

FROM THE STEAMBOAT TO HARLEM TO MAIN STREET  
AND TO BODYMORE: SATIRE AND SUBVERSION  
IN NOVELS OF PASSING

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## DEDICATION and ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated in honor of my late mother Alice Stoll Gauer, not only for her love but also for the love of reading she passed on to me, and to my husband, Ellis William (Bill) Edge, without whose love, support, and encouragement I would not have been able to pursue advanced degrees nor spend countless hours reading, researching, and writing during coursework and for this dissertation. Thanks, Mom and Bill.

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## ABSTRACT

From the Steamboat to Harlem to Main Street and to Bodymore:  
Satire and Subversion in Novels of Passing

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Race has often been a binary, either/or construction in America. One way in which authors--whether writing during the Jim Crow era, the Harlem Renaissance, the Second World War period, or the twenty-first century--have grappled with race and race-related issues is by creating works in which African Americans pass as white.

All passing narratives are inherently subversive. Racial stereotypes are transgressed, social conventions are contravened, and the racial *status quo* is attacked when characters who are “seen” as being “white” but who are deemed “black” by a fiction of law and custom are shown to be just as capable, talented, and intelligent as members of the dominant society. When irreverence, ridicule, and irony are added to passing tales with acid-tipped pens, authors’ assaults on racial discrimination, slavery, one-drop rules, and racial identity laws are heightened.

This dissertation analyzes selected passing novels and stories written in a satirical style and argues that these works are doubly subversive. Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring*, George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More*, and Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal* are among those examined. The inclusion of contemporary reviews, critiques, essays, and scientific works about race in

addition to judicial rulings and accounts of real-life passing provides a glimpse into the historical, political, social, and legal context in which these various fictional works were created. Novels of passing written in a more traditional stylistic manner are juxtaposed against the derisive and mocking ones to demonstrate how truly subversive the latter are.

The production of passing novels has dropped steadily from their heyday in the early twentieth century. Authors—whether black or white—no longer need to use this theme as a safe way to address racial issues. But, it is hoped that this examination of satirical, subversive passing narratives will not only increase our knowledge of America's ongoing, and seemingly endless, preoccupation with race but also bring these audacious, laugh-out-loud, iconoclastic--but also deadly serious—narratives to the attention of readers once again.

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## Introduction

“I know that there is no reason for this killing, this hatred, this demarcation. There is no difference between them. Black is white and white is black.... Only hate, the negative force, can separate them; only love, the positive force, can bind them together.”<sup>1</sup>

White. This is the only word that means “white.”

Black. Mulatto. Quadroon. Octaroon. Quintroon. One Drop. All these words mean “black” and it is white Americans who delineated these racial designations. It is they who proscribed the boundaries, opportunities, citizenship, legal rights, and freedoms of themselves and of the black Americans with whom they shared this nation from its very beginning.

For many white Americans, whiteness has meant a lack of blackness; blackness has meant any scintilla of African blood. For many white Americans, whiteness has meant power; blackness has meant powerlessness. For many white Americans, whiteness has meant superiority; blackness has meant inferiority. For many white Americans, whiteness has meant dominance; blackness has meant subservience. For many white Americans, whiteness has meant freedom and democracy; blackness has meant enslavement. These have been among the truths that many white Americans have found to be “self-evident,” despite the fact that our Declaration of Independence states that all men are created equal. From the 1600s--when northern European settlers and people from Africa came to these shores—until today, our nation has grappled with race. Race has defined us. Race has led to war. Race has killed us. Race has diminished us. Race has obsessed us.

The color line was supposed to be inviolable and impermeable. One was supposed to be not only able to define differences between the races but also to see these differences. Hair texture, skin tone, eye color, fingernails, scalp shape, and other physical

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<sup>1</sup> Walter White, “Why I Remain a Negro,” p.152.

characteristics were investigated to determine difference. Anthropologists, sociologists, and pseudo-scientists examined African American life and what were considered the physical traits of blackness; many of them wrote to support and defend racial stereotypes and boundaries. Racial integrity laws were codified, segregation of the races was legalized, and judicial rulings re-enforced white society's fears of race mixing in any and all walks of American life including social contacts, schooling, eating and drinking, entertainment, employment, and intermarriage.

But what if one could not "see" difference? "Suppose the skin of every Negro in America would suddenly turn to white," posited activist/author Walter White in 1947 in his "Why I Remain a Negro" (13-14). He attacks white racism, asking: "What would happen to all the notions about Negroes, the idols on which are built race prejudice and race hatred? What would become of their presumed shiftlessness, their cowardice, their dishonesty, their stupidity," White questions ("Why I" 4). "Would they not then be subject to individual judgment in matters of abilities, energies, honesty, cleanliness, as are whites? How else *could* they be judged?," he rhetorically suggests (White, "Why I" 14).

These are the same questions asked by generations of authors in their narratives of passing. What, they propose, would happen if one could not tell the difference? What would become of society if one could not "see" the difference? What if, as real-life African Americans who passed as white revealed, the supposedly solid color line that most white Americans desperately wanted to draw between themselves and the others could be crossed at will? What, as subversive satirists conjecture, would happen if the line was proven permeable and transmutable rather than rigid and impassable?

Passing novels and narratives featuring racially ambiguous characters began appearing in the mid-1800s. *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave*



*Life in the United States* by William Wells Brown was published in 1853 and *The Garies and Their Friends* by Frank J. Webb was published in 1857. Both of these fictional works were created by African Americans and include characters who could pass. Then, for well over a century, in novel after novel, story after story, poem after poem, play after play, and film after film, authors created works in which African Americans pass as white. Some characters pass for love; some do so for economic gain; some do so to avoid lynching; some do so because they wish to be judged as individuals rather than stereotyped; some do so to gain status; and some do so because they are white-complected, blond-haired, and blue-eyed and do not consider themselves “black.”

Passing narratives represent a means through which authors of fiction have been able to explore the meaning of race and the impact of racial issues on American society. Whether written by male or female artists and whether written by white or black authors, passing novels have ranged from the light-hearted to the serious, from those intended for broad popular appeal to scathing social indictments, and from comedic tales to penetrating views of American life. Some novelists who write passing novels utilize recurring themes like the “tragic mulatto”<sup>2</sup> to facilitate their discussions of racial issues while others reject such formulaic approaches. African American characters who pass must, more often than not, reject their kinfolk and community but some authors pen novels in which their heroes and heroines eschew a possible life in the white world and, instead, embrace a more authentic, black identity. The manners in which passing novels are written include somber, uplifting, romantic, and mocking.

But regardless of tone, theme, plot, authorial intent, or the time period in which they

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<sup>2</sup> The “tragic mulatto” is a female character of mixed-race heritage who does not easily fit into either the black or white worlds. She is a victim of racial ideologies and prejudices, may try to pass as white, and often meets a tragic end. An example of the tragic mulatto is the character of Julie in Edna Ferber's *Show Boat* (1926).

were created, all passing novels are subversive. Whether written in the Jim Crow Era, during the Harlem Renaissance, during the World War II period, or in the twenty-first century, portraying blacks as being the equals of whites, or even as being superior to them, overturns societal expectations and challenges racial constructions. When a character who has some black ancestry--but who does not have any of the physical characteristics often associated with Africans, who does not speak in anything other than the King's English, and who does not act as a subordinate to whites--is presented to readers as being educated, capable, well-mannered, industrious, attractive, and talented, then racial stereotypes and biases against African Americans are being shown to be the illogical and unfounded paradoxes that they are.

In addition to those authors who used the more traditional elements of the passing genre, a select few writers used satire to double their attacks on the racial *status quo* and to double the subversiveness that defines the passing theme. It is ridicule, irony, uncompromising critique, contempt, and deconstruction that Mark Twain and his fellow satirists employ. As Darryl Dickson-Carr explains in his *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, "satire manages to fascinate, infuriate, and delight us to the extent that it transgresses boundaries of taste, propriety, decorum, and the current ideological status quo. As the literary genre whose primary purpose is to criticize through humor, irony, caricature, and parody, satire is nothing if it does not aggressively defy the status quo" (1). Satire is intended, he further contends, to "act as an invaluable mode of social and political critique.... It is iconoclastic and frequently offensive" (Dickson-Carr 5). Reducing situations, social barriers, institutions, and racists to the absurd through a satirical, subversive passing novel undermines racial stereotypes and prejudices. Satire holds society in contempt and, through exaggeration, paradox, and juxtaposition,

deconstructs white racial ideologies and racial assumptions. *Reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to the absurd) is realized through humor and ruthless abandon.

Some satirical passing novels incorporate a trickster, a con man and scam artist, in them. This deceiver is an irreverent manipulator, a character who “wear[s] the mask that grins and lies,/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,” as Paul Dunbar describes fooling the white man in his 1896 poem “We Wear the Mask.” The trickster, exemplified by George Schuyler’s Max Disher in his 1931 novel *Black No More*, creates chaos while enriching himself at the expense of whites who think they are superior to him. As Ralph Ellison explains in 1958 in an essay entitled “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke:”

The white man’s half-conscious awareness that his image of the Negro is false makes him suspect the Negro of always seeking to take him in, and assume his motives are anger and fear—which very often they are. On his side of the joke the Negro looks at the white man and finds it difficult to believe that the ‘grays’—a Negro term for white people—can be so absurdly self-deluded.... To him the white man seems a hypocrite who boasts of a pure identity while standing with his humanity exposed to the world. (55)

Ellison further comments that this masking by black Americans is done “for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity.... [T]he motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals” (55). The eminent W. E. B. Du Bois also weighs in on this type of African American wittiness, writing in “The Humor of Negroes” that “men of all colors and races face the tragedy of life and make it endurable” but that his fellow blacks are “filled with laughter and delicious chuckling” when they make a “dry mockery of the pretensions of white folk” (12).

Men like Twain and Schuyler, among other authors of passing novels who are described by David S. Junker as “color-line satirists,” are writers who subversively attack racial stereotypes, discrimination, inequality, and prevailing racial views with their pens (4). They are, at times, thought-provoking, outrageous, ironic, critical, tongue-in-cheek, and laugh-producing. They are, at the same time, deadly serious. Adding irony to a passing novel heightens the author’s onslaught on racism and discrimination. Adding outrageousness further exposes the folly and stupidity of whites who claim inherent, God-given superiority and dominion over blacks. Adding ridicule and contempt raises the novelist’s level of attack on the ludicrousness of one-drop rules and on white America’s historically unequal and inexcusable treatment of its black citizens. The use of satire in narratives in which African Americans pass as white makes these works doubly subversive.

It is indeed ironic that such “transracial crossings nevertheless require two categories—that is, racial ‘crossing’ implies, and depends upon, the very binary either/or model of racial identity and classification that crossings seem to belie,” perceptively writes critic Andrea K. Newlyn (1053). Thus, even while deconstructing notions of a rigid biological and legal line, the “color-line satirists” had to incorporate the divisive barrier in their works to show that it could be crossed and that it was, in fact, neither logical nor impassable<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> There is no intent on this author’s part to accept a binary, either/or definition of race nor to promote the divisiveness this has created and continues to create. However, persons of African heritage will most often be referred to as black Americans or as African Americans and groups of Americans will generally be referred to as blacks or whites. This use reflects Darryl Dickson-Carr’s own explanation: “I use all these terms fully conscious of the fact that their acceptability and accuracy depend largely upon the reader’s own political orientation and sensibilities. I hope the reader will note that I have neither the desire nor the intent to offend via my use of this terminology” (xv). Quoted material is reproduced as accurately as possible and as originally written, regardless of the words a writer uses to refer to black or white Americans. The spelling of words such as “colored” and “coloured” will be reproduced as written without the caveat (sic) being inserted each time. Similarly, quotations of vernacular and dialect appear as published and, most often, a (sic) will not be inserted in order to be less disruptive to the narrative.

Each passing narrative—and each actual account of a person crossing from “blackness” into “whiteness”—occurred in a historical time period. Each author was reflecting—or reacting against—the cultural sentiments, legal restrictions, political trends, and social constraints of his or her own time. Chronologically, satirical passing narratives follow a time line that stretches from the Steamboat to Harlem to Main Street and to Bodymore,<sup>4</sup> each of which represents a significant period in American race relations and during which black Americans decried treatment of their race, white Americans sought to support and defend the color line, and persons passed in real-life to thwart it. Examining these works chronologically allows us to see how thoughts on race and racial issues have changed—or may not have changed—over time, not only in satirical novels of passing but also in American society itself; the layers of context demonstrate the interconnectedness of history and literature.

Beginning from the Steamboat, Mark Twain’s 1894 *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* was written during the Jim Crow/post-Reconstruction period and preceded the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision by two years. It is distinctively different from traditional passing novels of the period including Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1893), William D. Howells’s *An Imperative Duty* (1891), and Charles Chesnutt’s *The House behind the Cedars* (1900). Anti-black rhetoric by white Americans appears in Ray Stannard Baker’s 1908 work *Following the Colour Line* and James Bryce’s “Thoughts on the Negro Problem” (1891) at the same time that black pleas for greater civil rights and an end to maltreatment were being expressed in such works as W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Ida B. Wells’s “Lynch Law in America” (1900). Demonstrating a connection between reality and fiction are the true stories of black persons crossing the

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<sup>4</sup> Bodymore, Murderland is a slang term for Baltimore, Maryland, that reflects its high murder rate in recent decades, among other characteristics.

color line including William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) and Martha Sandweiss's *Passing Strange* (2009).

During the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes's "Rejuvenation through Joy" was published in 1933, Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* appeared in 1932, Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* was printed in 1926, and Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* was written in 1928. The humor, satire, and iconoclasm of these passing narratives distinguish them from more traditional uses of the genre as seen in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man* (1912), and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929). All these passing tales mirror, to a lesser or greater extent, the stories of real-life Americans who passed to have better economic opportunities, to marry, or to disrupt white prejudices and stereotypes as reported in "Army Man's Suicide Reveals He Is a Negro" (1932) and Kathryn L. Morgan's *Children of Strangers* (1980). African American demands for fairness grew and the writers of the Renaissance gave form and voice to these calls in such works as W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Social Equality of Whites and Blacks" (1920) and Alain Locke's "The New Negro" (1925). White Americans reacted angrily, denouncing the activism and continuing to promote white superiority in works including W. E. Castle's "Biological and Social Consequences of Race-Crossing" (1928), Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy* (1920), and E. B. Reuter's *The Mulatto in the United States* (1918).

George Schuyler's irreverent and outrageous passing novel—*Black No More*—was published in 1931 and epitomizes the double subversiveness of satirical passing novel. His tale is distinctively--and wickedly--different from such novels as Marie Stanley's *Gulf Stream* (1930). Schuyler's narrative, like other passing tales written during the Harlem

Renaissance period, are part of the confluence of art and activism as seen in Walter White's "I Investigate Lynchings" (1929) and Schuyler's own "A Negro Looks Ahead" (1930). Opponents of African American activism continued to rail against any change in race relations and to promote white supremacy in such works as "The American Mulatto" (E. B. Reuter, 1928). The article "I Pass for White" (1932) illustrates that black Americans who could not be identified as such continued to flout white society's demands for purity through its racial integrity laws.

Writings on race, and all that it signified in America, did not diminish during the Second World War period. Satirical passing novels from the period moved on to Main Street, including one by the Nobel Prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis. His transgressive and boundary-crossing *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) joins Chester Himes's *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* (1945) and Langston Hughes's "Fooling Our White Folks" (1950) in the contravening category while more traditional passing novels are represented by Cid Ricketts Sumner's *Quality* (1945) and Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* (1949). White Americans continued to cling to their status as demonstrated in works including "Who Is a Negro?" (1946, by Herbert Asbury), "The Measurement of Negro 'Passing'" (1946, by John H. Burma), and *The Lost White Race* (1944, by Ira Calvin). But such anti-black, anti-civil rights works could not fully counter the coming tide nor drown out the voices heard in works by Sterling A. Brown ("Count Us In" in 1945), "How Negroes Are Gaining in the US" (1957), and Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History* (1941). And, while real-life passing stories continued to be reported in articles represented by "Four Who Are Passing" (1949) and "I Passed for White" (1955), more prominent in the post-War decades are those in which black Americans who had a choice to pass but decided not to, such as 1951's "I'm Through with Passing" and 1950's "I Refuse to Pass"

(Kingslow).

Although use of the passing genre has largely disappeared, Jess Row's 2014 novel set in Baltimore--*Your Face in Mine*--transgressively updates the theme for a twenty-first century audience through scientifically-realized racial reassignment and also provides a lens through which earlier passing narratives can be considered. Authors including Yada Blay and F. James Davis—like Du Bois, Schuyler, and White in earlier eras--discuss what blackness means in their respective works entitled *(1) Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race* (2014) and *Who Is Black: One Nation's Definition* (1991). And, despite Mark Twain's contention that his character Roxy was only considered black and a slave due to the fiction of law and custom, F. James Davis disagrees, writing: "We can only conclude that none of the world's known alternatives to the American definition of who is black now seems at all likely to be given serious consideration in the United States" (184). He further contends that "[a]lthough the one-drop rule was developed to perpetuate the enslavement, segregation, and institutional exploitation of blacks, it is now firmly entrenched in both the black and white community and in American custom and law" (F. James Davis 184). Accepting Davis's pronouncement, use of the one-drop rule as a means to discuss race and racial issues, even in the modern era, is appropriate, despite the uncomfortableness and awkwardness that accompany its recognition.

In his autobiography entitled *A Man Called White*, Walter White acknowledges his personal truth: "I am not white. There is nothing within my mind and heart which tempts me to think I am. Yet I realize acutely that the only characteristic which matters to either the white or the colored race—the appearance of whiteness—is mine. There is magic in a white skin; there is tragedy, loneliness, exile in a black skin" (3). This tragedy, loneliness, and exile have been explored by writers for generations—from the antebellum period to



today. They have been explored by poets, novelists, essayists, and short-story writers and across many genres, although each work reflects the sentiments and unique vision of its author and the historical period in which it was created.

But it is the passing narrative and, most specifically the satirical one, that most spectacularly challenges the racial *status quo* and exposes racism, illogical racial designations, transgresses racial boundaries, and undermines white racist ideologies. Bringing together elements gleaned from reports of historical passers, the beliefs and convictions of civil rights activists, and a sardonic, iconoclastic, transgressive view of life, authors of satirical narratives of passing both amuse and shock their readers while they treat the topic of race with both humor and seriousness. Works including *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, *Infants of the Spring*, *Black No More*, and *Kingsblood Royal* bring both tears of laughter and tears of sadness to our eyes. They are subversive and iconoclastic. They tear at the very foundation of American racial discrimination. They rail against enslavement. They are—whether written by men or women and by persons black or white--thoroughly American. And, despite their age and any literary shortcomings, they are as relevant today as when they were originally penned.

Chapter One:  
From the Steamboat: *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Mark Twain

“The skin of every human being contains a slave.”<sup>5</sup>  
“Tell the truth or trump—but get the trick.”<sup>6</sup>

Out of Mark Twain's exposure to a world outside Hannibal, out of his changing views on slavery and race, and out of an iconoclastic and sardonic view of life came his 1894 novel *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*. By adding satire and irony to this passing narrative, Twain makes the work doubly subversive, manifesting his contention in the book's opening “Whisper to the Reader” that “there is no character howsoever good and fine, but it can be destroyed by ridicule” (PW 15). With a savage pen, one “warmed-up in hell” (qtd. in Twain, *Pen* x), the author attacks institutionalized slavery, racial stereotypes, and the illogical racial constructions codified in post-Civil War America through one-drop laws and other discriminatory measures.

Mark Twain's satire in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* attacks slavery and its effects on both the white and black residents of a sleepy Missouri town, eviscerating the racial *status quo* by presenting seemingly-white “blacks” as capable and as the equals, or betters, of “whites” and by challenging racial relations, stereotypes, and definitions. The opening chapter of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* provides an example of Twain's ironic approach as he writes:

The scene of this chronicle is the town of Dawson's Landing, on the Missouri side of the Mississippi, half a day's journey...below St. Louis.... [I]t was a snug little collection of modest one- and two-story frame dwellings whose whitewashed exteriors were almost concealed from sight by climbing tangles of rose-vines,

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Notebook*, p. 393.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Twain, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, p. 17. (David Wilson's calendar entry, chapter 1)

honeysuckles and morning-glories. Each of these pretty homes had a garden in front fenced with white palings and opulently stocked with hollyhocks, [and] marigolds. (17-18)

Twain lulls his readers with this seemingly benign opening. After similarly detailing the town's apparently innocent character for several more pages, he abruptly informs them that "Dawson's Landing was a slaveholding town, with a rich slave-worked grain and pork country back of it" (*PW* 20). F. R. Leavis, in his article "Mark Twain's Neglected Classic: the Moral Astringency of '*Pudd'nhead Wilson*,'" contends that one of the reasons this novel has been underappreciated is that it is not like *Huckleberry Finn*. The critic argues--naïvely and obtusely--that Dawson's Landing is simply a hamlet on the Mississippi, one described by its author in a manner that "unmistakably conveys the sense, sanguine and exalted, of an expanding and ripening civilization," rather than perceiving Twain's actual casting of the town as the archetype of America's slave-based society (Leavis 130). But critic George E. Toles comments on the infusion of Twain's trademark attitude in the tale, writing in "Mark Twain and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*: A House Divided" that "our sense [is] that something intricate and exacting is being revealed to us in the detached, gently ironic description" of the town (60).

The novel was written during America's Jim Crow era and, although the term may have come from a minstrel song-and-dance routine that exaggerated black racial stereotypes, the two words came to define a period in which discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement, and the social separation of the races were enacted into law and enforced in practice. Beginning when Reconstruction ended in 1877 as US Army forces were withdrawn from the South, African American officials were voted out of office, civil

rights laws were repealed or struck down by the courts, and well-intentioned teachers and activists moved back home to the North, Jim Crow America lasted through the mid-twentieth century. Despite the emancipation of black slaves by the Civil War, white supremacy had been re-institutionalized and reigned supreme once again.

Policies enacted during Reconstruction to improve the lives of the freed slaves ended and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 was invalidated by the US Supreme Court in 1875. As George M. Frederickson explains in his *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, many Northerners had grown tired of race-related issues after the Civil War and were “ready to be persuaded that the South’s new ‘paternalism’ was the answer to the Negro problem. The romantic image of the Old South...popularized...by Southern writers like Thomas Nelson Page<sup>7</sup> and [Joel Chandler] Harris, was erasing the memory of slavery as portrayed by abolitionists” (208). Ideals such as black progress, the extension of suffrage, and treating African Americans humanely fell out of fashion and the freed slaves were, in large part, excluded, poor, and oppressed. Whites, particularly in the South but also throughout the country, demanded codified dominance over those they felt were inferior.

Despite the protests of some liberals, clergymen, writers, and African American leaders, the status of blacks deteriorated as the Jim Crow era deepened. “It is one of the great ironies of American history [that] when the nation freed the slaves, it also freed racism,” concludes Joel Williamson in his 1984 work *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (qtd. in Ladd 99). The Ku Klux Klan, founded in Tennessee in 1866, grew in power. Violence against blacks, ranging

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922), a descendent of the First Families of Virginia, was an author who nostalgically yearned to return to the old plantation days.

from beatings to rapes to lynchings, was not only tolerated but also often encouraged and sanctioned. There was to be no intermingling and no intermarriage. No such threats to white purity were to be permitted and the lives of black Americans were again proscribed and legally controlled. “Separate schools shall be provided for white and colored children, and no child of either race shall be permitted to attend a school of the other race,” reads part of an Alabama law adopted in 1901 (qtd. in Lewis and Lewis 82).

In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, white Americans were obsessed with a binary concept of race and white society was preoccupied with defining who was white and who was not. To “identify as biologically black meant to write oneself into a history of slavery and a contemporary reality of Jim Crow, miscegenation law, one-dropism, and racial violence” (Belluscio 11). Many white Americans felt justified in defining themselves as the dominant and superior race.

Scientists conducted studies to further rationalize the marginalization of African Americans. “The negro brain is smaller than the Caucasian,” writes anatomy professor Robert Bennett Bean in 1906 (qtd. in Lewis and Lewis 73). Bean continues, holding that the “Caucasian...is dominant and domineering, and possessed primarily with determination, will power, self-control, self-government, and...a high development of the ethical and esthetic faculties and great reasoning powers.... They [the Negroes] are deficient in judgment, in the formulation of new ideas from existing facts, in devising hypotheses, and in making deductions in general” (qtd. in Lewis and Lewis 73). An article written by Professor E. W. Gilliam and published in *The Popular Science Monthly* in 1883 further illuminates Jim Crow thoughts on race and race relations. In his “The African in the United States,” Gilliam provides charts detailing the size of white and black

populations between 1830 and 1880. He then explains, in a manner that many white Americans would have found wholly appropriate and scientifically valid, that:

Emancipation found the negro without the master's care (and, as a body, slaveholders, at least from motives of self-interest, were humane), without the customary oversight and medical attention, dependent, not self-reliant. No wonder that many of the negroes have been worse off than under their former bondage.... A body of four million slaves, ignorant, uncivilized, and trained in habits of dependence, suddenly set free, then invested with the ballot, and intoxicated with political power, then checked...by the necessary and wholesome self-assertion of the white race. (436)

In response to an article by George W. Cable published in 1885 in *The Century Magazine*, Henry W. Grady echoes the theme propounded by men like Gilliam, opining: "We hold that there is an instinct, ineradicable and positive, that will keep the races apart.... and that will resist every effort of appeal, argument, or force to bring them together;" he concludes that the "South must be allowed to settle the social relations of the races according to her own views of what is right and best" (912, 916). There must remain, Grady urges, a "clear and unmistakable domination of the white race in the South" (917).

Ray Stannard Baker, in his 1908 non-fiction work entitled *Following the Colour Line: An Account of Negro Citizenship in the American Democracy*, discusses, as many of his contemporaries do, the number of mulattoes in the country. He sets the number even higher than that recorded in the 1870 and 1890 censuses. Baker states not only that Negroes were becoming lighter than their African forebears but also that, for America's black and mixed-race populations, the "ideal is whiteness; for whiteness stands for

opportunity, power, progress” (154, 158), thus continuing to delineate difference and domination while claiming, at the same time, that anyone with even a touch of black blood would prefer to be white so he or she could embrace and enjoy the advantages of that segment of society.

A man who did not see black Americans in the same way as most other white Americans did during the Jim Crow years was Albion W. Tourgée, a man born and raised in Ohio who lived in North Carolina after the Civil War. He was a radical Republican and civil rights activist who believed in equal rights and suffrage for all Americans, including blacks. In his 1884 tract entitled “An Appeal to Caesar,” he suggests that “the sentiment of prejudice or hostility against the colored race on the part of the whites of the South is generally considered one of those ‘results of the war’ which it is supposed to need only to be let alone to cure themselves” (Tourgée 95). Tourgée spoke out against lynching and urged Ohioans to adopt anti-lynching laws. In a letter written to a black congressman who was the editor of the *Cleveland Gazette* in 1894, Tourgée addresses this issue, writing: “Lynching is not the disease, but only the symptom of disease. The real evil is defiance of law and disregard of the rights of others. It is the most dangerous form of anarchy, because it breaks down the safeguards of life” (290). Two years later he was one of the lawyers representing Homer Plessy in the seminal case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

The violent and sadistic practice of lynching black Americans who were often innocent and who were denied jury trials for their alleged crimes occurred throughout the Jim Crow years. David Lionel Smith provides a dismal context for *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* in his article “Mark Twain, Pretexts, Iconoclasm,” noting that Twain “began writing this book in 1892. There were 235 lynchings that year, 200 in 1893, and

another 190 in 1894, the year *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was published. The total is 625 lynchings for just those three years” (185). An African American woman named Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) worked tirelessly and at great personal risk to end lynching. She was a journalist, suffragist, and civil rights leader known for her outspoken criticism of the horrific practice, speaking publicly and writing essays and pamphlets to further her cause. In her 1900 essay “Lynch Law in America,” Wells writes: “Our country’s national crime is *lynching*.... It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an ‘unwritten law’ that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal” (1).

Wells bravely took on the intimidation tactics of the Ku Klux Klan and described the ways in which mob violence was being wreaked by white Americans on black citizens. To support her cause, she provides lynching statistics by state and race of the victim and makes this simple plea: “All the negro asks is justice—a fair and impartial trial in the courts of the country” (6). In her 1892 pamphlet “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” published under her married name of Wells-Barnett, she urges blacks to defend themselves with arms, if necessary, and declares that there “is little difference between the Antebellum South and the New South. Her white citizens are wedded to any method however revolting, any measure however extreme, for the subjugation of the young manhood of the race” (17). Despite her eloquence and activism, calls for anti-lynching legislation would go unrealized.

After hearing about a particularly gruesome lynching in Missouri, the man born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in a slave-owning state but who was, by 1901, the



world-renowned author, lecturer, and humorist known as Mark Twain, issued a blistering condemnation of lynching (Foner 219). It was not published for several decades but the broadside entitled “The United States of Lyncherdom” reveals Twain’s ire and condemnation of the incident:

And so Missouri has fallen.... Certain of her children have joined the lynchers, and the smirch is upon the rest of us.... Why has lynching, with various barbaric accompaniments, become a favorite regulator in cases of ‘the usual crime’ in several parts of the country? Is it because men think a lurid and terrible punishment a more forcible object lesson and a more effective deterrent than a sober and colorless hanging done privately in a jail would be?.... It has been supposed—and said--that the people at a lynching enjoy the spectacle and are glad of a chance to see it.... Why did they do that? Because *none would disapprove*.... Why does a crowd...by ostentatious outward signs pretend to enjoy a lynching? Why does it lift no hand or voice in protest? Only because it would be unpopular to do it. (479-82)

While a few white Americans did oppose lynching, many of them agreed with the feelings expressed by James Bryce in his “Thoughts on the Negro Problem.” In this essay, the author argues that “[f]reedom has done for them [the freed slaves] in twenty-six years more than anyone who knew how slavery left them had a right to expect. One thing...freedom has not done. It has not brought the colored people any nearer to the whites” (Bryce 643). Like many of his contemporaries, Bryce contends that Southerners knew best how to deal with the so-called “Negro Problem.” While acknowledging that a black person is “confined to schools and colleges for his own race; he worships in his own

churches; he mingles in none of the amusements, he is admitted to none of the social or industrial organizations, which white people, even the humblest of them, enjoy or form,” Bryce ignores the rise of vigilante organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the codification of discrimination and segregation when he writes that this “social separation does not spring from nor imply any enmity between the races” (644). He concludes that the “vast majority of them are confessedly unfit for suffrage” (Bryce 647) but he is unable or unwilling to acknowledge that providing equal education, access to good jobs, better housing, and union membership might have helped make the freed slaves better fit for the suffrage that was being denied to them.

It is perhaps unsurprising, in light of the prevailing white sentiments of the Jim Crow era, that a historic decision was rendered by the United States Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* just two years after the publication of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. The Court upheld, in a nearly-unanimous decision, Louisiana's 1890 Separate Car Act that required “‘equal, but separate’ accommodations on all passenger railways, and mandating that no person, or persons, shall be permitted to occupy seats in coaches, other than the ones, assigned, to them on account of the race they belong to” (qtd. in Golub 563). The Court thus provided judicial sanction for the many segregation laws that had been, and would continue to be, enacted throughout the country.

Some “blacks” whose physical characteristics did not readily identify them as having any African heritage chose to pass as “white” to escape the strictures placed on them by the dominant society. As Mark Golub notes in his 2005 article “*Plessy* as ‘Passing:’ Judicial Responses to Ambiguously Raced Bodies in *Plessy v. Ferguson*,” plaintiff Homer Plessy looked white and, according to the justices, there was no blackness

“discernible in him” (564). To test the legality of the Louisiana law, Plessy, in essence, purposefully passed as a black who was passing for white. In Golub’s estimation:

Plessy’s ability to pass (and his publicly staged refusal to do so) called attention to the social and legal processes of racial sorting through which purportedly natural and discrete racial groups are produced and maintained. Reading *Plessy* as a case fundamentally about racial passing reveals the Court’s [and American society’s] deep anxiety regarding mixed-race individuals and the specter of interracial sexuality that ambiguously raced bodies necessarily signify. (564-5)

Among the questions raised in the briefs filed in the case, Plessy’s lawyers asked: “Is not the question of race, scientifically considered, very often impossible of determination? Is not the question of race, legally considered, one impossible to be determined?” (Tourg  e 297). *Plessy* thus called into question the concept and definition of race and discriminatory treatment based on it. If American society could not determine who was legally and officially black, then the counterpart of blackness—being legally and officially white--was threatened. Racial ambiguity or invisible blackness—as problematic in American society as passing—threatened accepted definitions of who was superior and who was, conversely, legally and socially inferior. If men like Homer Plessy could sit in railroad cars designated as “white only” with his legal blackness unknown to fellow passengers, then racial constructions were proven illogical and arbitrary. Passing represented a circumvention of race-based discrimination and sanctions and subversively proved the fluidity and permeability of the allegedly definitive and unassailable color line.

The lone dissenting voice in *Plessy v. Ferguson* was that of John Marshall Harlan, a Kentuckian whose father had raised his “black” half-brother Robert, a man who could

easily pass for white, in the same household as John and his siblings (Hobbs 105-110). Justice Harlan held that “in view of the Constitution, in the eyes of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law” (qtd. in Hobbs 323). But the decision was made, in large part, based on what Mark Twain called a “fiction of law and custom” in his *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (34). The author of *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Eric Sundquist, concludes about the decision that “*Plessy v. Ferguson* was at once a mockery of law and an enactment of its rigid adherence to divided, dual realities” (237). The decision in this case was seminal, according to Sundquist, because it “concluded the process of transfiguring dual *constitutional* citizenship into dual *racial* citizenship” (241). The divide between the races, through the *Plessy* ruling, was enshrined, codified, and the law of the land.

One could argue that *Plessy* was not even necessary to ensure that black Americans remained second-class citizens, given the separate—and unequal—worlds in which the two groups generally lived and worked. By “the turn of the twentieth century, the great majority of African Americans worked in low-paying, non-union jobs, more than half in agriculture, a third in domestic service.... [T]he great majority of black farmers did not [even] own land” (Painter 163). But despite judicial rulings, the enactment of discriminatory laws, disenfranchisement, and segregation, African American dissent and civil rights activism grew as the Jim Crow years went by. As Nell Painter details in *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*, black Americans strove to be educated and to succeed in spite of the obstacles

placed in their way by whites. Numerous African Americans entered professions and, particularly in cities, owned businesses catering to a middle- and upper-class black clientele and had access to newspapers and magazines like the *Chicago Defender* (Painter 166-186). Black institutions and civil rights organizations were founded and thrived during the Jim Crow era: the Tuskegee Institute in 1881; the National Association of Colored Women in 1896; the black civil rights Niagara movement of 1905-1908; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909-1910; and, to help African Americans coming to cities, the National Urban League in 1911 (Painter 158, 186).

The foremost African American figure during the early part of the Jim Crow era was Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). Born enslaved, this elder statesman walked a delicate line between demanding more for his people and gaining acceptance by whites of his business and education initiatives. The founder of the Tuskegee Institute delivered a speech in 1895 to the Cotton States and International Exposition that rising black civil rights proponents like W. E. B. Du Bois considered accommodationist. While Washington did promote greater citizenship and the betterment of the lives of blacks, it seemed to men like Du Bois that Washington was willing to settle for second-class status for the vast majority of African Americans. Washington's oration reveals his beliefs and contains a nod to old plantation days while also urging whites to hire blacks instead of new, foreign immigrants because African Americans had:

...tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities.... While doing this, you can be sure.... that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has

seen.... Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward.... I pledge that in your effort to work out the great and intricate problem which God has laid at the doors of the South, you shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race. (2)

Unlike Booker T. Washington, Du Bois (1868-1963) directly and forcefully attacked racism, discrimination, and lynching. One of the founders of the NAACP and editor of its magazine *The Crisis*, the erudite and scholarly Du Bois became a renowned leader and author. In one of his early works, “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois raises a series of thought-provoking questions in his 1897 essay, penning: “What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America?” (180). His extraordinary work *The Souls of White Folk*, published in 1903, is a collection of essays on race and racial issues that draw on his personal experiences. Du Bois boldly declares, in words that stand in stark contrast to those of Booker T. Washington, that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (*Souls* 5). As a young man, he sadly relates, he came to realize that a different future awaited him, as a person of color, than did a white man and that “the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine” (Du Bois, *Souls* 5). With soaring rhetoric, he captures the sad duality imposed by white society on the African Americans it was consigning to its fringes:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but

only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone kept it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, *Souls* 10-11)

Men like William Benjamin Smith attacked the challenge that Du Bois presented to the *status quo*, writing: "We affirm, then, that the South is entirely right in thus keeping open at all times, at all hazards, and at all sacrifices an impassable social chasm between Black and White. This she *must* do in behalf of her blood, her essence, of the stock of her Caucasian Race" (61). What he and others who pontificated about white racial purity in the Jim Crow era ironically and self-servingly overlook is that the intermingling of racial blood in America began in the 1600s and continued unabated in the centuries that followed. Despite the existing social chasm between blacks and whites, there had never been an impassable physical one.

With the feelings of many white Americans relatively unchanged by the first decade of the twentieth century, author Charles Chesnutt despairingly concluded in 1903 that the "rights of Negroes are at a lower ebb than at any time during the thirty-five years of their freedom, and the race prejudice more intense and uncompromising" (qtd. in Fishkin, "Tales" 363). White authors like Ulrich B. Phillips and Mildred L. Rutherford felt free to declare that the "only thing wrong about slavery...was the obligation the institution placed on whites" (qtd. in Hale 62). While Phillips does admit that there had been some

“injustice, oppression [and] brutality” in the slave system, he also argues that “slavery burdened white Southerners more than blacks as larger, inflexible expenditures on slaves limited economic development” (qtd. in Hale 64, 62). Happy and contented slaves had worked on plantations in a “spirit of camaraderie” with their owners and had found in America much “gentleness, kindhearted friendship, and mutual loyalty” writes Phillips (qtd. in Hale 62, 64), without a trace of irony and without a scintilla of historical accuracy.

This idealization of plantation life found literary expression in a well-known and widely-read collection of tales, the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908). First published in 1881, the stories remained popular for many decades and underwent numerous reprintings. Told to young, white children by a kind, elderly freed slave who remained on the plantation where he had once been held in captivity, the tales are related in a distinctive local dialect. The folktales--like those featuring Br'er Fox, Br'er Rabbit, and a Tar-Baby--are trickster stories in which the animal stand-ins for blacks often use their pluck and cunning to outwit their white counterparts. In 1926 parlance, Br'er Rabbit “represents the ideal hero of their primitive dream world—an individual able, through craft and downright trickery, to get the better of a master class seemingly unbeatable” (Nelson 116). Ironically, although the stories were collected and presented by a white man who enjoyed white privilege, a black man named Uncle Remus is the teller of the tales featuring subversive actions by animals representing African Americans.

The tales not only anthropomorphize animals in a picaresque manner to humorously show how the enslaved managed to win victories over their masters but also to deliver more serious discussions of racial topics. In one entitled “Why the Negro is Black,” Uncle Remus explains to his young charge that his palms are white because “dey



wuz a time w'en all de w'ite folks 'uz black—blacker dan me, kaze I done bin yer so long dat I bin sorter bleach out" (Harris 110). While the tale-spinner's explanation may have seemed funny both to his fictional charge and to Harris's white audience, having the genteel Uncle Remus state that whites descended from blacks is as subversive as Mark Twain creating a formidable African American character named Roxy in *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Uncle Remus explains that:

Niggers is niggers now, but de time wuz w'en we 'uz all niggers tergedder.... In dem times we 'uz all un us black...folks 'uz gittin' 'long 'bout ez well in dem days ez dey is now. But atter w'ile de news come dat dere wuz a pon' er water...w'ich ef dey'd git inter dey'd be wash off nice en w'ite, en den one un um, he fin' de place en make er splunge inter de pon', en come out w'ite.... [W]'en de folks seed it, dey make a break fer de pon', ...dey mighty nigh use de water up, w'ich we'n dem yuthers come 'long, de morest dey could do wuz ter paddle about wid der foots en dabble in it wid der han's.... en down ter tis day dey ain't no w'ite 'bout a nigger ceppin' de pa'ms er der han's en de soles er der foot. (Harris 110)

Some forty years after the first publication of Harris's collection, John Herbert Nelson, in *The Negro Character in American Literature*, not only mourns the passing of plantation society and devoted slaves like Uncle Remus but is also seemingly oblivious of arguments that race-based discrimination should change. He concludes that Harris "will be known to the future as the supreme interpreter of the American negro.... The negro of his writings...has passed from the stage, and into his place has stepped the free American black—quite a different person. For literature, the change is regrettable" (Nelson 107). He echoes the sentiments of others who yearned for a mythologized Old South and who

were seemingly uninterested in or unaware of the plight of blacks in Jim Crow America.

As the struggle for civil rights took hold in the mid-twentieth century, many deemed the Uncle Remus stories racist. But, in his forward to a 1955 compilation of Harris's tales, Richard Chase appears to be out of touch with what was giving rise to his own era's growing civil rights advocacy when he writes that for "seventy-five years now, Uncle Remus has held us by his charm.... This is an age of cultural confusion. Identity of race and race tradition is a treasure that all Americans, white or black or red, can keep in spite of the bewildering cross currents of lore and learning in our modern age" (xi). Chase's conclusion, however, seems to be in keeping with the sentiments and feelings of most white Americans throughout most of America's history.

Mark Twain, like his contemporary Joel Chandler Harris, incorporates the dialect of the slaves he knew in his youth into stories and novels that address slavery and racial issues. But the Missourian handled these topics in a very different manner than did the Georgia-born Harris. Twain demonstrates through the creation of characters like Nigger Jim, Roxy, and false Tom Driscoll that slaves and, by extension, all black Americans, were not just happy-go-lucky, child-like creatures but men and women capable of deliberate intent, resoluteness, and, on occasion, even monstrous acts. Twain challenges Jim Crow sentiments as he caricatures and parodies white Americans and the evil they had created. Critic Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes in "The Tales He Couldn't Tell: Mark Twain, Race and Culture at the Century's End: A Social Context for *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," that, although Twain sets his novel in the pre-Civil War South, the tale is:

...shot through with the acid irony, numbing pain, and crippling despair that so many African-Americans must have found themselves struggling to overcome in

the 1880s and 1890s in the face of lynchings, political intimidation, and social and cultural isolation and ostracism. In place of portraits of contented slaves who wouldn't for a moment attempt freedom, Twain gives us Roxanna, a woman who decides...that death—for herself and her child—is preferable to slavery.... Twain's is clearly a different moral universe from that inhabited by Thomas Nelson Page.

(369)

Twain underwent a revelatory journey from his early years in Missouri to the *fin-de-siècle* when he wrote *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Looking back on his youth from the vantage point of old age, the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* acknowledges in one of his autobiographies that his father owned slaves and that his family “lived in a slaveholding community” (*Auto of MT* 30). Twain nostalgically recounts that his fond feelings for a middle-aged slave named Uncle Dan'l resulted in his “strong liking for his race” which, in turn, led the author to conclude decades later that a “black face is as welcome to me now as it was then” (*Auto of MT* 6). His memories of childhood were that “all the negroes were friends of ours, and with those of our own age we were in effect comrades” but the adult Twain cogently recognizes the irony in his own statement, qualifying it by writing that “we were comrades and yet not comrades; color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of and which rendered complete fusion impossible” (*Auto of MT* 5, 6). Of the slave-owning milieu in which he was raised, Twain contends in this autobiography: “[I]n my schoolboy days I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing” (*Auto of MT* 6). That black men and women slaves

abhorred their enslavement and often took an opportunity to flee from it is not recognized by him here.

As Twain aged, he increasingly decried the treatment of blacks and further changed his feelings about slavery, even if he clung to a certain sentimentality for earlier times, writing that as “kind-hearted and compassionate as she [his mother] was, I think she was not conscious that slavery was a bald, grotesque and unwarrantable usurpation.... As a rule our slaves were convinced and content.... It was the mild domestic slavery [in Hannibal], not the brutal plantation article. Cruelties were very rare and exceedingly and wholesomely unpopular” (*Auto of MT* 30).

