck's choice recalls Brian Redfield's desire to move his family to Brazil in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), in order to escape the rigid racial order with which they have to contend in New York. As it turns out, Brazil does not fulfil Deck's expectations and he returns to the United States, settling in California.

<sup>17</sup> Faced with what Jeffrey Eugenides calls "the pronominal problem with he/she," throughout this piece, I will refer to Calliope Stephanides as Callie and use feminine pronouns to denote the narrator's experiences up to the age of fourteen. From that point forward, I will call the protagonist Cal and use masculine pronouns. Laura Miller, "Sex, fate, and Zeus and Hera's kinkiest argument," Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides, 8 October 2002, 14 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.archive.salon.com/books/int/2002/10/08/eugenides/print.html>>.

<sup>18</sup> The examples of this are virtually endless. John Warwick in Charles Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars* (1900) discovers he is legally black in North Carolina, but can be legally white if he moves to South Carolina. Angela Murray in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928) passes after moving from Philadelphia to New York.

<sup>19</sup> This derives from the custom of describing light-skinned African Americans as "yellow" or "high yellow."

<sup>20</sup> Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen: The Last Special Issue on Race* 29.4 (1988) 45.

<sup>21</sup> The blue vein on Birdie's head also recalls Charles Chesnutt's story "The Wife of His Youth," which features a Blue Vein society for light-complexioned African Americans, whose membership is determined according to the visibility of blue veins through translucent, pale skin. Charles Waddell Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," *Tales of Conjure and the Color Line: Ten Stories* (New York: Dover, 1998) 47-56.

<sup>22</sup> Significantly, Cole's car is a "butter-yellow Karmann Ghia" (403).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999) 59.

<sup>24</sup> David Fine and Paul Skenazy, "Introduction," *San Francisco in Fiction: Essays in a Regional Literature* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1995) 5.

<sup>25</sup> Fine and Skenazy 12.



<sup>26</sup> Harper, *AWNM?* 107.

<sup>27</sup> Hair as a metonym for Europeanised beauty – along with light skin colour – is a recurring trope in African American fiction after Brown. In *Our Nig* (1859), Mrs. B shaves Frado's "glossy ringlets," which may be viewed as a corollary to her insistence that Frado never "shield her skin from the sun." Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. By "Our Nig," introd. R. J. Ellis (1859; Nottingham: Trent, 1998) 36, 19. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Mrs. Turner, who has internalised white standards of beauty, seeks Janie Crawford out for a friend because she has a "coffee-and-cream complexion" and "luxurious hair" (1937; New York: Harper Perennial, 1990) 134.

<sup>28</sup> B. White 14.

<sup>29</sup> B. White 157.

<sup>30</sup> B. White 20.

<sup>31</sup> B. White 14.

<sup>32</sup> Halberstam 22.

<sup>33</sup> Garber 14. The bathroom dilemma is revisited in the promotional poster for the recent film *Transamerica* (2005), which features Stanley/Sabrina (Felicity Huffman) facing two public restrooms, one marked "male" and the other marked "female." The tagline is "Life is more than the sum of its parts."

<sup>34</sup> Halberstam 24.

<sup>35</sup> See Siobhan Somerville for a discussion of incest and homosexuality in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (122). In Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Irene warns Clare that if she attends a Negro dance unaccompanied, she might be mistaken for one of the "ladies of easy virtue looking for trade" (199). See Deborah McDowell for a convincing argument that *Passing* is more concerned with Irene's desire for Clare than it is with racial identity (616-625).

Miscegenation has always provoked fears of incest, perhaps because one of the effects of male slaveholder-female slave relationships was the existence of children who never knew who their fathers were, and thus who their half-siblings were. Literary juxtapositions of actual or potential or suggested incest as a direct result of miscegenation are present in Richard Hildreth's *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836; the affianced Archy and Cassy have the same father), Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic* (1868), Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (1901-1902; Benson tries to court his niece, Jewel) and *Of One Blood* (1902-1903; Reuel Briggs marries his sister, Dianthe. Fortunately, the marriage remains unconsummated), William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936; Charles Bon becomes engaged to his half-sister, Judith Sutpen) and Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940; Sapphira encourages her nephew, Martin, to seduce the slave girl, Nancy, even though it is intimated that they may have the same father). See also Werner Sollors's *NBNWYB* for a discussion of the intersection of incest and miscegenation (285-335).