Twain’s thoughts about race and black Americans did not change much during his early years. He wrote to his family back in Missouri in 1853 that “I reckon I had better black my face, for in these Eastern States niggers are considerably better than white people,” even yearning for the town of his youth where slaves knew their place: “I would like amazingly to see a good old-fashioned negro” (qtd. in Foner 194). As a young man, he served briefly as an irregular in the Confederate Army, but by 1862, and now writing as Mark Twain, he had “become a Union man” who felt “very much as if I had just awakened out of a long sleep” (qtd. in Ladd 86). Arthur G. Pettit, in his *Mark Twain and the South*, offers a different, and equally plausible, explanation for Twain’s apparent change of heart about black Americans, writing that:

When loyalty to the Confederacy proved a handicap in the face of shifting Western opinion—especially when it began to interfere with Clemens’s main business in the West, which was to make money—it did not take him long to decide that dropping the Confederate South was indeed a small price to pay.... He was probably relieved

to learn that coming down on the winning side did not require revision of his views about black people.... [M]ost of the West and the North was anti-black as well as antislavery and enjoyed the usual nigger jokes. (30)

His world-view continued to broaden as he traveled around the country, moving throughout the West and then on to Buffalo, New York (Fishkin, "MT and Race" 134-6). But Twain recognized the value in drawing upon the experiences of his youth, seeing the rewards inherent in exploiting the duality and understanding, as Fishkin posits, that "African-American vernacular speech and storytelling manifested a vitality and literary potential that was rich, powerful, and largely untapped in print.... [A]t a time when African Americans themselves were characterized as inferior specimens of humanity by pseudoscientists, statesmen, and educators,...he recognized that such pronouncements were absurd" (Fishkin, "MT and Race" 135). By 1869 he was living in the Northeast and had to "tone down [his] humorous treatment of blacks to better reflect Northern sentiments" (Pettit 38).

The author continued skewering everybody and everything in his tall tales and his humorous exaggerations. An essay entitled "Only a Nigger" appeared in the August 26, 1869 edition of the *Buffalo Express* and satire is the weapon he chooses to attack not only the recent murder "of two negroes" in Memphis but also to challenge the myth of Southern aristocratic chivalry:

Ah, well! Too bad, to be sure! A little blunder in the administration of justice by Southern mob-law.... Only 'a nigger' killed by mistake—that is all. Of course, every high toned gentleman whose chivalric impulses were so unfortunately misled in this affair...is as sorry about it as a high toned gentleman can be expected to be

sorry about the unlucky fate of a ‘nigger.’ But mistakes will happen, even in the conduct of the best regulated and most high toned mobs, and surely there is no good reason why Southern gentlemen should worry themselves with useless regret, so long as only an innocent ‘nigger’ is hanged, or roasted, or knouted to death now and then. What if the blunder of lynching the wrong man does happen once in four or five cases.... What are the lives of a few ‘niggers’ in comparison with the preservation of the impetuous instincts of a proud and fiery race? Keep ready the halter, therefore, oh chivalry of Memphis! (1-2)

The following year Twain married Olivia Langdon, the daughter of abolitionists who helped fugitive slaves escape from the United States through the Underground Railroad. As the budding author and humorist began rejecting outright racism, he “finally found [that] the most attractive way to return in spirit to the antebellum South” was, in Pettit’s estimation, by changing “Hannibal from distasteful memory into detached nostalgia” (59). An example of this trajectory is found in an 1874 short story entitled “A True Story: Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” in which Twain relates a conversation he had with an old African-American servant named Aunt Rachel, a woman he remembers as laughing often and loudly. From his position of white privilege and superiority and, despite his stated fondness and regard for the slaves of his youth, Twain naïvely and condescendingly views her stereotypically as a contented and happy slave, asking her: “Aunt Rachel, how is it you’ve lived sixty years and never had any trouble?” (*Pen* 128). She pauses and “without even a smile in her voice” replies “Misto C----is you in’arnest?” (MT, *Pen* 128). Twain is surprised by her reply and says to her, “Why, I thought—that is, I meant—why, you *can’t* have had any trouble. I’ve never heard you sigh, and never seen

your eye when there wasn't a laugh in it" (*Pen* 128). Gravely serious, Rachel replies: "Has I had any trouble?".... I's gwyne to tell you, den I leave it to you. I was bawn down 'mongst de slaves; I knows all 'bout slavery, 'case I ben one of 'em my own se'f." (MT, *Pen* 128). She tells him the story of her children being sold down the river when her master died: "Dey put chains on us an' put us on a stan'...an' all de people stood aroun', crowds an' crowds.... Well, dah was my ole man gone, an' all my chil'en, all my seven chil'en—an' six of 'em I hain't set eyes on ag'in to dis day" (MT, *Pen* 129-30). She concludes the story with this telling line: "Oh, no, Misto C----, I hain't had no trouble. An' no joy!" (MT, *Pen* 132). Perhaps Twain's reaction was, at the very least, chagrin, if not downright mortification.

Twain's personal evolution on race and racial issues continued. He wrote to President Garfield in 1881 regarding Frederick Douglass: "I offer this petition...because I so honor this man's...character and so admire his brave, long crusade for the liberties and elevation of his race. *He is a personal friend of mine* [emphasis added]...his history would move me to say these things without that" (qtd. in Foner 217). Given the time period in which he lived and the society in which he had been raised, for Mark Twain to claim America's leading black abolitionist as a personal friend is remarkable and informative.

According to noted Twain scholar Fishkin, the author planned to write a story about passing in the mid-to-late 1880s. Now referred to as "The Man with Negro Blood," the extant outline reveals that the story was to be about a young man who had been born enslaved. When he is grown, the character passes for white and finds financial success. At his engagement party, an African American waitress exposes the charade and his white fiancée is horrified to find that the young man is not only black but also her brother

(Fishkin, “MT and Race” 150). In this tale, Twain condemns not only slavery but also the institutionalized rape of slave women by their masters.

Twain addresses America and its racism in his masterpiece—the 1884 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Critic Fishkin explains that the “central question” is this: “How can a society that debases human lives on a mass scale consider itself civilized? In *Huckleberry Finn*...Twain used irony to shame his countrymen into recognizing the gap between their images of themselves and reality, as he portrays a racist society through the eyes of a boy too innocent to challenge that society's norms” (“MT and Race” 136). But Sterling A. Brown interprets things differently in terms of Twain and his treatment of black Americans in novels like *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in a 1939 article entitled “The American Race Problem as Reflected in American Literature.” Twain was “perfectly aware of America’s sorry defaulting of its debt to the Negro, [and] still did not reveal this awareness in creative work” (S. Brown, “American” 284). What Brown fails to take into account is evidence of Twain’s changing views of American society and of the damage slavery had done to both its black and white inhabitants.

But Fishkin, writing from the vantage point of the passing of decades, sheds further insight into the changes in Twain’s behavior towards black Americans. She reports that Twain financially supported a black painter’s apprenticeship and also spoke for free at African American churches during the 1880s and 1890s (Fishkin, “Tales” 372). Twain also paid some of the college costs of several black students because, in his words, it was “part of the reparation due from every white to every black man” (qtd. in Foner 192). In an 1884 letter sent to the dean of Yale’s law school about his offer to pay one African American’s expenses, Twain asks: “Do you know him? And is he worthy? I do not



believe I would very cheerfully help a white student...but I do not feel so about the other color. We have ground the manhood out of them, & the shame is ours, not theirs, & we should pay for it" (qtd. in McDowell 16). Twain states in an interview in 1896 that the "negroes at present are merely freed slaves, and you can't get rid of the effects of slavery in one or even two generations. But things will right themselves. We have given the negro the vote, and he must keep it" (Twain, *MT: The Complete* 287). That same year, he wrote a short tract entitled "Man's Place in the Animal World" in which he compared man to other animals, opining negatively, "Man is the only Slave. And he is the only animal who enslaves. He has always been a slave in one form or another, and has always held other slaves in bondage under him in one way or another" (211). Twain was not excusing the peculiarly American form of slavery that was based on race but, instead, was commenting on slavery's unnaturalness in the animal kingdom.

Despite such charitable acts and evidence of an evolving view on slavery and race-related issues, Twain retained a twoness in his attitude towards blacks, neither loving nor hating them. Although he decried lynching and outright ill treatment, he did not advocate for social equality. In his private notebooks and journals, the humorist continued to refer to African Americans in such socially-acceptable terms as "colored," "nigger," and "darkies" (*MT's Notebooks* vol. 1, 549; vol. 2, 534, 547; vol. 3, 57, 359). Conversely, he expressed sincere indignation when hundreds of indigenous people in the Philippines were slaughtered by American soldiers and, in 1899, penned an essay entitled "Concerning the Jews" in which he writes that "I have no race prejudices, and I think I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices.... All I care to know is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me" (236). True to form, Twain adds a sardonic codicil:

“he can’t be any worse” (“Concerning” 236).

Perhaps his feelings about white Americans, particularly in their treatment of blacks, are part of the largely cynical view he held of all mankind, as he expressed in a 1901 letter to Ray J. Friedman of New York: “One of my theories is, that the hearts of men are about alike, all over the world, no matter what their skin-complexions may be” (qtd. in Foner 182). Critic Butcher disagrees with Twain’s self-assessment and Fishkin’s re-assessment, disparagingly concluding that, while “Twain held enlightened views about race and nationality, but his writing is not always free of caricature and condescension...[and] so far as the delineation of the Negro is concerned....[is] worthy of the pen of Thomas Nelson Page” (233).

In an autobiography of his dated 1924, Twain describes meeting Booker T. Washington in the mid-1890s in London and displays white America’s prejudices and lack of awareness about the conditions most black Americans faced. He admits that he had never actually noticed what the African American leader looked like because Washington was, after all, just another black man. The author recalls that:

I have met him a number of times since, and he always impresses me pleasantly. Last night he was a mulatto. I didn’t notice it until he turned, while he was speaking, and said something to me. It was a great surprise to me to see that he was a mulatto and had blue eyes. How unobservant a dull [*white*] person can be! Always, before, he was black, to me, and I had never noticed whether he had eyes at all, or not. (*MT’s Auto*, vol. 2, 2)

Booker T. Washington, paying tribute to Twain after his death in 1910, writes that “the author, without making any comment and without going out of his way, has somehow

succeeded in making his readers feel a genuine respect for 'Jim,' .... I cannot help feeling that in this character Mark Twain has...exhibited his sympathy and interest in the masses of negro people" (qtd. in D. Smith, "Black" 117). In 1939, literary critic Sterling Brown assesses Twain's treatment of Jim similarly, writing that "Jim is the best example in nineteenth century fiction of the average Negro slave (not the tragic mulatto or the noble savage), illiterate, superstitious, yet clinging to his hope for freedom, to his love for his own. And he is completely believable" (qtd. in D. Smith, "Black" 120). In 1910, William Dean Howells published his reminiscences about his friend and colleague in a book entitled *My Mark Twain*. He contends that Twain was a fully "desouthernized Southerner" who "held himself responsible for the wrong which the white race had done the black race in slavery" (qtd. in Chellis 100). Howells also concludes about the Twain he came to know in the post-Civil War period: "No man more perfectly sensed and entirely abhorred slavery" (qtd. in Foner 198).

Renowned poet, activist, and novelist Langston Hughes wrote the introduction to a 1962 edition of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. In it, he unequivocally states that Twain's novel is about the ill effects of slavery and the illogical nature of trying to establish racial constructions, concluding that:

Mark Twain, in his presentation of Negroes as human beings, stands head and shoulders above the other Southern writers of his time, even such distinguished ones as Joel Chandler Harris...and Thomas Nelson Page. It was a period when most writers who included Negro characters in their work at all, were given to presenting the slave as ignorant and happy, the freed men of color as ignorant and miserable, and all other Negroes as either comic servants...or dangerous brutes on

the other. That Mark Twain's characters in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* fall into none of these categories is a tribute to his discernment.... In this novel Twain shows how much more than anything else environment shapes the man. (Hughes, "MT's PW" 328)

But, other critics—white as well as black—feel that Twain remained mired in the racism of antebellum and Jim Crow America and that his *Huckleberry Finn* is “humiliating and insulting” to African American students (D. Smith, “Black” 121). Dr. Carmen Subryan of Howard University, for example, shares her thoughts about Twain and his racism in an article in the April, 1985, issue of *Jet*. Her studies of Twain and his writings, she contends, prove that Twain was a racist (“Experts” 39). Subryan points to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as proof of this claim, interpreting false Tom as a “failure in life” because “Twain seemed to be stressing that one drop of Black blood in his veins made it impossible for success” (“Experts” 39). In 1968, Jack P. Wysong writes in “Samuel Clemens' Attitude Toward the Negro as Demonstrated in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*” that Twain exhibits a “condescending view...when he is dealing with the Negro race” (41). To bolster his argument, Wysong quotes a critic named Ellen Moers who feels that “the portraits of the Negroes in Twain's novels [can never] be made palatable to the present generation of Civil Rights activists. Stupidity, shiftlessness, superstition, helpless immaturity, and ineradicable ignorance are the qualities we find in Twain's Negroes, relieved only, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* by depravity, viciousness, and cruelty” (qtd. in Wysong 42, 42-3). Wysong does not address the greater issue of Twain's all-out attack on Jim Crow racism and the effects of slavery on African Americans in the novel but he does acknowledge the fallacy of one-drop rules

when he states that “Twain’s obvious intent here is to show that if one does not know which is which, one cannot tell the difference, the implication being that people are people” (47). What Wyson is capturing is the inherently subversive nature of passing narratives and the full ironic intent of all authors who use it in their fictional works.

A Confederate Army veteran who became a friend of Mark Twain’s and who went on speaking tours with him, George Washington Cable, wrote “The Freedman’s Case in Equity” in 1885. Attacking white American society and its views towards black Americans, Cable seems to foreshadow Twain’s words in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* when he opines that the “African slave was brought here by cruel force, and with everybody’s consent except his own.... There rests...a moral responsibility of the whole nation never to lose sight of the results of African-American slavery.... The original seed of trouble was sown with the full knowledge and consent of the nation. The nation was to blame” (1). Cable continues his polemic and argues that, to treat the freedmen so badly, society had to decide that there was “by nature, a disqualifying moral taint in every drop of negro blood” (10).

In his old age Twain looked back upon his hometown and came to a conclusion very like Cable’s, writing that the “whole community was agreed as to one thing—the awful sacredness of slave property...carried with it a stain, a moral smirch which nothing could wipe away” (*MT’s Auto*, vol. 1, 110). It is this stain, this smirch, this reprehensible institution that the sardonic author attacks in his subversive novel of passing—*The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*—despite critic Barbara Ladd’s contention in her *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* that it “isn’t so much the troublesome inheritance of the black man that concerned Mark Twain as that of

the white one” (101). The humorist-novelist chose these subjects despite the fact that he was writing from a position of privilege and with the “luxury of a white writer who, unlike Douglass or Du Bois, would never himself have to ride Jim Crow” (Sundquist 270). It is additionally ironic, writes Arlin Turner in “Mark Twain and the South: *Pudd’nhead Wilson*,” that Twain chose to write about slavery and race in 1894, at a time when much of his audience had lost interest in the plight of black Americans. Turner explains his contentions further, suggesting:

...by chance rather than intention, Mark Twain wrote his most perceptive and most impressive attack on racism and related doctrines at a time when his attack could stir no spark in the reading public.... [H]is new understanding came at just the time he realized...that society, in the North no less than in the South, had settled into a pattern of thought which could promise no relief for the victims of race oppression. (132)

Even though the timing of his attack on illogical racial constructions and the effects of America’s peculiar institution may have not been optimal, readers still flocked to it, looking for the twists and turns they had come to expect from him and suspecting, all the while, that Twain was leading them somewhere in his rambling novel. The author had much to say about humor and how it should be used, even when a novelist is addressing a serious issue at the same time. In 1895, for example, he writes that a parodist “was never yet properly funny who was not capable at times of being very serious” while in 1897 he concludes that “all true humor was based on seriousness, and hence the humorist, who often made other people laugh, laughed least himself” (Twain, *MT: The Complete*, 205, 321). Twain does not disappoint those reading his 1894 novel, fulfilling the theory he

states in an 1889 essay entitled “How to Tell a Story” that the “humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it” and that “very often, of course, the rambling and disjointed humorous story [contains]...a nub, point, snapper, or whatever you like to call it. Then the listener must be alert” (5).

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* is replete with such nubs, points, and snappers—from the description of Dawson's Landing to the story's plot lines to the characters' names. The most distinguished citizen in town is its judge, one York Leicester Driscoll, a man who was “very proud of his old Virginian ancestry” and “fine and just and generous. To be a gentleman—a gentleman without stain or blemish—was his only religion and to it he was always faithful. He was respected, esteemed and beloved by all the community” (20-21). Twain's depiction of Driscoll and his peers appears to be drawn from the author's past, the slave-owning Missouri society where Southern pride in the aristocratically-esteemed was palpable. He recalls in his *Autobiography of Mark Twain*: “My mother, with her large nature and liberal sympathies, was not intended for an aristocrat.... [But] I knew that privately she was proud that the Lambtons, now Earls of Dunham, had occupied the family lands for nine hundred years; that they were feudal lords” (28), not unlike the unjustified conceit of the leading citizens of his fictional Dawson's Landing.

Men with equally pretentious names are introduced to the novel's readers. Pembroke Howard is an “old Virginian grandee with proven descent from the First Families” who is a “gentleman according to the nicest requirements of the Virginia rule” while the younger brother of the judge is named Percy Northumberland Driscoll (MT, *PW* 21). Perceptively, critic James W. Caron writes about Twain's send-up of Southern

aristocratic airs that “unlike the playful embellishments of the tall tale that distort to make people laugh, the ‘old’ in Old Virginia signifies slavery and aristocracy—distortions designed for tears or ironic laughter in a country which considers itself Christian and democratic” (458). The nubs, points, and snappers have quickly appeared.

Into the town and tale comes one David Wilson. Arriving from New York in February, 1830, Wilson is described as a man with an “intelligent blue eye that had frankness and comradeship in it and a covert twinkle of a pleasant sort” (MT, *PW* 23). Wilson is not only an “other” because he is from the North but also because he is a college graduate with a sardonic worldview. He further brands himself as an outsider when he makes a joke about a dog that the locals do not understand. Instead of discerning Wilson’s play on words, the townspeople declare him to be a “perfect jackass” and brand him a “pudd’nhead” (MT, *PW* 26). Instead of welcoming this intelligent Northerner, the citizens of Dawson’s Landing set him apart. He, an isolated outsider, is free to view the town’s residents from a distance and make satirical comments about them in his calendar. Wilson, with no customers for the law business he tries to set up and making few friends, serves the tale as an apparently unbiased observer who is willing to assume the mantle of a fool.

Much later in the novel, Judge Driscoll and other citizens of the town read some of Wilson’s “whimsical almanac” (MT, *PW* 70). But, just as they are unable to understand his remarks about a dog when he first comes to town, “irony was not for those people; their mental vision was not focused for it. They read those playful trifles in solidest earnest” (MT, *PW* 71). Perhaps Twain realizes that some of his readers will not understand the satire, parody, and irony present in his tale either, despite his best efforts.



Wilson's calendar entries appear in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* at the start of each chapter and much of the book's humor derives from them, whether or not they have any bearing on what is happening at that moment in the novel. Chapter fourteen's entry is: "The true Southern watermelon is a boon apart, and not to be mentioned with commoner things.... It was not a Southern watermelon that Eve took; we know it because she repented" while chapter thirteen's calendar entries reads: "October. This is one of the peculiarly dangerous months to speculate in stocks in. The others are July, January, September, April, November, May, March, June, December, August, and February" (MT, PW 179, 166). In a manner akin to television and film characters speaking directly to the "fourth wall," Twain's alter ego Wilson opines on a wide range of topics, an example of which is the calendar entry for April 1<sup>st</sup>: "This is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the other three hundred and sixty-four" (PW 278).

While some readers and critics feel that Twain's humorous asides detract from the seriousness of his message, his contemporary William Dean Howells cautions that "it would be limiting him unjustly to describe him [only] as a satirist" ("Mark" 782). His friend strongly states that those readers who fail to see Twain's "indignant sense of right and wrong, a scorn of all affectation and pretense, an ardent hate of meanness and injustice, he will come indefinitely short of knowing Mark Twain" (Howells, "Mark" 782). Howells concludes his article in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* with this admonition: "If the prevailing spirit of Mark Twain's humor is not a sort of good-natured self-satire, in which the reader may see his own absurdities reflected, I scarcely should be able to determine it" ("Mark" 782).

In the twentieth century, critics have addressed Twain's humorous interjections in a

variety of ways. Leslie A. Fiedler begins his discussion of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* negatively, writing in 1955 in "As Free as Any Cretur..." that Twain's book is a "wreck of a comic tale framed by apologies and bad jokes" and "half melodramatic detective story, half bleak tragedy. What a book the original might have been.... [But] the resulting book is marred by incomprehensible motivations and gags" (130). What Fiedler overlooks is Twain's theory that the "humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular" (MT, "How" 4). John C. Gerber disagrees with Fiedler's assessment, arguing in "*Pudd'nhead Wilson* as Fabulation" in 1975 that the novel is a fable and that Twain, as a teller of tales, is "concerned primarily with the design and effects of his story, [and] he cheerfully ignores the realism of both subject matter and presentation when it serves his purpose to do so" (22). Almost thirty years after Fiedler, James W. Caron maintains, in a 1982 article entitled "Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar: Tall Tales and a Tragic Figure," that the "many instances of authorial intrusion and the implausibilities of plot are not defects since.... Twain's purpose is to draw attention with these techniques to the fictitiousness of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*" (455). Caron reads *Pudd'nhead* as a tall tale in the American tradition in which exaggeration is replete and purposeful, intentionally revealing the "fundamental imbalance of a slave-based aristocracy...[and] an artful lie woven into the history of America" (455). While David Lionel Smith asks in "Mark Twain, Pretexts, Iconoclasm" how the renowned author could "write with such petulant dissidence, and how did he get away with it?," the critic also concludes that the novelist "knew exactly how far he could push an uncomfortable observation, and he knew how to soften such utterances with shrewdly calculated humor" (186, 193).

Twain satirically exposes the town's inhabitants as people who see themselves as aristocrats, who live in a system that is anything but democratic, and who are unable to understand a simple joke. Critic Leavis disagrees with this interpretation of the novel when he writes: "Astringent as is the irony of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the attitude here has nothing of the satiric in it [and] (the distinctively satiric plays no great part in the work as a whole)" (132-33). Conversely, Fishkin concludes, in her article "Racial Attitudes," that there is a similarity between Wilson's joke about owning and killing half a dog and the fact that the Missourians are "engaged in just such a proposition; as they systematically degrade and destroy 'half' of the people in their land...they destroy their own community as well.... Just as slavery...had dehumanized slaveholders as well as slaves...postwar racism took its moral and psychological toll on whites as well as blacks" (612). This interpretation supports the conclusion that Twain's satirical, irony-filled passing novel—*The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*—is designed to attack both slavery and also the treatment of blacks in the Jim Crow period, perpetrated and supported by white Americans in both societies.

After introducing the town, its inhabitants, and its newest resident, Twain sets the novel's themes and actions into motion. Without much to do, Wilson begins taking the fingerprints of all the town's residents—including its slaves--and noting each person's name and the date on the grease-prints he collects on glass slides. Then, within a month of his arrival in Dawson's Landing, two boys are born in Percy Driscoll's house—one by his wife and another by the slave Roxy. Driscoll's wife dies the next week so Roxy must tend to both children. In Roxy, Twain creates a formidable African American character. As she passes by his house, Wilson describes the woman in this manner:

From Roxy's manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but

she was not. Only one sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show. She was of majestic form and stature, her attitudes were imposing and statuesque, and her gestures and movements distinguished by a noble and stately grace. Her complexion was very fair...her eyes were brown and liquid, and she had a heavy suit of fine soft hair that was also brown.... Her face was shapely, intelligent and comely—even beautiful.... To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and salable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave, and by a *fiction of law and custom* [emphasis added] a negro. (MT, *PW* 32-33)

A “fiction of law and custom” boldly writes Twain with satire dripping from his pen. But in 1965, Philip Butcher does not see Roxy’s portrayal as positive and condemns the novelist in “Mark Twain Sells Roxy Down the River” by declaring that *Pudd’nhead* is “doomed to inferior status as a work of art by defects of conception and execution of Twain’s portrait of Roxy” (225). To Butcher, she is merely a “ludicrous grotesque, a shadow signifying nothing except Twain’s inability...to rise above popular notions about the Negro’s emotional instability and lack of profound feeling.... Never is Roxy’s whiteness shown as the dominant influence it would have been” (228). What Butcher fails to perceive is that the novelist’s depiction of a slave woman as intelligent, attractive, noble, and white is wholly unlike that of his contemporaries and includes none of the negative and stereotypical depictions generally found in Jim Crow writings by whites.

To create a character with a minute percentage of black ancestry—one who does not have any of the physical characteristics often associated with Africans but who is

nevertheless a slave capable of making decisions and affecting the lives of the story's characters—is subversive. Roxy's physical appearance shows that racial stereotypes based on perceived blackness are illogical and unfounded paradoxes. Twain's addition of irony to his passing novel heightens his onslaught on the construction of racial identities and on the institution of slavery. By adding outrageousness, he further exposes the folly of whites who claim inherent, God-given superiority and dominion over blacks. By heaping ridicule and contempt on whites who, with unjustified pride, trace their lineage to a First Family of Virginia, he raises the level of attack on the ludicrousness of either/or, one-drop rules and on white America's treatment of its black citizens. By exposing the endemic hypocrisy of the antebellum and Jim Crow periods and by creating a character who appears to be white but is *not* considered so and who does not look black but *is* considered so, Twain plays not the fool but an unrelenting and contemptuous critic.

The “white” child is named Thomas à Becket Driscoll while the slave child has the equally highfalutin and seemingly aristocratic name of Valet de Chambre; the latter becomes simply known as Chambers. The two are virtually identical and, when Wilson asks Roxy how she tells the children apart other than by the disparate clothing they wear, Twain foreshadows the novel's central plot device when she replies: “Oh, *I* kin tell ‘em ‘part, Misto Wilson, but I bet Marse Percy couldn’t, not to save his life” (*PW* 34).

When some of Driscoll's money goes missing, his slaves are accused. While Roxy had not taken it, she saw another slave do so and justifies the petty thievery as an act that helps balance slavery's theft of their freedom. When none of the slaves admits to taking the money, Driscoll threatens to sell them all down the river. “It was equivalent to condemning them to hell!,” the slaves think (*MT, PW* 39). To save themselves from this

dire fate, the thieves admit stealing the money. Driscoll then does what he considers a “noble and gracious thing,” feels “moved to deeds of gentleness and humanity,” and is “pleased with his magnanimity” when he decides to sell them locally, rather than farther south (MT, *PW* 40). The irony Twain presents here is that the slaves will still be slaves, whether or not their lives will be marginally better in Missouri than in the Deep South. Stanley Brodwin, in his 1973 article “Blackness and the Adamic Myth in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*,” agrees with this assessment, writing that the novelist “captures in coldly ironic style the act of pride.... Twain’s use of irony is masterful here and may be regarded as a stylistic paradigm” (170). This scene is not only an attack on the pain and suffering of the enslaved but echoes the author’s childhood memories as revealed in his autobiography. Twain remembers that:

To separate and sell the members of a slave family to different masters was a thing not well liked by the people and so it was not often done, except in the settling of estates.... I vividly remember seeing a dozen black men and women chained to one another, once, and lying in a group on the pavement, awaiting shipment to the Southern slave market. Those were the saddest faces I have ever seen. (*Auto of MT* 30)

Roxy becomes frenzied with the thought that her child can be sold at any time the master chooses. She considers her options--killing the child, running away with the baby, or killing herself—not unlike the desperate choices contemplated by Sethe in Toni Morrison’s masterpiece *Beloved*. Instead, Roxy decides to switch the children so that *her* child will never be the one sold away. She changes the clothes on the children and puts each in the other’s bed, transgressively justifying her actions to the true Tom by saying that

“I’s sorry for you, honey.... Yo’ pappy would sell him to somebody, some time, en den he’d go down de river.... ’Tain’t no sin—*white* folks has done it!” (MT, *PW* 46). As Allyson Hobbs notes in her work *A Chosen Exile*—one in which she examines three centuries of real-life passing in America--“to pass as white in this period was to escape—not necessarily from blackness, but from slavery” (5). The irony is that Roxy, in deciding to switch the babies, not only helps Twain expose racial injustice but also puts herself in the “equivocal position of committing the same wrong against one human being that she was trying to prevent in another” (Chellis 104).

She, Roxy, makes a choice in a world that allowed her none. She, Roxy, takes control of her child’s body and keeps it safe from the white slave-holding society. She, Roxy, a slave woman, drives the action of the tale. She, Roxy, white but not white, black but not black, is Twain’s agent of subversion.

Carolyn Porter, in “Roxana’s Plot,” concludes that, as Roxy switches the babies, she “operates to subvert the white patriarchy” (163). Barbara Chellis sees irony in the baby-switching in her 1969 article entitled “Those Extraordinary Twins: Negroes and Whites” by pointing out that Twain’s Roxy is a “reversal of a type, the kindly Negro mammy who loves and protects the white child—turned inside out. Instead, she enslaves the white child, putting him in a position to be sold down the river, depriving him of his freedom, just as surely as the white man has deprived her of hers” (103). Philip Butcher, though, disagrees with these assessments of Roxy giving herself authority and exercising control in a society where she has virtually none, claiming instead in his “Mark Twain Sells Roxy Down the River” that switching the babies is merely a plot device needed by the author (227).

Roxy learns to treat her own child as the master's son and the real heir as a slave. But, the newly-minted Tom "was a bad baby, from the very beginning of his usurpation. He would cry for nothing; he would burst into storm of devilish temper without notice.... He would claw anybody who came within reach of his nails.... He would scream for water until he got it, and then throw the cup and all on the floor and scream for more" (MT, *PW* 52-53). Although one could blame false Tom's one drop of Negro blood for such behavior—as both readers and critics have done--Twain clearly lays the fault on the child's upbringing. The author states that false Tom "was indulged in all his caprices, howsoever troublesome and exasperating they might be" (*PW* 53-54). Twain explains that "[false] Tom got all the petting, [false] Chambers got none. Tom got all the delicacies, Chambers got mush and milk, and clabber without sugar. In consequence Tom was a sickly child and Chambers wasn't. Tom was 'fractious,' as Roxy called it, and overbearing; Chambers was meek and docile" (*PW* 55). Ironically, Twain writes that the "imitation-master" and the "dupe of her own deceptions" became Roxy's "accepted and recognized master. He was her darling, her master, and her deity all in one and in her worship of him she forgot who she was and what he had been" (*PW* 56).

Twain clearly contends that it was nurture, not any minute portion of African heritage that made false Tom evil, blaming his bad behavior and meanness on upbringing in a number of ways. Wilson's calendar entry for chapter five says simply, "Training is everything" (MT, *PW* 67), as Fishkin points out; she also concludes that the novel "argues that a black raised as a white will be as bad as a white" ("Tales" 374, 376). Further proof of Twain blaming upbringing rather than heredity, as suggested by critic Brook Thomas, are the words spoken by a character in his 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King*



*Arthur's Court*: "Training is everything; training is all there is to a person. We speak of nature; it is folly; there is no such thing as nature; what we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training. We have no thoughts of our own...they are...trained into us" (qtd. in Thomas 762).

Although the following passage was deleted from the final version of *Pudd'nhead* (and is part of a working version known as the Morgan manuscript<sup>8</sup>), it exposes Twain's feelings on the nature/nurture, white/black dualities in false Tom. Twain writes: "[T]hat which was base was the white blood in him debased by the brutalizing effects of a long-drawn heredity of slave-owning, with the habit of abuse which the possession of irresponsible power always created & perpetuated, by a law of human nature" (qtd. in Fishkin, "Tales" 376). It can also be argued that the opinion that evil is taught and learned through one's environment, rather than being an inherited trait, applies to the inhabitants of Dawson's Landing and all other American slave-owners. Southerners, and many other white Americans, had been inculcated to support the institution of slavery, to accept the inherent inferiority of blacks, and to believe that God had ordained white dominion over and subjugation of the descendants of Ham as part of the natural order of the universe.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the look-alike boys grow up together and years go by. False Chambers is meek, good-natured, and athletically gifted. He is also verbally and physically abused by false Tom, a young man who has become dreadful, spiteful, and hurtful towards both Chambers and his true mother. The imitation Tom fully assumes the role of the master's son, leading Roxy to realize that "the abyss of separation between her and her boy was complete. She was merely his chattel, now, his convenience, his dog, his

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<sup>8</sup> Refer to "The Composition of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Those Extra-ordinary Twins*: Chronology and Development" by Anne W. Wigger for a more complete discussion of revisions made to *Pudd'nhead* before its publication and of the Morgan manuscript.

cringing and helpless slave, the humble and unresisting victim of his capricious temper and vicious nature” (MT, *PW* 63). Only Roxy--and Twain’s readers--are aware of the sacrifice the slave woman made when she switched the babies.

Roxy, now aged thirty-five, is freed by Percy Driscoll on his death-bed. Judge Driscoll purchases Chambers from his brother before he dies so that false Tom cannot sell him down the river. With her manumission, Roxy leaves the plantation to become a chambermaid on a riverboat. When the bank in which she had been keeping her savings goes bust, Roxy returns to Dawson’s Landing and leaves a life of freedom behind. Twain then introduces another set of twins into his narrative--Luigi and Angelo Capello. From Italy, the two are travelling around the United States and arrive in Dawson’s Landing to a warm welcome, far different from that granted David Wilson decades earlier.

Twain wrote about twins before he did so in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. In an article entitled “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins” and published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1877, the author’s tongue-in-cheek spirit is freely displayed. Writing about Chang and Eng, the actual Siamese twins who toured the United States, Twain wittily creates absurdities:

During the war they were strong partisans...Eng on the Union side and Chang on the Confederate. They took each other prisoner at Seven Oaks, but the proofs of capture were so evenly balanced in favor of each that a general army court had to be assembled to determine which one was properly the captor and which the captive.... At one time Chang was convicted of disobedience of orders, and sentenced to ten days in the guard-house; but Eng, in spite of all arguments, felt obliged to share his imprisonment, notwithstanding he himself was entirely innocent. (24)

Back in the novel, false Tom goes off to Yale for two years. While there, he drinks and gambles and, as John Carlos Rowe tells readers of “Fatal Speculations: Murder, Money, and Manners in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*,” the author “is careful to tell us...that Tom learns to gamble at Yale; he wants the reader to be certain not to associate Tom’s vices with the black portion of his heredity. His gambling is his ‘inheritance’ from his white father” (146). When the “white” Tom returns from the North, he is bored with the town of Dawson’s Landing and sneers at the attire of the townspeople because he considers it inferior to his new Eastern finery. He goes to St. Louis to gamble and quickly falls into debt. His uncle has to cover what he owes and one such debt totals two hundred dollars, an amount that Roxy, shockingly, acknowledges is “enough to buy a tol’able good second-hand nigger wid” (MT, *PW* 98). Having a character who is a slave say this about a fellow slave and speaking casually about what it costs to purchase another human being—albeit only a “tol’able good second-hand nigger”—demonstrates Twain’s mockery of slavery and his exposition of its effects on black Americans. The author understands, and forces his readers to understand, the inherent irony in Roxy’s statement as he ridicules a society in which a woman who looks white but who is deemed black by a fiction of law and custom can utter such a statement.

When Chambers informs Roxy that Judge Driscoll has disinherited Tom due to his wastrel ways, she is shocked to learn that such a “disaster” could happen to her “pet” (MT, *PW* 99). The truth begins to tumble out of Roxy as she tells Chambers that he is a “mis’able imitation nigger dat I bore in sorrow en tribulation” (MT, *PW* 99). Chambers is amused by what she has said and, ironically and perceptively, replies: “If I’s imitation, what is you? Bofe of us is imitation *white*—dat’s what we is...we don’t ‘mount to noth’n

as imitation *niggers*” (MT, *PW* 99). Once again, Twain uses satire and ridicule in conjunction with the passing theme to subvert the cultural norms of antebellum Southern society and—by extension—the Jim Crow era in which he was writing *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Some people who are white-complexioned, blond-haired, and blue-eyed, Twain announces, are considered “black” and slaves and are, therefore, “imitation whites.” Twain adds additional irony as his false Chambers is unknowingly an “imitation black,” subverting further the lack of any logic in one-drop rules and demonstrating the fluidity of an artificially-imposed color line. As Evan Carton notes in “*Pudd’nhead Wilson* and the Fiction of Law and Custom,” although this illogical situation was created by Twain’s fiction of law and custom, it is “a fiction that nonetheless counts as stark fact” (85), a sad commentary on race in America.

Roxy sends Chambers to beg the Judge to re-instate Tom in his will. When he runs into Tom, the slave-owner demands of the man he thinks is a black slave: “Who gave you permission to come and disturb me with the social attention of niggers?” (MT, *PW* 101). He then beats false Chambers and throws the ironically-described “pure-white slave” out of the house (MT, *PW* 101). Soon thereafter, Roxy visits Tom in his rooms and grovels before the son she has raised as her master. She begs for a dollar, asking for this in return for the years she raised him. He derisively dismisses her and she threatens to tell the Judge all she knows about the callow youth. False Tom slumps to his knees, clings to Roxy’s skirts, and begs her to tell him the secret to which she alludes. Instead she takes the proffered dollar and leaves.

Tom is distraught, not because he has treated Roxy poorly, but because he had “knelt to a nigger wench.... I thought I had struck the deepest depths of degradation before,

but oh, dear, it was nothing to this.... I've struck bottom this time; there's nothing lower" (MT, *PW* 111). This statement hints to the novel's readers that this will not, in fact, be the lowest false Tom will sink. He then sneaks into Roxy's house and confronts her. In an outright condemnation of slavery, and without a satirical tone present, the slave woman tells false Tom the truth about his background: "You ain't no more kin to ole Marse Driscoll den I is!—*dat's* what I means!.... You's a *nigger!*--*bawn* a nigger en a *slave!*--en you's a nigger en a slave dis minute; en if I opens my mouf old Marse Driscoll'll sell you down de river befo' you is two days older den what you is now!" (MT, *PW* 113). Tom is stunned and insists it must be a lie but Roxy fires back: "you's my *son*" and that the "po boy dat yo's be'n a-kickin' en a-cuffin' to-day is Percy Driscoll's son en yo' *marster*.... En *his* name's Tom Driscoll, en yo' name's Valet de Chambers, en you ain't *got* no family name, beca'se niggers don't *have em!*" (MT, *PW* 114).

Tom is in shock, becomes disoriented, and begs Roxy not to tell anyone. She wrings concessions from him and asks for money for Chambers, the true plantation heir. But false Tom has no money due to his debts. He admits to Roxy, the slave he now knows is his natural mother, that he has been disguising himself and stealing valuables from the townspeople for gambling money, thus revealing an additional layer of passing and falseness. As he leaves, Roxy, with Twain's sense of irony now dripping from her own lips, reminds him: "Dey ain't another nigger in dis town dat's as high-bawn as you is" (*PW* 120).

While Roxy is alluding to the fact that a white man descended from a First Family of Virginia is his father and, therefore, false Tom is a "high-bawn" nigger, Twain is actually asking his readers to consider how any slave can be high-born in a society where slaves are

slaves, whites are whites, blacks are blacks, and masters are masters. But, when written with Twain's acid-dipped pen, perhaps not. Satire, mockery, and irony are combined by Twain to show the absurdity of nostalgia for the old plantation days described by men like Joel Chandler Harris and to force his readers to acknowledge the illogical nature of racial identity constructions. The man who was raised as a "white" has a blackened heart and is a gambler while Chambers, who is white but was raised as a "black" slave, is a wonderful, gentle, caring man. False Tom is evil not because of his one thirty-second portion of black blood and not only because of his spoiled upbringing but, even more importantly in Twain's view, because he is the product of the slave-owning society that represents America's original sin. This is, truly, the tragedy of his *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

As he tries to sleep that night, Tom disgustingly says to himself: "A nigger! I am a nigger! Oh, I wish I was dead!" (MT, *PW* 121). The next morning, Twain's authorial voice is heard, almost replacing that of false Tom as his character muses: "Why were niggers *and* whites made? What crime did the uncreated first nigger commit that the curse of birth was decreed for him? And why is this awful difference made between white and black?...How hard the nigger's fate seems, this morning!--yet until last night such a thought never entered my head" (*PW* 122).

One drop of blackness has forever altered false Tom's perception of himself and of the world around him. His reaction to finding out he is one thirty-second black is described this way by the renowned novelist:

A gigantic irruption [sic], like that of Krakatoa a few years ago, with the accompanying earthquakes, tidal waves, and clouds of volcanic dust, changes the face of the surrounding landscape beyond recognition, bringing down the high

lands, elevating the low, making fair lakes where deserts had been.... The tremendous catastrophe which had befallen Tom had changed his moral landscape in much the same way. (*PW* 122-23)

Twain further exaggerates false Tom's reaction to the crushing news. The young man wanders about for days, not only bemoaning his fate but also implicitly accepting either/or rules by instantaneously defining himself as a "black" slave and thinking that everyone else now "sees" him, as illogical as this may be, as a subordinate and inferior non-white. He does not challenge the preposterousness of Twain's fiction of law and custom. As James M. Cox asserts in his *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor*, false Tom has become a "marked man--a Negro. Yet how different he is from Nigger Jim, whom Huck ultimately saw as 'white inside.' Tom Driscoll is white *outside*, his white face and white talk hiding the mark within" (228). When he meets an old friend, Tom even feigns an inability to shake hands, because:

It was the 'nigger' in him asserting its humility, and he blushed and was abashed. And the 'nigger' in him was surprised when the white friend put out his hand for a shake with him. He found the 'nigger' in him involuntarily giving the road, on the sidewalk, to the white rowdy and loafer.... The 'nigger' in him went shrinking and skulking here and there and yonder, and fancying it saw suspicion and maybe detection in all faces, tones, and gestures.... He presently came to have a hunted sense and a hunted look.... He said to himself that the curse of Ham was upon him. (*MT*, *PW* 123-24)

Many of Twain's white readers would have identified with and understood false Tom's reaction to the news that he was now, suddenly and irrevocably, a black man. But

Twain wanted them to realize that not only was it illogical and unsupportable to contend that one drop of African blood changes anything about a person but also that it was white American society—and its institutionalized slavery and discriminatory laws—that allowed and encouraged them to have this reaction. Stating that contemporary readers felt “compassion” for false Tom when he discovers he has African heritage, critic Leavis concludes, perhaps reflecting feelings common to white critics in the 1950s or perhaps mistakenly overlooking the satirical, subversive tone that Twain weaves throughout the passing tale, that the “attitude of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is remote from cynicism or pessimism. The book conveys neither contempt for human nature nor a rejection of civilization” (133). While her criticism was written some fifty years later than Leavis’s, Beverly A. Hume contends that false Tom’s “amorality is exaggerated by Twain, and it quickly transforms him into an anti-realistic figure,” although she does acknowledge that Tom’s vile character, “whether that of a wretched master or a wretched slave, helps Twain demolish the classist and racist assumptions that have created him as well as any final nostalgia that his late-nineteenth-century readers might have had about the morality of a culture corrupted by arbitrary racist laws and class stratifications” (95, 97).

Readers of the novel do not see the numerous deletions and changes made between the first and published editions of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* but Twain’s authorial intent and feelings about race and slavery are revealed in them. Robert Moss concludes that “Mark Twain’s decisions to delete material that raised controversial racial matters suggest that he was trying to avoid the troublesome issue” (52). The critic, in “Tracing Mark Twain’s Intentions: The Retreat from Issues of Race in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*,” includes several other telling sentences excised prior to the book’s publication. “Slavery was to blame, not



innate nature. It placed the slave below the brute, without the white man's realizing it," originally penned Twain (qtd. in Moss 48). Even more illustrative is this deleted passage in which false Tom opines:

Why was he a coward? It was the 'nigger' in him. The nigger *blood*? Yes, the nigger blood degraded from original courage to cowardice by decades & generations of insult & outrage inflicted in circumstances which forbade reprisals, & made mute & meek endurance the only refuge & defence [sic].... That which was high came from either blood, & the monopoly of neither color; but that which was base was the *white* blood in him debased by the brutalizing effects of a long-drawn heredity of slave-owning, with the habit of abuse which the possession of irresponsible power always creates & perpetuates, by a law of human nature. (qtd. in Moss 49)

Lee Clark Mitchell feels that Twain is not wholly successful in proving that Tom acts in the manner he does because of his upbringing. In "'De Nigger in You': Race or Training in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*?" Mitchell argues that "events result from inherited characteristics no less than from social training, and thereby apparently buttress a racial myth that is everywhere else undermined" (296). The critic points out that "when the murderer of Judge Driscoll is discovered to have a smidgen of black 'blood,' his capacity for deliberative intention is discounted" (303), despite the fact that Twain clearly demonstrates throughout the novel that Roxy is not only capable of such deliberate intent but that it is her decision that drives the entire plot of the novel. Mitchell's interpretation seems to support the purportedly scientific findings about black mental inferiority that were made during the Jim Crow era. But when Mitchell writes further that "had Tom been

raised according to the lower caste to which he belongs, degenerate desires would not have been unleashed upon a community unprepared to resist” (303), he lays the blame for false Tom’s evil nature on the fact that a black slave was raised as a white slave-owner rather than with his own “kind,” simultaneously rejecting a black American’s ability to make decisions, to assume authority, and to be responsible for his/her own actions, whether good or bad. The racial passings of false Tom and false Chambers, both simultaneously “imitation white” and “imitation black,” were inadvertent because the two were switched as babies and did not have the agency to purposefully pass. However, once false Tom learns the truth and continues to live the life of a white master and slave-owner, his passing is no longer unintended. It becomes purposeful and chosen, an acceptance of Roxy’s fateful choice to save her true son from enslavement.

Things continue to worsen for false Tom in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. When his uncle is solicitous and asks about his health, Tom’s hatred of Judge Driscoll flares. He perceives that he is in a subordinate position compared to all the “whites” around him and sees the reality of slavery, thinking to himself: “He is white; and I am his chattel, his property, his goods, and he could sell me, just as he could his dog” (MT, PW 125). As time goes by, however, false Tom sublimates his knowledge of his true background.

The day before the Italian twins are to arrive back in Dawson’s Landing, resurrected unexpectedly by Twain in this part of his narrative, Tom disguises himself in Roxy’s clothes to raid houses to steal items to turn into needed cash. In doing so, he is passing not only as white but also as a woman. Twain’s narrative seems to lag again as it did when the author first introduced the twins to the story chapters before. But, once again foreshadowing what will happen later in the tale, the four men read their palms and Wilson

reads in Luigi's that he once killed a man. Luigi admits to having killed in defense of his brother's life and draws a picture of the knife he used. Wilson also takes and records the fingerprints of the twin visitors.

The twins and Judge Driscoll go drinking but get into a fight with fellow tavern patrons. The next morning, Tom takes Luigi to court and has him charged with assault and battery. Judge Driscoll is dismayed by Tom's actions because he has acted dishonorably--descendants of the FFV do not go to court for such a slight. Instead, men who self-identify as being honorable should challenge an offender to a duel. But Tom is sickened by the thought of dueling. Old Driscoll is heartbroken by Tom's cowardice and, as a consequence, rips up his will and disinherits Tom. Tom vows to find a way to get back into his uncle's good graces while the Judge prepares to duel in Tom's stead.

False Tom goes to Wilson's house where the constable and a justice of the peace happen to be. The men discuss the thievery that has been going on in town and all the valuables that have been stolen, noting that one of the items taken recently was Luigi's knife. In a turn of fate, Wilson's stature has risen in the estimation of some of Dawson Landing's inhabitants and he is asked to run for mayor. Judge Driscoll decides to re-draw his will, restoring the inheritance of the man Twain refers to as the "ostensible nephew" (*PW* 181). The Judge thinks about Tom's qualities and muses: "He is worthless and unworthy, but it is largely my fault.... I have indulged him to his hurt, instead of training him up severely, and making a man of him" (*MT, PW* 180). His thoughts about what made Tom into the kind of man he became echo those of Roxy, helping to dispel the interpretation of numerous readers and critics that false Tom's bad qualities were the result of his one drop of non-white blood.

As Judge Driscoll's friend Pembroke is witnessing the new will and before the two head to the dueling ground, Tom spies on them. Reading the document after the two have left, Tom realizes that his fortunes have been restored. He resolves not to drink or gamble any longer but also realizes that he still has Luigi's knife with him and that he cannot dispose of it due to the bounty that has been offered for the townspeople's stolen items. When Roxy learns that her son has refused to duel, she contemptuously chastises him for his cowardice. While no one is killed or badly wounded in the duel, Twain includes the practice in the novel as part of his assault on misguided and misplaced Southern aristocratic pride.

The words Twain employs in this scene seem to work against the author's blaming false Tom's malicious character on his upbringing, rather than on his one thirty-second part of African blood. But Roxy's statement can also be interpreted as Twain blaming Tom's evil nature on his white FFV ancestors, the men who were truly guilty of the evil perpetrated in America. Roxy says to Tom:

...[I]t make me sick! It's de nigger in you, dat's what it is. Thirty-one parts o' you is white, en on'y one part nigger, en dat po' little one part is yo' *soul*.... Whatever has come o' yo' Essex blood? Dat's what I can't understan'.... My great-great-great-gran'father en yo' great-great-great-great-gran'father was Ole Cap'n John Smith, de highest blood dat Ole Virginny ever turned out, en *his* great-great gran'mother or somers along back day, was Pocahontas de Injun queen, en her husbun' was a nigger king outen Africa-en yit here you is, a slinkin' outen a duel en disgracin' our whole line like an ornery low-down hound! Yes, it's de nigger in you! (MT, *PW* 188-89)

In a narrative filled with absurdities, incongruities, and paradoxes, having Roxy blame false Tom's failings on his one drop of "black" blood may be the tale's ultimate paradox. Critic Brodwin writes similarly about this scene, contending that readers are being forced to face the "terrible irony of a Negro condemning her own race [which] is.... for Mark Twain, the ultimate tragedy of the Negro. His mind and soul have been literally and figuratively 'whitewashed' so that he sometimes assumes the point of view of the slaveholder and despises himself for being a slave and black" (Brodwin 174). The ultimate irony, the ultimate subversion, and the ultimate tragedy of slavery and of American racism are laid bare by the author of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

As he now knows that such a dreaded fate is possible, Tom fears that he will be sold off as a slave. He agrees to Roxy's demand that he not gamble or drink for the next few months because she threatens to tell others the truth, that he is a "nigger en a slave" (MT, *PW* 196). But Tom is unable to rein in his bad ways and goes around town stirring up trouble in an attempt to make himself look better than the Italian twins, men who represent another form of "otherness" and "foreignness" to the small-minded men and women of Dawson's Landing. To raise funds, he leaves town to sell off the goods he has stolen but, ironically, they are stolen from him instead.

In an ensuing scene, Roxy tries to comfort her master/son but, when she tells him she loves him, "it made him wince, secretly—for she was a 'nigger.' That he was one himself was far from reconciling him to that despised race" (MT, *PW* 214). Not aware of the depth of his revulsion towards her, Roxy offers to sell herself back into slavery to get the money to cover his gambling debts. She is willing to do anything for her child, telling Tom: "Dey ain't nothin' a white mother won't do for her chile. Who made 'em so? De

Lord done it. En who made de niggers? De Lord made ‘em. In de inside, mothers is all the same. De good Lord he made ‘em so” (Twain, *PW* 216). Quite subversively, Twain portrays a “black” slave mother as having the same loving, caring, protective instincts as a “white” woman has, announcing to the world that mothers are all the same, regardless of race and, by extension, all human beings regardless of race.

The mother and son agree she will be a slave again, in Kentucky, and be bought back out a year later. But Tom deceives Roxy and sells his mother farther south instead. In his critique of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Carton comments that the irony of “Roxy’s willingness to return to slavery for Tom’s sake has often won her, from Twain’s readers, the epithet ‘noble.’ Selflessness, and the admiration of it, is a sentimental luxury for white society.... [that] merely describes the extent of her enslavement” (89). Chellis poses a different kind of question about Roxy’s offer to her son: “Mark Twain forces us to ask: when you make a white man, as Roxy made a white man of her son, what kind of man do you make? Mark Twain’s answer is that you stand a good chance of making a man who will sell other human beings into slavery for the most ignoble reason of all—money” (110).

Twain’s narrative briefly switches to campaign season. In an effort to elect Wilson as mayor, even though he was considered an outsider for many years, Judge Driscoll and his cronies disparage the twins and all other foreigners. Then, no longer considered quite such a pudd’nhead, Wilson is elected mayor of Dawson’s Landing.

Tom has gone to St. Louis where he runs into his mother, who has herself escaped from slavery. Twain weaves another ironic, double passing into his tale as Roxy, to disguise herself after her escape, blackens her face and dresses in men’s clothing because the slave-catchers were looking for a light-skinned woman. She chastises her son for

what he did to her and tells him how badly she was treated by the plantation overseer and his wife, both of whom were from the North: “Dat overseer wuz a Yank, too, outen New Englan’ .... *Dey* knows how to work a nigger to death, en day knows how to whale ‘em, too—whale ‘em till dey backs is welted like a washboard” (MT, *PW* 229). In just one sentence, Twain has not only condemned slavery but called out Northern complicity in it. Tom then further reveals the depth of his immorality—he is willing to take the reward money for Roxy’s re-capture. Roxy demands that he ask Judge Driscoll for the money to buy her back out of slavery but Tom decides to rob his uncle instead.

Twain works yet another passing into *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as false Tom, a man believed by society to be white and appearing to be white, “blackened his face with burnt cork” to disguise himself when he goes to rob his uncle (250). As Michael L. Ross notes in his “Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*: Dawson’s Landing and the Ladder of Nobility:”

Tom’s main function...is...to expose, through his astonishing success in keeping himself clear of suspicion, the ultimate insanity of the townspeople’s criteria of moral judgment. Because they are capable of...only...the type of discrimination that is inflexibly bound to external details of race and ancestry—they are utterly incapable of penetrating through Tom’s plausible disguises, to recognize the essential villainy of his nature. (252)

When the Judge awakens during the robbery, Tom stabs him with the knife he had stolen from Luigi. He manages to grab a few bills but flings the knife aside. Hearing the struggle, the twins rush in but it is too late to save the Judge or capture his killer. The irony presented here by Twain is that false Tom, tormented that the world may learn he is not what he appears to be, is anything but free. He is now not only a thief, gambler, and

coward but a murderer. He is also the offspring of a slave and, as matrilineally defined in America, at risk for subjugation.

Tom passes once again, not in black face this time, but by donning female clothing in yet another disguise. He flees to St. Louis and is pleased to read in the newspaper that Luigi has been accused of the murder. But when Wilson examines the crime scene after agreeing to defend Luigi, he spots fingerprints on the knife-handle and decides to uncover the identity of the perpetrator. He also wonders about the identity of the mysterious girl he saw outside the Judge's house. The townspeople then crowd the courthouse for Luigi's murder trial. Sitting with their peers in the upper tier designated for slaves are Chambers (the true Tom) and the woman he thinks is his mother. Things are not going well for the defense so false Tom assumes that he has outwitted everyone and will get away with the killing. That evening, Wilson examines his fingerprint collection, hoping to find the girl who may have been responsible for the Judge Driscoll's death and realizes that it might have been a man in girls clothing who committed the crime. He looks through his specimens again and says: "Heavens, what a revelation! And for twenty-three years no man has ever suspected it!" (MT, *PW* 277).

The next day Wilson takes reproductions of all the relevant prints to court and boldly stuns those present when he concedes that the person whose fingerprints are on the knife is the murderer and that he will unveil his identity. He asks everyone in court to make fingerprints on the room's glass windows and begins identifying each set by those he had taken over the years. The townspeople agree that those of the Italian twins do not match those on the murder weapon. He then shows that the prints of two young children taken when they were five and seven months old do not match those taken from them later



on. Wilson accounts for the discrepancies by announcing that “somebody changed those children in the cradle.... and the person who did it is in this house!” (MT, *PW* 297).

Roxy suddenly realizes that he is talking about what she did years before as Wilson continues: “A was put into *B*’s cradle in the nursery; *B* was transferred to the kitchen and became a negro and a slave” (MT, *PW* 298). He then shows that the fingerprints of child B at age twelve are an exact match for those of the murderer and announces to the stunned crowd: “The murderer of your friend and mine...sits among you. Valet de Chambre, negro and slave,--falsely called Thomas à Becket Driscoll,--make upon the window the finger-prints that will hang you!” (MT, *PW* 298-99). As a result of Wilson’s discovery, Luigi is freed, Roxy is heartbroken, and the lawyer’s future in Dawson’s Landing is assured. False Tom turns pale and faints as Roxy sobs: “De Lord have mercy on me, po’ misable sinner dat I is!” (MT, *PW* 299).

Twain then issues another powerful indictment of the institution of slavery, and of the country that enshrined and institutionalized it based on race, in the calendar entry that precedes the final chapter. The novelist, with a twinkle in his eye, his tongue in his cheek, and his pen warmed up in hell yet again, has Pudd’nhead Wilson make this satirical almanac entry for Columbus Day: “It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it” (300). How different the world would have been, Twain’s stand-in opines, if an America based on slavery and slave-labor had not been founded. “Perhaps the only way to read this text is as a subversive *unwriting* (rather than a *rewriting*) of the allegory of the American pilgrim’s progress toward a redemptive nationalism that will ‘transcend’ difference” (Ladd 131). Tragically, Twain concludes, the ideal of a new Eden being created in the New World—free of man’s original sin—was not,

and could never have been, realized.

The true master's son, raised as a slave, is unprepared to be "white" and cannot function in that society. With the identities of both false Tom and true Tom revealed, "both children end up being 'niggers,' the one legally and the other culturally [and] this outcome is consistent with the contaminating force of a system of property and exchange value that replicates the contamination of 'nigger' blood. Once a slave, always a slave. Once a 'nigger,' always a 'nigger,'" concludes critic Porter (155). Twain further demonstrates that one-dropism has no basis in fact when he shows that neither fingerprints nor upbringing nor looks nor motherly love delineate race. It is additionally ironic that the true Tom, the man who has, in essence, been passing as "black" for most of his life, finds that he is suddenly "rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter.... his manners were those of a slave" writes Twain (*PW* 302). He continues to describe the sad reality of the true, "white" Tom, writing: "Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up; they only made them more glaring and the more pathetic" (MT, *PW* 301-02).

As Twain nears the conclusion of a subversive novel of passing that condemns slavery, his *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* provides readers with one more satirical jab. The absolute illogic of racial constructions, both in the antebellum South and in the Jim Crow era, is assaulted one final time. False Tom confesses to his crimes and is sentenced to life in prison. But, prison is a luxury reserved for "white" people that Tom, as a "black" man, does not have. In the world of Dawson's Landing, the South, and most of pre-Civil War America, slaves have no rights—legally, socially, or morally—by actual

law and custom. It would be a sin, Twain reminds his readers, to lose the money one could get from selling a valuable slave. And so, in the penultimate irony and with a sense of poetic justice, Tom suffers the very fate from which Roxy had tried to save him. The creditors of his uncle's estate:

...claimed that 'Tom' was lawfully their property and had been so for eight years; that they had already lost sufficiently in being deprived of his services [as a slave]...that if he had been delivered up to them in the first place, they would have sold him and he could not have murdered Judge Driscoll.... Everybody saw that there was reason in this. Everybody granted that if 'Tom' were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him—and would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life—that was quite another matter. As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river. (MT, *PW* 303)

Twain worked on *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* for several years. He wrote to his publisher Fred J. Hall in early 1893, writing that "I will mail the book to you and get you to examine it and see if it is good or if it is bad. I think it is good...but for any real judgment, I think I am destitute of it" (*MT's Letters* 337). Then, in July, 1893, he crowed to Hall:

*This* time 'Pudd'nhead Wilson' is a success!.... The whole story is centred [sic] on the murder and the trial...everything that is done or said or that happens is a preparation for those events. Therefore, 3 people stand up high...Pudd'nhead, 'Tom' Driscoll and his nigger mother Roxana; none of the others are important or get in the way of the story or require the reader's attention. (*MT's Letters* 354)

In a letter to his wife Livy dated January 12, 1894, Twain told her that a University of Pennsylvania professor had stated that “Pudd’nhead was clearly & powerfully drawn & would live & take his place as one of the great creations of American fiction” (Love 291). Twain’s reaction was ecstatic: “Isn’t that pleasant--& unexpected! For I have never thought of Pudd’nhead as a *character*, but as a piece of machinery...with a useful function to perform...but with no dignity above that..... [O]ddly enough, other people have spoken of him to me much as Prof. Powell has spoken” (Love 291).

While Twain was pleased with the final version of his *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, contemporary reviews were mixed. According to Barbara Ladd, “David Wilson was *the* central character for white readers of the 1890s, particularly so because he...arrives in Dawson’s Landing, somewhat naïve, apparently ‘untouched’ by the legacy of slaveholding, about as decent a white man in the late nineteenth-century [as] American Mark Twain could imagine” (110). Several contemporary reviewers praised the book for its style and humor. Examples of this critical approach include an 1895 review in *The American Hebrew* in which the author concludes that *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is “the most coherent story that has issued from his pen for many years. Apart from the humor with which it abounds, it shows the hand of a master in the art of story-telling” (Tenney 184). The *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*’s review entitled “Mark Twain’s New Book” calls Wilson “one of the wittiest and most original characters Twain has produced” while noting that the work “is as full of the characteristic humor of Twain as is the best of his work.” An unnamed reviewer writes in the February 14, 1895 edition of the (*Washington, D.C.*) *Public Opinion* that “Mark Twain is an apostle of the unconventional, and he tells uncommon stories in uncommon ways. Being free from reverence for anything merely

because it is customary, and being blessed with a fancy which knows no bounds, his readers are sure of meeting improbable situations, treated with a gravity beyond their desserts.”

Others were not so kind. The reviewer in the (*Boston*) *Congregationalist* had little good to say about Twain’s work, disparagingly writing that “a coarse streak comes to the surface every little while and is disagreeable.” A review in the March 2, 1895 edition of *The Outlook* entitled “Novels and Tales” notes that, although it displays “flashes of fun” and “passages of dry humor,” the “story is excessively melodramatic, is confused, and is not always probable.”

A number of critics interpreted Twain’s latest tale in terms of its indictment of slavery and the self-proclaimed aristocracy of the slave-owning South. One of those who saw beneath Twain’s humorous approach was Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen who, in the January, 1895, issue of *Cosmopolitan*, notes the “fatuous prejudice” of the inhabitants of Dawson’s Landing. Soon after the book’s release, the reviewer in *Athenaeum* concludes that the “best thing in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*...is the picture of the negro slave Roxana, the cause of all the trouble.... [H]er motherly love, and the glimpses of nobler feelings...make her very human.” The reviewer in the *Spectator* seems to understand the indictment of slavery implicit in Twain’s tale, writing that “Mark Twain’s negroes are not of the Uncle Tom type; but the story is not on that account a less vigorous indictment of the old social order of the South.” T. M. Parrott in the February, 1904, edition of *The Booklover’s Magazine* finds the novel a “sombre [sic] story...which turned into a tragedy” and concludes that it is a “genuine and realistic picture of that phase of American life.... Had anyone but Mark Twain written such a book it would no doubt have been more generally

recognized as the grave and powerful piece of art it really is” (244). The author of the *London Morning Post*’s “Literary Notes” accurately captures Twain’s intent, stating:

Mark Twain has produced, in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, a book which must add considerably to its author’s reputation. Even the most devoted lover of Mark Twain’s writings could not have anticipated that he would produce a work of such strength and such serious interest as this.... There is a great deal of humour [sic] in the book, but it is not essential to a particularly vivid study of certain phases of American life in the days of slavery. (359)

Providing a sharp contrast to these reviews is that of Martha McCullough Williams. In an 1894 edition of *Fetter’s Southern Magazine*, she savagely attacks Twain’s novel, beginning her indictment by stating that a “better title...would be ‘The Decline and Fall of Mark Twain;’ for...there is no denying that his much-advertised serial is tremendously stupid” (M. Williams 351). Seemingly unaware of why Twain is disdainful of the slave-holding descendants of the FFV, the reviewer wonders why “the Southern man who has an honest and decent pride in the fact that he comes of good stock fares so ill at the hands of certain literary gentlemen” (M. Williams 351). She is dismissive of Twain’s style, finding “slovenly construction in every other paragraph” (M. Williams 352). And, although she claims that “I am no bigot in behalf of mine own people,” Martha Williams condemns Twain because “to his mind the only man worth either saving or damning in all the South country is the black man.... One can fancy him apologizing beforehand to the little negro for the violence he is compelled to do his character” (356, 355).

None of these contemporary critics addresses the passing theme that permeates Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*--and the subversive threat that such passing presented to

established norms of white superiority and black inferiority--or comments on Jim Crow America's obsession with racial purity, despite the myriad contemporary writings on the topic. Ray Stannard Baker's 1908 work, *Following the Colour Line: An Account of Negro Citizenship in American Democracy*, is just one example of these published studies of racial issues. He addresses the reality of "blacks" of obvious mixed-race ancestry and also the real-life passing of men and women who resemble Twain's Roxy and false Tom by writing:

I saw plenty of men and women who were unquestionably Negroes, Negroes in every physical characteristic...but I also met men and women as white as I am, whose assertion that they were really Negroes I accepted in defiance of the evidence of my own senses. I have seen blue-eyed Negroes and golden-haired Negroes.... And I have met several people, passing everywhere for white, who, I knew, had Negro blood. (Baker 151)

There is factual evidence that some Americans with a minute percentage of African ancestry chose to pass as white in the decades following Reconstruction and did so for a variety of reasons. As early as 1834, Robert Purvis, a "nearly white abolitionist born in Charleston, reveled in poking fun at countless whites who misrecognized him.... [He] dined, danced and discussed horses with Southerners who earlier had refused to sail with a black man" (Hobbs 60). Hobbs sees this interaction, and Purvis taking the opportunity to reveal his racial background to those he had purposely misled earlier, as "delight of passing as white, of 'fooling white folks' ... particularly in light of the everyday humiliations that free blacks suffered" (60).

One of the earliest non-fiction, real-life passing narratives was published in 1860,

told in the first-person by William Craft in his *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*. The couple fled from Georgia to England in 1848 when Ellen posed, not only as white, but also as the invalid male master of a slave named William. Ellen, thus, transgressed and crossed two boundaries, as Twain's Roxy does to escape slavery in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Craft states that his wife is "almost white" and "frequently mistaken for a child of the family," reminding white Americans that "slavery in America is not at all confined to persons of any particular complexion; there are a very large number of slaves as white as any one" (2).

In addition to telling the story of how he and his wife escaped from bondage, Craft describes how family members were sold off and torn away from their loved ones. In one of his reminiscences, he tells of a man buying a young girl for a purpose other than working in the field. When a horrified white female neighbor exclaims: "Oh, but she is your cousin!," the purchaser ironically replies: "The devil she is!.... Do you mean to insult me Madam, by saying that I am related to niggers?" (Craft 22), revealing the truth about racial intermingling and also the sad reality of institutionalized rape.

While the extent of racial passing was debated—some contending that the numbers were very high while others arguing that only a small percentage of those who could pass actually did, no one—black or white—denied that it happened. Another documented example of real-life passing is that of a man named Alexander Manly who, in 1898, fled from his home due to race riots. Unable to find union work in Philadelphia when he identified himself as African American, he decided to pass for white, disclosing that "I tried being white, that is, I did not reveal the fact that I had coloured blood, and I immediately got work in some of the best shops in Philadelphia. I joined the union and



had no trouble at all” (qtd. in Hobbs 133-34). However, he soon decided not to pass, even though it meant having a lower-level and less lucrative job, so that he could live in the African American community with his family (Hobbs 133-34).

Baker also includes Manly’s story in his own non-fiction work. He also explains why, in his estimation, some people with African heritage who do not have the physical characteristics commonly associated with blackness choose not to pass. One answer he condescendingly provides is that “white people don’t begin to have the good times that Negroes do. They’re stiff and cold. They aren’t sociable. They don’t laugh” (Baker 161). Baker also concludes that, while whites are generally unaware of black passing, members of the African American community know many who are doing so successfully.

Similar real-life passing stories are not rare. In Massachusetts in the early 1890s, a man named Asa P. More proposed to Anna D. Van Houten. When he learned his betrothed had a trace of African ancestry, he broke off the engagement. She then sued for breach of promise, winning the initial suit but losing later when the decision was overturned on appeal to a higher court; Van Houten’s attempt to pass as white failed (Kennedy, “Racial” 15). Similarly, in “Fading to White,” Jillian A. Sim describes her discovery that her great-grandmother had one drop of “black” blood but passed for white. This ancestor, Anita Florence Hemmings, is now considered the “first black graduate of Vassar College” (Sim 3). Hemmings’s daughter, Sim’s grandmother, “would not, could not, speak of her family. Grandma’s mother had been born black, and she had left her black family behind to become white. An irreversible decision. A decision that would affect all the future generations of her family” (Sim 4). In the case of the Hemmings-Sim family, racial passing, both deliberate and inadvertent, was successful in multiple generations.

While unusual, reverse passing—a white person choosing to self-identify as black—also occurred. That it took place at all further demonstrates just how fluid the purportedly rigid and unassailable color line could be. Clarence King (1842-1901) was a renowned Western explorer. In addition to having a white family in Newport, Rhode Island, he had a black family in Queens, New York, who believed he was a traveling steelworker. For thirteen years he hid his original family and background from those in the African American neighborhood where he lived with his second family. In describing King in *Passing Strange: a Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception across the Color Line*, Martha A. Sandweiss concludes that “like many white Americans, he understood race as something that belonged to other people, and he romanticized dark skin color as the mark of a more natural and sensual life” (6). Sandweiss concludes:

Clarence King took advantage of these distinctive American ideas about race to pass the other way across the color line, claiming African ancestry when he had none at all. Grasping that appearance alone did not determine his racial identity, the fair-haired, blue-eyed King presented himself as a ‘black’ man.... Rather than moving *toward* legal and social privilege, he moved *away from* it.... In an era in which the insidious ‘one drop of blood’ rules consigned many phenotypically ‘white’ Americans to live on the wrong side of the Jim Crow laws, King harnessed Americans’ most deeply held beliefs about race to pass voluntarily...as a ‘black’ man. (7-8)

Like Twain, other novelists and short-story writers made use of the passing theme in works written in the Jim Crow era. They incorporated what was actually taking place into their stories, creating storylines that undermined the codified separation of the races

and the protection of white purity, however illogical and unrealistic such aims were. However, other authors employing the passing genre did not add the irony and satire ever-present in Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. But, whether writing about invisible blackness, racial uplift, or tragic mulattas, all these passing narratives are works that attack racial discrimination and race-based definitions of who was superior and who was inferior. Works dealing with passing began to appear in the mid-1800s. Famed author Louisa May Alcott wrote from an abolitionist perspective in her 1863 short story entitled "M. L." in which her heroine decides, after her fiancé admits to being part African American rather than of Spanish descent, that she truly loves and will marry him despite his racial background. George Washington Cable addresses racial issues, including miscegenation and social inequality between the races, not only in his non-fiction works and political tracts but also in novels and novellas including *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (1880) and *Madame Delphine* (1881). The main character in an 1898 work by Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Uncalled*, is neither definitively black nor white but is, instead, racially ambiguous.

William Dean Howells—novelist, critic, playwright, social critic, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and life-long friend of Mark Twain—wrote *An Imperative Duty* in 1891. In this novel, he, like Cable, explores themes of race and miscegenation. The heroine, Rhoda Algate, is presented as being, and believing, she is white. She has a "rich complexion of olive, with a sort of under-stain of red," an "inky blackness of her eyes and hair," and a "tragic beauty" (*Imperative* 25), all of which foreshadow her role as a tragic mulatta in Howells's tale.

When white suitors are pursuing Rhoda, her aunt blurts that the girl's mother had

been a slave. Rhoda asks: “you mean to say—to tell me—that—that—I am *black*?” to which her aunt replies, “You are as white as I am—as any one,” but Rhoda retorts: “But I have that blood in me? It is the same thing!.... And you let me grow up thinking I was white.... You let me pass myself off on myself and every one [sic] else for what I wasn’t” (Howells, *Imperative* 98-99). She, like false Tom, completely and unequivocally accepts the one-drop definition of “blackness.”

On her way to mail a letter, Rhoda begins thinking about—and actually seeing for the first time-- the black Americans she encounters on the street, noting that “these coloured folk were of all tints and types, from the comedy of the pure black to the closest tragical approach to white” (Howells, *Imperative* 113). She begins to feel a kinship with them, a reaction distinctly different from that of Twain’s false Tom. She thinks: “I am black, too. Take me home with you, and let me live with you, and be like you every way” (Howells, *Imperative* 115).

Months after her aunt’s death, a suitor named Dr. Olney calls. He declares his love and asks Rhoda to marry him, but in response and unaware that her aunt had previously told him about her ancestry, gasps “I am a negress!” (Howells, *Imperative* 182). Reminding his readers that many white Americans judge African Americans by the degree of their blackness, Olney dismisses Rhoda’s declaration with “Well, not a very black one. Besides, what of it, if I love you?” (Howells, *Imperative* 182). She declines his marriage offer and says she is going to find her mother’s people but Olney wins her hand when he replies: “[I]f you must give your life to the improvement of any particular race, give it to mine. Begin with *me*.... All I shall ask of you are the fifteen-sixteenths or so of you that belong to my race by heredity; and I will cheerfully consent to your giving our coloured

connections their one-sixteenth” (Howells, *Imperative* 187).

One reviewer of Howells’s novel, writing the “More Novels” column in *The Nation* in 1892, asks a question apropos for a Jim Crow audience: do readers “feel that Olney’s solution of his problem is...right and just and admirable, but, supposing that he had known of Rhoda’s mixed blood from the beginning of their acquaintance, would marriage with her have been so commendable?” (154). Perhaps not, they might have concluded.

The goals of Howells and Alcott, white authors like Twain, are to demonstrate that social contact with African Americans is acceptable and to show just how little they differ from whites, especially when one does not, at least initially, know they are legally black. The two writers demonstrate that well-educated and well-comported people of color should be considered peers, not inferior beings. Unlike Twain’s passing tale, there is no humor, no satire, and no irony in these stories. Instead, Howells and Alcott present assaults on illogical racial divides wrapped inside interracial love stories.

A very different type of passing novel was written by Frances E. W. Harper in 1892. Harper was an abolitionist, author, suffragist, and social reformer. In her novel *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, Harper, herself a light-skinned African American, refuses to rely solely on the tragic mulatta theme. Instead, Harper uses the “prevailing strategy of racial uplift [that] black leaders employed against racism through the 1890s” in her passing novel (Gaines 437). Educated and socially-active African Americans like Harper not only “waged an ideological struggle to gain recognition from influential whites of their entitlement to citizenship status” but also protected “themselves against racial stereotypes...by espousing an ethos within which they increasingly saw themselves obliged to act as privileged agents of progress and civilization for the disadvantaged black

majority,” concludes historian Gaines in his 1993 article entitled “Black Americans’ Racial Uplift Ideology as ‘Civilizing Mission:’ Pauline E. Hopkins on Race and Imperialism” (437).

In the novel, Iola Leroy’s father, a wealthy plantation-owner in Mississippi, has “married” a former slave with few phenotypical African features. The Leroy’s are social outcasts but the children—Iola and Harry—are raised in a loving environment and are unaware of their ancestry. Mr. Leroy frees them all and the children are sent north to be educated. When Eugene Leroy dies, however, a judge decides that the manumissions were not lawful and the marriage is voided; mother and children are once again considered slave chattel. Iola is tricked into returning south and, because of her one drop of blackness, is sold into slavery and subjected to the sexual advances of slave-owners. Harper uses Iola’s uncle to comment on the racial intermingling that regularly took place within the slave system when he rhetorically asks: “Isn’t it funny...how these white folks look down on colored people, an’ then mix up with them?” (27).

The young woman is freed by the Union Army and becomes a nurse. A Northerner named Dr. Gresham proposes to her but with the understanding that she will live as a white woman. Iola refuses his offer. They meet each other again years later and Gresham espouses a more radical view of race relations, stating to Iola’s mother that “the problem of the nation...is not what men will do with the negro, but what will they do with the reckless, lawless white men who murder, lynch and burn their fellow-citizens” (Harper 217). Despite this, and the fact that he sees “no use in your persisting that you are colored when your eyes are as blue and complexion as white as mine,” she refuses his marriage offer again (Harper 232). Although she was raised to believe she was white and free, Iola now

self-identifies as black and boldly declares: “I am not willing to live under a shadow of concealment” (Harper 233). Her response, like that of Howells’s Rhoda, is the antithesis of Twain’s Tom.

Iola decides to help the black community and she wants to go home again to become a teacher of freed black children. She meets Dr. Frank Latimer, a man like Twain’s Roxy in whom “the blood of a proud aristocratic ancestry was flowing through his veins, and generations of blood admixture had effaced all trace of his negro lineage” (Harper 239). Iola tells him that “while others are trying to slip out of the race and pass into the white basis, I cannot help admiring one who acts as if he felt that the weaker the race is the closer he would cling to it” (Harper 263). To her, passing for white, especially for financial gain and social stability, means a “loss of honor, true manliness, and self respect [sic]” (Harper 266). Latimer then reveals that he has a minute amount of African heritage and has also been passing. The two return to the South to work in the black community for the “uplift” of all.

*Iola Leroy* is not great literature in terms of style, content, or plot. But, as the book reviewer in *The Nation* reminds the periodical’s readers: “the present generation can hardly be reminded too often of what slavery was.... ‘Iola Leroy’ tells again the shameful story... [and] derives added interest from being written from an inside point of view by one of the race, long known as an ardent worker in the cause of her people” (“Recent” 146-47).

Iola’s father comments to the woman he considers his wife, in sentiments echoing those of Mark Twain in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, that “slavery is a sword that cuts both ways. If it wrongs the negro, it also curses the white man” (Harper 79). Iola, as envisioned by Frances Harper, comes to align herself with the African American community and refuses

to pass for white. But, as in all passing novels, those “blacks” whose physical characteristics allow them to pass for white must speak perfect English with no hint of vernacular speech while persons of color who are, for an author's dramatic purposes, unable to pass due to their physical characteristics speak in a distinctive dialect. Twain's Roxy and false Chambers are exceptions to this pattern of delineation. They use the speech patterns and idioms of slaves, reproduced by Mark Twain and also by Joel Chandler Harris in their stories, and re-created from what they had heard in their youthful years. Although the two Twain characters have no physical characteristics marking them as being of African heritage, they cannot successfully pass for white because they talk like “slaves.”

Steven J. Belluscio, in his 2006 work entitled *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing*, discusses the passing narratives of both Howells and Harper. He notes that their novels are “significant in that they establish ‘to pass or not to pass’ as a central moral dilemma through either an act of perceived cultural betrayal or an act of perceived racial allegiance” (55). Belluscio distinguishes between reading Howells's work in the late nineteenth century and doing so today in the twenty-first. Readers in the Jim Crow era would have “understood visible racial difference” in a way that modern readers do not and, therefore, Rhoda “must be *characterized* by Howells in her childlike behavior rather than *visualized* in her physiognomy,” he suggests (Belluscio 53). The author of *An Imperative Duty* has the young heroine's suitor assign “many of Rhoda's shortcomings to her black ancestry,” the critic states, just as Roxy does with false Tom (Belluscio 63). He also contends that, in *An Imperative Duty*: “Howells manages...to anticipate Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) in his attack (if somewhat limited) on one-drop racial logic, which would become part...of a more generally antiracist critique



that African American authors issued throughout the early twentieth century in their own passing narratives” (Belluscio 60).

*Iola Leroy* is, like *An Imperative Duty*, a subversive tale of racial equality that also features a love story for the heroine. Belluscio reaches a similar conclusion, noting that, while Iola’s courtship stories would appeal to the emotional side of white readers, the “realistic depiction of African American speech, culture, and history could serve its pedagogical and political purpose” and that “Harper transforms race from a biological reality to an active *choice* one makes” (76, 85). Belluscio prefers Harper’s narrative to that of Howells, not for greater perfection in style but because Harper, as a black woman, addresses issues that a white male writing from a position of privilege does not and cannot. When Harper’s “characters who are able to pass refuse to do so...this refusal becomes part of an overall program of ‘racial uplift’ that emphasizes African American intelligence, hard work, and culture” (Belluscio 72). Harper’s Iola is a triumphant heroine who helps the less fortunate of her race, not a tragic mulatta.

Critic Marcia Alesan Dawkins does not address the subversiveness inherent in all passing narratives, whether serious or satirical in tone or whether written by white men or black women. But she does assert that, through this literary genre, Harper “challenges the structure of racial hierarchy by redefining passing as principle, a choice to speak eloquently, act sincerely and in accordance with morality, and show recognition of right and wrong” (83). Dawkins also identifies a double-passing in Harper’s story. Iola—who appears to be wholly white and does not know she has any drop of African ancestry until she is grown—chooses to pass as “black” when she decides to self-identify and work for the African American community (85).

Charles Chesnutt (1858-1932) could have passed for white had he chosen to do so. When asked why he did not cross the color line, Chesnutt simply replied: “Ah, but I married a woman darker than myself, and I will never go where she is not welcome, too” (qtd. in Hobbs 117). He was, as Sylvia Lyons Render characterizes in her introduction to *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*, a “‘voluntary’ Negro” (3). W. E. B. Du Bois wrote the following about the novelist and activist after his death:

Chesnutt was of that group of white folk who because of a more or less remote Negro ancestor identified himself voluntarily with the darker group, studied them, expressed them, defended them, and yet never forgot the absurdity of this artificial position and always refused to admit its logic or its ethical sanction. He was not a Negro; he was a man.... He did not repudiate persons of Negro blood as social equals and close friends. If his white friends...could not tolerate colored friends, they need not come to Mr. Chesnutt’s home. If colored friends demanded racial segregation and hatred, he had no patience with them. Merit and friendship in his broad and tolerant mind knew no lines or color or race. (qtd. in Hobbs 309)

As Chesnutt wrote in his *Journals* in 1880, “the object of my writings would not be so much for the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites” (qtd. in Render 9). His turn-of-the-century works were well-received by both critics and the reading public (Render 50), despite the fact that the author himself felt that “I am beginning to suspect that the public as a rule does not care for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or written with a striking sympathy with that race as contrasted to the white race” (qtd. in Fabi, “Reconstructing” 62).

In 1889 Chesnutt wrote an essay entitled “What is a White Man?” In it, he argues

against the absurdity of state laws aimed at classifying and drawing definitive lines between “Negro” and “White” citizens and legalizing race-based prejudice. He attacks racial discrimination, stating in his essay that:

...[I]t is evident that where the intermingling of the races has made such progress as it has in this country, the line which separates the races must in many instances have been practically obliterated. And there has arisen in the United States a very large class of the population who are certainly not Negroes in an ethnological sense, and whose children will be no nearer Negroes than themselves. (“What” 837)

Novels and stories about passing were a safe way for authors in the post-Civil War and Jim Crow eras to address the topic of race and the illogical nature of drawing artificial, codified lines of discrimination based on physical characteristics. It may seem ironic, though, from a twenty-first century perspective, that Chesnutt, a man who self-identified with the black community rather than crossing over, used the tragic mulatta genre in a number of his works including *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and *The House behind the Cedars* (1900).

In *House*, Chesnutt addresses the problems faced by those who pass. Render glowingly writes that this work is a “bold treatment of ‘passing’ and miscegenation, and unusual in its sympathetic treatment of the major Negro characters” (50). Chesnutt’s heroine is Rena Walden. Her brother dreams of being a lawyer but cannot do so because he is black by a fiction of law and custom. Because John is able to pass, he changes his name and moves to North Carolina where he becomes a successful lawyer, marries a white woman, and has a child. Rena joins her brother to help raise his child after his wife dies and agrees to pass as well.

Rena soon falls in love with a white man named George Tryon and he with her. Before accepting his marriage proposal, Rena wants to tell him about her ancestry, wondering: "Would he have loved me at all...if he had known the story of my past? Or, having loved me, could he blame me now for what I cannot help?.... He says that he loves me. He *does* love me. Would he love me, if he knew?" (Chesnutt, *House* 74-76). Although she does not tell him the full truth about her ancestry, she agrees to marry him because he says to her: "If a woman is beautiful and good and true, what matters it about his or her ancestry?" (Chesnutt, *House* 83).

Rena returns home to care for her ailing mother and George, unbeknownst to her, travels to the same town on business. He spots Rena and realizes that she may not be white as he had thought. When she sees him, she "saw a face as pale as death, with starting eyes, in which love, which had once reigned there, had now given place to astonishment and horror.... One appealing glance she gave.... When she saw that it brought no answering sign of love or sorrow, or regret," she faints (Chesnutt, *House* 140-41). Tryon is agitated and angry, seeing himself as a victim. His words echo those of the pseudo-scientists and many white Americans in the Jim Crow era when he thinks:

A negro girl had been foisted upon him for a white woman, and he had almost committed the unpardonable sin against his race by marrying her. Such a step...would have been criminal at any time; it would have been odious treachery at this epoch, when his people had been subjugated and humiliated by the Northern invaders, who had preached negro equality.... But no Southerner who loved his poor, downtrodden country, or his race, the proud Anglo-Saxon race which traced the clear stream of its blood to the cavaliers of England, could tolerate the idea that

even in distant generations that unsullied current could be polluted by the blood of slaves. (Chesnutt, *House* 143-44)

Tryon still has loving feelings and writes to Rena but she asks him not to contact her further, responding: “You are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black. I accept the classification, however unfair, and the consequences, however unjust.... [A]s a woman, shut out already by my color from much that is desirable, my good name remains my most valuable possession” (Chesnutt, *House* 258). Rena goes away to teach black children, as does her fictional counterpart Iola Leroy. As she flees from the ungentlemanly advances of an unscrupulous black suitor, she runs into the forest during a rainstorm and becomes deathly ill. She does not know that George has had a change of heart and now concludes that: “Custom was tyranny. Love was the only law.... There were difficulties—they had seemed insuperable, but love would surmount them.... [I]f the world without love would be nothing, then why not give up the world for love?” (Chesnutt, *House* 292-93). Rena dies just as Tryon arrives at her house behind the cedars.

Critic Belluscio argues that “Chesnutt is not so interested in examining the propriety of passing as he is in critiquing the racial logic that makes passing necessary” (140). The moral focus of Chesnutt, according to Belluscio, is “not so much upon ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ choices—between the ‘white race’ and social mobility on the one hand and the ‘black race’ with its rich cultural offerings on the other—rather, the focus is upon race itself” (145). This distinguishes Chesnutt’s approach from those of Howells, Harper, and Twain. In *House*, most of Chesnutt’s white characters feel negatively about the freed blacks. And, although two characters are somewhat sympathetic to the plights of African Americans, none of the whites in *House* question the binary definition of whiteness and

blackness or challenge the racial *status quo*. They reflect the majority sentiments of the times and believe that “one drop of black blood makes the whole man black” (Chesnutt, *House* 170).

Twain, Chesnutt, Howells, and Harper wrote novels of passing during the post-Reconstruction era, as did numerous other authors. Despite differences in tone, style, intent, and purpose, they are all inherently subversive because their authors are forcing contemporary audiences to see, if not to accept, that when one cannot tell whether a person is “black” or “white,” then racially-constructed identities, disenfranchisement, codified discrimination, and the second-class citizenship of African Americans are illogical. Chellis supports the argument that novels of passing, including Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, are subversive when she writes that:

To take Roxy’s point of view—which is easy to do because we admire her—is really to take the white point of view, the white point of view which attributes inferiority to the Negro. While Roxy is a Negro ‘by fiction of law and custom,’ she is white in many other ways, her color being only the most obvious way. This, in fact, is the central ambiguity of the novel. How, Mark Twain forces us to ask, can we tell, if we can’t tell by color? His answer is that we cannot. (103)

As a white man, Twain is able to infuse his passing tale with satire and irony at a time when authors of African descent, like Harper and Chesnutt, dared not. His 1894 novel *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* is not only about racial passing but is a powerful indictment of the institution of slavery, delivered with characteristic humorous asides. But he is deadly serious as he indicts America’s slave-owning, pseudo-aristocratic society and critiques not only sentimental nostalgia for the old plantation days but also the

commonly-held white belief in an inherent and God-given superiority over blacks.

Mark Twain knew both great joy and great sorrow in his personal life. He outlived his beloved Livy and all but one of their children. But he remained able to recognize the dualities that life offered and the intersections of humor and grief. In a 1905 interview, he said:

What is it that strikes a spark of humor from a man?.... It is an effort to throw off, to fight back the burden of grief that is laid on each one of us. In youth we don't feel it, but as we grow to manhood we find the burden on our shoulders. Humor? It is nature's effort to harmonize conditions. The further the pendulum swings out over woe the further it is bound to swing back over mirth. (Twain, *MT: The Complete* 522-23)

This iconic author once wrote that “there are many humorous things in the world, among them the white man’s notion that he is less savage than the other savages” (qtd. in Fishkin, “MT and Race” 146). This sentiment is on full display in his 1894 *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*. The savagery in his novel, and in America in his estimation, was the doing of white men, not persons of African heritage. As great as America was, he contends that she would forever be tainted by the sin of slavery and by white America’s treatment of the people it brought to its shores in chains. As evidenced in his 1894 novel and other writings, Twain’s “disgust with his race was deep-seated and profound, and his prognosis for America was not good. There was a long road to travel before any real change or progress could take place, and he knew it would not happen in his lifetime. ‘The shame,’ as he put it in 1885, ‘is ours’” (Fishkin, “Racial” 614).