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, in which Angela Murray, in the company of her white lover, denies her sister, Jinny, in a New York train station, (1928; Boston: Beacon, 1990) 158-159. See also Langston Hughes's "Passing," in the form of a passer's letter to his mother, the writer confessing to having "felt like a dog, passing you downtown last night and not speaking to you," *The Ways of White Folks* (1933; London: Vintage, 1990) 51.

<sup>37</sup> At Aurora, too, Sandy embarks upon a lesbian affair. Aurora is "a world of women without names, without pasts, without documents. Women who didn't exist" (135). In Sandy's case, it is a safe haven from pursuing Cointelpro agents. That homosexuality and political subversion coexist in the space of Aurora recalls Lee Edelman's argument that throughout the 1950s, homosexuality was equated with the invisible threat of Communist subversion. According to Edelman, "Senator McCarthy's campaign against subversives in the American government had the effect of focusing public attention on the unrecognized pervasiveness of homosexuality as the enemy within." Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 157.

<sup>38</sup> Alice Dreger notes the greater frequency of the occurrence of 5-ARD among populations in which intermarriage is practised, and specifically cites the rural area of the Dominican Republic and the Sambia people of Papua New Guinea as examples of such populations. She does not, however mention, the population of southeastern Turkey (40-41).

<sup>39</sup> Neil Campbell, "Introduction: On Youth Cultural Studies," *American Youth Cultures* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004) 2.

<sup>40</sup> Eugenides in Miller, "Sex, fate, and Zeus and Hera's kinkiest argument."

<sup>41</sup> Danzy Senna, "Novel Companions: Books for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Interview with Amy Aronson, *Ms. Magazine*, Dec. 1999, 10 January 2005 <<http://www.msmagazine.com/dec99/books-senna.html>>.

<sup>42</sup> Danzy Senna, "Mulatto Millennium," *Salon Mothers Who Think*, 24 July 1998, 3 July 2004 <<http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/1998/07/24feature.html>>.

<sup>43</sup> Thus, as Alice Dreger reports, "in 1995, a medical student was given a cash prize in medical ethics by the Canadian Medical Association for an article specifically advocating deceiving androgen-insensitive parents (including adult patients) about the biological facts of their condition. The author argued that 'physicians who withhold information about AIS [Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome] patients are not actually lying; they are only deceiving' because they selectively withhold facts about patients' bodies" (Dreger 188).

<sup>44</sup> Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1998) 31.

<sup>45</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics* 2.

<sup>46</sup> Eugenides recounts this story as follows: "He [Tiresias] was walking one day and saw two snakes copulating, threw his staff at them, and he was turned into a female. Then seven years later he saw the same snakes, threw the same staff at them, and was turned back into a man. The story you're recalling is an argument between Zeus and Hera over which sex has a better time in bed. Strangely, I think, Zeus thinks women have a better time and Hera thinks men do. [. . .]. So they get Tiresius [*sic*] and he says women have more fun, and she loses. Because she's angry at Tiresius [*sic*], Hera makes him blind, but then she or another god gives him foresight, prophecy."

Miller, "Sex, fate, and Zeus and Hera's kinkiest argument." Eugenides's Tiresias story is likely drawn from the version told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

"Once he had come upon two serpents mating,  
In the green woods, and struck them from each other,  
And thereupon, from man was turned to woman,  
And was a woman seven years, and saw  
The serpents once again, and once more struck them  
Apart, remarking, 'If there is such magic  
In giving you blows, that man is turned to woman,  
It may be woman is turned to man. Worth trying'  
And so he was a man again" (Ovid 1. 327-335)

<sup>47</sup> William Gass, "The Art of Self: Autobiography in an age of narcissism," *Harper's Magazine* May 1994, 45.

<sup>48</sup> James Atlas, "Confessing for Voyeurs; The Age of The Literary Memoir Is Now," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 May 1996, 13 Sept. 2005 <<https://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F30917F73E5D0C718DDDAC0894DE494D81>>.