Twain’s agent of shame and change in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is Roxy, a “black” slave

woman who is physically as “white” as any of the slave-owning inhabitants of Dawson’s Landing. Both she and the children she raises—one “white” and one “black” by birth—pass for both black and for white. They are all both “imitation white” and “imitation black.” In the topsy-turvy world Twain creates it is impossible to determine just what race many of his characters are, and that is just what he wanted to prove.

*The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* is a tale of dualities: black/white, good/evil, twins/switched babies, ignorance/knowledge, North/South, reality/myth, democratic ideals/enslavement, farcical comedy/tragedy. Mark Twain employs his trademark satirical approach in a passing novel that critiques American society and lambastes the discrimination and one-drop racial lines of the Jim Crow era. While this work by the world-renowned humorist is not his best in terms of style, narrative cohesion, or consistency, the novel showcases his willingness to speak out against slavery and to reveal the illogical, erroneous, and fallacious underpinnings of white American society in the post-Reconstruction years.

He offends. He exaggerates. He makes comical asides. He is irreverently iconoclastic. He exposes hypocrisy. He rejects the tragic mulatta theme. He creates a formidable female character in a slave. He calls out white supremacy, enslavement, aristocratic Southern airs, and America itself.

Tragically, Mark Twain transgressively concludes, perhaps it would have been better for us all, as he has his Pudd’nhead Wilson muse, if America had never been discovered at all.



## Chapter Two: To Harlem: Renaissance, Defiance, and Subversion

“Would America would have been America without her Negro people?”<sup>9</sup>

“Renaissance? Hell, it’s a backwash!”<sup>10</sup>

“How difficult it is sometimes to know where the black begins and the white ends.”<sup>11</sup>

Shine, an African American character in Rudolph Fisher’s 1925 satirical novel of passing entitled *The Walls of Jericho*, stares at the charred ruins of a home in a white neighborhood. It has been firebombed. The home’s owner is Fred Merrit, a “black” man who has been passing as “white.” Through Shine’s thoughts, Fisher reveals not only white apathy about the social, economic, and political conditions in which most African Americans lived during the early decades of the twentieth century but also white complicity in the ongoing violence being wreaked on black citizens. Fisher illuminates the sadness, despair, and hatred shared by many non-white Americans. As Shine stares at a neighborhood as seemingly benign as Dawson’s Landing in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, he realizes that:

For the time being his present mission of vengeance was submerged in the onrush of a greater hatred, a hatred more deeply ingrained and of far longer standing; for the moment he glared insanely around at the cool still, empty street and at the rows of serene gray houses standing side by side. They gave forth a maddening impression of distance and unconcern. They looked quite satisfied.... Now that it was done, they could go on as they always had. The ruined dwelling had simply earned and received the wages of sin. (Fisher, *Walls* 245)

Fisher’s tale is set in the racist and unyielding white society of America’s “Jazz

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<sup>9</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, qtd. in *African American Quotations*, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace Thurman, “This,” p. 241.

<sup>11</sup> Booker T. Washington, qtd. in *African American Quotations*, p. 265.

Age” and the “Roaring Twenties”—a decade of bathtub gin, the Charleston, and Al Capone that was ushered in on the heels of the First World War and defined by rising hemlines, rising stock prices, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. As in previous centuries, black Americans largely remained outsiders in the eyes of the dominant American culture, trapped in a codified “exclusion of blackness from definitions of Americanness” (Hutchinson, *Harlem* 14). Sadly, the “magical sentiment of patriotism which makes black and white, blond and brunet, one, because all are Americans” (Hankins 293) was as fictional in the 1920s as it is in the twenty-first century.

To counter the thinking of many white Americans; to promote themselves as legitimate, educated, thoughtful, scholarly, and talented; to fight against discrimination, segregation, and second-class citizenship; and to pursue their own dreams and demonstrate their own talents, members of the African American artistic community supported civic activism. The Harlem Renaissance is the name most often given to the literary, musical, and visual arts movement of the early twentieth century that occurred within, and was intertwined with, progressive social, cultural, and political forces urging change in the racial *status quo*. Its symbol was what Alain Locke called the “New Negro.” While Emily Bernard explains in “The Renaissance and the Vogue” that the phrase was not coined in the 1920s but had been used since the 1700s (28), Locke’s “New Negro” of 1925 was emblematic of the novelists, playwrights, poets, painters, and musicians who depicted racial pride in their diverse works. This is how Locke describes the movement and its paradigm:

By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation.... The Negro to-day [sic] is inevitably moving

forward under the control largely of his own objectives.... [T]he Negro to-day [sic] wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings.... This deep feeling of race is at present the mainspring of Negro life.... It is radical in tone, but not in purpose. ("New" 4, 10-11)

This New Negro was "more than a persona; he was an idea, an ideological construction," exposes Bernard (28), as she situates Locke and fellow New Negroes in this manner:

The world of African American arts of the 1920s was intoxicated with the idea that it had invented itself, not only in terms of its creative ambitions, but also as a locus of a new black identity, namely the New Negro. Black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance invested in the ideology of the New Negro all of their ambitions to liberate black people—psychologically, socially, and even politically—from the denigration of the slave past. (29-30)

George Hutchinson describes the confluence of art and activism in the era in his *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, writing "that the movement for social justice should place such emphasis on culture...should not be surprising" (13). The spirit of change was also captured in print media. Periodicals--*Harlem*, *The Crisis*, and *Opportunity*—and newspapers—including the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *New Amsterdam News*--were produced for and edited by black Americans while "white" journals including *The American Mercury*, *The Nation*, *Modern Quarterly*, and *The New Republic* began to feature the work of African American authors (Painter 209; Hutchinson, *Harlem* 17).

Despite the legal, social, political, judicial, and economic barriers placed in their way, the New Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance raised white awareness of the many

contributions being made by African Americans and worked with civil rights activists to counter negative stereotypes. Proudly displaying their talents and skills, these educated and gifted artists saw themselves as the equals of whites and were no longer willing to be thought of as inferior or as second-class citizens. The decade became, in the words of Langston Hughes, “the period when the Negro was in vogue” (qtd. in Bernard 28).

Another factor contributing to the change in black/white relations was the half million or more Southern blacks who migrated to urban centers in the North and Midwest during the 1910s in search of better jobs, better pay, better housing, and better schools and also to enjoy more freedom, less institutionalized discrimination, and less segregation.

Nell Irvin Painter describes this mass movement in her *Creating Black Americans*, noting:

The Great Migration was dramatic because its first wave occurred in the space of only a few years, 1916-1919. It suddenly multiplied the black population in cities where African Americans had hardly been noticed before. The Great Migration increased Detroit’s black population by 611 percent; Cleveland, 308 percent; Chicago, 114 percent; New York City, 66 percent.... [There were] 65,500 new black people in Chicago, 61,400 in New York City, and 36,200 in Detroit. (191-92)

Locke also describes this Great Migration, writing: “with each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and more democratic chance—in the Negro’s case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern” (“New”6). In their newly-adopted cities, black American men could vote and, in some cases, were once again being elected to office (Painter 193). And, many black Americans were no longer willing to let race relations continue as they had; inequitable conditions were no longer considered

acceptable and were to be actively and, if necessary, forcefully countered. Particularly in the North, African Americans began to show less deference to whites, became more militant, and outwardly displayed self-pride; they were less willing to be maligned or attacked simply because they had darker skins (Painter 189-213).

While they may have differed about the manner in which change should come, civil rights activists agreed that change must come. This heightened activism and defiance was made manifest in 1917 in New York City when over 7,500 African Americans sported black armbands as they silently marched in the streets to protest recent racial massacres. Two years later, having served honorably in France during the First World War, the veterans of the all-black 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment displayed their pride as they marched up Fifth Avenue to Harlem from lower Manhattan (Painter 199). In his essay “Returning Soldier,” W. E. B. Du Bois characterizes the changing sentiments rising during the years following the War:

We are returning from war!.... [W]e fought to the last drop of blood; for America and her highest ideals, we fought in far-off hope.... For the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disenfranchisement, caste, brutality, and devilish insult—for this...we were forced by vindictive fate to fight, also. But today we return!.... *We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy!* (3-5)

Writings by luminaries including Hughes, Locke, Du Bois, Johnson, White, and Schuyler influenced and supported the growing calls for civil rights and for better economic opportunities being championed by organizations like the National Urban League and the NAACP. Commenting on the social and political implications of

America's treatment of her black citizens, James Weldon Johnson gave voice to a new spirit among the non-white population by penning: "Black America is called upon to stand as the protagonist of tolerance, of fair play, of justice, and of good will. Until white America heeds, we shall never let its conscience sleep.... White America cannot save itself if it prevents us from being saved.... [O]ur rallying cry, 'Fight, fight, fight!'" ("Negro" 176).

When anti-black riots erupted in the Red Summer of 1919, numerous African Americans resisted the onslaught by whites, retaliated in kind, and killed numerous foes. "Everyone noticed that African Americans had fought back. Unlike the East St. Louis riot two years earlier, when nearly all the victims were black, the violence in Chicago looked more like a real war between the races," writes Painter (199-200). The burgeoning movement and changing mind-shift are exemplified in a 1926 opinion piece published in *The Messenger* in which its author, George S. Grant, claims the designation of "black Americans" for his people because:

As negroes we may be jimcrowed, disenfranchised; as colored people we may be segregated, discriminated against.... By voluntarily choosing the logical mark which distinguishes our group from the groups of White Americans, we endow both it and ourselves with a dignity, which...will operate to dispel the fallacious ideas of white purity, white beauty, and white superiority. ("What" 300)

Growing black pride and defiance are also found in Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" from 1919:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot

.....

If we must die, O let us nobly die  
 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

.....

Like men we'll face the murderous/cowardly pack,  
 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! ("If")

James Weldon Johnson makes his own powerful pledge which, while not as graphic as Claude McKay's protest poem, is just as fervent: "I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I shall defend and maintain its integrity against all the powers of hell" ("Negro" 177).

The intersection of art and activism was found in the leadership of the NAACP. Du Bois promoted the cause by editing its publication, *The Crisis*, while novelist Jessie Fauset served as the magazine's book editor. James Weldon Johnson—author, composer, and poet--served as the NAACP's executive secretary while lynching investigator and novelist Walter White served as its assistant secretary. And, while other writers may not have held important roles in activist organizations, they eagerly took up the call for change through their pens. Locke delineates the difference between black activists of an earlier generation and his own, writing that "when the racial leaders of twenty years ago spoke of developing race-pride and stimulating race-consciousness, and of the desirability of race

solidarity, they could not in any accurate degree have anticipated the abrupt feeling that has surged up and now pervades the awakened centers” (“New” 7-8). In the post-First World War era—one filled with men and women who had not been born slaves but free and who were examining their lives and culture in new, fresh ways—Locke felt that the races must co-operate but that “[t]his deep feeling of race is at present the mainspring of Negro life. It seems to be the outcome of the reaction to proscription and prejudice; an attempt, fairly successful on the whole, to convert a defensive into an offensive position” (“New” 11).

In addition to Locke, a veritable who’s-who of African American giants rose to prominence in the literary scene centered in Harlem. Walter White wrote *The Fire in the Flint* in 1924, Jean Toomer authored *Cane* in 1923, Jessie Fauset created *Plum Bun* in 1923, and James Weldon Johnson’s poetry collection--*God’s Trombones*--was published in 1927. The words of Countée Cullen, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, and George Schuyler reached beyond the streets of Manhattan and gave a voice to the oppressed black Americans who struggled each day to share in the opportunities their country denied them.

The studious, writer-philosopher W. E. B. Du Bois worked to change the thoughts and feelings of white Americans. While Du Bois felt that black Americans could reach parity with whites through assimilation, he also demanded equal rights and absolute equality. In his “The Social Equality of Whites and Blacks,” he addresses a topic that remains a hot-button one to this day--social equality between black and white Americans. Du Bois writes that the:

...misuse of the phrase ‘social equality’...has separated and insulted and injured men of many races and groups and social classes. We believe that social



equality...means moral, mental and physical fitness to associate with one's fellowmen.... *The Crisis* believes absolutely in the Social Equality of the Black and White and Yellow races and it believes too that any attempt to deny this equality by law or custom is a blow at Humanity, Religion and Democracy. (16)

It was not enough to discuss social equality—further attacks on the racial *status quo* were required. In his 1920 work *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, Du Bois attacks white supremacy and ill-founded notions of superiority. “How easy,” he writes, “by emphasis and omission to make children believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man’s soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man’s deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man’s dream” (Du Bois, *Darkwater* 16). Too many white Americans had been lead to believe that “everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is ‘white’: everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable, is ‘yellow’: and the devil is ‘black,’” he laments (Du Bois, *Darkwater* 22). The author then asks an unanswerable question: “Is not the world wide enough for two colors?” (*Darkwater* 25).

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) hit hard at white privilege, violence, and discrimination in his 1930 novel *Not without Laughter* in which the author assails the status of blacks in 1930s America. One chapter is entitled “White Folks” and in it an old woman describes a horrific lynching scene in which whites burn down an entire black community. She admits, harshly and unrepentantly: “White folks run the world, and the only thing colored folks are expected to do is work and grin and take off their hats as though it don’t matter....O, I hate ‘em!.... I hate white folks.... I hate ‘em all” (Hughes, *Not* 90). No reconciliation, no understanding, no kowtowing, no empathy, and no quarter is being given

or offered here.

The Negro Renaissance era was also a time in which many white New Yorkers flocked to the clubs in Harlem that, ironically, denied entrée to most black Americans. James Weldon Johnson, in his autobiography *Along This Way*, captures the two-ness of African American life--the grind of the everyday world of most black Americans as well as the vibrant, pulsating night life in Manhattan where blacks and white liberals rubbed elbows, drank, enjoyed the syncopated rhythms of jazz, and watched light-complexioned chorines strut. He writes:

This was the era in which was achieved the Harlem of story and song; the era in which Harlem's fame for exotic flavor and colorful sensuousness was spread to all parts of the world; when Harlem was made known as the scene of laughter, singing, dancing, and primitive passions, and as the center of the new Negro literature and art.... The picturesque Harlem was real.... But there is the other real and overshadowing Harlem. The commonplace, work-a-day Harlem. The Harlem of doubly handicapped black masses engaged in the grim, daily struggle for existence in the midst of this whirlpool of white civilization. (JWJ, *Along* 380)

Artists—visual, musical, and literary—disagreed about whether the works they created should be uplifting, portraying only the best of the African American community so that white Americans would think better of them and the path to greater civil rights would be eased, or whether their portraits should stress what was considered the exotic and primitive elements of African heritage. James Weldon Johnson weighed into the discussion, penning in 1918 that a “great literature is both the result and the cause of greatness in a people. Let me make that clearer; noble actions give birth to great literature,

and great literature stimulates to noble actions” (“When” 268). But Johnson also recognized the duality faced by the black artist, the double consciousness of which Du Bois wrote and with which each non-white writer struggled:

...[T]he Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America.... To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America.... The Negro author may please one audience and at the same time rouse the resentment of the other; or he may please the other and totally fail to rouse the interest of the one. (“Dilemma” 378, 381)

How best to portray black Americans was debated in the journal *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* in 1926. For months, eminent writers—both black and white—weighed in on the debate by answering a series of questions. Ironically, as will be made clear later in this chapter, Carl Van Vechten, the white champion of African American arts and a friend to many black artists, writes in the March issue that he is “fully aware of the reasons why Negroes are sensitive in regard to fiction which attempts to picture the lower strata of the race” (“Negro” 219). Walter White opines that the “Negro writer, just like any other writer, should be allowed to write of whatever interests him whether it be of lower, or middle, or upper class Negro life in America; or of white...and should be judged not by the color of the writer’s skin but solely by the story he produces” (“Negro in Art” 279). Jesse Fauset’s position sounds as if it comes from the nineteenth-century, rather than from the

Harlem Renaissance, when she states that black Americans must “learn to write with a humor, a pathos, a sincerity so evident and a delineation so fine and distinctive that their portraits, even of the ‘best Negroes,’ those presumably most like ‘white folks,’ will be acceptable to publisher and reader alike” (“Negro” 71). Charles W. Chesnutt seems to fall between those who think African American writers should write whatever they want--even if it demeans the race--and those who believe that artists should support racial uplift in their works, writing that the black artist:

...can write what he pleases. I see no reason why a colored writer should not have the same freedom. We want no color line in literature.... The colored writer, generally speaking, has not yet passed the point of thinking of himself first as a Negro, burdened with the responsibility of defending and uplifting his race. Such a frame of mind, however praiseworthy from a moral standpoint, is bad for art. (“Negro” 28-29)

Wallace Thurman also weighed in on the topic in a 1927 essay. In “This Negro Literary Renaissance,” Thurman takes on the literary movement with his typically sardonic, self-deprecating, take-no-prisoners attitude, and challenges the prevailing opinions of those who felt that the 1920s and 1930s artistic scene in Harlem was exceptional:

There has been, we are told, a literary renaissance in Negro America. As proof we have a shelf of books recently published by Negro authors.... It is not important or congenial to mention that none of these works have been very good, or that most of the authors have no talent whatsoever.... [I]t is only natural that...native authors should also discover the American Negro. And it is also only natural that the

Negro should...become articulate and discover himself. (241)

Thurman goes on, with a Twain-like pen warmed up in hell, to state that some of his contemporaries view the rise of black artistic output and self-pride as a sign that the “millennium was about to dawn. The second emancipation seemed inevitable” (“This” 242). He lambastes artists of the period ranging from himself to Walter White, to Jessie Fauset, to Claude McKay, to Countée Cullen, and to Nella Larsen. In a conclusion that sets him apart from many of his Harlem Renaissance peers, Thurman posits that “genius is a rare quality in this world, and there is no reason why it should be more ubiquitous among blacks than whites” (“This” 247).

George S. Schuyler also aims his trademark satirical wit at the heralded African American artists of the period. In a 1926 edition of his “Shafts and Darts” column in *The Messenger*, he deflates the pretentiousness of the movement, offering his distinctive take on both it and its heralded artists as he seems to foreshadow Wallace Thurman’s acerbic take on the Renaissance and its devotees in his *Infants in the Spring*, writing:

ADVICE TO BUDDING LITERATI:.... for the instruction and enlightenment of Negro intellectuals who have the itch to write. They should by all means move immediately to New York City....[and] having arrived at the mecca of suckers, sharpers, cabaret proprietors and other such bandits, they should immediately get in touch with that group of about twenty New Negroes who represent the intellect of the Negro race so admirably.... [S]ome mediocre ability to write will be helpful.... Success depends, however, on the ability of the striving writer to do the Charleston, sing the spirituals and chatter amiably with the abandon supposed to be

characteristic of members of a race with a primitive background.<sup>12</sup> (9)

Not everyone, and certainly not most white Americans, appreciated or applauded the growing artistic output and defiance being displayed by black Americans. Sociologist E. B. Reuter complained in 1918 that the “bitter, abusive tone of so much present-day Negro literature does not voice the attitude of the Negro [because] the real Negro is remarkably free of bitterness” (*Mulatto* 369). A mere eight years later, in a book entitled *The Negro Character in American Literature*, John Herbert Nelson disparages the widely-acknowledged accomplishments of Harlem Renaissance artists, disdaining both African Americans and those who portrayed them. His views are stereotypical and demonstrate that he cannot comprehend writings by men such as George Schuyler and is incapable of anticipating the serious works about race written just a few years later by men including Richard Wright. Nelson wonders:

Whether any author, in fact, either white or black, can successfully portray the negro in the heavy roles of tragedy also remains to be seen. Some commentators contend that the true African—essentially gay, happy-go-lucky, rarely ambitious or idealistic, the eternal child of the present moment, able to leave trouble behind—is unsuited for such portrayal.... Only the mulatto and others of mixed blood have, so far, furnished us with material for convincing tragedy. (136-37)

Despite the intentions of the stars of the Harlem Renaissance and the work of civil rights leaders, black Americans still had fewer freedoms than whites and had unequal access to jobs, housing, education, and financial success. Discrimination and segregation—whether Jim Crow or *de facto*—limited and defined the lives of most African

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<sup>12</sup> George Schuyler and Langston Hughes debated the appropriate role of black artists in the two instructive and instrumental articles respectively-entitled “The Negro-Art Hokum” and “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” A discussion of the Schuyler article appears in Chapter Three.

Americans through the 1920s and 1930s. And while the northward movement may have somewhat improved the lives of those black Americans who left Southern homes, its effects on the racially-obsessed majority were entirely different. “Some white Americans perceived the Great Migration as a ‘racial threat’ and their fears underlay the strong desire for racial purity in this period,” contends Elizabeth Marie Smith in her dissertation (13). E. B. Reuter’s reaction to the black diaspora reflects the dread of many white Americans. In his 1918 work *The Mulatto in the United States: Including a Study of the Rôle of Mixed-Blood Races throughout the World*, he contends, despite evidence to the contrary, “among the Negro people of the North, therefore, there is more failure, dissatisfaction, complaint, more bitterness, more enforced idleness, more distress, poverty, and crime than in those sections of the country [from which they moved]” (Reuter 365).

Works produced by scores of writers reflect the distrust and anxiety many white Americans felt. They attacked the feared black race to preserve the racial *status quo*. Madison Grant, in his introduction to Lothrop Stoddard’s 1926 work entitled *The Rising Tide of Color*, deplores a changing world and sounds an alarm, writing that “democratic ideals among the homogeneous population of Nordic blood...is one thing, but it is quite another for the white man to share his blood with, or entrust his ideals to, brown, yellow, black, or red men. This is suicide pure and simple, and the first victim of this amazing folly will be the white man himself” (xxxii). Stoddard himself reviles race mixing, contending that whites the world over are facing a crisis and that “crossings with the negro are uniformly fatal.... Unless man erects and maintains artificial barriers the various races will increasingly mingle, and the inevitable result will be the supplanting or absorption of the higher by the lower types” (301-02). It is incongruous that calls for separation of the

racism and racial purity were coming some three hundred years too late.

Faced with what it perceived as threats to white domination by African Americans and by newly-arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe, the Ku Klux Klan waged a war of violence and vitriol. Ironically, a 1926 article attributed to KLUXER was published in *The Messenger* in 1926. Its author proudly claims that the KKK “stands for the highest ideals in American civilization.... Why do we say that it is the greatest institution? Well, it stands above the law and the law is supreme in our country. Whenever the law gets in our way we trample it beneath our feet” (KLUXER 141). One way in which such men trampled the law was through lynching.

Despite the efforts of the NAACP, an organization that investigated and exposed the horrors of lynching and promoted the adoption of national legislation banning the practice, use of this terroristic tool persisted. Over seventy-five black Americans—men, women, and children-- were lynched in 1919 alone. Additionally, the move to ensure pure whiteness continued unabated and new racial integrity laws were written and then revised. Rhetoric grew more strident and restrictions became more stringent. Not content to legally quantify what made a person “black,” these laws employed the idea that “whiteness would be defined by the absence of blackness” (Wolfe 1-2). In Virginia, government agencies were required to trace the ancestry of all persons to “keep track of who was white, black, and Indian” in order to prevent racial passing (Wolfe 3). Eugenics, a “pseudo-science of white superiority” (Wolfe 1), argued against racial mixing. Intermarriage and social contact between races was banned in many states.

Ostensibly scientific studies were published to support codified discrimination and segregation and to prove that black Americans were inherently inferior to whites. In a



1926 edition of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, W. E. Castle of Harvard University opens his article “Biological and Social Consequences of Race-Crossing” by stating that “what constitutes the essential differences between human races seems to be a question difficult for anthropologists to agree upon but from a biologist’s point of view those appear to be on safe ground who base racial distinctions on easily recognizable and measureable differences perpetuated by heredity irrespective of the environment” (145). He goes on to state, unequivocally, that while “writers who appeal to race prejudice are very much in vogue.... It is not difficult to persuade us that our group of races is the best group, our particular race the best race and all others inferior” (Castle 147). He speaks of race pride, race prejudice, mulattoes, amalgamation, “biological unfitness,” and “alien stocks” as he reaches the conclusion that “social considerations *are* of much more importance than biological ones” (Castle 156, 151, 15).

In the same vein, C. B. Davenport re-iterates the contention that people with mixed-race heritage are innately lesser beings in his 1917 article “The Effects of Race Intermingling.” He argues that there is still hope for America if the nation restricts immigration, if “selective elimination is permitted,” and if “eugenical ideals prevail in mating” (Davenport 368). Ignoring the talents of men like Booker T. Washington and Charles Chesnutt—men with a significant percentage of white blood in addition to a small percentage of African ancestry—he captures the sentiments of many white Americans during the Jim Crow era when he writes that “miscegenation commonly spells disharmony—disharmony of physical, mental and temperamental qualities and this means also disharmony with environment. A hybridized people are a badly put together people” (Davenport 867).

Similarly, William W. Gregg states in 1924 that it “seems fair to assume that the white race is superior to the negro race, that the white race is more efficient and represents a less primitive and, presumably, a higher stage of civilization” (1066). Overlooking—or oblivious to—the fact that blame for the intermingling of the races lay squarely on the shoulders of white Americans through slavery and its institutionalization of rape, Gregg places the responsibility for America’s racial issues on people of mixed race and concludes that “it is evident that he [the Negro] is regarded as distinctly non-assimilable human material which is equivalent to a direct assertion of permanent racial inferiority” (1067). Another scientist, E. A. Hooton, writes in 1926 in the journal *Science*, that “all anthropologists agree that the criteria of race are physical characters. The tests of racial distinctions are the morphological and metrical variations of such bodily characters as hair, skin, nose, [and] eyes” (75). What Hooton, and his contemporaries who make similar statements, incredulously ignore is that, by this logic, men and women who look like Walter White or like the fictional characters Roxy, Fred Meritt, and Clare Bellew should be considered “white” rather than “black” and accorded the same rights and privileges as others in the dominant race.

The majority of these scientists and the larger part of the white population before, during, and after the Harlem Renaissance period blamed blacks for the conditions in which they found themselves, denying the fact that the dominant class was responsible for these conditions. In his 1927 work *The American Race Problem: A Study of the Negro*, E. B. Reuter fails to acknowledge the fact that it was white Americans who brought the African slaves to these shores in chains. He announces that the “Negro people themselves may be understood only in light of their history as a minority and culturally retarded group”

(Reuter, *American Race* 3). He attributes their status to “the peculiar racial traits of the Negro people themselves” and because Africans, and then African Americans, “were inferior in fact and they accepted their inferiority. Slavery did not rest upon force except in the early stages of the institution.... The forces that controlled the slaves were within the slaves themselves” (*American Race* 7, 105). Reuter conveniently ignores the rape of African and African American women when he claims that sexual congress between slave-owners and their chattel was “not properly to be considered as a forced relationship” (*American Race* 128). While Reuter does acknowledge that black Americans need to be better educated, he also writes that such issues are “elements of the Negro problem, not because the Negro is black and of a different race but because the group is culturally backward in the midst of a foreign culture” (*American Race* 15). By Reuter’s reasoning, black Americans are inferior and are also complicit in, if not the reason for, their own inferior status; white Americans are blameless. He even opines that “many black leaders came to accept the position that the prejudice and discrimination of the whites was an advantage to the race” (Reuter, *American Race* 400). Apparently he had not read or heard of anything written by Du Bois, Schuyler, Garvey, Hughes, White, or the other authors and civil rights activists of the era.

Rather than using science to support white domination over those deemed intellectually, ethically, and morally inferior, anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits (1895-1963) tried to combat such notions in his study published in 1928. In his *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing*, Herskovits seems more sympathetic to the plight of African Americans than many of his time but he was, like so many others, fascinated with the mulatto population. Herskovits re-iterates the theme that white

civilization is the superior one and the only one to which black Americans should and must aspire, contending:

[T]he America Negro.... is set apart by his color in a culture in which the predominant traditions are not his, and the members of the predominant population group, both in numbers and in influence are different from himself.... He must learn to adjust himself to his cultural environment if he would survive.... [H]e will...succeed only in so far as he adapts himself to the patterns of the dominant culture. (*American* 54)

But not all white Americans supported the rhetoric and hatred being aimed at black Americans. Edwin R. Embree, grandson of an abolitionist, wrote *Brown America: The Story of a New Race* in 1931. He discusses topics including public schooling, voting, and population shifts in America's non-white populations and he acknowledges their second-class treatment. "The odds are against him because he is a nigger; and he is called a nigger in that tone of voice to make certain the odds are against him," Embree concludes (197). He decries racial lynching, incarceration, injustice, poor living conditions, inferior education, and persecution, urging white Americans to advocate for change because "there is no use pretending that Negroes are better than they are.... The only questions are: Do we want to leave them there? Are we willing to allow ancient prejudice and primitive taboos to keep back the growth of twelve million people who are a part of this nation, who are inextricably tied up with its backwardness or progress?" (Embree 198). Unfortunately for black Americans, few members of the dominant class were persuaded by Embree's pleas.

White America's obsession with racial purity and the complete separation of the races translated itself into a preoccupation with and a fear of racial passing. That some

“black” Americans did not have the phenomenological characteristics often associated with those of African heritage and could, therefore, pass as “whites” presented a social and legal challenge. Herskovits comments on racial passing in a 1925 article entitled “The Color Line.” The anthropologist states the obvious, noting that, over time, “some of the Negroes become so light that it was practically impossible to tell that they were Negroes at all, and...they became white in name as well as in fact.... A very light Negro now passes as white, and perhaps even goes entirely over into the white community” (“Color” 206). Despite the fact that most “blacks” who were able to pass as “white” did not do so, that many who did so for a time chose to return to the African American community, and that many did so only during the day to obtain better jobs but lived and socialized with non-whites, Reuter feels free to state that:

The ambition of the man of mixed-blood is to be identified with the superior group; to share its life, its work, and its civilization.... Everywhere, were it possible, the mixed-blood group would break off with their darker relatives, hide their relationship to them, and, through marital relations, obliterate from their offspring the physical characteristics which mark them as members of a backward and despised race. (*Mulatto* 315-16)

In the preface to his 1929 work entitled *From Negro to Caucasian, or How the Ethiopian is Changing His Skin*, Louis Fremont Baldwin captures the irony that many “white” Americans may actually have “black” blood, despite their cries for racial purity and the enactment of racial integrity laws. He suggests what was, to most white Americans, unthinkable and an anathema, even though it was undoubtedly true, writing in the preface to his work:

[H]ow difficult for any person, particularly those whose ancestors resided ‘in the South’ to be perfectly sure that there is not ‘a drop of Negro blood in their veins!’ That it can be there, goes without saying...but just as millions of Negroes—Negroes with fair complexions and perfectly straight hair,—those who have not ‘Crossed Over’ as well as those who have, have white blood in their veins...[C]an there not be millions of persons who believe themselves to be white, yet have Negro blood in their veins. (L. Baldwin n.p.)

Louis Baldwin goes on to describe a situation virtually identical to that of the fictional Roxy in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. In the real-life case he presents, a plantation owner had sexual relations with his slave half-sister. The woman then switched her child with that of the slave-master and his wife died shortly after the births. Years later, the slave mother tells the truth to the white daughter she had raised but, unlike Roxy and false Tom, the slave mother is supported and loved by the child. Louis Baldwin comments that they “were both ‘PASSING’ though of course the daughter was of white parentage on both sides, and the most affectionate relations existed between them” (45). It is unlikely, however, that this scenario would have had the same outcome—a “white” child embracing a “black” parent rather than reacting with horror—in most cases during the Jim Crow period.

An African American man, Kelly Miller, writes in 1910 that the virulent hatred expressed toward African Americans by Stoddard, Grant, and other racists actually increased passing, ironically positing: “Whenever you narrow the scope of the Negro by preaching the doctrine of hate you drive thousands of persons of lighter hue over to the white race carrying more or less Negro blood in their train.... Hundreds of the composite

progeny are daily crossing the color line and carrying as much of the despised blood as an albicant skin can conceal without betrayal” (50-51). It is ironic to realize that the actual consequences of codified discrimination, segregation, racism, and racial purity laws--aimed at a complete separation of the races--actually had the opposite effect by driving more “blacks” into the ranks of “whites.”

Charles S. Johnson—a civil rights activist and sociologist who was the first black president of Fisk University—claims in a 1925 essay entitled “The Vanishing Mulatto” that appeared in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* that over 350,000 “white” Americans were part of a “wholesale deception” by black Americans who had passed (291). Caroline Bond Day, a 1919 graduate of Radcliffe College who was of mixed-race, was an anthropologist who produced *A Study of Some Negro-White Families in the United States* in 1932. She collected data, studied photographs, researched genealogical charts, and conducted field studies, reaching the conclusion that racial crossing was common, just as many white Americans feared. Day writes:

The best illustration of this is the fact that out of 346 families studied, thirty-five of them included one or more individuals who had completely lost their racial identity. Most of these are married to white people.... At least twenty more might be added who, for the sake of lucrative employment or the securing of one or another advantage, adopt the ruse of ‘passing’ periodically, but eventually return to their families. (11)

Others chronicled similar real-life passing stories. Randall Kennedy, in his review of racial passing in multiple eras, discusses a woman who passed to procure better employment in the 1930s. Her granddaughter, Cheryl A. Hines, recalls that “day in and

day out [my grandmother] made herself invisible, then visible again, for a price too inconsequential to do more than barely sustain her family” (Kennedy, “Racial” 11). A similar situation is reported in a *New York Times* article in January, 1932, highlighting the “almost unbelievable story of a Negro who masqueraded as a white man for eighteen years of brilliant service in the United States Army, thirteen years of which were as a commissioned officer in charge of white troops” (“Army” 1). Everyone who knew him, including his fellow officers, were astounded by the revelation, reports the *Times*. One wonders if the reporter is more shocked by the passing, by the length of the successful charade, by the fact that the man was not only capable but successful in supervising whites, or by his friendships with other officers.

In *Children of Strangers: The Stories of a Black Family*, Kathryn L. Morgan details the experiences of her own family as told through tales passed down through generations; numerous instances of passing are included among these legends. Just prior to the First World War, for example, “selected members of the family who could pass for white were sent north to Philadelphia to explore the possibilities for employment for those able to ‘pass,’” she writes (K. Morgan xv). Most of them soon returned to Lynchburg’s African American community but others stayed in the North and passed for fun and job opportunities. Kathryn Morgan proudly reports, however, that, unlike many others who, for whatever reason, fled from blackness into whiteness:

There are no stories of ‘cross-overs’ in the book. Why? Because there are no ‘cross-overs’ among the Gordons. A family member who ‘crosses over’ is considered dead. Gone. Unmourned. Under no circumstances are they to contact the family. No white-skinned member of the Gordon family ever ‘crossed



over.’ ‘Keeping the color’ has been a long-standing practice in our family. (74)

A legal case involving racial passing gripped the attention of the nation in the mid-1920s. Alice Jones, a domestic servant, married Leonard Kip Rhinelander, a wealthy young white man whose family was part of New York’s upper class. Once the press discovered the marriage, he sued for annulment by accusing Alice of having hidden her racial identity. She counter-sued and a tabloid media sensation was created. The case blurred lines that white Americans had hoped were solid and impermeable. Concludes Elizabeth Marie Smith in her 2001 doctoral dissertation “*Passing*” and the Anxious Decade: the Rhinelander Case and the 1920s, “passing, the very act that Alice Rhinelander was accused of, challenged the very existence of racial boundaries. Because the Rhinelander annulment trial brought the phenomenon of passing for white into the open, the process of constructing race and the meaning of race in the 1920s were also laid bare” (3). The case also “raised the unsettling possibility that racial difference might not be detectable and that perhaps, no difference between the races really existed” (E. Smith 3), confirming the unsupportable attempts to ban racial intermingling and illogical attempts to legally define racial difference.

Racial intermarriage, although rare, was not illegal in New York State. Alice’s lawyers argued during the trial that her husband knew of her racial background before their marriage and, therefore, the case had no merit. But, ironically, to win her case she had to disavow her self-identification with whites and “was forced to allow the jury to define her as ‘colored’ in order to defeat the annulment” (Nisetich 348). She partially disrobed before the all-white, all-male jury in the judge’s chambers, displaying herself so that the jury would conclude that, having been intimate with Leonard Rhinelander prior to their

marriage, he would have known that she had some African heritage. The jury ruled in her favor and the annulment was denied.

The legal codification of superior/inferior, dominant/subordinate, and desirable/undesirable groups of Americans in Jim Crow America defies the logic of defining race by what one is able to see, or not see. “Blacks” who have straight hair, blue or green eyes, light complexions, and thin noses should logically be included in the dominant class, rather than subjugated by it. Those “black” Americans who could and did pass for “white”—both in real-life and in fictional works—subversively proved the unrealistic nature of trying to define a connectedness between race and what one can or cannot see. And, as in earlier decades, passing was not only a real-life issue but also a literary genre used as a way to explore issues of race and racial identities.

Racial passing was examined by writers of both fiction and non-fiction and by authors of both races. As in the post-Civil War era, passing remained a factor in American life and was addressed by essayists, poets, novelists, and playwrights in addition to scholars and scientists. In his exhaustive study of the subject entitled *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, Werner Sollars lists over one hundred stories and novels that were written on interracial issues during the 1920s and 1930s; many of these works specifically dealt with passing (382-387). Diverse authors used the theme to expose the inherent irony of racial integrity laws and, in so doing, defied the racial *status quo* and ranged from the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Edna Ferber (*Show Boat*, 1926) to one of the white co-founders of the NAACP, Mary Ovington (*The Shadow*, 1920).

Passing novels, stories, and poems are based on deception—the vision and

perception of the observer or reader are deceived by the passer, a person wearing a figurative mask who literally masks his/her racial identity. Characters who pass cannot accurately be “seen” or “read” by those they encounter, much like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. And, should the passing character also narrate the tale or should the story be told through his/her eyes, he/she is, at the same time, unreliable in addition to being a deceiver.

Rudolph Fisher, Langston Hughes, Carl Van Vechten, Wallace Thurman, and George Schuyler exemplify the satirists who rose to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance period and attacked racial norms through their passing narratives. “Although the era gave license to authors to parade the follies and vices of marginal types as ethnic virtues and cultural truths,” writes Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, “the black satirists assumed the role of moralists revealing the truth beneath the mask of surface reality” (137). Locke acknowledges the impact of satire in Harlem Renaissance works in his “Negro Youth Speaks,” writing that “satire is just beneath the surface of our latest prose, and tonic irony has come into our poetic wells. These are good medicines for the common mind” (52). When the masks of passing are presented in a satirical manner and when irony, juxtapositions, and outrageousness are added by the authors, then the works become doubly subversive.

*The Ways of White Folks*, published in 1933, is a series of short stories and vignettes by Langston Hughes (1902-1967). He was one of the many African American artists of the 1920s and 1930s who employed the passing theme in his works. His “Rejuvenation through Joy” is the tale of a huckster named Eugene Lesche who caters to rich, but unhappy, white folks. The only people admitted to Lesche’s resort are those with “blue blood straight out of Back Bay” and who live “from Park Avenue right on up to New

England” (Hughes, “RTJ” 85). The con-man develops an almost cult-like following of people who are willing to do anything, including acting in a totally ridiculous manner, while paying him great sums of money in a search to find their personal “joy.” “A thousand pairs of female arms, and some few hundred men’s, were lifted up with great rustle and movement, then and there, toward the sun,” the author writes with playful abandon (Hughes, “RTJ” 68). He then gleefully pens: “They were really lifted up toward Lesche, because nobody knew quite where the sun was in the crowded ballroom—besides all eyes were on Lesche,” ridiculing the folly of the scam artist’s white devotees and, by extension, most of white America (Hughes, “RTJ” 68).

The satirically-named Colony of Joy soon becomes the “in” place to be, a place where, with Hughes’s ironic intent in full force, the “curative values of Negro jazz” are part of the bag of tricks Lesche uses to urge his patrons to “see how the Negroes live, dark as earth, the primitive earth, swaying like trees, rooted in the deepest source of life” (Hughes, “RTJ” 73, 84). Depicting white patrons acting like black slaves, while paying lavishly for the privilege, is both humorous and absurd. Although Hughes’s readers have not been told so yet, Lesche is a black man passing for white.

The out-of-touch and oblivious “true whites” drawn to the resort wonder: “How did it happen that nobody before had ever offered them Rejuvenation through Joy? Why, that was what they had been looking for all these years! And who would have thought it might come through the amusing and delightful rhythms of Negroes?” (Hughes “RTJ” 87). Who, indeed, asks Hughes? The author then pokes fun at those who characterized all blacks as exotic savages. Ignorant in their ill-founded bliss, the white dancers cheerfully don the title of “Primitives” (Hughes, “RTJ” 89). Hughes’s great ironic twist is that, just

as Lesche has been passing as “white,” the whites who come to his clinic are, however obviously, passing as “black.” In this sense, all the participants have forfeited their “true” racial identities and are equal targets of Hughes’s transgressive pen.

The whole scheme quickly descends into chaos, jealousy, in-fighting, and gunfire. The Colony of Joy closes and everyone, including Lesche, quickly disappears. The newspapers relish the downfall of the high-and-mighty patrons. The “columnists wisecracked” that it was “all very terrible! As a final touch, one of the tabloids claimed to have discovered that the great Lesche was a Negro—passing for white!” (Hughes, “RTJ” 95). While Lesche’s rich, white acolytes were not laughing at the deception for which they had fallen, Hughes and many of his readers certainly were.

David S. Junker’s assesses Langston Hughes’s use of satire in a dissertation entitled “*Decrowning*” *Whiteness: Color-Line Satire from Twain to Hughes*, writing: “Out of all the great color-line satirists that emerged from the Harlem Renaissance, none was more innovative, versatile or long lasting than Langston Hughes” (147). “From the mid-1920s...Hughes committed to writing the lives of ordinary African Americans, treating with comic-warmth, tragic sorrow and ironic bitterness the paradox of being black in a white nation.... [H]is satire strikes at the very structures of white discursive authority,” Junker further contends (147). Other African American writers also felt free to use satire as a weapon of subversion during the 1920s and 1930s, attacking white supremacy and notions of superiority as they aimed their wit at racial definitions, codified racial distinctions, and attempts to keep the color line distinctly drawn. Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934) was not only a writer but also a doctor who specialized in x-ray diagnosis and therapy; his early death resulted from his exposure to radiation. While his 1928 novel *The*

*Walls of Jericho* was not particularly well-known or widely-read during the early twentieth century, Fisher's work is particularly representative of the satirical treatment of passing employed by African American writers during the Harlem Renaissance years.

*The Walls of Jericho* is the tale of a lawyer named Fred Merrit. To buy a house in a white neighborhood near Harlem, he passes. Other major characters include a dark-complected housekeeper named Linda; African American piano movers named Shine, Jinx, and Bubber; and a liberal--but highly prejudiced--white woman named Miss Cramp. While racism and the purportedly iron-clad color line are Fisher's primary targets, he also addresses color prejudice within the African American community, an ironic and unfortunate consequence of white America's own beliefs and actions. His satirical approach is found in the book's themes and also in the small details woven into the story. One of the latter is the dictionary he appends to the novel. It is entitled "An Introduction to Contemporary Harlemites: Expurgated and Abridged" and is included for the benefit of clueless white readers who do not understand words like "butt," "darkey," "the man," or know all the many and varied words that mean "Negro" (Fisher, *Walls* 295-306).

As do numerous other novelists of the period, Fisher pokes fun at well-known Harlem Renaissance luminaries, a "little group of dickties, superiorly self-named the Litter Rats," a playful disparagement of the "literati" who gather to discuss such issues as the "Negro's Contribution to Art and The Lost Sciences of Ethiopia" (*Walls* 35). The group's members include J. Pennington Potter, a "plump little sausage of a man, whose skin seemed stuffed to the limit with the importance of what it contained," and Langdon, "an innocent looking youngster who was at heart a prime rascal and who compensated by

writing poetry” (Fisher, *Walls* 36). It is Potter’s “conviction that only admixture produced harmony between races. He argued quite logically. Prejudice and misunderstanding were due to mutual ignorance and ignorance due to silence,” pens Fisher (*Walls* 98). Litter Rat members also include well-intentioned white liberals who, like the real-life African American art promoter Carl Van Vechten, “always explained elaborately about the ‘wealth of material’ to be found in Negro Harlem” (Fisher, *Walls* 100). Another member of Merrit’s literary club is Bruce, a man who is light-complexioned but chooses not to pass as white. He recounts a time when he was confronted by “a bunch of bad jigs [who]...mistook me for a fay, and I had a devil of a time proving I was a Negro, too!” (Fisher, *Walls* 41). Now why, Fisher iconoclastically infers, would anyone want to do that!

Merrit is described as having “rosy cheeks and cherubic grin. He was anomalous in certain important particulars. Fair as the northernmost Nordic, his sandy hair was yet as kinky as that of any pure blooded African; and not the blackest of Negroes could have hated the dominant race more thoroughly” (Fisher, *Walls* 38). Unlike Alice Jones Rhinelander, Merrit does not identify with his white ancestors—he loathes them and all other white people. He explains his choice to buy a house in an area next to Harlem: “All of you know where I stand on things racial—I’m downright rabid. And even though...I’d enjoy this house, if they let me alone, purely as an individual, just the same I’m entering it as a Negro. I hate fays<sup>13</sup>. Always have. Always will. Chief joy in life is making them uncomfortable. And if this doesn’t do it—I’ll quit the bar” (Fisher, *Walls* 37).

Rudolph Fisher includes a broad range of socio-economic levels, professions, and skin hues in his tale of Harlem residents; he writes about both “dickties” (upper class

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<sup>13</sup> Fays, or ofays, refers to white people. Ofay is also the pig-Latin word for foe.

blacks) and “rats” (lower class African Americans). Several of his characters speak in uneducated dialect while others use proper English. He includes scenes of the rats enjoying themselves—moving pianos, shining shoes, playing pool, and drinking with their buddies--as well as their sorrows and struggles. “Has any New Yorker confessed,” Fisher perceptively writes:

...that when aristocratic Fifth Avenue crosses One Hundred Tenth Street, leaving Central Park behind, it leaves its aristocracy behind as well? Here are bargain-stores, babble, and kids, dinginess, odors, thick speech.... You can see the Avenue change expression—blankness, horror, conviction. You can almost see it wag its head in self-commiseration.... A city jungle this...peopled largely by untamed creatures that live and die for the moment only. Accordingly, here strides melodrama, naked and unashamed. (*Walls* 3-4)

But Fisher does not disparage lower class African Americans who work hard for a living. Instead, like Hughes, he depicts them both realistically and positively, seeing their poverty as the result of their treatment by an uncaring, vicious, and discriminatory white society, not placing blame on the very people who eked out a living and were denied a path out of the circumstances to which they had been condemned. The author also captures the fears of white Americans that were fanned by the Great Migration of black Southerners to the North. The street to which Merrit is moving is described, ironically, as a “snob of a street. Yet it is somewhat to be pitied in its pretense at ignoring the punishment that is at hand; the terribly sure approach of the swiftly spreading Negro colony” (Fisher, *Walls* 45). By moving there, Merrit is challenging racial boundaries in two ways, literally by relocating to this street and figuratively by his passing which, in turn, challenges the racial



*status quo* and exposes its illogical underpinnings.

Soon after moving in, Merrit receives a note warning him to leave the neighborhood. Jinx and Bubber discuss Merrit's note and recall a similar experience where another black man bought a "swell place on the upstate Pike, not far out 'o town. Throws big parties and raises hell jes' like d' fays. Folks up there didn' know he was a jib till he had a party—and they offered him a million dollars fo' the place jes' to get him out" (Fisher, *Walls* 49). Although segregation by race was not legal in New York State, the color line in housing was rigidly drawn in a *de facto* manner, just as it was in social and financial arenas.

Critic Bell concludes that the "heated comic arguments between Jinx and Bubber provide the levity that buoys the serious themes of housing discrimination, intraracial prejudice, and race war" (140). Shine is astonished by the educated homeowner's demeanor. He wonders: "What manner of dickty was this? He greeted you like an equal, casually shared his troubles with you, and did not seem to care in the least what the devil you did with his furniture" and concludes that "[i]f this bird wasn't a dickty he'd be o.k. But they never was a dickty worth a damn" (Fisher, *Walls* 51). In writing this scene, Fisher acknowledges both socio-economic distinctions and intra-racial relations.

Miss Agatha Cramp is a self-deluded white woman who feels she is being charitable when she talks to her maids about their lives. She is a woman who had a "sufficiently large store of wealth and a sufficiently small store of imagination to want to devote her entire life to Service" (Fisher *Walls* 59). Fisher lampoons Miss Cramp, a woman who, despite "devoting her life to the service of mankind," had never entertained the "startling possibility" that "Negroes might be mankind, too" (Fisher, *Walls* 61).

Fisher's omniscient narrator wryly ridicules such thoughts, observing that her "bare statement is extravagant; the fact is not" (*Walls* 61). Miss Cramp, ignorant about black Americans and oblivious to the ways in which most were forced to live, is iconoclastically and transgressively characterized as being stereotypical of white Americans. The author further contemptuously pens:

Negroes to her had been rather ugly but serviceable fixtures, devices that happened to be alive, dull instruments of drudgery, so observed, so accepted, so used, and so forgotten. Had all the dark-skinned folk in the country been blotted out by some specific selective destruction, Miss Cramp would not have missed them in the least, would not have been glad nor sorry, would have gone serenely and unaware...remaining wholly untouched in her sympathies. (Fisher, *Walls* 61-62)

Fisher's satirical approach to serious race issues is exemplified in a scene in which Miss Cramp and Linda talk about race. The young woman mentions an organization that investigates lynchings to which the ignorant, deluded, and offensive Miss Cramp responds: "Why don't they turn their attention to conditions here at home?... There must be much to be done here among you—an alien, primitive people in a great, strange metropolis. Why don't they do something here?" (Fisher, *Walls* 67). Fisher is transgressively ridiculing Miss Cramp and other white Americans who are ignorant of or oblivious to the fact that people of African descent had been living in the United States for over three hundred years and were regularly lynched in their own communities. Agatha decides to help a black organization named the G.I.A. because she experiences a sadly-comical epiphany, suddenly realizing that "when I saw you [Linda] this morning and noticed for the first time how different you were from most colored people, I said to myself, 'There now—why can't

they all be like that?’ And I said, ‘Why they *can* be if they have the right sort of help” (Fisher, *Walls* 68). This wealthy woman will now allow herself, without relinquishing her throne of wealth and white privilege, to uplift the lowly to the level of her black domestic. How ridiculous and misguided, the iconoclastic Fisher has his readers see.

Miss Cramp attends the G.I.A.’s meeting but it “shocked and outraged her to see that most of the fair-skinned visitors were unmistakably enjoying themselves, instead of maintaining the aloof, kindly dignity proper to those who must sacrifice to serve. And of course little did she suspect how many of the fair-skinned ones were not visitors at all but natives” (Fisher, *Walls* 104). Just as in Hughes’s “Rejuvenation through Joy,” Fisher’s white Americans are delusionally oblivious of life’s realities. Miss Cramp spots Fred Merrit and assumes that he, like she, is a well-intentioned white person. That he does not disabuse her of this notion is Fisher making fun of a white woman and getting one over on the ruling class. Fisher writes that “Merrit did not resist temptation and admit his complete identity.... There is first his admitted joy in discomfiting members of the dominant race” (Fisher, *Walls* 105-06). Merritt’s glee is further displayed when the author tells his readers that to “admit his identity would have wholly lost him this chance. And as for the fact that she was a woman, that only made the compensation all the more complete, gave it a quality of actual retaliation, of parallel all the more satisfying” (*Walls* 107-08).

When Miss Cramp asks Merrit, “How do I find Negroes? I like them very much. Ever so much better than white people.... [Because] they have so much more color,” Fisher’s tongue-in-cheek style is on full display (*Walls* 108). Miss Cramp acknowledges that some of the attendees are “as fair as I am” while others are “absolutely black” but she does not see this as ironic nor as proving the illogical nature of trying to defend an

indefensible color line (Fisher, *Walls* 112). Merrit sarcastically explains that “[t]hese people have been out of their native element only three or four hundred years, and just see what it has done to their complexions” (Fisher, *Walls* 113). Miss Cramp naïvely and obtusely concludes that it must be the American climate that has created the lighter hues. “Just imagine.... A Negro with skin as fair as your own!” she wonders, to which Merrit, rather than laughing out loud like readers are now doing, replies simply and transgressively: “Yes. Just imagine” (Fisher, *Walls* 114).

Merrit continues to act as a trickster and the author layers irony after irony into the tale, ridiculing the supposedly do-gooding Miss Cramp while skewering the racism rampant among white Americans as evidenced in their deeds and as displayed in the writings of men like Lothrop Stoddard, E. B. Reuter, and Madison Grant. When Miss Cramp comments on this wonderful “chance to observe different types of Negroes,” Merrit wryly responds that it is also an “excellent chance to observe different types of Caucasians” (Fisher, *Walls* 120). Agatha goes on to state that she can think of “nothing more awful” than living in a black neighborhood because “to help them is quite all right. To live beside them is quite another matter” (Fisher, *Walls* 128). *Reductio ad absurdum*, subversiveness, contempt, and stupidity are all found in this simple exchange.

The white/black man then spins a tale for Miss Cramp about an imaginary world in which the races trade places. He deconstructs the *status quo*, just as racial passing does and just as Schuyler will do in his own satirical treatment of race and passing in his *Black No More*, musing:

Wouldn't it be funny, Miss Cramp, if the Negro let his fair-skinned brother...do all the so-called serious work? Build bridges, dig canals, capture natural forces, fly

airplanes, amass wealth, evolve society.... Wouldn't it be amusing if the Negro let others worry their brains out devising and developing the civilized luxuries of life—while he spent his time simply living, developing nothing but his capacity for enjoyment.... Suppose...that this irrepressible laughter, this resilience, is caused by the confidence that he will reap what his oppressors have sown.... If the climate keeps changing, or if people keep exposing themselves to changes in climate, the time will eventually come when there won't be but a few pure skins left—Now won't it be positively uproarious if the serious achievements reach their height about then. (Fisher, *Walls* 122-23)

Positively uproarious—and tragically outrageous as well. The tale's omniscient narrator weighs in on racial issues again, speaking literally about the conversation between Merrit and Miss Cramp but commenting figuratively about American race relations during the Harlem Renaissance period. He posits that “[b]etween members of opposed races...the subject of race is difficult, almost...delicate. Neither party quite wholly sacrifices his illusions about his own people nor admits his ignorances about the other. The conversation...becomes a series of unwitting affronts, mutual mistrusts, and suppressed indignations increasingly harder to bear” (Fisher, *Walls* 133).

Miss Cramp is then told about Merrit's true racial identity. Her reaction is one of horror but it is primarily driven by thoughts of what others will think of her. “A Negro on Court Avenue and I asked him to call—they'll blame *me*—A Negro on Court Avenue” (Fisher, *Walls* 140). Goodness gracious, one can almost hear Fisher laughingly pen for comic effect. She later admits to a friend that she thought he was white as she voices fears about social equality between black and white Americans, ridiculously stating that “it's one

thing to help them and quite another to live beside them as equals. And to have everyone in the street *blaming* me—I simply couldn’t bear it” (Fisher, *Walls* 173).

Merrit’s house is then burned to the ground but he survives the attack. Shine reacts strongly to the violence but he then also matures. He lets go of his anger when he discovers that that it was a “black” man, erroneously thought to be “white” and not an actual “white” man, who was responsible for the fire. Fisher’s ironic twist is that it was a “Negro—using white prejudice to cover what he wanted to do—putting the blame in the most likely spot—almost getting away with it too” (*Walls* 280). Miss Cramp is also upset by what has happened, but not so upset that she revises her opinion of blacks. She concludes, rightfully, that “there is so much hatred between races” but also, wrongfully, blames African Americans for their own condition, as did so many other white Americans during the Jim Crow era, claiming that:

Negroes...are extremely deceitful.... [T]his man Merrit, who owned the house that burnt up—he was always practicing some sort of deceit.... [H]e was extremely fair of skin...so that you wouldn’t ordinarily have noticed that there was anything wrong about him.... But he was always posing as a white man.... He posed as white when he purchased that house.... He even went so far as to deceive white women in order to get into their homes—God knows for what purpose. (Fisher, *Walls* 285-86)

In Miss Cramp’s eyes, Merrit is now not just a trickster and deceiver but, stereotypically, a voracious black sexual predator.

But Fisher’s tale ends on a positive note as Shine and Linda drive away together. As he watches the pair leave, Merrit muses about the various people—white and

black—with whom he came into contact through his Court Avenue house. He looks down the road at the disappearing couple and smiles: “The road led up and over a crest beyond which spread sunrise like a promise.... With distance the engine roar grew dim and the van seemed to stand and shrink. Against that far background of light he saw it hang black and still a moment—then drop abruptly out of vision, into another land” (Fisher, *Walls* 293). If only, as Mark Twain wryly observes in his *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the land of Shine, Roxy, Miss Cramp, and false Tom had never been discovered, then the America of slavery, illogical racial discrimination, and a seemingly-insurmountable racial divide might never have existed at all.

The title of Fisher’s passing narrative alludes to the Biblical walls of Jericho in several ways. Shine, whose real name is Joshua Jones, interprets the myth as a metaphor for an end to racial discrimination and prejudice. In a similar vein, another character in the novel explains: “So will towering illusion tumble. So will you straightaway enter triumphant into the promised land” (Fisher, *Walls* 187). The prescient narrator observes a night-club scene and envisions a breaking-down of barriers like segregation, just like the walls of Jericho in Israel fell when Joshua’s army blew their trumpets:

So swept the scene from black to white through all the shadows and shades.

Ordinary Negroes and rats below, dickties and fays above, the floor beneath the feet of the one constituting the roof over the heads of the other. Somehow, undeniably, a predominance of darker skins below, and, just as undeniably, of fairer skins above. Between them, stairways to climb. One might have read in that distribution a complete philosophy of skin-color, and from it deduced the past, present, and future of this people.... One great common fellowship in one great

common cause. (Fisher, *Walls* 74)

Figurative walls are built between groups of people in Fisher's narrative—black vs. white, rich vs. poor, and dickties vs. rats. People are separated from each other and from a better society by the protective partitions they erect between themselves and others and by the deceiving masks they don. Critic Charles Scruggs contends that, by the conclusion of *The Walls of Jericho*, “not all the walls are destroyed, but Fisher hints that one wall that came a-tumbling may be the most significant demolition.... The economic partnership between Joshua Jones and Fred Merrit...seems to imply the birth of a new Harlem, one that will replace the divisive earthly city of Jericho” (172-73). This would bring an end to just one of the multiple walls of prejudice that must be torn down.

Fisher's Harlem Renaissance contemporaries critiqued his novel. W. E. B. Du Bois condemns *Walls* in *The Crisis* in November 1928, basing his dissatisfaction on the fact that Fisher did not write about a better class of black people. He scathingly pens:

Mr. Fisher does not yet venture to write of himself and his own people: of Negroes like his mother, his sister, and his wife.... the glimpses of better class Negroes which he gives us are poor, ineffective make-believes. One wonders why? Why does Mr. Fisher fear to use his genius to paint his own kind.... Perhaps he doubts the taste of his white audience.... Perhaps he really laughs at all life, and believes nothing. (qtd. in Thurman, “High” 218)

At least, in the scholarly Du Bois's estimation, Fisher's novel is a “step upward from Van Vechten and McKay” (qtd. in Thurman, “High” 218). In response, satirist Wallace Thurman challenged Du Bois's critique of *Walls*, writing that, while Du Bois “is one of the outstanding Negroes of this or any other generation” and “has served his race



well,” the “time has come now when the Negro artist can be his true self and pander to the stupidities of no one, either white or black” (“High” 219). While Thurman feels that Fisher did not realize his full potential in *Walls*, he deems it the “first novel written by a Negro wherein the author handles his theme and writes with enviable ease; the first novel written by a Negro which does not seem to be struggling for breath because the author insists upon being heavy handed either with propaganda...or with atmosphere” (“High” 219). But, in a different essay of his, Thurman was not so kind. He writes in “This Negro Literary Renaissance” that Fisher has “told a good story. He presented us with some amusing and lifelike characters. But he never stirred us, never provoked more than a mild smile. For this reason his first novel was an interesting but disappointing performance” (Thurman 249). Langston Hughes weighed in on *The Walls of Jericho* but he does not so much assess the novel as praise its author, writing:

...the wittiest of these New Negroes of Harlem, whose tongue was flavored with the sharpest and saltiest humor, was Rudolph Fisher.... His novel, *Walls of Jericho*, captures but slightly the raciness of his own conversation. He...frightened me a little, because he could think of the most incisively clever things to say.... I used to wish I could talk like Rudolph Fisher. (“From” 85-86).

Modern-era critics continue to discuss the novel. Bernard W. Bell, for example, interprets *Walls* as a “satirical treatment of prejudice and self-delusion.... In its modern context the legend signifies the external reality of the color line that encircled the growing Harlem colony during the 1920s and the disparity between the surface behavior and deeper self of the characters” (138-39). He aptly concludes that *The Walls of Jericho* is an “uneven blend of biblical legend, satire, and comedy...[that] reveals the bitter-sweet truths

of color and class prejudice beneath the surface reality of Harlem” (Bell 140).

Fisher also features racial passing and satire in a short story of his entitled “High Yaller,” published in *The Crisis* in 1925. While incorporating the passing theme in the tale, the author’s iconoclastic and ironic approach is primarily directed at the meaning of skin color and how its many shades are characterized and valued within the African American community. The character of Evelyn is blue-eyed and has both a thin nose and “tawny, yellow-flicked scintillant hair” (Fisher, “HY” 129). Her fellow night-clubbers think she has “yellow fever—girls she goes around with—all lily whites...pass for white anywhere” (Fisher, “HY” 128). Evelyn concedes that “I’ve been thinking about my best friends. They’re practically all ‘passing’ fair. Any one of them could pass—for a foreigner, anyway” (Fisher, “HY” 129). Her dance partner, Jay, bemoans the fact that “there aren’t any more dark girls. Skin bleach and rouge have wiped out the strain. The blacks have turned sealskin, the sealskins are high-brown, the high-browns are all yaller, and the yallers are pink” (Fisher, “HY” 129). Evelyn wishes she were darker and, referencing the renowned black cosmetologist Madame C. J. Walker, she asks why, if a “washerwoman can make half a million dollars turning dark skins light. Why doesn’t someone learn how to turn light skins dark?” (Fisher, “HY” 129). She then poses a telling question: “Can you imagine what it’s like to be colored and look white?” (Fisher, “HY” 129). She also explains that her situation is intolerable and that darker men will not date her. But, she decides she likes Jay because he acts like he is “so—white” (Fisher, “HY” 131), equating goodness and value with whiteness, as so many scientists and rhetoricians did during the Jim Crow years.

Fisher takes aim at race and racial constructions—both by blacks and whites—as

Jay takes Evelyn to a club where patrons of both races are free to mix but he reminds her that “colored men don’t like to see white men with colored women and the white men don’t like to see colored men with white women” (Fisher, “HY” 135). Jay explains to a friend that it is difficult to date Evelyn because everyone thinks he, an African American, is taking out a white woman. He adds that she “thinks it’s a sort of duty to be colored, so she’s going to make a thorough job of it—do it up brown.... The only man that could unscramble her would be a real white man. She’s not going to compromise” (Fisher, “HY” 138). Evelyn’s interest in the African American community is anything but the racial uplift found in numerous passing novels. When she tries to explain her situation to a white visitor, he suggests that she pass but the young woman responds: “That’s impossible. There’s mother. Wherever I’d go I’d have to take her and she couldn’t pass for anything but American Negro” (Fisher, “HY” 140). Readers must decide for themselves whether Evelyn’s desire to be darker is genuine or not.

After her mother dies, Evelyn disappears from the community. Jay and a friend believe she has crossed the color line for good. But Mac says that he doesn’t “blame her. I’d do the same thing if I didn’t have so damn much brownskin family” (Fisher, “HY” 141). Evelyn does go out with Jay again but she is asked to leave an establishment because the proprietor thinks she is a white woman on a date with a black man. Through the character of Jay, Fisher uncompromisingly critiques codified *de facto* discrimination based on skin color, writing:

What an enormity, blackness! From the demons and ogres and ravens of fairy tales on; storm-clouds, eclipses, night, the valley of the shadow, gloom, hell.

White, the standard of goodness and perfection. Christ himself, white. All the

angels. Imagine a black angel!.... He'd seen a little white child run in terror from his father once, the first black man the child had ever seen. Instinctive?....

Unbearable. (Fisher, "HY" 144)

As the tale ends, Jay watches as Evelyn passes forever into whiteness.

Demonstrating the confluence of activism and art during the Harlem Renaissance, it was Walter White who helped Fisher get "High Yaller" published while it was Carl Van Vechten who arranged for the publication of *The Walls of Jericho* (Cooney, "WW and the HR" 237; Coleman 90). Van Vechten praises Fisher's short story in 1926 and lauds its author for depicting lower-class blacks--and being unconcerned about the possible negative effects of doing so—when he writes that "plenty of colored folk deplore the fact that Fisher has written stories like 'Ringtail' and 'High Yaller.' If a white man had written them he would be called a Negro hater" (Van Vechten, "Negro" 219).

Black/white relations, racial identities, and racial prejudice are also addressed in a satirical manner in the novel *Nigger Heaven*. Its author, Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), was an artist, photographer, and patron of African American arts. He was friends with numerous African American luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance period; he and his wife hosted parties attended by artists and activists of both races and they often attended Harlem night clubs with friends of all hues (Coleman 90-102). An inscription James Weldon Johnson penned in one of Van Vechten's books illustrates how many black American artists felt about the benefactor. It says simply: "Dear Carl—Has any one ever written it down—in black and white—that you have been one of the most vital factors in bringing about the artistic emergence of the Negro in America?" (qtd. in Coleman 8).

The main character in Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* is Byron Kasson, a

college-educated young man who is self-deluded and blames everyone else—and society—for his all woes. But, regardless of their socioeconomic status, education, or skin color, all the African American characters featured in the narrative are victims of the racial prejudice that was endemic and codified in Jim Crow America. Van Vechten, eschewing the advice of men such as W. E. B. Du Bois and writing like Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman instead, features working-class black people in his work. His novel shows what he believed—that the “squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life, offer a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque material to the artist” (Van Vechten, “Negro” 219). The African Americans Van Vechten portrays primarily live on the seamy side of life and speak in an uneducated manner, as does a young woman named Ruby who proclaims about Harlem: “dis heah is Nigger Heaven” (VV, *NH* 15). While Van Vechten may infuse his narrative with what he perceives to be authentic “black” dialect, it is debatable whether or not he achieves his purpose or is merely writing somewhat disparagingly about his characters from a position of white privilege.

The title of the novel refers both to the balcony seating in theaters to which black Americans were segregated and to Harlem itself (Scruggs 162). Both black and white readers and critics complained about the title. Van Vechten had concerns, “with some justification,” writes Leon Coleman in his 1998 work *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance: a Critical Assessment*, “about the possible Negro reaction to the title” but used it, nevertheless, because he felt that it was “symbolic, ironic, and even tragic” (111). Despite that fact that James Weldon Johnson, Rudolph Fisher, and Walter White “read the galley proofs” of the controversial novel prior to its printing, Coleman notes that Van Vechten admitted years later that the “word ‘nigger’ shocked personally, a lot of people,”

while also claiming that “I don’t use the word myself” (qtd. in Coleman 111). Despite this protestation, Van Vechten used the word throughout *Nigger Heaven*. Ironically, a footnote in the book explains that “while this informal epithet is freely used by Negroes among themselves, not only as a term of opprobrium but also actually as a term of endearment, its employment by a white person is always fiercely resented” (VV, *NH* 26). The paradox, as Van Vechten realizes, is that he is a white author whose characters freely use the word. Perhaps, had he been heeding his own advice, he would not have done so.

While passing is not the main theme of the book, it is woven into several of its story lines. A number of the young ladies, including Byron’s occasional girlfriend Mary Love and her friend Olive, pass for better theater seats and similar amenities. One member of their circle is Dick Sill, described as a “young man who was so white that, like Olive, below the line [dividing Harlem from the rest of New York] he was never taken for a Negro” (VV, *NH* 45). When others ask why he is so white, he responds—ironically-- that “the Southern explanation is that Sherman marched to the sea” (VV, *NH* 46), thereby claiming that the institution of slavery was not the prime factor in creating multiple generations of “black” Americans who chose to pass but blaming the evil Northern army’s trek through Southern soil instead.

Those assembled at Olive’s party discuss intermarriage and other race issues of the day. The hostess chimes in, echoing the sentiments of many white Americans who, despite the fact that men such as Pushkin and Dumas who had some African heritage were considered geniuses, “apparently miscegenation is a very fine thing indeed after it has happened, but for God’s sake don’t let it happen!” (VV, *NH* 47). One of Olive’s friends, Buda Green, is passing and plans to marry a white man, about which Olive comments: “It’s

funny...how we love to fool white people” (VV, *NH* 62), providing readers with a glimpse into how African Americans subversively defied the *status quo* and white dominance.

Serious racial issues are also discussed in *Nigger Heaven*, including the economic, legal, and social discrimination faced by black Americans during the 1920s. Byron voices the despair and anger that non-whites experienced, the unfeeling obtuseness of whites, and the importance of Harlem, opining:

Nigger Heaven! That’s what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally, they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that...something has to be done. It doesn’t seem to occur to them...that we sit above them, that we can drop things down on them and crush them, that we can swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. No, they have no fear of that.... Harlem! (VV, *NH* 149)

Van Vechten’s white characters are as clueless, ignorant, and self-importantly conceited as Miss Cramp, Lesche’s followers, and the townspeople of Dawson’s Landing. Later in the tale, Dick Sill announces in *Nigger Heaven* that “I’m going white!” (VV, *NH* 182). His reason, he insists, is that “They make us do it.... They make us. We don’t want to. I don’t want to, but they make us” (VV, *NH* 182-83). Buda Green, who is now married to a white man, urges Dick to pass permanently, telling him that “there are ten thousand of us in New York alone. Why don’t you come across the line? You’re light enough.... I go everywhere with my husband and no one has ever suspected me” (VV, *NH* 183). Dick then uses Biblical stories, better job opportunities, and freedom from

segregation to support his decision to pass forever and become a white man.

Byron is not convinced that such a move would be right for him, however. While he understands that Dick has done what thousands of other black Americans have when they chose to pass, he wonders if “the race [would] eventually lose its identity [and] was destined to dissolve in this white blood?” (VV, *NH* 190). Rather than seeing passing as the only way in which “blacks” could get a chance at a better life in a racist society, Byron wonders whether or not it would “be possible for white and black to live peaceably, side by side, each offering his gifts, one to the other? That consummation [however]...was not to be immediately hoped for” (VV, *NH* 191). Despite considering the option, Byron explains to a friend of Dick’s that “I couldn’t.... I just couldn’t. I guess I haven’t got the guts” to pass (VV, *NH* 212).

Byron visits a publisher to whom he has submitted a story. The editor explains that he has rejected the script for various reasons even though he is “much interested in Negro literature” (VV, *NH* 222). Byron blames the rejection and all his other shortcomings on his “blackness,” although it is undetectable by most whites. He is the “wrong colour” and “just another Nigger,” he thinks to himself (VV, *NH* 229), refusing to entertain the thought that he simply may not be a good writer.

After rejecting Mary, Byron has been having a love affair with an attractive, wealthy, powerful, free-loving, and free-living woman named Lasca. Lasca’s views on race are radically different from his. She refuses to be a victim, preferring to always be in control of a situation and be dominant, rather than subservient to whites or anyone else. Because of her personality and her worldview, Lasca does not worry about discrimination or segregation, proclaiming: “Negroes aren’t any worse off than anybody else.... They



have the same privileges that white women had before the bloody fools got the ballot....

I've never bothered very much about the fact that I'm coloured. It doesn't make any difference to me and I've never thought very much about it" (VV, *NH* 235-36). Lasca, unlike other African American female characters in the novel, is a woman totally devoid of humanity.

Van Vechten then weaves further irony into his work, including a scene where Byron makes passionate love to Lasca as she cries out: "I want you to possess me, to own me. I want to be your slave, your Nigger, your own Nigger" (VV, *NH* 239). Lasca, despite begging to be returned to antebellum status, bitterly announces her hatred of black "race-leaders" and "uplifters" (VV, *NH* 257). "These Niggers," Lasca says, "I learned about life from them. They taught me to kick my rivals. They taught me to hate everybody who got more than I did" (VV, *NH* 258). Her anger and resentment are aimed at anyone who is weak and also at anyone who has more than she does, rather than at the white society that created the need for the change being championed by these "race-leaders" and "uplifters."

She then rejects Byron because she has become bored with him, his failures, and his neediness. When Byron begs Lasca not to toss him aside, she derisively sneers at him: "White men and brown men, they're all the same. All. I use 'em until I tire of 'em and then I say, damn you and good-bye!" (VV, *NH* 259). He then shakes her violently and insults her. As a result of what she perceives to be his new-found manliness, she restarts the affair and crows re-iteratively that "I'm your slave, your own Nigger! Beat me! I'm yours to do with what you please" (VV, *NH* 260). But Lasca disappears from his life for good a few days later. Once again, Byron blames everyone else for his problems and the

downward spiral in which he finds himself, not his own self-destructive behavior. He goes to a nightclub and is involved in a shoot-out. As the novel comes to an end, Byron stomps on a man lying on the floor and shoots twice into his body. He is then conscious of a white policeman reaching for the gun in his hands as Byron protests that “I didn’t do it!” (VV, *NH* 284).

Van Vechten’s narrative—in addition to addressing class, prejudice, and passing—includes the disagreement between black artists of the era about the direction African American artists should take. Should African American writers present the exotic, the primitive, the lower classes, the gamblers, the social outcasts, and the nightclubs or should they write and paint for the uplift of the race and demonstrate how black Americans are respectable, capable, and fit for full citizenship rights? The editor to whom Byron submits a story—who could be Van Vechten’s stand-in—exposes the side of the argument on which *Nigger Heaven*’s author falls, stating:

What I want to know is this: why in hell don’t you write about something you know about?.... I happen to be proud to call certain Negroes my friends. I have visited Harlem in two capacities, as a customer and as a guest in my friends’ homes.... Nobody has yet written a good gambling story; nobody has touched the outskirts of the cabaret life.... I find that Negroes don’t write about these matters; they continue to employ all the old clichés and formulas.... [I]f you young Negro intellectuals don’t get busy, a new crop of Nordics is going to spring up who will take the trouble to become better informed and will exploit this material before the Negro gets around to it. (VV, *NH* 222-23)

Van Vechten exploited this material in his *Nigger Heaven*, to the delight of some

and the dismay of many others. Countée Cullen, in “The Negro in Art,” seems to be directing his comments at whites like Van Vechten and at novels like *Nigger Heaven* when he writes: “As far as I am concerned the white writer is totally out of the scene. He will write as he pleases, though it offend.... He is not under the same obligations to us that we are to ourselves” (194). James Weldon Johnson summed up the controversy surrounding the book and the inherent irony found in the diverse reactions of the black and white communities to it, stating that “[w]hite objectors declared that the story was a Van Vechten fantasy; that they could not be expected to believe that there were intelligent, well-to-do Negroes in Harlem who lived their lives on the cultural level he described” (“Critiques” 108-09). Conversely, he notes that “Negro objectors declared that the book was a libel on the race, that the dissolute life and characters depicted by the author were non-existent. Both classes were wrong” (JWJ, “Critiques” 109).

Reviews of the book varied widely. In a 1926 *New York Times* review, Edwin Clark contends that “*Nigger Heaven*, while a pioneering effort in its study of the negroes in their Harlem district, is hardly a startling variation.... Here there is a society of various strata that is...very much like the composition of other social orders elsewhere. In the course of his novel, Van Vechten runs the gamut from low life to high life” (BR2). Decades later, Hugh M. Gloster, in a 1945 critique, was far less kind, penning that the “fatal mistake of the Van Vechten school was to make a fetish of sex and the cabaret rather than to give a faithful, realistic presentation and interpretation of Harlem life” although, in Gloster’s opinion, “the Van Vechtenites helped to break away from the taboos and stereotypes of earlier years...and to demonstrate...that Negro authors have an important contribution to make to the nation’s cultural life” (314). George Schuyler, on the other

hand, wrote a satirical poem in response to *Nigger Heaven*. Entitled “The Curse of My Aching Heart,” and fictitiously attributed it to a barely-disguised “Carl Von Vickton,” the poem makes fun of the white author’s work and denigrates Van Vechten’s role in getting black novelists published. It reads, in part:

I’ve made you what you are today,

Yet I’m dissatisfied.

I’ve boosted you until ‘twas said,

No one so glibly lied.

Now bookmen print your puerile trash;

.....

Though your vogue’s nearly through,

To think I boosted you.... (Schuyler, “Curse”)

But in a commentary included in a 1951 edition of Van Vechten’s work, Schuyler takes a different approach, writing that “when *Nigger Heaven* was published in 1926, most white folks were enthusiastic...while black folks were fascinated and sometimes indignant. All but a few of the Caucasian brethren had been quite ignorant of the fact that there was a sophisticated Negro society...which was literally a carbon copy of their own” (Schuyler, “Critical” n.p.). The negative reaction to the book by black Americans, Schuyler explains, is largely due to the fact that a white man used the word “nigger” not only in the book’s title but also in the dialogue found within it. But he also points out that those African Americans “who read it rejoiced over the uncannily accurate portrait of Negro urban life in sophisticated New York; its polish and its pitfalls, its joy and its grief, its disappointments and its achievements, its panorama of the vices, virtues, fads and

foibles of a post-war community” (Schuyler, “Critical” n.p.). Perhaps the passage of time had altered Schuyler’s perception of Van Vechten when he wrote a profile of the white patron in 1950 in which he listed the many ways in which Van Vechten helped black artists, promoted greater understanding among races, and inspired others to rid themselves of color prejudice. Schuyler now lauds Van Vechten, writing:

A great revolution has taken place in American race relations in the past quarter century, and while this phenomenon is ascribed to many causes by various authorities on the subject, perhaps the most prepotent has been the individual effort of Carl Van Vechten.... [who] has done more than any single person in this country to create the atmosphere of acceptance of the Negro. (“Phylon” 362)

Van Vechten’s satirical approach to serious issues like racial prejudice and passing and his portrayal of lower-class African Americans who were hardly pillars of the community resonated with--and offended--black and white readers alike. The book’s sales totaled over 100,000 copies; it was then reprinted and translated into other languages. Its success, according to Coleman, led white publishers to being more willing to publish novels written by African Americans (146).

As in Langston Hughes’s “Rejuvenation through Joy,” Rudolph Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho*, and Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, satire, ridicule, and ruthless abandon all find their way into Wallace Thurman’s 1932 novel *Infants of the Spring*. Better known for his 1929 work *The Blacker the Berry*, Wallace Thurman was born in 1902 in Utah and died, too young and too poor, in Harlem in 1934. About the gifted young man, Langston Hughes wrote that “he was a strangely brilliant black boy, who had read everything, and whose critical mind could find something wrong with everything he had read” (“From”

81). “Wallace Thurman wanted to be a great writer,” Hughes continues, “but none of his own work ever made him happy.... [H]is *Infants of the Spring*, a superb and bitter study of the bohemian fringe of Harlem’s literary and artistic life, is a compelling book. But none of these things pleased Wallace Thurman.... [and he] found his own pages vastly wanting” (“From” 82). When Thurman’s radical journal *Fire* was condemned by both black and white critics and failed, Hughes writes that the young man “laughed a long, bitter laugh. He was a strange kind of fellow.... who liked being a Negro, but felt it a great handicap” (“From” 84).

The novel’s title comes from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as its verso page shows: “The canker galls the infants of the spring/Too oft before their buttons be disclosed/And in the morn and liquid dew of youth/Contagious blastments are most imminent” (WT, *Infants* 2). Thurman’s infants are the young bohemian artists whose almost-childlike existence and care-free lives will soon be threatened. They live in Niggeratti Manor, an apartment building in Harlem owned by Euphoria Blake. Characters residing there include a Canadian named Stephen Jorgensen, Raymond Taylor (Thurman’s stand-in), Paul Arbian, Eustace, Sam Carter, and Pelham Gaylord. These artists—visual, literary, and theatrical—idle away their time drinking and partying and achieve little, if any, actual artistic output. When Stephen joins the black artists, he admits that he had rarely seen people of African heritage before, let alone lived, worked, and mingled with them. He voices his fear and trepidation at being surrounded by black Americans and how little he had valued them as real people, saying:

I was frightened. After all I had never seen a Negro before in my life, that is, not over two or three, and they were only dim, passing shadows with no immediate

reality. New York itself was alarming enough, but when I emerged from the subway at 135<sup>th</sup> Street, I was actually panic stricken. It was the most eerie experience I had ever had. I felt alien, creepy, conspicuous, ashamed. I wanted to camouflage my white skin, and assume some protective coloration. Although, in reality, I suppose no one paid the slightest attention to me [although there was] the undercurrent of racial antagonism which I felt sweeping around me. (WT, *Infants* 5-6)

Stephen quickly becomes Raymond's close friend. Raymond, inhabiting a world about which Thurman could only have dreamt, sees the friendship as emblematic of the erasure of race as determinative of difference and opposition. Thurman writes of the two:

Like children, they seemed to be totally unconscious of their racial difference. It did not matter that Stephen's ancestors were blond Norsemen...and that Raymond's ancestors were a motley ensemble without cultural bonds. It made no difference between them that one was black and the other white. There was something...more vital and lasting than the shallow attraction of racial opposites. (WT, *Infants* 17)

Raymond holds himself out as an authority on Harlem and, revealing Thurman's oft-stated opinions, is "disgusted with the way everyone sought to romanticize Harlem and Harlem Negroes" (WT, *Infants* 18). In contrast, Stephen, like many liberal white New Yorkers and somewhat like Fisher's Miss Cramp, was "uncritical in his admiration for everything Negroid that he saw. All of the entertainers...and actors were... marvelous.... Stephen, like all other whites who had only a book knowledge of Negroes, seemed surprised that a people who had so long been enslaved, and so recently freed, could make

such progress” (WT, *Infants* 18-19). Raymond tries to educate Stephen and, by extension, all white Americans by telling the naïve Canadian that “if you had lived in Harlem as long as I have, you would realize that Negroes are much like any other human beings. They have the same social, physical, and intellectual divisions. You’re only intrigued...by the newness of the thing” (WT, *Infants* 20). Through the words of his character Raymond, Thurman is interpreting the vast artistic output of the Harlem Renaissance as a demonstration of the fact that black Americans are not only up to the task of being full-fledged Americans but are equal to—if not superior to—the white citizens who already enjoy the democratic rights promised to all men in the Declaration of Independence.

Thurman includes a character named Aline who is “quite fair” and could “easily have passed for white” in his *Infants* (23). In actuality, she “passes for white most of the time” (WT, *Infants* 31). Paul, on the other hand, has “never recovered from the shock of realizing that no matter how bizarre a personality he may develop, he will still be a Negro, subject to snubs from certain ignorant people. The fact distresses him.... He sits around helpless, possessed of great talent, doing nothing, wishing he were white” (WT, *Infants* 32). The artist, in Raymond’s estimation, has decided that “since he can’t be white, he will be a most unusual Negro. To say ‘nigger’ in the presence of a white person warms the cockles of his heart” (WT, *Infants* 33). Eustace, somewhat similarly, is “ashamed of his color, and won’t sing spirituals because he does not care to remind the world that he is a Negro and that his ancestors were slaves of whom he is now ashamed” (WT, *Infants* 33). Ironically, when Eustace does sing spirituals at an audition, he fails miserably. About himself, Raymond/Thurman concludes that “I know I’m a Negro and so does everyone else. I certainly cannot pass nor can I effect a change. Why worry about it? I rather



love myself as I am, and am quite certain that I have as much chance to make good as anyone else, regardless of my color” (WT, *Infants* 33). The protagonist continues: “In fact, I might even say that being black gives me a certain advantage which a white person of equal talent would be denied” (WT, *Infants* 33).

Wallace Thurman, like a number of other Harlem Renaissance satirists, includes characters representing Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countée Cullen, and Alain Locke in his satirical, subversive narrative. Thurman’s W. E. B. Du Bois is his Dr. Parkes while Rudolph Fisher is his Dr. Manfred Trout. Cynicism and self-deprecating humor abound as Thurman mocks those artists who feel they are elite models for other, lesser blacks. Carl Van Vechten’s novel *Nigger Heaven* is also briefly mentioned and, like Van Vechten, Thurman includes the debate about black art and whether it should portray uplift or primitivism. In the guise of an omniscient—and irreverent--observer, Thurman comments on the literary and visual black arts movement of the 1920s, writing: “Word had been flashed through the nation about this new phenomenon. Novels, plays, and poems by and about Negroes were being deliriously acclaimed and patronized.... And yet the more discerning were becoming more and more aware that nothing...was being done to...make it the foundation for something truly epochal” (WT, *Infants* 34). Thurman further shares his feelings about Negro art, writing that he/Raymond “had no sympathy whatsoever with Negroes...who considered that should their art be Negroid...the artist, must be considered inferior. As if a poem or a song or a novel by and about Negroes could not reach the same heights as a poem or a song or a novel by or about any other race” (*Infants* 65).

Thurman’s poison pen spares no one. He contemptuously ridicules white sponsors

who love African Americans and their art, people who Raymond claims were branded by Zora Neale Hurston as:

Negrotarians, which when analyzed, is most apt. They are as bad as those eloquent oleaginous Negro crusaders and men of God, who sit in mahogany office chairs or else stand behind pulpits and thunder invective to Negroes against whites. The Negrotarians...have regimented their sympathies and fawn around Negroes with a cry in their heart and a superiority bug in their head. It's a new way to get a thrill. (WT, *Infants* 85)

In addition to using the passing theme in his slim novel, Thurman addresses other forms of inter- and intra-racial relations. When Stephen is attracted to and pursues an African American woman, the black residents of Niggeratti Manor object. Paul states, reflecting the new attitude among African Americans fighting for racial justice that even force may be necessary: "I ain't used to seein' no white man with no colored woman. The bastards lynch every nigger that has a white woman and I kinda thinks darkies ought to do the same" (WT, *Infants* 39). Another of the group's friends relates that he personally gets revenge on his uncle's lynching by "havin' ev'ry white woman I kin get, an' by hurtin' any white man I kin. I hates the bastards. I gets drunk so's I can beat 'em up an' I likes to make their women suffer" (WT, *Infants* 39). Within the group of residents and colleagues, a darker-hued woman named Lucille wants to be with any white man and likes Stephen, but the young white Canadian prefers Aline. Raymond muses that the "whole scene was absurd and unreal. Stephen's presence among them was eternally bringing up new complications," leading him to wonder, "Could not Negroes and whites ever get together and act like normal individuals or must there always be this awareness of color?" (WT,

*Infants* 56). He further ponders on relations between the races, commenting: "White people to him were no novelty. Nor was friendship with them any strange event in his life.... He could no more deify one of them than he could deify a Negro. They were all creatures of the earth" (WT, *Infants* 57-58). If only Raymond/Thurman's fictional thoughts could have been translated into reality.

In addition to denying their general lack of effort and lack of talent, Thurman credits the denizens of Niggeratti Manor with some positive qualities. At their parties, for instance, "color lines had been completely eradicated. Whites and blacks clung passionately together as if trying to effect a permanent merger. Liquor, jazz music, and close physical contact had achieved what decades of propaganda had advocated with little success.... This, he [Raymond] kept repeating to himself, is the Negro renaissance" (WT, *Infants* 115).

Thurman also includes other forms of passing in his novel. A Jewish girl from the Bronx passes herself off as a countess who, after a love affair falls apart, "migrated to Harlem, broke and discouraged, to discover that among Negro men she could be enthroned and honored like a queen of the realm" (WT, *Infants* 58). This Barbara admits to Raymond that she is not a countess and opines: "It's tragic to realize that your Negro men are all so eager to possess a white woman, no matter what her antecedents or present condition.... They do so much yawping...for racial solidarity, and then when someone like me comes along...they fall over one another in the rush. It's tragic" (WT, *Infants* 59). Tragic it is, in the mind of Wallace Thurman.

Other race-related observations are made by Raymond. Thurman's character opines, for example, that "ninety-nine and ninety-nine hundredths per cent of the Negro

race is patiently possessed and motivated by an inferiority complex.... Within themselves and by their action they subscribe to the doctrine of Nordic superiority and the louder they cry against it the more they mark themselves inferior” (WT, *Infants* 86). He then angrily states that “Negroes are a slave race and a slave race they’ll remain until assimilated. Individuals will arise and escape on an ascending ladder of their own individuality. The others will remain what they are. Their superficial progress means nothing.... [T]hey are still the servile progeny of servile ancestors” (WT, *Infants* 87). Thurman vents his uncompromising critique of the world at large, at America, at whites, and at his fellow black citizens, displaying a sardonic—even bitter—view of society.

As *Infants of the Spring* is nearing its end, the landlady is closing down Niggeratti Manor and the tenants are being forced to leave. Aline tells Raymond that she has decided to pass for white permanently and will be the mistress of a white jeweler. “When I go white, I wanta stay white and never hear of being colored again” (WT, *Infants* 161). She fears that she will be outed by fellow blacks when she is out in public or visiting relatives in Harlem. But Raymond assures her in a manner that anticipates the plot of George Schuyler’s passing novel *Black No More* that: “Thousands of Negroes in real life cross the line every year and I assure you that few, if any, ever feel the fictional urge to rejoin their own kind.... Negroes who can and do pass are so glad to get away they probably join the K.K.K. to uphold white supremacy” (WT, *Infants* 162).