<sup>49</sup> Eugenides in Miller, "Sex, fate, and Zeus and Hera's kinkiest argument."

<sup>50</sup> In reviews of *Middlesex*, the novel is described as one or more of: a "comic epic," "road novel," "coming-of-age story," "love story," "autobiography," "fictional memoir" and "family saga." See Geraldine Bedell, "He's not like other girls," *Observer*, 6 Oct. 2002, 15 Sept. 2005 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/impac/story/0,14959,1285050,00.html>> and Laura Miller, "'Middlesex': My Big Fat Greek Gender Identity Crisis," *New York Times*, 15 Sept. 2002, 15 Sept. 2005 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9800E5DF153EF936A2575AC0A9649C8B63&n=Top%2fFeatures%2fBooks%2fBook%20Reviews>>.

<sup>51</sup> Dreger 168.

<sup>52</sup> "The Mulatto Millennium" appeared in *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*, ed. Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn (New York: Pantheon, 1998) 12-27.

<sup>53</sup> Spickard 77.

<sup>54</sup> See Bost 185-189 and Reginald Watson, "The Changing Face of Biraciality: The White/Jewish Mother as Tragic Mulatto Figure in James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*," *Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora* 4.1 (2002) 101-113.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Walker, *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (New York: Riverhead, 2001) 11.

<sup>56</sup> There are several other similarities between Senna's novel and Walker's memoir. *Black, White and Jewish* also symbolically connects the break-up of her parents' marriage to the political and ideological changes that took place as the Civil Rights movement yielded to the Black Power era. "With the rise of Black Power," according to Walker, "my parents' interracial defiance, so in tune with the radicalism of Dr. King and civil rights, is suddenly suspect" (60). Consequently, Rebecca herself, like Birdie, finds that her mixed race body "no longer make[s] sense" (60). Moreover, Senna provides a book jacket blurb in praise of *Black, White, and Jewish*, just as James McBride offers a blurb in praise of *Caucasia*. McBride, Senna and Walker are all published by Riverhead Books.

<sup>57</sup> This configuration of the mulatta as monstrous recalls the autobiographical writings of Lisa Jones. Jones, who is herself of mixed racial ancestry but identifies as black, recalls the experience of watching the 1934 film version of *Imitation of Life*, thinking she will see in Peola "a big-screen version of myself." Instead, she finds that "this Peola isn't me at all, she's a remake of Frankenmulatta, that character from *The Octoroon Concubine of Frankenstein*, one of Mary Shelley's lost sequels." Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (London: Penguin, 1995) 1.

<sup>58</sup> Birdie's ethnicity is alternately taken to be, or described as, Sicilian (Senna 27-28, 130), Puerto Rican (43), Italian (107, 194), French (107), Greek (130), Pakistani (130) and Indian (378). While on the lam, her mother tells her she can choose her new identity from a range of ethnic options but eventually decides to reinvent her daughter as Jewish.

<sup>59</sup> Danzy Senna, Interview. Amy Aronson, "Novel Companions: Books for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Ms. Magazine*, December 1999 <<http://www.msmagazine.com/dec99/books-senna.html>>.

The writer of passing stories with whom Senna is most often compared is Nella Larsen. Like Larsen, whose entire novelistic oeuvre consists of *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Senna has, to date, written just two novels, both of which are concerned with passing and mixed race identities. See Claudia M. Milian Arias, An Interview with Danzy Senna, *Callaloo* 25.2 (2002) 447 and Michele Hunter (308) for comparisons of Senna with Larsen. In another interview, Senna herself cites Larsen's *Passing* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* as influences on *Caucasia*. Bill Vourvoulis, "Talking with Danzy Senna – Invisible Woman," *Newsday* 29 July 1998: B11.

<sup>60</sup> The name "Gunnar" is possibly a reference to Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal who, in 1944, published *An American Dilemma*. For Myrdal, racial inequality in the U.S. was attributable to the conflict between the general American Creed of rights to equality and liberty and the particularities, especially in the U.S. South, of white supremacist thought. The tension between the universalist and the regionalist produces the dilemma of the book's title. Myrdal fully subscribed to the (then) emergent discourse of race-as-culture, rather than race-as-biology. Gunnar Kaufman's "American Dilemma" is that he feels just as circumscribed by the discourse of race-as-culture as by race-as-biology. My brief discussion of Myrdal is indebted to Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004) 21-48.

<sup>61</sup> Harper, *AWN*? 103.

<sup>62</sup> Harper, *AWN*? ix.

<sup>63</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York, Dover, 1994) 2. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Lisa Nakamura, "Head-hunting on the Internet: Identity Tourism, Avatars, and Racial Passing in Textual and Graphic Chat Spaces," *Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (London: Sage, 2005) 520-533.

<sup>65</sup> Wald 187.

<sup>66</sup> The definition of atavism is Sollors's *NBNWYB* 49. The notion of atavism is explored in, to give just two examples, Kate Chopin's short story, "Desirée's Baby" (1893) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929).

<sup>67</sup> Gass 46.

<sup>68</sup> Harper, *AWN*? 11.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Books of the Times: Black Poet's First Novel Aims the Jokes Both Ways," *New York Times* 31 May 1996, 25.

<sup>70</sup> Tracy Curtis, "Basketball's Demands in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*," *Upon Further Review: Sports in American Literature*, ed. Michael Cocchiarale and Scott D. Emmert (Westport: Praeger, 2004) 67.

<sup>71</sup> In the basketball-poetry combination, Beatty is echoing Trey Ellis who, in 1989, explicated a "New Black Aesthetic." According to Ellis, young black artists of his generation share a feeling of being "misunderstood by both the black worlds and the white," which manifests itself in art that "shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines." Ellis calls this "NBA" for short, initials that bring the National Basketball Association more readily to mind. Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 38 (1989) 234.

<sup>72</sup> Harper, *AWN*? 23.

<sup>73</sup> Curtis 64.

<sup>74</sup> The title of Gunnar's poetry collection is likely a nod to the film *Watermelon Man*, in which white racist Jeff Gerber awakens one morning to find he has been transformed into a black man. *Watermelon Man*, dir. Melvin Van Peebles, perf. Godfrey Cambridge, Estelle Parsons and Howard Caine, Columbia Pictures, 1970.

<sup>75</sup> Bryan Dexter Davis provides a useful and concise explanation of what is involved in a poetry slam: "Slamming poets perform a 'set' of two or three of their own poems. Randomly selected members of the audience judge the poetry spontaneously with a score of 1-10 immediately following each 'reading.' Slam poems are judged as much on content as on dramatic delivery." Heather E. Bruce and Bryan Dexter Davis, "Slam: Hip-Hop Meets Poetry – A Strategy for Violence Intervention," *The English Journal* 8.5 (2000) 121.

<sup>76</sup> Jabari Asim, "Grand Slam Champ," *The Washington Post*, *Book World* 13 June 1999, X12.

<sup>77</sup> According to Graham Caveney, Ginsberg "likened Beatty's work to the music of Miles Davis," suggesting yet another form of hybridity between poem/music. Graham Caveney, "The Books Interview: Paul Beatty; Sweet Talk and Fighting Words; Don't Call Paul Beatty 'Street-Smart'." It's his language and imagination that deserve enough respect," *The Independent* 22 July 2000, 9.

<sup>78</sup> Bruce and Davis 121.

<sup>79</sup> Michelle Ingrassia, "Trends: A Sudden Turn for the Verse," *Newsweek* April 19 1993, 61. Incidentally, Ingrassia's article draws upon information provided by Danzy Senna, reporting from New York.

<sup>80</sup> Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2001) 8.

<sup>81</sup> Dickson-Carr 4. Like Ishmael Reed in *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), the most immediate and obvious target of Beatty's ire is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Gunnar opens his narrative by scorning "the typical bluesy earthy folksy denim-overalls noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism aw shucks Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist" (5). This would appear to confirm Darryl Dickson-Carr's suspicion that, because satirists tend to be overwhelmingly male, "certain types of sexism have dogged satirists and besmirched their reputations (5). However, Reed himself, through references to the "mojo magic black man" and "too much mumbo in the jumbo" also comes in for some early mockery (5). Moreover, as I have shown, Beatty does not limit his satire to African American novelists.