In the closing chapter, readers are told that “Aline had crossed the line and done it so successfully that there was no clue to where she had gone or what she was doing” (WT, *Infants* 167). Paul declares that he, too, is going to pass, not as a Nordic but as a Spaniard. Raymond’s last night in Niggeratti Manor becomes a metaphor for the end of the dreams of

the artists of the Harlem Renaissance period and the yearnings of the civil rights activists of the era (Toombs 5). Paul has painted the building that had been their home; it is depicted by the artist and by author Wallace Thurman as a failed black experiment: “The foundation of this building was composed of crumbling stone. At first glance it could be ascertained that the skyscraper would soon crumple and fall, leaving the dominating white lights in full possession of the sky” (WT, *Infants* 175). White Americans will continue to rule the sky, in Thurman’s estimation, and to define what black men and women—whether artists or not—can and cannot do.

Throughout the novel, Thurman not only pokes fun at men like Du Bois and Hughes but self-deprecatingly critiques himself as well. He writes about Raymond that “it had been bruited about that he was soon to emerge as one of the black hopes of Negro literature” (*Infants* 74). In an unpublished review of his own work, written around 1932, Thurman admits that his “*Infants of the Spring* is a novel which the author was impelled to write. The characters and their problems cried out for release. They intruded themselves into his every alien thought.... The faults and virtues of the novel...are the direct result of this inescapable compulsion” (“Review” 226). He concludes that his shortcomings as an author resulted in an “unsatisfactory novel” for which there is “no excuse for having allowed it to be published” (WT, “Review” 226). He then condemns both black and white reading audiences, writing with words that seem to mirror the conflicting opinions of the value of Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* when he writes:

Negroes...resent any novel, no matter how meritorious, which does not deal with what they call ‘the better class of Negroes’.... Literate whites, too, have peculiar ideas concerning the material Negro authors should utilize.... [and insist that] the

Aframerican novelist limit himself to one certain type of character, the earthy, naïve Negro to whom life is just a bowl of cherries, but who is ultimately strangled by the pits. (WT, "Review" 226-27)

Thurman's cynical view of the world, directed at topics ranging from black-white relations to the Harlem Renaissance and its stars, shows that "all of us know that the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the '20's was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked," writes Langston Hughes ("From" 79). The author continues: "Carl Van Vechten, in the character of Byron in *Nigger Heaven*, captured some of the bitterness and frustration of literary Harlem that Wallace later so effectively poured into his *Infants of the Spring*—the only novel by a Negro about that fantastic period when Harlem was in vogue" (Hughes "From" 79). In his "Afterword" to a 1979 edition of *Infants*, John A. Williams captures Thurman's feelings about the era, writing that the novel is not only a "product of the Renaissance of the 1920s" but also is "*about* the Renaissance at the time of its greatest fame, or as Thurman would have said it, notoriety. There have come out of that period very, very few critics of it, and none have been bitter as Thurman" (286). Thurman has his alter-ego Raymond confide the sad and bitter feelings of the author to the fictional Stephen when he states: "I'm going to write, probably a series of books which will cause talk but won't sell, and will be criticized severely, then forgotten. Negroes won't like me because they'll swear I have no race pride, and white people won't like me because I won't recognize their stereotypes" (*Infants* 133). The "strangely brilliant black boy" described by Langston Hughes further declares:

I'm sick of both whites and blacks. I'm sick of discussing the Negro problem, of having it thrust at me from every conversational nook and cranny. I'm sick of

whites who think I can't talk about anything else, and of Negroes who think I shouldn't talk about anything else. I refuse to wail and lament.... Most of the people who would segregate me because of my color are so inferior to me that I can only pity their ignorance. (*Infants* 133-34)

But Thurman, despite his jaundiced view of America and the sad state of race relations, holds out some hope. He continues expressing his thoughts about race, opining:

“Anything that will make white people and colored people come to the conclusion that after all they are all human, all committed to the serious business of living, and all with the same faults and virtues, the sooner...the Negro problem will cease to be a blot on American civilization” (*Infants* 134).

Other satirical works were created by black artists during the Harlem Renaissance period, marking a distinct change from prior eras when black artists were forced to use literary genres and styles deemed more acceptable by white Americans. A short essay entitled “Some Disadvantages of Being White” that appeared in the April, 1928, edition of *The Messenger* was written by A. H. Gordon, a professor of history and economics at State A&M College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. In this work, A. H. Gordon turns the tables on whites and exposes white prejudice by inverting the social positions of the two races, ironically writing: “So common is the idea that it is a disadvantage to be a colored person, that it will doubtless seem surprising to our white friends and may even seem strange to our own colored people for us to announce that there are some disadvantages in being white in this country today” (A. Gordon 79). This learned black man then goes on to list, for the amusement of some and for the edification of others, these said disadvantages, the first of which is that whiteness “places one in a prejudiced environment and so makes it extremely

difficult; in fact almost impossible for one to maintain the ‘scientific attitude’ toward the facts of life whenever those facts touch the far-flung, complex ramifications of race relationships” (A. H. Gordon 79). “He,” the white man, “thinks he is honorable *because he is WHITE* and so he develops a false pride and takes himself with a seriousness that is altogether out of proportion to his real worth to the human family,” pens A. H. Gordon (79). The professor ends his parody by portraying whites as the lesser race, sarcastically suggesting that “[w]e are grateful that good fortune has spared us this mishap. And let us be patient and sympathetic with our white friends seeing that they labor in the face of a misfortune which doth so easily beset them here in the ‘Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave’” (A. H. Gordon 79). Thomas Kirksey similarly uses a satirical attitude when addressing the serious issue of race in Jim Crow America in his 1926 essay “Reflections upon Race.” Kirksey pokes fun at racist diatribe, writing: “It sounds to us, however, just about like what we should expect a passage from a composition of a high school boy of the Nordic race of Texas or Tennessee to read” (363). Kirksey irreverently aims his attack at white notions of superiority, by outrageously and irreverently musing:

Had the coming of Christ been postponed twenty centuries later...the northern of the United States...would get their heads together to see if they could not in some manner beguile the Almighty to send his only begotten son into the world as a Nordic.... Alas, the affair happened twenty centuries ago.... So the lamb of God made his appearance as a child of Israel, although you would not think so from a glance at his photography. A Jew! Oh! Well, anyway, it could have been worse; for Jews are at least white. (363-64)

“Malicious Lies Magnifying the Truth,” written by Taylor Gordon in 1934, also



shows how African American writers used comic ridicule and juxtaposition to attack racial discrimination during the 1920s and 1930s. He contends that the “Caucasians are a queer people. They think that any other people that can’t see things as they do are to be pitied and cared for” (T. Gordon 56). Taking his polemic farther, Taylor Gordon pens that “perhaps the greatest source of prejudice against the black man in the world comes from the millions of morons in these United States of America” (56). He then adds a footnote to explain the word “moron” so that whites can understand its definition: “Signifying, in this case, *cretin*, idiotic” (T. Gordon 56). Imagine, Taylor Gordon then laughingly suggests, a world in which poor white trash—just like black people-- are expected to fix their hair and change the way they talk so they more closely resemble the power elite.

From the 1910s to the 1930s, diverse authors used satire to make their passing novels and stories doubly subversive, to attack the racial status quo, and to point out white shortcomings and misguided racial views. However, by the Harlem Renaissance era, even those writers who used the passing genre in a more traditional manner did so with themes and viewpoints that differentiated their works from those of Twain, Chesnutt, Harper, and Howells. James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) wrote *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* in 1912 but published it anonymously. It was neither well-received nor often-reviewed (Fabi, *Passing* 91). The novel was re-issued in 1927 and Johnson was then identified as the work’s author. M. Giulia Fabi notes that the novel was much more successful following its re-publication and attributes the change to the “different cultural climate of the Harlem Renaissance” (*Passing* 91). Johnson’s *Autobiography* also represents, in Fabi’s estimation, a “transition from the nineteenth-century concern with race loyalty and the insider’s description of black life to a twentieth-century preoccupation

with defining a distinctive African American identity” (*Passing* 93).

Johnson’s narrative is centered on the life of an unnamed protagonist who, like the ebony and ivory piano keys he plays, ebbs and flows between the black and white worlds. The ex-coloured man is nameless, faceless, and raceless, alienated from both the black and white worlds and from himself. He is destabilized and unable to form true bonds of friendship or love. He deconstructs racial constructions by passing in both worlds. He is “unable to be,” writes Maurice J. O’Sullivan, Jr., “either black or white, constantly seeing the white self from a black perspective and the black self from a white perspective” (qtd. in Pisiak 94). There is nothing of the racial uplift message of Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* in Johnson’s novel and there is nothing satirical or laugh-producing in it either.

Oppositions abound in the novel—white/black, named/unnamed, high class/lower class, classical/ragtime. Never named, the ex-coloured man slips back-and-forth between disparate worlds without ever truly knowing himself or where he fits, wandering without grand ideals or grand passions. But, while it is not a satire or a parody, Johnson’s work is much more than a mere passing novel. The author uses the genre for his own purposes—to expound on race relations and to deplore discrimination. His rhetoric challenges white supremacy and the racial *status quo* of Jim Crow America. In a paragraph imbued with irony, the title character contemplates both the illogical rigidity of the color line and also the joy he feels in thwarting it, recalling:

The anomaly of my social position often appealed strongly to my sense of humour. I frequently smiled inwardly at some remark not altogether complimentary to people of colour, and more than once I felt like declaiming: ‘I am a coloured man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop of Negro blood renders a man unfit?’

Many a night when I returned to my room after an enjoyable evening, I laughed heartily over what struck me as the capital joke I was playing. (JWJ, *Auto* 197)

Looking back from the perspective of adulthood, the narrator opines on the hard reality of realizing that he is considered “black” by a white-dominated world and engages in a dialectical examination of his own circumstances that evokes W. E. B. Du Bois’s “double consciousness:”

From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were coloured, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized it in a great, tangible fact. And this is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every coloured man in the United States. He is forced to take this outlook on all things, not from the view-point of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the view-point of a *coloured man*.... This gives to every coloured man, in proportion to his intellectuality, a sort of dual personality. (JWJ, *Auto* 21)

James Weldon Johnson uses *Autobiography* to expound his own views on the civil rights issues being raised during the Harlem Renaissance and the growing civil rights activism and black defiance exhibited during the early 1900s. His protagonist sees it as a “struggle; for though the black man fights passively, he nevertheless fights; and his passive resistance is more effective at present than active resistance could possibly be” (JWJ, *Auto* 75). Johnson continues, writing that the “battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul; later, as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments of learning; and today it is being fought out over his

social recognition” (JWJ, *Auto* 75). Ironically, his unnamed narrator concludes: “I consider the conditions of whites more to be deplored than that of the blacks. Here, a truly great people, a people that produced a majority of the great historic Americans from Washington to Lincoln, now forced to use up its energies in a conflict as lamentable as it is violent” (JWJ, *Auto* 76).

As the tale’s protagonist travels through the South, he is “taken for and treated as a white man” (JWJ, *Auto* 172), leading to interesting and illuminating conversations with white Americans. At one stop, terrifyingly, he witnesses a lynching and Johnson exposes the harsh reality of what it means to be defined as black in Jim Crow America. Even those Southern whites who seem to be appalled and sickened by the lynching do nothing to stop the violence. After describing the scene in horrifying detail, the protagonist walks away and a “great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it...should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive” (JWJ, *Auto* 187-88). And, yet, his horror is not translated into anger nor does it spur him to take action to change society.

The sad spectacle, though, leads the unnamed narrator to decide that he “would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would...let the world take me for what it would.... I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals” (JWJ, *Auto* 190-91). And, so, he moves back to the North to pass forever. He is detached and lonely as he dons a figurative mask and lives in disguise. He assumes the mantle of a white businessman, marries a white woman, and has children. He pulls back, retracts

from pursuing either fame or fortune, settling for an ordinary, bland existence and a lesser life. Looking backwards, he closes his autobiography with the following line: “I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage (JWJ, *Auto* 211).

Instead of employing satire or outrageousness in his critique of a racist, racialized society, Johnson uses irony. The unnamed narrator, like other characters and real-life persons who pass, demonstrates just how fluid and permeable the purportedly inviolable color line actually is while also illuminating the illogical nature of legal, cultural, and sociological discrimination based on one’s assigned race. The main character is both “black” and “white,” as it suits him, as he leads a life of purposeful ambiguity. Roxanna Pisiak, in her article about the irony and subversion found in Johnson’s novel, concludes that the “text contains irony on the narrator’s part *and* on the implied author’s part.... By its very existence, his text demonstrates that the constructs upon which the story is based—the most important being the split between ‘white’ and ‘black’ in America—are themselves ‘unreliable’” (85). And, therein lies its subversiveness.

James Weldon Johnson’s title character is never named, never fully realized, and never truly willing to commit himself to anything. Ironically, the only true decision he makes is to move away from his authentic self. Rather than running towards blackness, as Rhoda Algate does in Harper’s novel and as Angela Murray does in Fauset’s *Plum Bun*, Johnson’s drifting man abandons what little blackness he has and makes a “mess of pottage” of his life.

Like Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, the novel *Passing*, written by Nella Larsen (1891-1964) in 1929, is similar to all other passing novels in its

inherent contravention of white racial expectations. Perceptions of blackness and whiteness are woven into Larsen's story. While one of the main characters dies at the end—by choice, by accident, or by being pushed by her friend—and, thereby, suffers the same fate as many a tragic mulatta, Larsen's exploration of race in America seems fresh and modern.

As the tale begins, Clare Kendry is described as being a "pale small girl" but no other racial markers are provided for the reader's edification or identification (Larsen, *Passing* 143). A friend from her youth, Irene Redfield who is married to a dark-complexioned doctor, occasionally passes for fun and to gain entry to social arenas from which she would be prohibited if her "blackness" were known. Larsen crafts a scene in which Irene is passing to take tea in a Chicago hotel. As another woman notices her, Irene worries: "[C]ould that woman, somehow know that here...on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell.... Never...had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro" (Larsen, *Passing* 150). Maria Balshaw finds irony in this scene, noting in *Looking for Harlem: Aesthetics in African-American Literature*: "Absurd indeed, since Irene has failed to detect that the person looking at her is also a passing Negro" (66).

When the other woman laughs, Irene realizes that she is Clare Kendry and then discovers that Clare has been passing for many years and is married to a rich white man. Irene accepts Clare's invitation to call on her at her home but Irene's motives in accepting are not entirely pure. She "wished to find out about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another

environment, not entirely strange...but certainly not entirely friendly” (Larsen, *Passing* 157). While Irene passes occasionally for entertainment and to amuse herself, she is fascinated by Clare’s total abandonment of the African American community and her racial identity.

Demonstrating the interconnectedness between white and black in America, Irene believes that the aunts who raised Clare were themselves passing as “whites” but, in actuality, they were “white” and not “black” passers. Clare, by the fiction of law and custom and one-drop rules, is, ironically, considered to be a “black” who is passing as “white,” despite the fact that she is actually more “white” than “black.” Clare’s and Irene’s situations echo the fictional lives of characters including false Tom and Fred Merritt and the real-life passings of generations of men and women who did not bear the physical attributes of African heritage and chose to cross the color line.

Clare’s husband, John Bellew, comes home and his first words to his wife are “Hello, Nig” to the surprise and shock of those present at Clare’s gathering (Larsen, *Passing* 170). He explains that “when we were first married, she was as white as—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s getting darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find out she’s turned into a nigger” (Larsen, *Passing* 171). He then “bellows” with laughter, as does Irene, although she does so because she knows Clare actually is “black.” Bellew responds to Clare’s query about whether he would mind finding out that she had one or two percent black blood by saying, “I know you’re no nigger, so it’s all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I know you’re no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be” (Larsen, *Passing* 171). One drop is all it

takes to banish someone to the other side of the color line; Clare's husband then adds that he does not just dislike African Americans but hates them.

In the second part of the novel, Irene has traveled to New York. She suspects that Clare's desire to re-acquaint herself with the African American community is disingenuous. She also mulls over Clare's permanent passing and recognizes the "irony of it! She couldn't betray Clare, couldn't even run the risk of appearing to defend a people that were being maligned, for fear that the defense might in some infinitesimal degree lead the way to final discovery of her secret," pens Larsen (*Passing* 182). The author continues, writing: "She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race" (Larsen, *Passing* 182). When discussing the situation with her husband, she comments that "it's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (Larsen, *Passing* 186).

Both of the main characters are deceivers, passing for fun or permanently and never revealing their true feelings to themselves, to each other, or to their families. Irene considers telling Bellew about his wife's circumstances but "she was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three" (Larsen, *Passing* 225).

Two years later, Bellew discovers the truth about his wife's racial identity; readers are also told that Clare suspects Irene of having an affair with her husband. At a party attended by both couples the following day, Bellew rushes in and confronts Clare, calling



her a “damned dirty nigger” (Larsen, *Passing* 238). In the midst of all the confusion, Clare stands by a window and, suddenly, Bellew cries out in horror, “Nig! My God! Nig!” (Larsen, *Passing* 239). Whether Clare accidentally fell, killed herself, or was pushed by someone—Bellew, Clare, or even Clare’s husband—is left unclear. What Larsen does reveal is that “Irene wasn’t sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost” before she faints at the sight of Clare lying dead on the sidewalk (Larsen, *Passing* 239). Irene’s lack of compassion and feeling may be attributed to her repressed sexual attraction to Clare, to the fact that she feared her husband was intimately involved with Clare, or to Larsen’s intentional ambiguousness.

Larsen plays with the words “passed” and “passing” throughout her novella, examples of which include that Irene’s “feeling passed” and a “moment passed” (*Passing* 150, 155). As Balshaw writes about Larsen’s work:

What is debated in *Passing* are forms of difference that cannot be seen, or rather, markers of difference that can only be seen by viewers who know what they are looking for. The passing woman, whether the passing is taken to be racial or sexual, poses an epistemological challenge because she refuses to occupy the identity designated for her, precisely because she does not have to. (68)

Notes critic Michael G. Cooke in *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century*, for Clare, “passing cancels Harlem, sneaking into Harlem cancels passing, and she is invested in both. For Irene, staying does not protect her from the radical threat of the outside, and her inability to make of staying the life she desires cancels its value for her” (67). He concludes that neither Clare nor Irene “can cope with the double veil” described by Du Bois in an earlier era (Cooke 67).

All passing—whether racial, sexual, cultural, or sociological—is inherently subversive. Racial passers figuratively wear masks as they enter the white world and the act itself exposes the fallacy of racial constructions and upends racial assumptions and stereotypes, despite the contention of critic Cheryl A. Wall that “Larsen’s most effective act of passing was masking the subversive themes that frequently simmered beneath the surface of the fiction” (qtd. in Belluscio 17). While both Clare and Irene are central figures in Larsen’s novel, her *Passing* is primarily Irene’s story, told through the interactions between the two and the intersecting points of their lives. Although Amritjit Singh contends that it is “unfortunate that Larsen—who exhibits the sensitivity and literary skill to match the challenge of her theme—does not choose to deal with passing from Clare’s point of view, exposing the many subtle shades of feeling in the life of a woman who chooses to cross the color line,” he concludes, “[b]ut, then, that would have been a very different book” (100).

Larsen’s novel is provocative and has remained potent across decades, not only because it deals with passing and other race-related issues but because it is centered on the tales of two black women, both of whom struggle to deal with the limitations placed on them by men and by a dominant white society. A passing novel far different from Larsen’s, but also written by a black female writer during the Harlem Renaissance period, is Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun*. Fauset (1882-1961) was the literary editor for *The Crisis* from 1919 to 1926 and author of four novels in addition to poems and essays. Her 1929 novel is the story of the Murray family and features racial uplift in addition to passing. The father of the family is dark-complected while Mrs. Murray is very light. One sister—Virginia--wants to teach piano when she grows up. She has a bronze

complexion while the other sister—Angela—dreams of leaving her black middle-class life behind. The mother passes occasionally, to get good seats in the theater or to eat in an exclusive restaurant, but she tells her husband about her adventures on the other side of the color line and categorizes her actions as a way “to flout a silly and unjust law” (Fauset, *PB* 440). Angela, on the other hand, concludes:

First, that the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure,—are for white-skinned people only.... [Her father and sister] were denied these privileges because they were dark.... The effect of her fallaciousness was to cause her to feel a faint pity for her unfortunate relatives and also to feel that coloured people were to be considered fortunate only in the proportion in which they measured up to the physical standards of white people. (Fauset, *PB* 441)

One day, Angela and her mother are passing and see Virginia on the street but do not acknowledge her; her mother feels ashamed by this but Angela does not. At school, Angela loses a friend because she had not told the other girl she was “coloured.” Angela reacts in amazement: “Why of course I never told you that I was coloured! Why should I?” (Fauset, *PB* 459). Although the budding friendship ends, Angela “wonder[s] which was the more important, a patent insistence on the fact of colour or an acceptance of the good things of life which could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known” (Fauset, *PB* 461). When a young black man speaks to her about race, Angela replies, “I don’t think being coloured in America is a beautiful thing. I think it’s nothing short of a curse” (Fauset, *PB* 466). She equates living well and being cultured—and all that is good and desirable—with being white, as decreed by white Americans. As she studies in an academy, she chooses not to

reveal her racial identity, passing not for an occasional thrill but to change her life. Again, the truth is exposed and Angela re-iterates the words she spoke in high school, “Coloured! Of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I?” (Fauset, *PB* 479).

Angela decides that there is nothing wrong with passing. She challenges her sister, who is proud of being visibly identifiable as African American and who is dedicated to racial uplift, saying that “after all I am both white and Negro and look white. Why shouldn’t I declare for the one that will bring me the greatest happiness, prosperity and respect?” (Fauset, *PB* 484). Virginia replies: “No reason in the world except that since in this country public opinion is against any infusion of black blood it would seem an awfully decent thing to put yourself, even in the face of appearances, on the side of black blood and say: ‘Look here, this is what a mixture of black and white really means!’” (Fauset, *PB* 484). But Angela is determined to join the white world. She meets a blond, blue-eyed, wealthy young man and wants to marry him. The irony, as in Larsen’s *Passing*, is that her love interest is racist. He is proud of his discriminatory behavior and declares that “I’d send ‘em all back to Africa if I could” (Fauset, *PB* 518).

Fauset includes hints of the tragic mulatta theme in her passing novel, as when Angela tries to hold out for marriage but relents and becomes the white man’s lover. When the couple breaks up, she decides to repair her relationship with her sister and pursues a young man named Anthony who she believes is Brazilian. Ironically, he has not revealed that he is African American but presents himself as Portuguese. Anthony admits that he hated white people until he fell in love with Angela; he had always planned to tell her the truth but was afraid she would end her friendship with him when she, a “white” woman, found out he was “black.”

Angela undergoes a radical change of thinking and decides she will return to the African American community, stop passing, and be with Anthony because she suddenly realizes that her:

...sympathy and her tenderness were real, fixed and lasting, because they were based and rooted in the same blood, the same experiences, the same comprehension of this far-reaching, stupid, terrible race problem. How inexpressibly happy, relieved, and overwhelmed he [Anthony] would be. She would live with him in Harlem.... She would label herself, if he asked it; she would tell every member of her little coterie of white friends about her mixed blood.... No sacrifice of the comforts which came to her from 'passing'...would be too great for her. (Fauset, *PB* 628)

Because Angela has wasted so much time on her white lover and overlooked Anthony as a potential suitor, he became engaged to her sister Virginia. But everything works out in the end as each sister ends up with the man who truly loves her and they will all live happily ever after in the African American community.

Wallace Thurman condemns Fauset's novel as "just the sort of literary works both Negroes and sentimental whites desired Negroes to write.... Miss Fauset's work was an ill-starred attempt to popularize the pleasing news that there were cultured Negroes, deserving of attention from artists, and of whose existence white folk should be apprised" ("This Negro" 244-45). A 1970s critique of the novel written by Singh includes the conclusion that the novel's author displays quality "craftsmanship in anticipating the turns and twists of her plot and manages to write a story whose exploitation of the black-white ironies in American life parallels that of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*" (96).

While Fauset's writing does not rise to the level of Twain, particularly in his most highly-regarded novels such as *Huckleberry Finn*, they do share similarities in their attacks on racism. Mark Twain's trademark satire was aimed at white hypocrisy, one-drop racial definitions, the institution of slavery, and American society itself in his 1894 passing novel *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Although the satirists of the Harlem Renaissance period--a time of civil rights activism, growing African American self-pride, and burgeoning resistance to white authority--challenged societal norms and expectations as Twain did, they were defiant in a way that Twain was not and could not be.

As long as white Americans determined who was dominant and who was subordinate, as long as white Americans decided who was white and who was not, as long as white Americans decreed who could have full citizenship rights and who could not, as long as white Americans codified who could ride at the front of the bus and who could not, as long as white Americans proclaimed who was free and who was not, a percentage of "black" Americans who looked like "whites" chose to pass to the other side of the color line. However much white pseudo-scientists and racists railed against passing and enacted racial integrity laws in a vain attempt to stop racial interaction, nothing could. And, both in real-life and in fiction, passers became part of the fabric of America. Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, Carl Van Vechten, and Wallace Thurman ruthlessly and subversively portrayed passing blacks as the equals or superiors of whites to deconstruct racial bias. They irreverently exaggerated, defied, condemned, and ridiculed. They wrote ironic, paradoxical, contemptuous, and iconoclastic passages to make their passing stories and novels doubly subversive. Their works embodied the challenging words of Claude McKay's 1925 poem "The Mulatto:"

Because I am the white man's son—his own,  
 Bearing his bastard birth-mark on my face,  
 I will dispute his title to his throne,  
 Forever fight him for my rightful place.  
 There is a searing hate within my soul,  
 A hate that only kin can feel for kin,  
 A hate that makes me vigorous and whole,  
 And spurs me on increasingly to win. (rpt. in D. Lewis 262-63)

Other novelists, essayists, and short-story tellers used satire but did not include racial passing in their tales. Other novelists, essayists, and short-story tellers used the passing genre but did not use satire in their narratives. Other novelists, essayists, and short-story tellers used irony but did not use the satire that heightened the irreverence, defiance, and iconoclasm of Hughes, Fisher, Van Vechten, and Thurman. As powerful, defiant, and subversive as the works of these men are, they would be surpassed just a few years later by the ultimate satirical novel of passing written during the Harlem Renaissance—George Schuyler's *Black No More*.

Chapter Three:  
To Harlem: George S. Schuyler and *Black No More*

“The Negro in America is not permitted for one minute  
to forget his color, his skin, or his race.”<sup>14</sup>  
“I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue,  
my hair is blond.... [but] I am not white.”<sup>15</sup>  
“I guess we’re all niggers now.”<sup>16</sup>

George Samuel Schuyler was one of the more prolific authors of the Harlem Renaissance. In his 1931 passing novel, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933-1940*, Schuyler subversively attacks constructions of racial identities by wrapping racial truths inside hyperbole and satire. With a unique vision in his *oeuvre*, he creates an ironic, fictional world in which Negroes could, suddenly and fantastically, change their color. What, he posits, would happen to them and to the racist America of the 1930s if millions of non-whites could miraculously become white and pass forever? Schuyler plunges readers into a chaotic world of racial indeterminacy and dedicates his novel--with the wink of his eye and a tongue in his cheek--to “all Caucasians in the Great Republic who can trace their ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert that there are no black leaves, twigs, limbs, or branches on their family tree” (*BNM* 4).

Schuyler’s novel, and considerations of his influence, have often been omitted from discussions of Harlem Renaissance literature (Retman 1449). The author’s use of satire and irony, rather than soaring rhetoric, to attack racism set him apart from most of the other Harlem Renaissance writers, as did his strong anti-Communist political views and his ideological conservatism, both of which grew more pronounced over time and distanced

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<sup>14</sup> Claude McKay, *The Negroes in America*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> George S. Schuyler, *Black No More*, p. 214.



him from the black power movement and the civil rights struggles of later decades. But he, and works like *Black No More*, reflect the trends—literary, social, cultural, and political—of the Harlem Renaissance period and of the ideas and passions of his fellow writers. He is both of the 1920s/1930s literary movement and singularly, stylistically his own person which, perhaps, makes George Schuyler and his *Black No More* true testaments to the ideals of liberty, equality, and freedom of expression without regard to race.

In the early twentieth-century, African American civil rights activists joined with visual artists and writers to disprove racial stereotypes and to counter discrimination based on race. The “interventions into the political and artistic discourses of the 1920s and 1930s” of authors including George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman, contends J. Martin Favor, “were meant to counteract the romanticization of Harlem at that time and provide for their readers a healthy skepticism toward issues of race, color, nationalism, and conformism” (198). In his “George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman: Two Satirists of the Harlem Renaissance,” Favor writes that these men are tied together by a “caustic wit directed at the customs, mores, and politics of their contemporaries” and because they urged others to “go beyond making the race anew” to “challenge the validity of ‘race’ altogether” (199, 202). These two writers, joined by their acerbic, iconoclastic, challenging, and transgressive approaches in their passing novels and their other works, “consistently and tirelessly attack the kinds of psychological, social, and economic damage done by American racist ideology.... [T]hey seek to dismantle racial identity as a stable and ultimately knowable set of categories,” in Favor’s estimation (204).

Schuyler was raised in Syracuse, New York, in a home that, although lower middle

class, was stable and in which education, reading, and moral responsibility were highly esteemed. He proudly claims these values in his autobiography, *Black and Conservative*, in which he also touts the fact that his family had always been free blacks, not slaves (GSS, 2-3). Schuyler muses in this retrospective work that he “learned very early in life that I was colored but from the beginning this fact of life did not distress, restrain, or overburden me. One takes things as they are, lives with them, and tries to turn them to one’s advantage” (*Black and Conservative* 2). He served overseas during the First World War and then held a series of low-paying, physically-demanding, unsatisfying jobs before finding his way to New York City during the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. Schuyler soon became an editor, an author published in both black and white periodicals, a columnist, an investigative reporter, and a lecturer. Contemporary H. L. Mencken praises Schuyler’s journalistic skills, writing that he “is the most competent journalist that his race has produced in America. There are few white columnists, in fact, who can match him for information, intelligence, independence, and courage” (qtd. in Ferguson 2).

Throughout his life, Schuyler consistently supported equal opportunity and freedom of choice for all American citizens regardless of race. He did not conceive of race in biological terms, as many white Americans did at the time, but as being a social, cultural, and legal construction. He felt that “race is a superstition.... We need to strive to become one people in our resolution, determination, and achievement instead of two peoples, colored and white” (GSS, *Black and Conservative* 352). Schuyler explains his feelings about race and race relations when he states in his autobiography that “while I was aware that I was physically different in appearance from my white neighbors, I have never felt inferior. Indeed, I strongly question the view of many psychologists and sociologists

that most colored people regard themselves as inferior. They simply are aware that their socio-economic position is inferior, which is a different thing” (*Black and Conservative* 18). He wrote fervently about the need for American society to change, seeing the *status quo* as neither acceptable nor democratic. He believed that “once possessed of the right to equal education, the right to vote, the right to live where desired, the right to public accommodation and the right to freely earn a living without color discrimination, the Negro ceases to be any problem in America and takes his place in society as an American” (GSS, “Dilemma” 17). This goal of Schuyler and of the other artists and activists of the early twentieth century was not realized during the Harlem Renaissance period nor, in certain important aspects, has it been to this day.

Much of Schuyler’s literary output during the 1920s and 1930s was devoted to countering contemporary white America’s misconceptions about blacks. Through his investigations, he chronicled the black experience and condition, hoping that whites in the reading public would gain a better appreciation of the plight of their fellow Americans. He argued against the segregation and discrimination supported and espoused by many whites. Schuyler, with a Thurman-like acid pen, employs satire and juxtaposition as his weapons to attack race prejudice in a 1924 “Shafts and Darts” column, writing:

Many of the leading thinkers of the nation ‘view with alarm’ the growing prejudice against Caucasians. No intelligent Negro should fall victim to this dastardly form of race prejudice, based wholly on a certain group’s lack of pigmentation.

Contrary to all of the pernicious propaganda circulated by black supremacy advocates, the Negro is in no way superior to Caucasians. (41)

He ridicules self-anointed white supremacist views, satirically penning that “physically,

the Caucasian compares very favorably with us.... It should be kept in mind that the Caucasian is quite capable of all the fine sentiments we possess. Their sense of chivalry and fair play is rarely, if ever, equaled.... [T]he Caucasians suffer tremendously from an inferiority complex, as one would naturally expect” (GSS, “Shafts” 1924, 41-42).

Schuyler concludes that “we must meet all the arguments of the Caucasophobes with irrefutable facts. Only in this way can race prejudice be scotched,” bringing his outrageous juxtapositions back to reality (“Shafts” 1924, 42).

Schuyler’s essay--paradoxical and transgressive in tone--presents a strong counterpoint to the rampant racism expressed by most white Americans during the Jim Crow era. A 1928 essay written by E. B. Reuter and entitled “The American Mulatto” demonstrates the great gulf between the thoughts on race held by most white Americans and those being expressed by African American artists and activists. Reuter contends that the “[d]ifferences in racial cultures are accepted as the natural consequences of inherent differences...and as proof of inherent differences. The superior cultural status of the white group is taken as evidence and proof of its superior endowment; the degraded position of the Negroes is understood as the...obvious proof of native inability” (“American Mulatto” 39). Despite the talents and aspirations of America’s black citizens, white Americans continued to portray and perceive of the “others” as inherently unequal and innately inferior.

Schuyler regularly railed against racial inequities and considered himself the equal to—or superior of—white Americans, often using satire and exaggeration, but, sometimes, writing in a more straightforward manner. Although he promoted equal civil rights for his people, he also questioned the aims and goals of his fellow activists. He asks, for

example, if the “Negro [will] solve his problems by amalgamating with the Nordic population? Because of his color he has been a social problem since he first entered God’s country, manacled by the Founding Fathers” (GSS, “Negro Looks” 216). In the same essay, “A Negro Looks Ahead,” Schuyler seems to promote not only integration but also amalgamation when he writes that if American society would only eliminate “social barriers...[then] the tides of life will flow together.... [C]ulture is more important than color, and the blacks and whites here have a common culture and language.... Social taboos...have so conditioned the whites that only a powerful and unforeseen circumstance could lower the bars separating the two groups” (217). Such an unforeseen circumstance would occur in his passing novel *Black No More*, but it is a work of science fiction rather than a true seismic shift in white American thinking.

Not only did George Schuyler use satire and wit to attack racial barriers and stylistically differentiate himself from his contemporaries, he held other beliefs that distanced him from them as well. He challenged ideas of black nationalism, stating in his 1940 article “Who is ‘Negro’? Who is White?” that black Americans should “stop fostering separatism when the need is for unity; and, attaining at last a vision of a great people of the future welded together by indissoluble bonds, we would practice here the human brotherhood” (GSS 56). Schuyler was highly critical of pan-Africanism, sentiments clearly displayed in his comment about Marcus Garvey’s short-lived back-to-Africa movement: “The Aframerican is first and foremost an American.... He has nothing in common with the African blacks save his color” (“Negro Looks” 213). He also felt that the African American artists of the Negro Renaissance were not, despite their claims and their donning of the New Negro mantle, essentially different from their white

counterparts. In his 1928 editorial “The Negro-Art Hokum,” Schuyler states this opinion:

As for the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans—such as there is—it is identical in kind with the literature, painting, and sculpture of white Americans; that is, it shows more or less evidence of European influence.... This, of course, is easily understood if one stops to realize that the Aframerican is merely a lampblackened Anglo-Saxon. (114)

Langston Hughes responded to Schuyler’s editorial the following week, railing against Schuyler’s opinions. Hughes and many of his fellow Harlem Renaissance artists saw their works as distinctively unique because they were created by African Americans. They did not see themselves as mere “lampblackened Anglo-Saxons” nor as men and women who were creating works “identical in kind” to those of whites.

Further distancing himself politically from his contemporaries in 1931, the avowed anti-Communist Schuyler spoke out against what he perceived as the exploitation of the defense of the Scottsboro Boys Case<sup>17</sup> by the Communist Party in the United States. This earned him the ire of many of the civil rights activists who supported the young men. In an open letter addressed to Schuyler that appeared in the *Atlanta Daily World* in 1934, Channing Tobias and his co-signers attack Schuyler for his reactionary views. They castigate the author/journalist, accusing him of not supporting civil rights, of aligning himself with white Southern racists, and of being out of sync with the fight being waged by

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<sup>17</sup> Nine black youths who became known as the Scottsboro Boys were accused of raping a white woman in 1931. They were tried and found guilty; eight were sentenced to death. Their convictions were appealed numerous times and the United States Supreme Court handed down several different rulings on the case and ordered new trials more than once. In their final trials, the Scottsboro Boys were sentenced to prison rather than death. Their legal treatment became a *cause célèbre*, pitting racist white Southerners against liberals, civil rights groups, and outspoken Communists. Most Americans feel that “black is black and white is white, and the one shall be the slave of the other,” contends author Theodore Dreiser in a speech about the Scottsboro Case (177). Regarding the alleged rapes, Dreiser, unlike most of his contemporaries, claims that “mixing the blood of a white man with that of a Negro woman is certainly the same as mixing the blood of a black man with that of a white woman” (177).

other African Americans. They write to Schuyler:

We have read with horror your attacks upon the defense of the Scottsboro boys....

We have seen in these attacks repeated attempts to crush every effort of the Negro people for mass struggle. Your statement...is...proof of your alliance with the lynchers in the south.... Your attacks upon the defense of...the Scottsboro boys are attacks upon us as members of the Negro group, an oppressed group struggling to free itself from oppression. (Tobias 2)

Schuyler became increasingly conservative over the course of ensuing decades, presenting a startlingly different picture of the man and making his views on race and relations appear contradictory. He published articles in the John Birch Society's periodical supporting Senator Joseph McCarthy's virulent attacks on Communism and suspected Communists; he disparaged and disdained civil rights activists as diverse as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (Gates 31). In his review of a book presenting Schuyler's essays to a twenty-first century audience, African American author/scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses what he terms "George Schuyler's struggle with Du Bois's dualism" and calls Schuyler a "fragmented man" (31). Gates outlines Schuyler's journey from subversive civil rights activist and acerbic Harlem Renaissance writer to reactionary, militant anti-Communist. While Gates credits Schuyler for the contributions he made to civil rights during the 1920s and 1930s, he also reminds readers that the author opposed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Nobel Peace Prize award. Incredulously, Schuyler wrote that "neither directly nor indirectly has Dr. King made any contribution to world (or even domestic) peace" (qtd. in Gates 31). Professor Gates categorizes Schuyler as singular and distinctive not only for his literary style but because "no black American,

before or since, has written for such an ideologically disparate array of publications in both the black and white press, or embodied more contradictory ideological positions” (31).

Although, perhaps, one should allow even a black author who was prominent during the Harlem Renaissance period the right to his own views and opinions, however they may have become out of step with the times and at odds with his fellow African American artists and promoters of civil rights.

George Schuyler opposed rigid definitions of race and the cultural divide between the races. He believed that Americans were more alike than not, even if they looked different or even if they were New Negro artists. He married a blond Caucasian heiress from Texas and, in 1929, wrote a pamphlet debunking the social taboos against interracial love and marriage entitled *Racial Intermarriage in the United States: One of the Most Interesting Phenomena in Our National Life*. But Schuyler also contends that “once we accept the fact that there is, and will always be, a color caste system in the United States, and stop crying about it, we can concentrate on how best to survive and prosper within that system. That is not defeatism but realism” (GSS, *Black and Conservative* 121-22).

Schuyler objected to the ways in which some of the Harlem Renaissance writers and artists stressed the exotic and primitive elements of black culture because he felt whites used this as proof of their inferiority and, thereby, thwarted the push for equality between the races (Hutchinson, “Mediating” 538).

Like Gates, George Hutchinson, in his 1994 “Mediating ‘Race’ and ‘Nation:’ the Cultural Politics of the *Messenger*,” chronicles the dichotomies in Schuyler’s opinions and deems Schuyler’s thinking self-contradictory. Hutchinson concludes that the author “adhered to a particularly provoking and rather paradoxical form of American cultural



nationalism, on the one hand insisting on the mutual cultural identity of...Negro and Caucasian Americans and, on the other hand, stressing the grim significance (and insanity) of that culture's characteristic—if self-destructive—discourse....of 'race'" ("Mediating" 534). Schuyler distances himself from "the canonical Harlem Renaissance writers," in Hutchinson's estimation, because "he regarded [their]...efforts to develop a black aesthetic as submission to the racial absurdities of white supremacy" ("Mediating" 538). Despite Hutchinson's and Gates's critiques of Schuyler's changing world views, it does appear that the satirist and iconoclast refused to stifle or edit his beliefs to better align himself with any particular era or with any other person.

Critic Jane Kuenz, in her 1997 article entitled "American Racial Discourse, 1900-1930: Schuyler's *Black No More*," argues that Schuyler's works--and, most importantly, his *Black No More*—need to be re-examined. She holds that the work's reputation and importance suffered because of the conservatism of Schuyler's latter years. Kuenz sees Schuyler as an artist whose works are not generally considered on a par with other Harlem Renaissance works because of his political viewpoints—but should be. Her review of *Black No More* does not concentrate on the author's stylistic individuality nor on its passing theme but she does conclude that "perhaps understandably, critical attention has often responded solely to the conservative crank rather than the complicated and contradictory social satirist" (172).

Like other satirists— those of earlier ages and cultures including Erasmus and Swift, those of the 1800s including Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce, and those of the 1920s including Hughes, Thurman, and Fisher--Schuyler attacked hypocrisy and the state of racial relations by "painting the opposition as foolish and laughable rather than

absolutely evil...[and] sought to mitigate and even heal the rapacious desires released by epochal social change. Instead of opposing these desires directly, they attempted to deflect them through the ironic use of language” (Ferguson 56). As biographer Jeffrey B. Ferguson notes in *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance*:

Schuyler also joined Du Bois in viewing the ‘Negro Problem’ ironically. Yet where Du Bois invoked the passion and pain of tragedy to characterize the American race complex, Schuyler employed the disfiguring energies of satire. Where Du Bois found inspiration and wisdom in such moving black cultural creations as the Sorrow Songs, Schuyler invoked the tradition of black humor, the wisdom of which resided in its sharp recognition of the ludicrous and outlandish in American race relations. (32)

With a skillful pen, George Schuyler will utilize this “tradition of black humor” to transgressively create a scam artist who crosses the boundaries drawn between the races and to demonstrate the illogical nature of racism and racial integrity laws.

Schuyler’s *Black No More*, written towards the end of the Harlem Renaissance period, exemplifies both his views on race and also his own personal literary style. The work is a subversive novel of passing. This interpretation is supported by critic Sonnet H. Retman in his “*Black No More*: Schuyler and Racial Capitalism,” in which he claims: “Passing unmask[s] the juridical, economic, and racial structures of race.... [and] is always predicated on some kind of trespass.... Not only does passing manufacture whiteness through non-biological means, it also reveals the ideological foundations of biological race” (1452). *Black No More* is not only an attack on racial discrimination and on the

illogical and unsupportable color line but it is also a work of science-fiction in which a black American scientist invents an electrochemical process about which newspaper headlines scream: “NEGRO ANNOUNCES REMARKABLE DISCOVERY: Can Change Black to White in Three Days” (GSS, *BNM* 10). In *Black No More* millions and millions of blacks—virtually the entire non-white population—can suddenly “pass” and, in a few years’ time, there are no longer observable physical barriers between the races. Attitudes and prejudices such as those expressed in E. B Reuter’s essay are lampooned and caricatured while racial identities and constructions are torn apart in a wildly satirical manner. Schuyler’s fictional America is white America’s worst nightmare.

Further turning logic on end--and with full ironic intent-- Schuyler’s imagined world is one in which blacks reject those blacks who do not undergo the process and whites—whether naturally Caucasian or chemically-created—blame their spouses when a couple’s children are born black. Within this hilariousness and comical outrageousness, Schuyler champions and demonstrates the full equality, and, sometimes, even the superiority, of black Americans. His *Black No More* presents a scenario in which America’s color line is obliterated, although the country’s “race problem” remains inescapable.