<sup>82</sup> Bernstein 25.

<sup>83</sup> Ingrassia, "Trends" 61.

<sup>84</sup> Bernstein 25.

<sup>85</sup> Bernstein 25.

<sup>86</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "A Critic at Large: Phillis Wheatley on Trial," *The New Yorker* 20 Jan. 2003, 87.

<sup>87</sup> Bennett, "Toni Morrison" 205.

<sup>88</sup> In *Bamboozled*, when Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) fails in his attempt to pitch a Cosby-esque TV show to his boss, he comes up instead with *Mantan's New Millennium Minstrel Show*, which he assumes will lead to his dismissal and his release from his contract with the network. However, his boss loves the idea of African Americans blacking up, the show is made and becomes a hit. *Bamboozled*, dir. Spike Lee, perf. Damon Wayans, Savion Glover and Jada Pinkett Smith, New Line Cinema, 2000.

## Notes to Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> Tim Carvell, "A Million Little Corrections," *New York Times* 11 Jan. 2006 A29.

<sup>2</sup> William Grimes, "We All Have a Life. Must We All Write About It?" *New York Times* 25 Mar. 2005 E27.

<sup>3</sup> The *Irish Examiner* reports, for example, that seventy-year-old Paddy Malone, who lived four doors down from the McCourts in Limerick, objected so much to the representation of his home city that he tore up a copy of *Angela's Ashes* during a McCourt book-signing in Limerick. Tony Purcell, "Plaudits as home city gives film thumbs up at showing," *IrishExaminer.Com* 13 Jan. 2000, 13 May 2006 <[http://archives.tcm.ie/irishexaminer/2000/01/13/current/ipage\\_27.htm](http://archives.tcm.ie/irishexaminer/2000/01/13/current/ipage_27.htm)>. In the U.S., meanwhile, a Limerick-born man called David Crowe organised a book burning at a Long Island bar in March 2000. Eibhear Mulqueen, "'Ashes' to ashes as McCourt book burning organised in New York," *Irish Times* 19 Feb. 2000, 1.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Lev Grossman, "The Trouble With Memoirs; An Author is accused of making up key parts of his best-selling life story. Does truth really matter?" *Time*, 23 Jan. 2006, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin Sims, "A Geisha, a Successful Novel and a Lawsuit," *New York Times* 19 June 2001 E2.

<sup>6</sup> Brent Staples, "Editorial Notebook; Hating It Because It Is True," *New York Times* 27 Apr. 1997 4:14.

<sup>7</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> In a scathing article for *Vanity Fair*, James Wolcott points to the M.F.A. offered by the University of Pittsburgh as evidence of the academy's legitimisation of creative nonfiction, "Me, Myself, and I," *Vanity Fair* Oct. 1997, 214.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Karr, "His So-Called Life," *New York Times* 15 Jan. 2006, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Gass 49.

<sup>11</sup> Atlas 25.

<sup>12</sup> Staples 4:14.

<sup>13</sup> Grimes E27.

<sup>14</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1985) 112.

<sup>15</sup> Atlas 25.

<sup>16</sup> Jameson 114.

<sup>17</sup> Literary critics for newspapers and magazines find themselves caught in between academic and mainstream views of postmodernism. Notably, Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* has written a number of articles over the last decade or so railing against deconstructionist trends in the academy. See, for example, "Is It Fiction? Is It Nonfiction? And Why Doesn't Anyone Care?" 27 July 1993 C13 and "Bending The Truth In a Million Little Ways," 17 Jan. 2006 E1.

<sup>18</sup> Grossman 58.

<sup>19</sup> Warren St. John, "Figure in JT Leroy Case Says Partner Is Culprit," *New York Times* 7 Feb. 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Warren St. John, "The Unmasking of JT Leroy: In Public, He's a She," *New York Times* 9 Jan. 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Terminator [J.T. LeRoy], "Baby Doll," *Close to the Bone: Memoirs of Hurt, Rage, and Desire*, ed. Laurie Stone (New York: Grove, 1997) 14-47.

<sup>22</sup> Karr 13.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson 241.

<sup>24</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Woe is Me: Rewards and Perils of Memoirs," *New York Times* 21 Oct. 1997, E8.

<sup>25</sup> Jocelyn McClurg, "Memoirs: Truth is stranger than fiction," *Times Union*, 26 Oct. 1997, J4.

<sup>26</sup> Karr 13.

<sup>27</sup> Warren St. John, "A Literary Life Born of Brutality," *New York Times* 14 Nov. 2004, 1.

<sup>28</sup> The text of "Baby Doll" is that which appears in the collection *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) 125. Page references will be hereafter included in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>29</sup> According to Alex Ross, true crime became a standard publishing category in the 1980s, distinct from long-standing genres of mystery and crime literature, "The Shock of the True: Crime and why we can't stop reading about it," *New Yorker* 19 Aug. 1996, 70. For a discussion of the popularity of true crime fiction, see also Rosemary Herbert, "Publishers Agree: True Crime Does Pay," *Publishers Weekly* 1 June 1990, 33-36.

<sup>30</sup> Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, "Introduction," *White Trash: Race and Class in America*

Ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (New York: Routledge, 1997) 4.

<sup>31</sup> Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 13.

<sup>32</sup> Michele Ingrassia, "The Author Nobody's Met: Is a young boy's book hard truth – or a ruse?," *Newsweek* 31 May 1993, 63. Tad Friend followed up with an in-depth investigation into the Anthony Godby Johnson case for the *New Yorker* in 2001. Tad Friend, "Virtual Love," *New Yorker* 26 Nov. 2001, 88-99.

<sup>33</sup> In her response to the exposure of J.T. LeRoy, Karr maintains that LeRoy "weaseled [her] into taking a call by dropping Mary Gaitskill's name," 13.

<sup>34</sup> The phrase "critical reworking" is from Hutcheon's *Poetics*. For Hutcheon, postmodernism is engaged in "a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past" (4).

<sup>35</sup> St. John, "A Literary Life," 1.

<sup>36</sup> Luke Crisell, "The Lost Boy," *Observer Magazine* 6 Mar. 2005. 21 Oct. 2005 <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/magazine/story/0,11913,1429633,00.html>>.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Adams, "Feel the pain," *Observer* 29 Jan. 2006, 1 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,1697020,00.html>>

<sup>38</sup> James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (London: John Murray, 2006) v.

<sup>39</sup> Steve Almond, "Memoir as fiction? Not so fast," *Boston Globe* 22 Jan. 2006, third ed.: E7.

<sup>40</sup> Almond E7.

<sup>41</sup> Marc Peyser, "The Ugly Truth," *Newsweek* 23 Jan. 2006, 62.

<sup>42</sup> David Zhou, "Sophomore's New Book Contains Passages Strikingly Similar to 2001 Novel," *The Harvard Crimson* 23 Apr. 2006, 11 Aug. 2006 <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=512968>>.

<sup>43</sup> Kaavya Viswanathan, *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life* (London: BCA, 2006) 10. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

<sup>44</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "Viswanathan-Gate," *Gladwell.com* 30 Apr. 2006, 8 June 2006 <<http://gladwell.typepad.com/gladwellcom/2006/04/viswanathangate.html>>.

<sup>45</sup> Doris Black, "How Passing Passed Out," *Sepia* Dec. 1972, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Black 66.

<sup>47</sup> Having been rejected because of low test scores, the brothers were hired by the department in 1978 after they reapplied declaring themselves as black. See Peggy Hernandez and John Ellement, "Two fight firing over disputed claim they are black," *Boston Globe* 29 Sept. 1988, 29 and Tina Cassidy, "Job complaint recalls 'racial charade': T defends rise of controversial former firefighter," *Boston Globe*, 28 Sept. 1999, B1. See also Randall Kennedy's *Interracial Intimacies* for a discussion of the Malone case, 334-338.

<sup>48</sup> Wald 184.

<sup>49</sup> Wald 183.

<sup>50</sup> Wald 184.

<sup>51</sup> Dinitia Smith, "A 'How to Get Into College by Really, Really Trying' Novel," *New York Times* 6 Apr. 2006 E3.

<sup>52</sup> Belluscio 9-10.

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