The novel is set in 1933, just two years in the future from the book’s publication date, and in the city its author loved: “LIFE WAS wonderful! New York in the spring! Central Park in a riot of greenery!” (GSS, *Black and Conservative* 95). It reflects Schuyler’s personal affection for the nightlife and excitement of Harlem during “those...prodigal days” (GSS, *Black and Conservative* 98). The novel’s African American protagonist—Max Disher—is part of the Harlem scene. Schuyler’s

Max/Matthew is a trickster, a man who, like literary characters including Br'er Rabbit, is “wily, cunning, a confidence artist who lives for adventures in which he can match wits with his supposed betters” (Peplow, “Black” 8). Max is manipulative and sly and he gleefully enjoys outwitting those who fall prey to the schemes he concocts. Michael Peplow, in his “The Black ‘Picaro’ in Schuyler’s *Black No More*,” further explains that this character “demonstrates throughout the rest of the story the characteristics of a black *picaro*, an adventurer and trickster who wears the mask of whiteness in order to ‘put on Ole Massa’” (“Black” 7).

The words Schuyler uses to describe Max underscore this interpretation of the tale’s protagonist. “His negroid features had a slightly satanic cast and there was an insolent nonchalance about his carriage,” writes the author (GSS, *BNM* 1). He “sauntered over to the table [to meet a beautiful blond girl from Atlanta] in his most sheikish manner” (GSS, *BNM* 7). His eyes, even when he has been turned into a “white” man, retain the “sardonic twinkle” characteristic of a huckster on the make (GSS, *BNM* 30). Not only do Max and his friend Bunny Brown make money off a racist organization named the Knights of Nordica, they—a pair of pseudo-whites—possess the ruthless abandon and devil-may-care attitude to investigate black intellectuals in a town that Schuyler ironically names “Paradise.” The pair also scam money from white Southern business owners who fear labor agitation by the poor whites who find their social and economic situation challenged by newly-minted “whites.” One can not only hear Max and Bunny but also Schuyler and the black reading public chuckling out loud at the pair’s shenanigans.

In a nightclub one night, Max is immediately infatuated with a strawberry blond-haired Southern beauty but she spurns his invitation to dance in a nightclub: “‘No,’

she replied icily, ‘I never dance with Niggers!’ Then, turning to her friend, she remarks: ‘Can you beat the nerve of these darkies?’ She made a little disdainful grimace with her mouth” (GSS, *BNM* 8). Despite her reaction, Max dreams of Helen, of “dancing with her, dining with her, motoring with her, sitting beside her on a golden throne while millions of manacled white slaves prostrated themselves before him. Then there was the nightmare of grim, gray men with shotguns, baying hounds, a heap of gasoline-soaked faggots and a screeching, fanatical mob” (GSS, *BNM* 9). The sad reality of race relations in the 1930s America thwarts his desire. So, to win her affection and to improve his economic and social status, Max eagerly and voluntarily seizes upon an unforeseen opportunity to change his life.

Remarkably, and incredibly, one Dr. Junius Crookman<sup>18</sup> has invented a process that allows black Americans to become “white.” His treatments not only whiten skin but narrow noses and lips, straighten hair, and change hair and eye color. Crookman and his fellow scientists establish a sanitarium in Harlem and announce in newspapers that they are open for business. Early on, Schuyler foreshadows the problem of offspring of transformed “black” Americans continuing to bear African ancestry traits, even after one or more of their parents has undergone the processes: “there’ll be hell to pay when you whiten up a lot o’ these darkies and them mulatto babies start appearing here and there,” Schuyler writes (*BNM* 15-16).

Crookman is well-educated and a minister’s son; he studies black issues and

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18 Schuyler plays with names in *BNM*, using them to describe stereotypes and poke fun at racist ideologies. Crookman (a black scientist who enjoys the racial chaos he creates), Snobbcraft (a racist politician), McPhule (a pastor who loves burning Negroes), and Senator Kretin (an “incomparable Negro-baiter”) are examples (GSS, *BNM* 144). His caricatures of noted Harlem Renaissance figures are addressed later in this chapter. For a full discussion of Schuyler’s rhetorical use of wordplay, read Michael W. Peplow’s “George Schuyler, Satirist: Rhetorical Devices in *Black No More*.” In this critique, Peplow details what he calls Schuyler’s use of antithesis and anticlimax to achieve “*reductio ad absurdum*” and to “deflate individuals and institutions” (248, 249).

history, reads black newspapers, and sees himself as a “great lover of his race” (GSS, *BNM* 46). Nevertheless, he comes to the conclusion that “if there were no Negroes, there could be no Negro problem. Without a Negro problem, Americans could concentrate their attention on something constructive.... He was so interested in the continued progress of the American Negroes that he wanted to remove all obstacles in their path” (GSS, *BNM* 46-47). Therefore, he decides to “bring about chromatic democracy” in America (GSS, *BNM* 58). Ironically, Crookman creates a way for African Americans to become physically “white” but the unintended consequence of his erasure of America’s color line is that black newspapers, black businesses, and black history are literally being wiped out. As Kenneth W. Warren characterizes this seismic shift in his *What Was African American Literature?*, the “black cultural past proves to be almost no obstacle to Max and the millions of blacks who avail themselves of the Black-No-More process” (29). Warren further comments on Schuyler’s satirical, subversive method of ridding America of its “color problem,” concluding:

There is something disarmingly simple—one might even say, simplistic—in the novel’s satirical solution to the race problem. The almost childish sentiment that we’d all be better off if everyone were the same color is treated with a devilish seriousness that defies us to take it seriously.... [W]e could do worse than take seriously the book’s claim that race is only skin deep. (31-32)

Stacy Morgan, in “‘The Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science:’ Race Science and Essentialism in George Schuyler’s *Black No More*,” maintains that Crookman’s use of scientific methods to thwart America’s rigid color line and racial discrimination is ironic because it challenges the claims of sociologists, anthropologists

and others who “scientifically” proved white supremacy and black inferiority (338).

Schuyler portrays his Crookman as a man of science to provide a needed “counterpoint to a brand of race science which enjoyed considerable influence and a substantial reading audience in the United States” (S. Morgan 39) and which was expounded upon by men including Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard, E. B. Reuter, and E. A. Hooton.

While Schuyler promoted equal civil rights in other works, he acknowledged that, in the America of the 1920s and 1930s, African Americans who looked “white” could, and did, transgress the color line for a variety of reasons. He writes: “Color—or the absence of it—is...a social asset...since the United States has impressed upon its Negro citizens of industry, commerce, politics, and social life that the real mark of full citizenship is the absence of skin pigment” (GSS, *Racial* 26). In keeping with these thoughts, Schuyler has his Max Disher muse about the possibilities of becoming white:

It looked as though science was to succeed where the Civil War had failed.... Sure, it was taking a chance, but think of getting white in three days! No more jim crow [sic]. No more insults. As a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last...and probably be able to meet the girl from Atlanta. What a vision! (*BNM* 11)

When Max is ready to undergo the treatment, he tellingly realizes that, not just for himself but also for America: “It was either the beginning or the end” (GSS, *BNM* 21). He overcomes his momentary regret and undergoes the process. When he sees his reflection in a mirror, he is “startled, overjoyed. White at last! Gone was the smooth brown complexion. Gone were the slightly full lips and Ethiopian nose. Gone was the nappy hair.... [N]o more discrimination; no more obstacles in his path. He was free! The world

was his oyster and he had the open sesame of a pork-colored skin!” (GSS, *BNM* 22-23). He had “passed” for good. The now white-skinned, light-eyed, straight-haired, Nordic-nosed, and formerly-black man strolls around Manhattan, naïvely thinking that all of his—and American society’s—racial woes will soon be over. All possibilities now await him—good employment, equal housing, financial success, and love. He sells his story to a New York paper but becomes angry at the white female reporter’s questions, asking himself, in Schuyler’s irrepressibly ironic style, why “he had undergone the tortures of Doc Crookman’s devilish machine in order to escape the conspicuousness of a dark skin and now he was being made conspicuous because he had once had a dark skin!” (GSS, *BNM* 27). Max has a few more regrets about the change when he takes the white newspaperwoman to a cabaret where he could not have gone when he was still black:

Despite his happiness Max found it pretty dull. There was something lacking in these ofay places of amusement or else there was something present that one didn’t find in the black-and-tan resorts in Harlem. The joy and abandon here was obviously forced.... It was all so strained and quite unlike anything to which he had been accustomed. The Negroes, it seemed to him, were much gayer, enjoyed themselves more deeply.... He felt a momentary pang of mingled disgust, disillusionment and nostalgia. (GSS, *BNM* 28-29)

On his way to Atlanta to pursue Helen, Max has another fleeting regret about leaving his life as a black man behind, musing: “Momentarily he felt a disposition to stay among them, to share again their troubles.... But then, he suddenly realized with just a tiny trace of remorse that the past was forever gone.... He was white now” (GSS, *BNM* 35). Despite his claims of freedom and future success, all based on his new-found whiteness,



this seeming stand-in for the author--and also all black Americans in 1931-- asks: "Could one never escape the plagued race problem?" (GSS, *BNM* 27).

Shedding not only his black skin but also his name, Max Disher becomes Matthew Fisher and heads south. Fellow African Americans are flocking to Crookman's sanitariums, following in the footsteps of the one-half million African Americans in their Great Migration of the early twentieth century. But this time, the masses head north to erase their racial identification, not just to seek a better life. Madame Blandish, the black owner of a hair-straightening salon, realizes that "only a few hundred Negroes had so far vanished from their wonted haunts, but it was known that thousands, tens of thousands, yes, millions would follow them" and that black businesses, like hair-straightening salons and local banks, would soon fail (GSS, *BNM* 55). Former blacks desert their towns and farms and leave behind the sense of community that had sustained them; they flee Harlem for parts of New York City previously denied to them and cash in their life savings so they can afford the process. Newly-created whites abandon their churches, their community organizations, and their civil rights activism. With no apparent social or legal barriers, former non-whites marry whites. Southern businesses no longer have a source of cheap labor and poor white Southerners are denied a pool of second-class citizens to debase and degrade. Political, class, racial, and socio-economic alliances are re-aligned and presidential elections are swayed.

Total mayhem reigns in this new race-free America. Crookman and his partners instantly become wealthy, opening more and more sanitariums to meet demand. Hospitals must also be built to which babies who are born black can be whisked away to undergo the process so no taint of color attaches to them--or their parents—or reveals to the

world that at least one of the parents has even one drop of African heritage. With “white” women--whether truly or newly white--giving birth to black babies, “the prevalence of sexual promiscuity was brought home to the thinking people of America.... The entire nation became alarmed.... The real white people were panic-stricken.... There was no way, apparently, of telling a real Caucasian from an imitation one” (GSS, *BNM* 122).

Subversion of the racial *status quo* through passing is thus fully realized.

Imagine, Schuyler posits, an America not built and founded upon race. As his tale unfolds, the very type of society that E. B. Reuter warned against is being created and newspaper articles and editorials scream in protest against the whitening of black Americans. The Tallahassee *Announcer* is prompted to lament:

While it is the right of every citizen to do what he wants to with his money, the white people of the United States cannot remain indifferent to this discovery and its horrible potentialities. Hundreds of Negroes with newly-acquired white skins have already entered white society and thousands will follow them. The black race from one end of the country to the other has in two short weeks gone completely crazy over the prospect of getting white. Day by day we see the color line which we have so laboriously established being rapidly destroyed. There would not be so much cause for alarm in this, were it not for the fact that this vitiligo<sup>19</sup> is not hereditary... THE OFFSPRING OF THESE WHITENED NEGROES WILL BE NEGROES! This means that your daughter, having married a supposed white man, may find herself with a black baby! Will the proud white men of the Southland so far forget their traditions as to remain idle while this devilish work is going on? (GSS, *BNM* 41)

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<sup>19</sup> Vitiligo is a disease in which smooth, white, pigmentless patches form on the skin.

The fictive *Announcer* does not entertain the possibility that “your daughter,” or even that both of the parents, have the contributory, tainted black blood nor does it acknowledge the fact that the institutionalized rape of black women by white slave-owners and consensual miscegenation had created mixed-race Americans centuries before Crookman’s discovery.

Several months following his post-transformation move to Atlanta, Max reads an advertisement written by the Reverend Henry Givens, the Imperial Grand Wizard of the Knights of Nordica. Givens is asking for “10,000 Atlanta White Men and Women to Join in the Fight for White Race Integrity.... The racial integrity of the Caucasian Race is being threatened by the activities of a scientific black Beelzebub in New York. Let us Unite Now Before it is TOO LATE!” (GSS, *BNM* 60). The Reverend is described as an “ignorant ex-evangelist, who had come originally from the hilly country” who, ironically, feels he is allowed to steal from the Knight’s treasury (GSS, *BNM* 62). His followers are uneducated, poor, and ignorant whites who desperately need to retain their self-appointed superiority over blacks. Max also discovers that his bigoted, blond love interest is Helen Givens, the Imperial Wizard’s daughter.

Max, ever the trickster, presents himself as being an anthropologist from New York who is outraged by Black-No-More’s assault on racial integrity. He is, he asserts indignantly and paradoxically, someone who is intimately “aware, of course, of the extent of the activities of this Negro Crookman” (GSS, *BNM* 64). Due to his rhetorical and flimflamming skills, Max Disher/Matthew Fisher quickly, and outrageously, becomes the spokesperson for this Ku Klux Klan-like organization. He finds himself preaching and promoting hatred of blacks and of the newly-white-formerly-black Americans. To further his schemes and infiltrate the Knights for his own purposes, Max is forced to laugh

“cynically when some coarse, ignorant white man voiced his opinion concerning the inferior mentality and morality of the Negroes” (GSS, *BNM* 57), even though he knows he is smarter, more talented, and more capable than they. Bunny Brown, his longtime friend from Harlem who has now also undergone the process, joins him. Max/Matthew, the rising star of the anti-black movement and a persuasive showman, and his friend embark on a crusade to hoodwink the Knights, avenge the treatment of their race, and become rich and powerful in the process. Matthew becomes the Grand Exalted Giraw of the Knights of Nordica, given the title by Givens because he realizes that “the longer and sillier a title, the better the yaps like it” (GSS, *BNM* 127). He marries Helen within a year of being introduced to her in the guise of a white scientist and makes his first of many million dollars by fleecing the Knights. His one regret is that Helen is a woman who is “so much more ignorant than she was beautiful” (GSS, *BNM* 110).

The racial transformation of America becomes virtually complete within two years. Only those blacks in “prisons, orphan asylums, insane asylums, homes for the aged, houses of correction” and the like have not been whitened (GSS, *BNM* 140). But a small number of blacks choose not to undergo the process and pass, including Dr. Crookman himself and those “mulatto babies whose mothers, charmed by the beautiful color of their offspring, had defied convention and not turned them white” (GSS, *BNM* 140). In Schuyler’s fictional America, white mothers are free to love their non-white babies and are free to cross racial and societal boundary lines. The author has created a world in which the satirical thoughts he expresses in his 1937 “Dilemma of the American Negro: The Case for Segregation” are realized:

Legal miscegenation would make for greater virility of American stock, increase

the national I.Q. thereby, and be the final blow to colorphobia. A bit of natural sun-tan would be a boon to the complexion of Homo Americans, and a bit of the tar brush would, as elsewhere, raise the standard of American pulchritude, a consummation devoutly to be wished. (GSS, "Dilemma" 19)

His *Land of the Free, 1933-1940* is the America of which Schuyler dreamed—one where race did not matter, where blacks and whites could live without acrimony and thrive together, and where blacks were free and accepted as equals. But mixed into the levity is Schuyler's condemnation of the systemic mistreatment of black Americans. The South of Schuyler's novel is, and rightfully so in the minds of many, being punished politically, economically, and socially for the many historical sins it had committed and for the many wrongs it was continuing to commit through its Jim Crow laws. Schuyler reveals the sad realities of America's racist past—and present—writing: "When one-third of the population of the erst-while Confederacy had consisted of the much-maligned Sons of Ham, the blacks had really been of economic, social and psychological value to the section" (*BNM* 141). The satirist continues to explain that "not only had they done the dirty work and laid the foundation of its wealth, but they had served as a convenient red herring for the upper classes when the white proletariat grew restive under exploitation" (GSS, *BNM* 141). "The South had always been identified with the Negro," Schuyler further explains, "and its most pleasant memories treasured in song and story, were built around this pariah class" (*BNM* 141), as evidenced in the writings of men including Joel Chandler Harris who yearned for a return to the old plantation days.

Schuyler weaves further ironies and paradoxes into his *Black No More*. Naturally-born whites, or those who think they are one-hundred per cent white, begin

tanning themselves because the skins of potion-created whites are actually lighter than theirs. Chemically-created whites resort to applying lotions so that their skins are less white once more. Both races want dark skins to prove whiteness—*reductio ad absurdum* realized!

Across the country, birth and marriage records are scoured for proof of authentic and “true” whiteness, just as laws in states including Virginia demanded. In Schuyler’s passing narrative, two leading Southerners enter into the fray. Arthur Snobbcraft is described as an “F. F. V. and a man suspiciously swarthy for an Anglo-Saxon” (GSS, *BNM* 166). He is the president of the Anglo-Saxon Association and has devoted himself to passing racial integrity laws in his state. Faced with the unbelievable prospect of virtually every African American subversively passing as white, Snobbcraft aligns himself with Dr. Samuel Buggerie, a genealogical statistician who is “highly respected among members of his profession,” Schuyler contemptuously pens, and “who has written such works as *The Fluctuation of the Sizes of Left Feet among the Assyrians during the Ninth Century before Christ*” (*BNM* 169). Snobbcraft, as proud of his ancestry as the moneyed “aristocrats” of Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, is informed by Buggerie that “one of your maternal ancestors was the offspring of an English serving maid and a black slave” and that his claim to being related to Pocahontas is tainted by findings that “there hasn’t been an Indian unmixed with Negro on the Atlantic coastal plain for over a century and a half” (Mott 97; GSS, *BNM* 198, 199). Buggerie’s grand project has backfired and actually proven that most “whites”—including himself and Snobbcraft—actually have “black” blood, further turning upside down the ideal of racial superiority based on color and notions of true and pure Caucasian racial integrity.

Although there is abundant wordplay and satire in most of *Black No More*, the tone of Schuyler's work turns deadly serious. Headlines scream "DEMOCRATIC LEADERS PROVED OF NEGRO INTENT" and Buggerie and Snobbcraft flee from an angry mob (Schuyler, *BNM* 210). Their escape plane crash-lands in Happy Hill, Mississippi, a town that is, Schuyler-style, anything but emblematic of its name. Thinking it best to blend in with the local populace, and not realizing that all non-whites fled from the community long ago due to the townspeople's severe mistreatment and rampant racism, the two on-the-lam ideologues apply black shoe polish to their faces in a "black humor" parody of minstrelsy. The townspeople of Happy Hill have long been dedicated white supremacists but are being inspired to new heights by their philandering preacher. He is the Reverend McPhule, a self-anointed and sinful minister who is flagrantly Christian when it suits him and who feels his mission on earth will be fulfilled "if the Lord would only send a nigger for his congregation to lynch!" (GSS, *BNM* 233). Into the clutches of McPhule and his fellow Negrophobes come the two black-faced politicians. At first, the two are able to convince the locals not to lynch them by rubbing off the shoe polish and, at least physically, proving their whiteness. But one of the townspeople waves a newspaper containing the article identifying Buggerie and Snobbcraft as men with the dreaded taint of black blood in their veins. The prayers of McPhule and the townspeople are answered. The good, God-fearing Christian (albeit Negro-hating) locals and their leader tear Buggerie and Snobbcraft from limb to limb and proceed, with great relish and enjoyment, to hang and burn them.

In Schuyler's tale, two chemically-created whites in the crowd feel compelled to join in the "festivities" lest they suffer a similar fate. By doing so, they are restored "to

favor and banished any suspicion that they might not be one-hundred-per-cent Americans” (GSS, *BNM* 244). This scene depicts what Sonnet H. Retman deems the “final horror of whiteness” in his 2008 analysis entitled “*Black No More: George Schuyler and Racial Capitalism*” (1458). Retman explains that when the whitened blacks feel compelled to participate in the lynching, the “victims and victimizers become one and the same. In this impossible position, as laughter fades, we confront the horror of whiteness and the rituals and technologies of violence out of which it is constituted” (1458). Other critics take a broader view of this part of the novel. In Shanir Tahir Mott’s dissertation *Masquerade Narratives: Writing Race and Imagining Democracy in American Literature, 1930-1955*, the author aptly notes:

In writing the leaders of the Anglo-Saxon association as the epitome of whiteness, white men with black ancestry, white men who look black, and then, white men legally seen as Negro, Schuyler demonstrates the arbitrary way in which the state has codified race and the arbitrary way in which people believe in and enforce myths of racial purity. (93)

The grand satirist of the Harlem Renaissance has subversively demonstrated the illogic of trying to define and protect white racial purity but has doubled the novel’s transgressiveness by employing his trademark deconstructive and iconoclastic wit.

The writings of diverse contemporary authors are eerily similar to Schuyler’s lynching scene in *Black No More*, grounding his fictional scene in sad and horrifying reality. Thomas Kirksey’s 1926 essay seems to be describing Snobbcraft and Buggerie when he asks: “Who can tell but that some of the most venomous Negro-Phobists have been impelled to preach the doctrines of race hatred and race prejudice against the Negro



because of their knowledge of that same Negro blood coursing through their veins... [and] direct it upon some object outside of oneself?" (381). Walter White, intentionally passing to investigate lynching for the NAACP, once narrowly escaped death while doing so. In Arkansas, local whites become aware of a "black" man passing as "white." As White boarded a train to escape, the conductor asks why he is leaving "just when the fun is going to start.... There's a damned yellow nigger down here passing for white and the boys are going to get him.... When they get through with him he won't pass for white no more" (White, *Man* 51).

Schuyler, in a novel that is variously witty, funny, and outlandish, is on a savage attack. His satire is no longer amusing, although it remains wholly subversive. He does not shy away from describing the relish with which some whites enjoyed torturing, mutilating, and killing black Americans. Thousands of African Americans were killed in this manner and, although lynchings slowly began to decrease during the 1900s, those that were committed became more racially-motivated and served as a form of entertainment for some of the white perpetrators and their communities (Painter 180-81). Schuyler depicts this gruesome reality and conflates being "one-hundred-per-cent American" with white people who feel it is their right to inflict grievous harm and kill innocent people solely because their skin color differs. In *Black No More*, Schuyler shows the truly monstrous nature of the crime as he juxtaposes images of burning, mutilated flesh with those of a sin-filled minister, politicians with shoe polish on their faces, and residents of a town (mis)named Happy Hill. He has yet again laid bare the ridiculousness of America's "race problem." Biographer Ferguson discusses this wrenching scene, concluding about Schuyler's deceptive perceptiveness: "[B]y focusing more sharply on the stupidity of the

mob than on its power and on the complicity of whites and blacks in the perpetuation of racial violence, the Happy Hill episode...makes a complicating and controversial commentary on the discourse of lynching.... even as it departs from the satire's prevailing jovial mood" (243).

But as this passing novel continues, its subversive, transgressive attack on race and racial constructions proceeds apace. Dr. Crookman has discovered that the "new Caucasians were from two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians" and that, in actuality, the "old Caucasians had never really been white but rather were a pale pink shading down to a sand color and a red.... To a society that had been taught to venerate whiteness for over three hundred years, this announcement was rather staggering" (GSS, *BNM* 245). "What was the world coming to," Schuyler again satirically queries, "if the blacks were whiter than the whites?" (*BNM* 245).

Schuyler ends his work in a kinder, gentler, and more hopeful vein. Max and Helen's child is born black, but because Buggerie's racial tests have revealed that Helen and her father Wizard Givens are not pure whites themselves, she blames herself rather than Max. He then tells his wife about his true racial heritage but, unexpectedly, Helen feels:

...a wave of relief go over her. There was no feeling of revulsion at the thought that her husband was a Negro. There once would have been but that was seemingly centuries ago when she had been unaware of her remoter Negro ancestry. She felt proud of her Matthew. She loved him more than ever. They had money and a beautiful, brown baby. What more did they need? To hell with the world! To hell with society! Compared to what she possessed, thought Helen, all talk of

race and color was damned foolishness. (GSS, *BNM* 214)

Her father, the former Imperial Grand Wizard of the Knights of Nordica, then resignedly sighs: “I guess we’re all niggers now” (GSS, *BNM* 214).

The family moves to Europe and the story ends with Dr. Crookman—now the United States Surgeon General—smiling as he sees a newspaper photograph of a “happy crowd of Americans...on the sands of Cannes.... he recognized...Bunny Brown and his real Negro wife, former Imperial Grand Wizard and Mrs. Givens, and Matthew and Helen Fisher. All of them, he noticed, were quite as dusky as little Matthew Crookman Fisher who played in a sandpile at their feet” (GSS, *BNM* 250). Whiteness has become a rarity in this fictional world, a world that has—for the most part, at least—been de-racialized. Whether this is Schuyler’s last satiric jab or a true victory over America’s problem with the color line is something each reader must decide for him/herself. But, out of the chaos that Schuyler has created in *Black No More* has come a true and heartfelt reconciliation of the races. Harmony, assimilation, and integration have replaced racial discord. Blacks and whites are—as suddenly and miraculously as the development of Dr. Crookman’s formula--able to live together and the “problem of the color line” is *No More*.

In his novel, Schuyler erases what Jason Haslam refers to as the “non-privilege of blackness” in his “‘The Open Sesame of a Pork Colored Skin:’ Whiteness and Privilege in *Black No More*” (22). George Schuyler’s *Black No More* proposes a solution that, while hypothetical and fantastical, mirrors what the author wanted to happen in American society. The author--both in *Black No More* and in an essay he wrote five years before the publication of the novel—promotes the idea of an America in which race relations have improved so that blacks are both free and free to flourish. He writes in “The Negro-Art

Hokum:” “No one knows what the future holds, but this much is certain: that whatever happens to America will profoundly influence interracial relations” (GSS 212). His novel’s ending resembles the future that Alain Locke envisioned in his own “Enter the New Negro,” an essay in which this author writes:

No one who...faces the situation with its substantial accomplishment or views the new scene with its still more abundant promise can be entirely without hope. And certainly, if in our lifetime the Negro should not be able to celebrate his full initiation into American democracy, he can at least...celebrate the attainment of a significant and satisfying new phase of development. (6)

Despite Locke’s hopefulness, for far too many African Americans, their “initiation into American democracy” has still not been fully realized.

In his novel, Schuyler playfully intertwines the “real and the absurd, the plausible and the possible” (Peplow, “George” 243). *Black No More* blurs lines between fantasy--as its premise is a fictional process that allows blacks to pass as whites--and reality, where Jim Crow laws legalized segregation and discrimination against African Americans and blacks were lynched without cause. And, if it can be said that truth is stranger than fiction, Schuyler’s satirically-imagined world was touted as an actual possibility two decades later by Walter White in a 1949 *Look Magazine* article entitled “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?” White informs his readers that scientists have actually discovered a “chemical that can change the color of skin from black to white. If completely perfected and widely used, this chemical could hit the structure of society with the impact of an atomic bomb. It carries implications of tremendous social changes” (“Has” 94). White then invites the magazine’s readers, just as Schuyler does in *Black No More*, to “consider

what would happen if a means of racial transformation is made available at reasonable cost. The racial, social, economic, and political consequences would be tremendous” (“Has” 95). Chaos would be a more likely result, as George Schuyler proposes in his passing novel.

Similarly, a Japanese scientist claimed, in an article published in *The Pittsburgh Courier* in 1929, that he was able to “change a Negro into a white man” (“Racial” 3). The reporter announces that Dr. Yusaburg Noguchi invented a process aimed at changing the characteristics of the Japanese populace that uses “sun rays, ultra-violet rays, special diets and glandular treatments” to achieve this radical transformation (“Racial” 3). The scientist crows that, although his processes will take several generations to be totally effective, “given time, I could change the Japanese into a race of tall blue-eyed blonds” (“Racial” 3), echoing thoughts expressed by Walter White in his *Life Magazine* article and by Schuyler in his comedic fantasy *Black No More*. The outcomes—whether scientific, fictional, or fantastical--would be the erasure of color and the lines that delineate and distinguish whites from others.

While Schuyler’s most outrageous caricatures in the novel are of stereotypical whites, he also lampoons famous African Americans from the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement. Madam C. J. Walker, born Sarah Breedlove and the first female self-made American millionaire who produced hair and cosmetic products for African American women, becomes Mrs. Sari Blandine/Mme. Sisseretta Blandish in *Black No More*. Santop Licorice is the stand-in for (the very dark-complected) Marcus Garvey, the promoter of racial pride who urged blacks to return to Africa and whom Schuyler disparagingly describes in his autobiography as a “short, smooth, black, pig-eyed,

corpulent West Indian from Jamaica who had come to the United States a few years before panting like so many Negroes before him to solve the color problem” (*Black and Conservative* 120). Schuyler's Dr. Napoleon Wellington Jackson is James Weldon Johnson while Walter White becomes Walter Williams. Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard is the author's fictionalized W. E. B. Du Bois.

Schuyler reserves his most acerbic characterizations, however, for whites. In *Black No More*, Caucasians and Nordics are not only misguided but also not particularly bright. The entire Givens family, and most especially Helen, are uneducated and unintelligent while blacks like Max and Bunny are sly tricksters in the Br'er Rabbit tradition. Through his use of the passing genre, the novelist shows blacks as equal, and often superior, to whites, adding to the novel's subversive themes. These African American hucksters display Schuyler's feelings that blacks are “shrewd, calculating, diplomatic, patient and a master of Nordic psychology” (“Negro Looks” 220). For centuries, black Americans had to figure out how to survive in a white-dominated society; consequently, they came to understand whites, in Schuyler's opinion, far better than whites could or would ever know blacks. In another of his essays--“Our White Folks”--Schuyler counters the perceptions of the self-anointed superior class when he contends that “the majority of Nordics seem to believe that all Negroes look upon them as some sort of demigods—as paragons of intelligence, efficiency, refinement, and morality” (386). The characters of Max/Matthew, Bunny, and Crookman subversively show the extent to which blacks do not believe they are inferior to these self-appointed “paragons.” It is whites who are the misguided and the uninformed, holds Schuyler; it is they who have been fooled into believing that they are superior simply because their skins are whiter. “To judge an

individual solely on the basis of his skin color and hair texture is so obviously nonsensical,” Schuyler further explains in “Our White Folks,” that blacks “cannot help classing the bulk of Nordics with the inmates of an insane asylum. He views with mingled amusement and resentment the stupid reactions of white folks to a black skin” (388).

Schuyler’s satirical tone and wit are found not only in *Black No More* but also throughout his writings. He consistently uses them as a method of attacking racial inequality and notions of white superiority. In his 1929 “Our Greatest Gift to America,” the author iconoclastically concludes:

It is not surprising, then, that democracy has worked better in this country than elsewhere. This belief in the equality of all white folks—making skin color the gauge of worth and the measure of citizenship rights—has caused the lowest to strive to become among the highest.... [B]y substituting a color caste system that roused the hope and pride of teeming millions of ofays—this indeed is a gift of which we [black Americans] can well be proud. (411-12)

Schuyler did not want to be white but he did not want his darker skin to matter. He regularly attacked the use of hair straighteners and skin lighteners by black Americans because he felt African Americans had no need to artificially mimic the other race. Ironically, however, his *Black No More* is a novel of passing in which millions of African Americans choose to not only “pass” as white but to become so permanently.

A number of real-life black Americans who did not bear the physical traits of African heritage chose to pass as whites before, during, and after Schuyler’s era. A true-life contemporary of his wrote about his personal passing experience in a 1932 article entitled “I Pass for White.” The piece’s anonymous author introduces his work with

words that echo those of the fictional Max Disher: “My reason for passing for white is because I found it exceedingly hard to remain Colored. I was looked upon with suspicion everywhere I went” (14). This “Negro” writer decides to “pass” for white because whites do not see him as an individual when he identifies himself as “black.” He wants a better job and better housing. And, once he passes, he dates Caucasian women. The narrator sadly concludes, however, that “this business of passing for white has caused me untold suffering [even though] the hard job of remaining Colored has often brought tears to my eyes” (14).

“I Pass for White” is a brief account of one man’s experiences on the white side of the color line. The article’s author thought he would be wildly successful once he passed for white, just as *Black No More*’s Max Disher does, but he is disappointed to find that there is no easy road to prosperity, even when one is a white man. He longs for the friendship of African Americans and writes: “And now I am a white man, I have not found any royal road to success. Instead I have suffered many disappointments, many heartaches, for I thought, as many of my race think, that being white solves all problems” (“I Pass” 14). Schuyler—through his main character—utters similar feelings. Max relishes the freedoms he acquires through his color change but also laments the loss of contact with a more vibrant black community and realizes that “life as a white man [was not] the rosy existence he had anticipated” (GSS, *BNM* 58).

Similar tales of real-life passings are related and documented throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Elmer A. Carter, in a 1926 article entitled “Crossing Over,” writes that the Great Migration of black Americans from the South to the North led to “nothing less than the crossing over of thousands of Negroes from their own race to the dominant white race;



it is the deliberate annihilation of ethnic affiliation” (376). Carter continues, stating that the “color line, invisible but ever present, is a constant reminder of his inferior status.... To escape, then, the color line, countless Negroes...have voluntarily exiled themselves from the Negro race and cast their lot with the irreproachable Nordic Blond” (376). Like Schuyler, White, and Noguchi, the answer he offers is science and its promise of straight hair bringing an end to discrimination based on physical characteristics.

Caleb Johnson, in an article published the same year as Schuyler’s *Black No More*, asserts in his “Crossing the Color Line:” “Crossing the color line is so common an occurrence that the Negroes have their own well-understood word for it. They call it ‘passing’” and, that in New York City, “it is a matter of common repute among the colored folks of Harlem that more than ten thousand of their number have ‘passed,’ and are now accepted as white in their new relations, many of them married to white folks, all unsuspected” (526). Due to the high number of racial passings, Caleb Johnson even claims that, “it seems not inconceivable that the American Negro will eventually vanish, completely absorbed into the general body of mixed bloods of all races which will constitute the American people of the future” (“Crossing” 543).

Although attributed to Anonymous, the wording, syntax, and subject matter of a 1925 article entitled “White, but Black: A Document on the Race Problem” point to Walter White as being its author. The unnamed author relates what happened to him during a train trip through Georgia. At the depot, a fellow “white” traveler ironically points out light-complexioned “blacks” to the fellow traveler, mistakenly believing he is “white” like him. “Mister, I wish you’d look at them yaller niggers out there.... They can’t fool me.... I don’t care how white a nigger gets to be, I can tell ‘em every time” (Anonymous 494).

After the reporter asks how the other can do so when he himself had seen “a number of colored people as white as you or I and didn’t know they were negroes until I was told,” his companion answers that “I can tell ‘em by their hair, their eyes, their skin—oh, in lots of ways.... If you had a single drop of nigger blood in you,” he ironically tells the writer as he gestures towards White’s fingernails, “you’d have a dark-blue circle right there”

(Anonymous 494). Time after time, decade after decade, the Walter White stand-in describes incidents in which people unsuspectingly assume that he is “white” and share their thoughts on race and America’s racial problems with him. He asks: “How many of my readers know the number of those who, like myself, are white to all outward appearance, but have some negro blood? Many, very many, have ‘passed over’ .... It is the easiest thing imaginable to ‘get by’ in places like New York” (Anonymous 496, 498).

When this blue-eyed, blond-haired, white-complected man later admits to an Englishman that he is classified as “Negro” in America, the response is: “What damned fools Americans must be on the Race question” (Anonymous 499). Damned fools, just as Mark Twain wrote.

In an article formally attributed to him, Walter White writes in a similar vein about other instances in which he passed as white. “One other time the possession of a light skin and blue eyes (although I consider myself a colored man) almost cost me my life when (it was during the Chicago race riots in 1929) a Negro shot at me thinking me to be a white man” (White, “I Investigate” 229). Additionally, when he was accused by a sheriff of breaking laws against passing, another man suggested that White compute the mathematical percentage of “Negro blood” he had because, if “it proved to be less than one-eighth [I could] sue for libel those who had charged me with passing” (White, “I

Investigate” 233).

Although Virginia’s strict racial integrity laws were aimed at preventing passing and interracial relations, Jonathan Peter Spiro, in his book *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*, enumerates their unintended consequences. Aimed at preserving and ensuring white racial purity, the laws allowed the descendants of John Rolfe and Pocahontas to be classified as “whites.” This, Spiro explains, resulted in “people who honestly thought that they were white, whose families had been white for as long as they could remember, whose neighbors testified that they were white, who even had in hand yellowed court decisions certifying that their forebears were white, suddenly discovered,” much like Schuyler’s Snobbcraft, Givens, and Buggerie, that “*they* were not white, hence they could not marry a white person, attend a white school, or ride a white train” (256). Suddenly, Spiro reports, there was an “upsurge in the number of citizens who admitted that while they were only fifteen-sixteenths white, the remaining one-sixteenth was of Indian blood. They claimed full membership in the white race by virtue of ‘the Pocahontas Exception’” (256). Because other laws were passed that limited recognition of marriages conducted outside Virginia where racial laws were not as strict, “respectable citizens were reduced to testifying in public that they were illegitimate” (Spiro 257). Thus, a number of ordinary “white” Virginians chose to pass either as Native American or as the offspring of sinful ancestors in order to remain officially classified as “white” rather than as “black.”

Reverse passing, similar to the contrivances used to stymie the restrictions of racial integrity laws, also existed. One such example is described in Carla Kaplan’s 2013 work about the white women who were part of the Harlem Renaissance and the early civil rights

movement. In her *Miss Anne In Harlem: The White Women of the Black Renaissance*, Kaplan tells the tale of the woman named Lillian E. Wood who wrote *Let My People Go* in 1925. In her work, Wood traced the history of black Americans from the end of the Civil War to the 1920s. As Kaplan notes, while “Wood never claimed to be black,” the historian/civil rights activist did not disabuse anyone of thinking that she was an African American (60-81).

Josephine Lewis Cogdell married George Schuyler in 1928 and this union reveals numerous instances, and a variety of types, of racial passing. Kaplan claims that Josephine “recognized that once she had married the Harlem Renaissance author and given birth to Philippa [their daughter], that she did not ‘belong’ anywhere and ceased, in an important sense to be white” (90). She was a woman who had changed, in her own words, from being a “thoroughgoing Negrophobe” to a “Negrophile” (qtd. in Kaplan 99) and had, in essence, passed into another life upon her marriage to a leading African American author. Josephine chose to list her “color” on their marriage license as “Colored, thus, passing as black” (Kaplan 132; Kennedy, *Interracial* 344). As Carla Kaplan describes the choice by Schuyler’s bride-to-be, “No one questioned her claim to blackness. As an article in *The Negro Digest* notes, ‘[t]his is by far the easiest of all forms of passing, even if the woman happens to be a golden blonde. Few whites, or Negroes either, for that matter, can imagine her saying she is a Negro if she isn’t’” (qtd. in Kaplan 132).

When Schuyler attacked whites in his various writings, and Josephine did not object, she “passed yet again, this time as something other than the white woman her husband was vilifying across the nation,” in Kaplan’s estimation (140). Josephine Schuyler passed in a different manner when she wrote articles as Julia Jerome, a “black

advice columnist” featured in *The Pittsburgh Courier* (Kaplan 153). Ironically, the depiction of the fictional Julia Jerome was of a “Victorian-style silhouette of a stereotypically bushy-haired and large-lipped female profile” (Kaplan 154), thus ensuring the white, Southern woman’s passage into blackness.

Schuyler’s wife appears to have sugar-coated the difficulties she faced as a white woman married to a black man in the early twentieth century. In her 1946 article “An Interracial Marriage,” she insists that she and George “have lived like any other middle-class American couple” and that she has “made many friends among my colored neighbors” in Harlem (J. Schuyler, “Interracial” 273, 275). In general, she claims, her “life in Harlem has been most satisfactory,” although she recognized that “Negro-white couples are more closely identified with the colored than with the white group. Negroes, while critical of interracial marriages, are usually more tolerant, and when they learn such couples are sincere and decent, they are friendly and cooperative” (J. Schuyler, “Interracial” 277). Espousing such unions, she claims that “the race barrier...is America’s last frontier and it requires all the courage and determination of a pioneer to enter into an interracial marriage” (J. Schuyler, “Interracial” 277). Despite Josephine’s protestations to the contrary, author Carla Kaplan addresses another difficulty faced by Josephine, concluding:

*Black No More* must have been hurtful to Josephine. It was not only that Helen, the white wife, is tiresome, dull, an intellectual lightweight, and sexually uninspiring. But the novel’s perverse racial logic must have affected her. She [Josephine] had staked everything on the idea that race differences could be breached.... She had ‘consecrated’ her life to a spiritual union with her husband that

would prove that what everyone said about identity was wrong. If race, finally, was a fissure that could never be closed, perhaps she'd been wrong all along.

Perhaps her greatest experiment was a failure. (Kaplan 160)

Historical men and women who looked “white” and could successfully pass as members of the dominant society often assumed that being white would solve all their problems. Both Schuyler and those who wrote about passing in the 1920s and 1930s stress that race, as perceived in America, is more a social and cultural construction than a biological one. The conundrum presented by both Schuyler in *Black No More* and those who crossed the color line is: what is blackness and what is whiteness? Schuyler asks this question in 1937, querying: “Does one become less a ‘Negro’ the closer he approaches the Caucasian appearance? If ‘one drop’ of ‘white’ blood does not make a ‘Negro’ a ‘white’ man, why does ‘one drop’ of ‘black’ blood make a ‘white’ man a ‘Negro’?” (“Dilemma” 54). As Schuyler aptly demonstrates in *Black No More*, the question may be unanswerable. Why, he posits again and again in his writings, do Americans insist upon categorizing people by race and discriminating on this basis? The fact that a white-complected, blue-eyed, straight-haired man may not be considered “white” by white America is addressed by numerous writers, sometimes in a humorous and satirical vein, sometimes in a serious manner. The critical issue subversively raised in Schuyler’s novel and in all real-life passing narratives is that racism and racial identity constructions are not only illogical but also wrong.

Anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, a contemporary of Schuyler’s who had an academic interest in African American life, also questions America’s binary conception of race when he asks in his “The Color Line:” “Why call a man, three-quarters of whose

ancestors were white, a Negro? And yet we find...a law defining the term Caucasian as meaning only such persons who are (presumably) absolutely free from any ancestry other than European?" (204). Herskovits's studies led him to ask what element or set of characteristics determines a person's blackness or whiteness, the same question posed again and again by Schuyler in his essays, his editorials, and in his passing novel *Black No More*.

In addition to discussing *Black No More* as a satirical attack on racism and racial identity, Schuyler's use of the passing genre and its literary value have been debated by critics during both the Harlem Renaissance and modern eras. Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, for example, discusses Schuyler's work as a passing novel in a 2008 article comparing *Black No More* with *The Accidental Asian*, although her main interest lies in issues of class. She concludes that the chemically-induced passing and transgressive crossing of the racial color line in *Black No More* is emblematic of how "racial passing narratives have often been used to reveal the constructed and fragile nature of racial categories and to critique the hypocritical and discriminatory system of US democracy that equated white skin with freedom and citizenship" (171). Joo also concludes that Schuyler's novel is not only a parody of racial constructions and identities but a satire of the passing narrative itself (172). Because virtually all blacks in Schuyler's fictionalized America choose to pass, and not just an individual or two and the color line is all but erased, there is no reason for the passing genre to exist any longer, according to Joo (172).

*Black No More* was generally well-received after its publication and, although numerous critics "were quick to note the satire's literary flaws, none of them challenged Schuyler's *racial* loyalties" (Peplow, "Black" 7). W. E. B. Du Bois did not seem to mind

Schuyler's ribbing. In his review of the novel he urged "persons who wish a few hilarious hours must hasten to buy and read" it ("Browsing" 100). Du Bois notes that the work is a "satire, a rollicking, keen, good-natured criticism of the Negro problem in the United States," while also acknowledging Schuyler's distinctive use of irony and parody ("Browsing" 100). The eminent social philosopher distinguishes *Black No More* from other works of the Harlem Renaissance by reminding his readers:

The object of satire is to point out fault and evil by the very exaggeration of its fun; and the test of its genuineness is its honesty and clearness of object.

American Negroes have written satire before, usually in small skits.... But Mr. Schuyler's satire is frank, straight-forward and universal. It carries not only scathing criticism of Negro leaders but of the mass of Negroes, and then it passes over and slaps the white people just as hard and unflinchingly straight in the face. It is...courageous as well as biting. (Du Bois, "Browsing" 100)

A preview of the book in a January, 1931, edition of the *Norfolk New Journal and Guide* provides Schuyler's reason for writing *Black No More*; the author states the book was written "to portray the high comedy of the American color question" ("George S. Schuyler's 1st" 8). Harlem Renaissance poet Countée Cullen's take on *Black No More* is that its author is the "ablest, in fact, the only Negro satirist, [who] has done a remarkably fine piece of work" (qtd. in "George S. Schuyler's 1st" 8). Floyd J. Calvin, writing for *The Pittsburgh Courier*, describes how the book's original cover underscores Schuyler's satiric theme. He notes that the "word 'Black' is in heavy black type on a gray background, and the words 'No More' are in light gray type on a black background" (F. Calvin, "Plot" 1). Modern critic Michael W. Peplow concurs with Schuyler's personal



assessment that he was the “first...to treat the subject with levity,” agreeing that the novel was “the first book length satire to be written by a black author in the United States” (Schuyler, *Black and Conservative* 170; Peplow, “George” 242). Rudolph Fisher does not stress *Black No More*’s satire and subversiveness but does recognize that “probably no one, Mr. Schuyler least of all, will insist that this is really a novel. It is at heart a popularized critique of race prejudice, which it endeavors to reduce to the absurd.... It is without detachment, without sympathy, without restraint” but is also one “without clear characterization, and without dialogue that traces crisp portraits. The rich fictional possibilities are all subordinated...to implicit exposition, argumentation, and Schuyleric opinion” (“Novel” J5). But fellow author Alain Locke, despite being one of the African American authors lampooned in Schuyler’s novel, heartily endorses the work, writing that “it sinks in places to the level of farce and burlesque, and yet succeeds on the whole, in evidence of the novelty and the potential power of the satirical attack on the race problem in fiction. I believe that one of the great new veins of Negro fiction has been opened by this book” (“We Turn” 43).

Other reviews and critiques were not so laudatory. Walter White praises Schuyler for his “gift of satire” but deems *Black No More* “difficult of classification” and regrets that its author “could not more successfully achieve the etched-in-acid portraiture” (“Negro” 448). Dorothy Van Doren, writing in *The Nation*, declares that Schuyler has “written white satire. He has spared neither race in his sharp criticism and neither is likely to love him for it. His book has many faults; the most glaring being its vulgarity” (219). The reviewer in *The New Republic* complains that “Mr. Schuyler’s satire is racy and amusing in a sophomoric way; it would be more amusing if he had not achieved his cynicism quite so

cheaply—by an unfunny and indiscriminate lampooning of the leaders of his race” (“Fiction” 845). Josephine Schuyler responded to Van Doren’s negative review of her husband’s novel, opining that the “sooner the white liberal accepts the Negro for what he is, just a dark-skinned, more exploited American, and not for a simple, primitive, exotic being to be alternately pitied and patronized, the sooner the American color problem will be solved” (“Black” 382). Critic Leonard Ehrlach admits that he “formed a white man’s estimate of the work,” but also feels compelled to “report upon its venomous spirit, its artistic negligibility, the coarse bludgeoning substance” (799). Periodicals like *Bookman* and *The Nation* complained about the novel’s “crudities” and “vulgarity” while *The New York World* and *Survey* announced that “subtlety is not in Schuyler’s bag of tricks” and that the “tale is put together in slovenly fashion” (qtd. in Peplow, “George” 242).

The critics—whether discussing the author’s style or concentrating on its content—were divided, some praising it while others panned it. The novel, and its estimation, remains controversial to this day. While *Black No More* is, admittedly, not great literature nor does Schuyler’s rhetoric match favorably to that of Locke, McKay, Hughes, and Hurston, it does achieve the author’s goals. The novel reflects Schuyler’s belief that “the primary step in bettering race relations and lessening color prejudice is to re-condition the white masses” (*Black and Conservative* 259). *Black No More*’s author recognizes that the status of black Americans would only change if, and when, white Americans were convinced of the need to do so. His job was to lessen their collective ignorance and misunderstanding. He campaigned to “stress the idea that national unity is dependent upon national brotherhood; that real democracy is impossible without fraternity; that liberty cannot be realized without equality of opportunity and freedom of choice”

through the written word and the acid of his pen (*Black and Conservative* 259).

Schuyler's subversive satire *Black No More*--like those written by contemporaries including Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, Carl Van Vechten, and Langston Hughes—stands in stark contrast to myriad other passing novels written during the Harlem Renaissance period. Amritjit Singh suggests that the “more important reason for the preponderance of the theme among Harlem Renaissance novelists has to be their feeling that its treatment would give them the leverage to say things that, to them, seemed important to say at that particular juncture in the history of American race relations” (*Novels* 93). Josephine Schuyler, writing under the pseudonym of Heba Jannath, addresses the wealth of passing novels being written, noting that “passing from one group to another is now of such common occurrence that it has lately become the subject of much popular fiction. Within the last few years *Plum Bun*, *Passing*, *Flight*...[and] *Gulf Stream*...have been published” (61). Case studies, scientific investigations, and personal reports prove that Josephine Schuyler's assessment of passing is correct.

Walter White's 1926 venture into the passing genre, in his novel *Flight*, was eviscerated by Wallace Thurman in this satirist's typically acerbic fashion; he deems White's work both pedestrian and uninspiring:

When a Negro writes with passion and understanding of the peculiar problems and vicissitudes of his own race, he is likely to produce a book which commands attention and respect.... But the present volume does not fall in that class. Mr. White seems to feel that he can handle his people from the same angle that one would use in treating a group of whites, and yet create a special interest by assuring us from time to time that they are colored—and by introducing the dramatic episode

of Negro persecution. He fails.... [I]t is neither a very consistent nor a very stirring story.... [I]t is entirely disappointing. ("Notes" 190-91)

White's heroine is Mimi Dasquin, daughter of a light-complexioned New Orleans family who moves to Atlanta. When racial tensions rise in Atlanta one summer, Mimi asks her father, echoing the thoughts of many African Americans: "After all, what real difference does it make? A difference in colour, different hair, different features, but what do these matter in the long run? Why can't people be just people and stop all this meanness?" (White, *Flight* 69). The father and daughter witness a white mob killing an innocent black man and brutally beating others. They, like the real-life Walter White, escape the violence because the mob mistakes them for white. His fictional heroine "dated...her consciousness of being colored" on the day she witnessed the sad spectacle and she concludes that for her, now, the "old order had passed, she was now definitely a race set apart" (White, *Flight* 77).

Over time, though, Mimi begins to see that not all Caucasian people are bad and that not all African Americans are saints. When she becomes pregnant, she chooses not to marry the baby's father and leaves for Philadelphia to raise the child on her own. This is a subversive choice and a rejection of societal norms and expectations. But the heroine Mimi "would not compromise in her 'soul' even if it meant loss of comfort and social reputation," judges Singh (*Novels* 94). She is unable to support both herself and her child so she places her son in a white orphanage in Baltimore until she can afford to raise him herself. As stories of her child's illegitimacy follow her to her aunt's house in New York, she decides to escape her past, leave Harlem, and pass as white. White's depiction of the young woman's rueful decision mirrors those of real-life persons who chose the same path,

writing:

Thus her passing from the race seemed to Mimi persecution greater than any white people had ever visited upon coloured people—the very intolerance of her own people had driven her from them. And in the deception she would have to practice as one ostensibly white, she felt she was doing a mean and dishonourable [sic] thing. She would do so, she determined, for there was no other course open to her. But in her new life she missed the spontaneity, the ready laughter, the naturalness of her own. (*Flight* 212)

As Mimi works towards her goal of reclaiming her son, White weaves additional passing scenarios into his novel. The owner of the dress shop where Mimi works, for example, pretends to be a French lady but is really an illiterate Irish immigrant while a fellow seamstress is a Jew passing as a Christian. Years pass. Eventually, she meets a wealthy white man and falls in love with him. Mimi decides not to tell her suitor the truth and they marry. But, as in other passing narratives, the prejudices of her husband, like those of Clare Kendry's, are revealed as Mimi's husband rails against “kikes and Catholics and niggers” (White, *Flight* 265).

The protagonist becomes disenchanted with her life as a wealthy white woman and begins traveling to Harlem to re-connect with her roots. Mimi has an epiphany when she and her husband attend Carnegie Hall to hear slave tunes and watch a re-enactment of the enslavement of Africans by white Americans:

To her sitting there in the semi-darkness came a vision of her own people which made her blood run fast. Whatever other faults they might possess, her own people had not been deadened and dehumanized by bitter hatred of their fellow

men. The venom born of oppression practiced upon others weaker than themselves had not entered their souls. These songs were of peace and hope and faith, and in them she felt and knew the peace which so long she had been seeking and which so long had eluded her grasp. (White, *Flight* 299)

Mimi decides to leave her husband and reclaim both her son and her life among her fellow black Americans. Her tale, as depicted in *Flight*, does not veer far from the tragic mulatta formula except that, in true Harlem Renaissance style, the story's heroine chooses to return to the black community and, following decades of denial of her racial heritage, opts to self-identify as "black" by the tale's end. But the story does provide Walter White with an opportunity to expound on racial issues, to prove that "black" Americans are eligible for all the rights of citizenship, and to show that they should not be discriminated against due to the color of their skin or their heritage.

Some contemporary critics were more charitable than Wallace Thurman when they reviewed White's fiction. His friend and colleague Carl Van Vechten deems *Flight* better than White's first novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, and crowns that Mimi is a woman who "does not long permit herself to be hampered by the restrictions of Negro life and she is equally independent in her relations with the two men who play important parts in her career. She refuses to marry the father of her child; later, she leaves her white husband to return to the heart of her own race" ("Triumphant" 3). Van Vechten mistakenly claims that White "approaches the subject from a new and sufficiently sensational point of view" by ignoring the literary output of men including James Weldon Johnson and Charles Chesnutt. As *Flight* contains doctrinaire elements, Van Vechten erroneously concludes the work is an "excellent novel which may [be] read simply as a story without a thought of propaganda"

(“Triumphant” 3). Although finding more of a middle ground, the review penned by Frank Horne in *Opportunity* veers closer to that of Thurman than that of Van Vechten. Horne states that, while there is “much in this book that is commendable,” its author has not “stood up to the conception of his story” and it “lacks the interest...ruggedness and power” of his earlier work (227).

One of the other recently-published passing novels that Josephine Schuyler mentions in her defense of *Black No More* is Marie Stanley’s *Gulf Stream*. While it is subversive because it is affirmative of the African American community and does not depict black Americans as objects of scorn or derision, it hews toward more traditional passing novels by employing the tragic mulatta theme rather than toward the outlandish satires written by Schuyler, Thurman, and Fisher. Stanley, a white woman born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1885, wrote film scripts, poetry, short stories, and children’s tales, according to Caldwell Delaney in the novel’s preface (*Gulf* vii-xiv). Stanley’s only novel was published in 1930. Many of her characters speak in the dialect of people from the section of Mobile known as Sand Town, “the black community Marie Stanley depicted under its own name;” both the naming of the community and the wealthy white woman’s use of black dialect angered numerous readers and local inhabitants, according to Beitler in the novel’s introduction (*Gulf* xxvi).

Stanley’s protagonist is Adele Childers, a young woman who bears no physical markers of African heritage and who speaks in perfect English rather than in local dialect. She is determined to leave her life of squalor and low status. Unbeknownst to Archibald Fenleigh, the young white man with whom she has fallen in love and who rejects her in favor of marrying a white girl, Adele bears a child. Fearing that the child may be “black,”

she has the doctor who assists with the birth, Tom Rogers, take the child away before she sees it.

Adele then travels to an isolated island community named Mille Fleur Island. There the inhabitants are of mixed-race, the offspring of French settlers and slaves. In writing about this community and Adele's love affair, Stanley, to her credit, overtly deals with the topic of miscegenation. On Mille Fleur, Adele becomes the companion of a beautiful courtesan named Bezelia, a woman of whom it "was hard to realize...was not white" and who had occasionally passed as white when she was younger (Stanley 134). The elderly woman is dying of tuberculosis and Adele becomes her caretaker. As Bezelia falls asleep one evening, she declares to Adele: "you are lovely my dear, lovely. White skin...black blood" (Stanley 127).

Bezelia chides a visiting priest when he shows her an image that some of the island's inhabitants had created--a Madonna of color who more closely resembled their non-French ancestors. Her reaction is strongly supportive of civil rights activism and reflects the growing black self-pride of the 1920s and 1930s:

'God made man in His own image.... [W]hen man makes *his* image of God, what is more natural than that he retaliate by making his God a duplicate of himself? You ask those poor blacks to worship a simpering white woman with a rosy child in her arms! No, Father, it's against reason.... It's a spark of pride in race that moves them, and, who knows, may save them yet! 'We are done with your white God...give us a God of our own who will understand us, who is black like ourselves!'' (Stanley 138-39)

But, Bezelia also rages against the locals because "they hadn't the courage or the



pride of the what-not to go the whole way. For she's a Madonna with No-Kink on her hair.... They've made her hallowed hair straight; they lacked the courage for the kink" (Stanley 139). Bezelia is one of the characters through which Stanley addresses not only miscegenation but also white privilege and black pride.

Bezelia dies and Adele is her sole beneficiary. The young woman returns briefly to Sand Town and discovers that her daughter Delia is white in appearance. She re-unites with her child and the two return to Mille Fleur. Eighteen years later, Delia has been educated at a convent and wants to go north, attend a black college, and become a nurse. She "had the beauty of an exotic, unreal kind; crisp and cool, with a touch of fey in her gold-flecked eyes and her pale pointed face.... [H]er bright crinkled hair shone like lustrous copper" (Stanley 252, 261). Despite the fact that Adele wants her daughter to "meet new people—*white* people" (Stanley 267), Delia is scornful of her mother's dreams for her. The daughter proudly supports black civil rights and dislikes the way her mother feels and acts superior to darker and less-educated African Americans. The daughter, unlike her mother, has learned to "not pretend to be white when I am not. They've taught me not to be ashamed.... You say you want me to go away...and look for love.... Do you think any decent white man would marry me unless I fooled him, lied to him?.... I will never do that" (Stanley 269). Adele admits that she thinks Delia's only option is to be a white man's mistress but the young woman proudly announces that she is engaged and that both she and her fiancé will be teaching African American students. Adele slaps Delia when her daughter shows her a picture of her beloved, a man with "heavy black lips...tight hair...[and] a black face" (Stanley 271). The daughter scornfully replies: "You're a white nigger.... I never knew what it was, that secret thing about you I've always hated. A

nigger, a white nigger” and leaves (Stanley 272).

Stanley writes that the Gulf Stream represents the “warm tropic wash, the Black flowing between ‘cold walls’ that are the White” (285). Coincidentally, Fenleigh’s legitimate daughter is drunk one evening and is taken in by Adele. Both he, and Doctor Rogers, arrive in response to Adele’s summonses. Fenleigh has not aged well. He also does not recognize his former lover until the doctor reveals everyone’s secrets, including the fact that Adele “had your black daughter for all that her skin is as white as this girl’s here” (Stanley 295). In realizing that it is Delia that is pure, serene, and polished while the daughter Fenleigh raised is neither virtuous nor accomplished, Tom then announces that “your nigger bastard is the Fenleigh; your white daughter isn’t” (Stanley 296). Adele declares to the doctor: “Delia is a nigger.... She is a nigger and proud of it. After all these years, after all I’ve taught her; she is a nigger, and she’s going to marry one, a black nigger” (Stanley 301). She rejects Tom’s romantic overture and contemplates drowning herself. But, at the last minute, Adele returns to the beach and the novel ends.

*Gulf Stream* sold nearly 4,000 copies, according to Beidler in his introduction to the 1993 edition of the work, hardly the success enjoyed by Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* or Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* but not embarrassingly low either. Charles Puckette declares in his review entitled “Race Drama” that “Miss Stanley writes with power, economy, and delicacy. The closing chapter is as rich in drama as her novel is in color” (84). The reviewer in *The New York Times* is also impressed by the work, declaring that “Miss Stanley is concerned with the problem of racial intermixture and with the problems of the individuals most victimized by it, those Negroes who appear outwardly to be white, or nearly so” (“Sanatorium” 4). Declaring that *Gulf Stream* “deserves to be ranked as a

novel of decided merit,” this article’s author seems to ignore or be oblivious to the pressing needs and difficulties faced by most African Americans during the Jim Crow era when he focuses on the “exceedingly difficult and psychological adjustments demanded of [a passing black]” and that she “feels that the situation of the intelligent, ambitious Negro is not mitigated by any accident of birth. Straight hair and a white skin may enable him to pass, but they can never resolve the fundamental conflicts in his nature, can never subdue or regulate the passionate tropic strain of his race” (“Sanatorium 4, 7). Stanley’s novel, however, is not based on the “fundamental conflicts” in the nature of a “black” American who can pass—if she so chooses—but on the outdated and unrealistic racial assumptions and expectations of Adele. Her daughter Delia is neither an unrestrained exotic nor conflicted regarding her racial identity or loyalty.

Aubrey Bowser’s review in the *New Amsterdam News*, a black newspaper, is decidedly different. He declares that the “Gulf Stream is the current of Negro blood in the veins of a near-white woman.... [and] follows the usual fictional formula for people of mixed blood in this country;” he then asks:

Why do all white authors think that suicide is the only logical end for a mulatto?.... The average mulatto, quadroon or octoroon lives, loves, marries and prospers as much as anyone else, and probably gets more fun out of life than the white person who affects to pity him. He will probably laugh at the statement on the jacket of the book: ‘Adele’s problems are the pitiable problems of every impressionable mulatto.’ The author of this book will have to go a long way before she finds a mulatto woman actually committing suicide because her daughter marries a Negro. Thus the book does not reflect any widespread sentiment or practice among colored

people. (Bowser 2)

Despite portraits bordering on the stereotypical, Bowser does feel that Stanley treats her characters sympathetically and writes well. Virgilia Peterson Ross, writing for *The Outlook*, is entirely dismissive of Stanley's tale. "Between the intertwined lives of Southern whites and blacks," she writes, the "contrasts are striking, decorated, scarcely real. The emotions are poured from the mind of the stage director, shouted by the over-trained actors" (V. Ross 667). Stanley's passing novel, for a variety of reasons, has passed into relative obscurity like so many others written during this era.

Like Stanley and White, Schuyler uses the passing genre in his 1931 novel *Black No More* but he adds contempt and comic ridicule while creating a fictional world in which black Americans are freed by chemical processes from the constraints imposed on them by a dominant white society. Although he contends that "this whole idea of liberty and freedom is an illusion. Man, regardless of his race, color or creed, is imprisoned in a hundred different ways" (qtd. in Ferguson 116-17), Schuyler utilizes the work to critique class warfare, American institutions, racism, the financial exploitation of the masses, and racial strife. But, like the true-life author of "I Pass for White," the black characters in Schuyler's novel realize that being white is not a cure-all, be-all, or end-all. It was 1930s American society--a culture in which racism reigned, in which the Ku Klux Klan was powerful, in which blacks were still being lynched, in which the poor suffered greatly, and in which opportunities for blacks were severely limited--that had to be changed. Changing the color of one's skin—whether by passing or by applying a potion—would not end the discrimination faced by black Americans nor ensure their happiness and prosperity. As W. E. B. Du Bois writes so eloquently in his 1897 essay "Strivings of the Negro

People,” a black American “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of development” (qtd. in Hutchinson, *Harlem* 78). But, there was—and is--no simple solution to this dilemma.

George Samuel Schuyler was an influential author of the Harlem literary scene of the 1920s and 1930s who fought against inequality and championed legal equality for all America’s citizens. He exemplified the “two-ness” of which Du Bois wrote, “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body” (qtd. in Gates 31). Schuyler was bold, brash, and controversial. He ridiculed America’s obsession with race, attacked racial constructions, and showed how racism and a race-based society was illogical. He rejected the idea of racial uplift because he believed that African Americans are inherently the equals of whites. He was an ardent supporter of freedom who challenged assumptions of what it meant to be a black American in an America dominated by whites and who became an arch-conservative and a strident anti-Communist. He wondered if African Americans would, after acquiring the rights they deserved, simply “disappear through amalgamation with the surrounding Caucasians” or if they would “manage to preserve what remains of his racial integrity” (GSS, “Negro” 212). He decried the back-to-Africa movement, expressed opinions that were both the same and antithetically-opposed to those of Alain Locke, married a white Texan, and was praised by W. E. B. Du Bois for his novel of passing, *Black No More*.

Words matter—in constructing an either/or, black/white, one-drop, binary system of race and racial identities in America--as does the progression of time and the evolution of ideologies. The journey of non-whites in white-dominated American society has, in an

historical sense, been from slavery, to Reconstruction, to Jim Crow, to civil rights activism, to Black Power, and to (someday, perhaps) post-racialism. Legally, it has been marked by the Dred Scott Decision, by the Fourteenth Amendment, by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, by *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, and by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And words—used to sing praises of fellow Negroes and to champion the cause of equal rights and equal treatment—were the weapons of choice of the influential men and women of the Harlem Renaissance. With his pen, Schuyler fought against those who believed that “humanity is divided into rigidly definable groups called races; that some are inferior and others superior; that the superior are recognized by lack of pigmentation and certain physical features; that the darker groups have contributed nothing to civilization while the lighter groups have contributed everything” (GSS, “Who” 53).

Throughout his life, Schuyler was individualistically and fervently himself. He developed a witty, irony-laced style that distinguishes him from most of the other authors of the Negro Renaissance. He played with words and names so outrageously that readers continue to laugh out loud at his caricatures of both whites and blacks. He did not pander to fads nor suffer critics lightly. He held fast to his personal opinions, despite withering criticism by his contemporaries. Instead, he praised their literary works in the periodicals he edited. George Schuyler was truly a “New Negro” of the Harlem Renaissance although, perhaps he would have preferred to have been called in a simple, egalitarian, democratic, subversive, and non-racial manner, “George Schuyler, satirist and wordsmith.”

Chapter Four:  
To Main Street: Sinclair Lewis and *Kingsblood Royal*

“I am a Negro American. All my life I have wanted to be an American.”<sup>20</sup>  
“We live here, have lived here, have a right to live here, and mean to live here.”<sup>21</sup>  
“This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”<sup>22</sup>

Sinclair Lewis once stated that “I love America but I don’t like it” (qtd. in Allen 191). These sentiments echo those of fellow satirist Mark Twain when the author of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* iconoclastically and irreverently wrote that the world would have been better off if America had never been discovered at all. America—that “grand republic” held up as the epitome of democracy and equality for all—did not fulfill its promises. Rather than being a land of milk and honey and a land free of the sins of the Europe that spawned it, America became a land filled with bigoted, backwater towns like the Grand Republic crafted by Lewis in his subversive and deconstructive 1947 novel of racial passing--*Kingsblood Royal*.

Lewis (1885-1951) is the best-selling author of over twenty novels including *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927). He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930, the first American to have done so. Not surprisingly, he ruthlessly critiqued not only his fellow United States authors but also those from Europe in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, declaring that “in our contemporary American literature...we...have no standards, no healing communication, no heroes to be followed...no certain ways to be pursued, and no dangerous paths to be avoided” (Lewis, “Nobel” 4).

Throughout his writings, Lewis attacked complacency and hypocrisy, portraying

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<sup>20</sup> Spencer Logan, *A Negro’s Faith in America*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Douglass, qtd. in *African American Quotations*, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” p. 90.

middle class Midwesterners as the archetypal embodiments of these traits, however unknowingly or unconsciously the self-satisfied and self-important men and women portrayed in his novels were guilty of these offenses. Like Twain, Fisher, Schuyler, and Thurman before him, Lewis used juxtaposition, stereotypes, paradoxes, and irony while weaving ridicule, satire, and contempt into his tales. He went even further in *Kingsblood Royal*, when his acid-tipped pen was aimed not only at smugness and a blindness to racial realities but also at bigotry, discrimination, and restrictive covenants. And, like his predecessors, Lewis used the passing genre to attack one-drop rules. The world-renowned author condemns the descendants of those who institutionalized slavery and portrays black Americans as being more honorable than white suburbanites. While critic Daniel R. Brown, in his 1971 article entitled “Lewis’s Satire: A Negative Emphasis,” may contend that “what his indignant critics did not see or did not admit was that Lewis not only loved the sinners despite their sins, but actually, much of the time, loved the sins as well,” his *Kingsblood Royal* effectively uses the trope of invisible blackness with ruthless abandon to condemn, to attack, to ridicule, and to destabilize the “narrow-mindedness” and “puritanical viciousness” of seemingly fine and upstanding white citizens (52).

The author’s Grand Republic, the fictionalized setting of both *Kingsblood Royal* and *Cass Timberlane*, serves as the epitome of “prosperity and success [and] demonstrate[s] that behind the façade of neat, comfortable homes, pleasant neighborhoods, and an abundance of commodities lay hypocrisy, complacency, nescience, and, in *Kingsblood Royal*, racism and brutality,” writes Andrea K. Newlyn in her “Undergoing ‘Racial Reassignment:’ The Politics of Transracial Crossing in Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal*” (1043). Just like Twain’s Dawson’s Landing and the Harlem-abutting neighborhood in Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho*, these communities may appear to be



pleasant but are, in reality, anything but. Their white inhabitants prove themselves capable of brutality and violence when the racial *status quo* is threatened and previously undetected blackness is made known. Grand Republic may, at least to its white residents, represent the “Midwestern ideal,” but conceptualizing it as a heaven on earth, a place “where equality and democracy can exist is totally destroyed by the end of the novel,” contends Sally Parry, executive director of the Sinclair Lewis Society in her “Gopher Prairie, Zenith, and Grand Republic: Nice Places to Visit but Would Even Sinclair Lewis Want to Live There?” (25).

Published soon after the end of the Second World War, Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal* followed a period in which “African-American activism grew deeper and more widespread” and “black Americans became more visible in American culture than before the First World War and in the era of the New Negro” (Painter 230, 232). The prominence and influence of artists including Dizzy Gillespie and Marian Anderson and of athletes including Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and Jackie Robinson contributed to this increased visibility (Painter 232-233). Membership in the NAACP rose from 50,000 to 450,000 between 1940 and 1945 (Delton 313). The organization’s advocacy grew as well; the NAACP filed lawsuits in the fields of education and voting rights including *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* in 1938 and *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944, both of which resulted in legal victories for African Americans (Painter 234). The civil rights activism of the period and calls for sweeping changes in how America treated its black citizens culminated in the seminal 1954 US Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka*.

As the Great Depression, which devastated the lives of black Americans even more than it had those of white Americans, began to subside with the advent of the Second World War, job opportunities were created for all Americans—both black and white. Everyone

began moving back into the work force, although racial segregation and discrimination against people based on phenotypical characteristics remained the common practice throughout the land. The community of color was still “confronted...with familiar problems: segregated and exclusionary armed forces, bans on black officers, and racial discrimination in the workplace. Their responses, too, were familiar: protest and struggle,” according to historian Painter (239). However, a new spirit among African Americans was emerging, one that differentiated the 1940s from previous eras. These citizens had, as a group, “acquired enough self-confidence, experience and allies as workers and citizens to protest effectively against all-too-pervasive discrimination” (Painter 239). Statistical evidence also shows that economic strides were being made by African Americans during the 1940s. “The national median income for urban blacks increased...from \$700 to \$1,263” during the decade while unemployment ranged from 4.5 to under 6 percent between 1948 and 1955 (Hobbs 351). Continuing the road paved during an earlier generation’s Great Migration, over 1.5 million black Americans left the South for the American West and North and the steady move from non-farm to manufacturing employment accelerated as well during the post-War period (“How” 106).

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8803 in 1941 that dictated “fair employment” in those industries crucial to the nation’s defense and created a Fair Employment Practices Commission to help regulate the order, even though the act did not “desegregate the armed forces. That would not begin until the very end of the war under President Harry S. Truman, and would not come to fruition until the 1960s” (Painter 241). The exploits of the Tuskegee Airmen notwithstanding, long-standing prejudices and biases continued virtually unchecked, even in the armed services. Additionally, “racial discrimination and segregation worsened nationwide housing shortages and

aggravated racial tensions” (Painter 242). In 1943, as in years before and after, racial violence was the result, especially in the large cities; thirty-four people—mostly African American—died in Detroit that year (Painter 242).

Black Americans, buoyed by the efforts of the Congress of Racial Equality and judicial rulings, continued their efforts to register voters and increased the number of African American voters in the South from 200,000 to 600,000 between 1940 and 1946 (Painter 256). Osceola McKaine, a black veteran from South Carolina, helped create that state’s Progressive Democratic Party and captured the sentiments of many when he stated that “we are living in the midst of perhaps the greatest revolution within experience. Nothing, no nation, will be as it was before when the peace comes.... There is no such thing as the status quo” (qtd. in Painter 248).

“Since the war,” writes Horace R. Cayton in “The Negro’s Challenge” in 1943, the “Negro problem.... has become a world problem and the United States must do something about it. It must act not merely for moral reasons, to right the social injustices involved but for motives of self-interest” (10). In spite of the attitudes of a majority of white Americans, Cayton avers that this is an era in which the “crucible of frustration and despair” is changing as the African American “is developing a new and positive line of thought which holds hope for black people and for the institution of democracy” (“Negro’s Challenge” 11).

Non-white Americans were also making progress in areas like college enrollment, government employment, and politics. *U. S. News and World Report* enumerated some of these increases in a 1957 article entitled “How Negroes are Gaining in the U.S.” Based on a study conducted by the President’s Committee on Governmental Employment Policy and an address at an International Labor Conference, the article states that “two of every 100

Negro workers now are highly skilled, professional persons, doctors lawyers, teachers, dentists, or similarly trained workers” (“How” 105). Even though a majority of the federal positions held by African Americans were clerical, the journal reports that almost one-fourth of all federal jobs in five major cities were filled by blacks, a fifty per cent increase in just twelve years (“How” 106).

James Baldwin contends that, despite modest gains, there was a pervasive downturn in black-white relations during the War years and that the “treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks, for me, a turning point in the Negro’s relation to America. To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply, a certain hope died, a certain respect for white America faded” (qtd. in Dalfiume 91). As historian Richard M. Dalfiume explains in “The ‘Forgotten Years’ of the Negro Revolution,” black Americans were excluded from and/or discriminated against in numerous fields related to the war effort; they were primarily relegated to menial roles in the armed forces and their donated blood was separated from “white” blood, all of which increased frustration among African Americans and resulted in protest marches, demonstrations, an increase in race consciousness, and calls for change (91-104).

Despite the progress made by the African American authors and visual artists during the Harlem Renaissance period, stereotypical portrayals of minorities persisted in both society and in the arts. As late as 1944, psychologist Harry O. Overstreet writes that the “Negro writer of fiction is inevitably a spokesman for his people. He is not free to write what he pleases. Such freedom is reserved for the whites” (5). Like the dualism, the two-ness which W. E. B. Du Bois described decades earlier, Overstreet claims that the “Negro writer...has a double obligation: to truth, and to the effect upon his readers of the particular truth he selects” (5). Imposing a white point of view on what black authors

should be doing, the essayist concludes that the “most difficult and important task that confronts Negro writers of fiction: to interpret their people to us and to themselves” (Overstreet 6). In his 1944 essay “The Caucasian Problem,” George Schuyler sets himself in direct opposition to men like Overstreet, contending that white Americans are responsible for the so-called “Negro problem,” claiming instead: “By a peculiar logical inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ruling class, its imitators, accomplices and victims have come to believe in a Negro problem.... It is written into the laws...and is deeply embedded in our customs and institutions.... [T]here is actually no Negro problem, there is definitely a Caucasian problem” (“Caucasian” 281).

Satirist Schuyler also has a different view of the obligation of African Americans, including writers, contending in his 1956 article “Do Negroes Want to be White?” that “no generalization about Negroes is apt to be true, and the one that they all want to be white is not an exception.... [I]t is far less true than it is thought to be, or ever was, or ever will be” (55). Ironically railing against the very premise of his own novel *Black No More*, Schuyler then pokes fun at the “huge advertisements in the otherwise race-proud Negro newspapers [that] praised a magic elixir guaranteed to turn a black person white in ‘Three Minutes by the Clock’” (“Do Negroes” 56). But Schuyler squarely lays blame for the rising tide of African American civil rights activism in the 1950s on the dominant society, writing that “apprehensive white America itself is responsible for the brownskin militancy and solidarity it now deplores, a solidarity transcending petty divisions and appealing to pride of race” and claiming that the “goal is not to be white but to be free in a white world” (“Do Negroes” 57, 59).

Attacking the same issue as Schuyler but with a very different style, Langston Hughes points out the inherent inequities created by the color line, chastising white

Americans for the freedom granted recent immigrants that is being denied to black Americans who have lived here for centuries. In his “My America,” Hughes decries that these newly-arrived “white” people, just like other white Americans, “may travel where they please, vote, and attend concerts and the theatre” but, tragically and ironically, Hughes and the rest of his people may not because “I am American—but *I am a colored American*” (Hughes, “My” 299). He highlights his theme through the use of repetition, writing: “For Democracy to approach its full meaning, the Negro *all over America* must have the vote. . . . For Democracy to have real meaning, the Negro must have the same civil rights as any other American citizen” (Hughes, “My” 301).

As others did in the Second World War period, William Allan Neilson, in a 1939 article published in *Survey Graphic*, draws parallels between what is happening in fascist Europe and the situation of American blacks. He comments on this paradox:

...[W]e are faced with the fact of unpardonable indifference on the part of Americans as a whole to the undeniable obligation to extend to the members of an injured race the rights and privileges of free citizens. Every time we are moved to raise our voices in protest against cruelty and injustice in other countries, our effectiveness is diminished by the knowledge that we have not put our own house in order. (Neilson 103)

Similarly, long-time activist Wendell L. Willkie, candidate for president in 1940, addressed the NAACP in 1942 at its annual conference. In his speech, Willkie states: “Our very proclamations of what we are fighting for have rendered our own inequities self-evident. When we talk of freedom and opportunity for all nations the mocking paradoxes in our own society become so clear they can no longer be ignored” (qtd. in Myrdal vol. 2, 1009).

The contention that the experiences and the societal shifts brought about by the

Second World War made apparent the need to change the American racial *status quo* did not belong to Willkie alone. Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, for example, opine in their 1943 essay entitled “The Races of Mankind” that “this war, for the first time, has brought home to Americans the fact that the whole world has been made one neighborhood. All races of man are shoulder to shoulder.... Our neighbors now are peoples of all the races of the earth” and that the “races of mankind are what the Bible says they are—brothers” (169, 172). The pair disputes the racial ideology espoused by both German Nazis and American white supremacists, writing that “a country has a population. It does not have a race” (179). They then challenge the United States to “clean its own house and get ready for a better twenty-first century.... sure that victory in this war will be in the name, not of one race or of another, but of the universal Human Race” (Benedict and Weltfish 192). But an insufficient number of white Americans shared the race views of Willkie, Benedict, and Weltfish to effect changes in race relations.

Such lofty ideals stand in direct contrast to those promoted by Theodore G. Bilbo, twice governor and three times senator from Mississippi. Reflecting the sentiments of the many white Americans who feared the societal changes America was facing, Bilbo writes in 1947 in his *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* that he is issuing an “S.O.S. call to every white man and white woman within the United States of America for immediate action” on racial purity issues (i). “It is not too late,” he warns, to “yet save the integrity and civilization of both the white and black races” (Bilbo iii). Race mixing began in America in the 1600s. Yet, apparently unaware or ignorant of the irony in his statement that a “physical separation” of the races “as advocated from the days of Thomas Jefferson to the present is the only solution. To do this may be a herculean task, but it is not impossible” (iii), Bilbo rages against intermarriage, civil rights activism, and an end to

segregation. In words similar to those of Bilbo, Ira Calvin dismissively states in 1944 in his provocatively-titled *The Lost White Race* that “minority groups...are constantly irritating and annoying that great majority, the real, honest American people” (21). His pejoratives include these statements: “Under the false cloak of democracy these minority groups have just about demoralized this whole Nation.... [T]hey have been trying to destroy pride of ancestry, because they themselves have no ancestry to be proud of” and also that the “colored man, be he Japanese, Chinese, Indian, or Negro, is the natural enemy of the white man” (I. Calvin 22, 23). Ira Calvin then urges his fellow white Americans to “get rid of the weeds; before they get rid of us” (25).

Black newspaperman Horace R. Cayton aptly captures the sentiments of men like Bilbo and Calvin in his 1942 essay “Fighting for White Folks?,” writing that a “large group of white persons in America do not wish to change the position of the Negro. Just as there is a feeling in the non-white world that things are changing...so there is a feeling among whites that their position of dominance is being challenged and that they must resist any encroachment” (269). Sterling Brown, in his 1945 essay entitled “Count Us In,” paints a realistic and unflattering picture of race relations. Iterating that black Americans simply yearn for fair treatment, he writes that “Negroes want to be counted in. They want to belong. They want what other men have wanted deeply enough to fight and suffer for it. They want democracy” (S. Brown, “Count” 384).

The obsession of many white Americans with persons of color continued unabated, however, and articles like “What Color Will Your Baby Be?” were widely published. Author Dr. Julian Lewis discusses this issue in his article while, at the same time, acknowledging that “American society is still far removed from the day when minorities will no longer be penalized for their color differences” (4). He addresses intermarriage



and percentages of melanin in one's physical make-up--and the possible coloration outcomes for one's children--as he, ironically, ends his article by stating that it "is a tragic commentary on our society that the scientific facts of skin color have for too many people more social than biologic significance" (J. Lewis 7). Men like Everett V. Stonequist continued to perpetuate white America's fascination with persons of mixed race. In his *The Marginal Man: A Study of Personality and Culture Conflict* (1937), Stonequist states that his "marginal man" is "one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic, cultures" and that the "most obvious type of marginal man is the person of mixed race ancestry [because] his very biological origin places him between the two races" (xv, 10).

But a growing number of white Americans supported sweeping changes in how America treated her black citizens. In 1942, for example, Wendell Willkie wrote an article entitled "The Case for the Minorities" that was published in *The Saturday Evening Post* and in which he contends:

Our nation is composed of no one race, faith or cultural heritage. It is a grouping of some thirty peoples possessing varying religious concepts, philosophies and historical backgrounds.... The keystone of our union of states is freedom—freedom for the individual to worship as he chooses, to work as he chooses, and to live and rear his children as he chooses.... Throughout our history...we have had to be continually mindful that the minority had the same freedoms under the law as those enjoyed by individuals sharing the majority sentiment of the community. (14, 50)

Richard Wright--author of *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and other books, essays, and articles--pens similar thoughts in 1941, writing: "We black folk, our history and our present

being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America *is*. If we black folk perish, America will perish” (“12 Million” 146). Wright succinctly explains in this short essay that African Americans only want “what others have, the right to share in the upward march of American life” (“12 Million” 146).

Scientific interest in race and race-related issues also continued. Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987) published his groundbreaking two-volume work entitled *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* in 1944. He begins the study by concluding that there exists a “‘Negro’ problem in the United States and most Americans are aware of it.... To the great majority of white Americans the Negro problem has distinctly negative connotations. It suggests something difficult to settle and equally difficult to leave alone. It is embarrassing. It makes for moral uneasiness” (vol. 1, xli). Myrdal continues his introduction to the exhaustively-researched tomes, writing:

*The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the decisive struggle goes on.... [A]t bottom our problem is the moral dilemma of the American.... [It] is the ever-ranging conflict between, on the one hand, the valuations preserved on a general plan which we shall call the “American Creed,” where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and, on the other hand, the valuations on specific plans of individual and group living.* (vol. 1, xliii) (italics in original)

The sociologist addresses America’s “Negro problem” in detail across political, social, and economic spheres and also examines related beliefs, organizations, and

institutions. He includes a discussion of passing in his work, finding just how easy it is for those “black” Americans who do not appear to have any African characteristics to do so if they so choose. Myrdal confirms: “‘Passing’ is the backwash of miscegenation, and one of its surest results. Passing must have been going on in America ever since the time when mulattoes first appeared” (vol. 1, 129), despite what numerous white Americans continued to both claim and disavow.

Riding the wave of interest in American race issues, Sinclair Lewis decided to write a novel on race and use the passing genre to do so. His *Kingsblood Royal*, despite the contention of Steven Wandler in his 2014 article entitled “Race and Citizenship in Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal*” that, although it “invokes many of the ideas and tropes of the passing novel...[it] is not a novel *about* passing” (80), the novel *is* a passing narrative. Lewis’s novel differs from most other passing novels because a “white” man becomes a “black” one. It is the inadvertent passing of its protagonist—Neil Kingsblood—and his journey to embracing his newfound blackness and the African American community upon which the tale is structured.

While *Kingsblood Royal* does not contain the laugh-out-loud sections of Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, George Schuyler’s *Black No More*, and Langston Hughes’s “Who’s Passing for Who?,” Lewis does infuse humor into his satire, finding its way into the novel through juxtapositions and absurdities. One is free to chuckle, for example, when Lewis has his character Vestal choose Christmas gifts for her young daughter Biddy that include a doll and a “lovely, new-fashioned machine gun which, in the 1940’s, had become just the right token of the Christchild for a nice little girl” (SL, KR 31). The author not only satirically displays his contempt of complacent, compliant white American society but partners images of Christ with guns and matches dolls with

death-producing armaments.

The novel opens with a family from New York driving through Minnesota and poking fun at all things Midwestern, including the town of Grand Republic whose 90,000 inhabitants naïvely consider it the “center of the universe” (SL, KR 4). The trio of travelers –just like the local white inhabitants--fail to notice anything about the town’s African American community and are oblivious to the fact that a “Negro clergyman who was a Doctor of Philosophy” lives there (SL, KR 4). However superior they may feel, the visitors share racist views with the Minnesotans and contemplate the uppishness of a black waitperson by asking themselves why a “nigger hash-hustler in a dump like this was making like he was at the Ritz!” (SL, KR 5), as if a change of venue to a New York hotel would somehow change their bigoted view of his attitude.

In addition to taking aim at the illogical nature of racist ideologies throughout *Kingsblood Royal* by deconstructing notions of race, by using juxtaposition to destabilize racial stereotypes, and by irreverently challenging claims of inherent and God-given white superiority, Lewis exposes just how unsophisticated, bland, and bigoted the local townspeople truly are. “The terrible judgments which he pronounces upon the provincial civilization of America flow from the bitterness of a revolted provincial,” contends Walter Lippmann (91). This interpretation is also held by Professor T. K. Whipple who, in 1928, writes that Lewis “hated his environment, with a cordial and malignant hatred. That detestation has made him a satirist, and has barbed his satire and tipped it with venom” (77).

The tale’s protagonist is soon introduced. Neil Kingsblood is described as an “amiable” man who is distinguished by the “singular innocence of his blue eyes and the innocence and enthusiasm of his smile” (SL, KR 5). He was wounded while serving in the

Second World War and is now a junior bank officer. Like Twain's seemingly idyllic Dawson's Landing and the ostensibly benign street on which Merrit bought a house in Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho*, Kingsblood lives with his young family in a development ironically named Sylvan Park. They have a "'colonial cottage,' new and neat and painty, with broad white clapboards and blue shutters" in a "picture-window" setting (SL, KR 6). The outward appearance of the community masks the racism that is sometimes overt and sometimes simmering just below the surface. Lewis subversively pens the paradox that this "highly sensible paradise" is a community proud that it is "just as free of Jews, Italians, Negroes, and exasperatingly poor as it is of noise, mosquitoes, and rectangularity of streets" (SL, KR 10, 9). Sylvan Park is only free of troublesome blacks because they have been banished from this self-proclaimed Eden to a part of town called Five Points.

Neil is "red-headed, curly-headed, blue-eyed, stalwart, cheerful" and, with Lewis's ironic touches apparent, is as "free of scholarship as he was of malice" (KR 7). Neil, just like Grand Republic, is actually quite ordinary. There is nothing extraordinary about him or about his hometown. His wife Vestal, whose name refers to the chaste keepers of sacred fire in ancient Rome, is active in local social circles and in causes that allow her to feel "advanced and humanitarian" (SL, KR 11). But she is also shallowly focused on how her activities are perceived by the white, self-anointed *crème de la crème* of the town. She is college-educated—but not very bright--and loves and respects her husband. Their four-year-old daughter is described as "enchanted, the good-tempered Biddy, with her skin of strawberries and cream, her hair like champagne," although she gleefully calls their black cocker spaniel "Nigger" "without any thought except that black dogs *do* get called Nigger" in common practice in towns throughout America like Grand Republic (SL, KR 7, 20). Neil and Vestal, Lewis pens in a manner that both foreshadows the wrenching

changes that will come in their lives and sets his critical, transgressive tone, “were truly a Happy Young American Married Couple,” capitalization for emphasis included by the author (*KR* 8). The *Kingsbloods* employ a live-in African American housekeeper named Belfreda with whom they do not get along. They are suspicious of her, complain about her poor housekeeping and cooking skills, and are resentful of an attitude they consider disrespectful. Their racial prejudice towards her is palpable.

Neil is unaware of the inherent irony in a racially-charged statement he makes, that “even hating prejudice, I do see where the Negroes are inferior and always will be. I saw them unloading ships in Italy, all safe, while we white soldiers were under fire” (SL, *KR* 11). He is obtusely ignorant, like most white Americans not only in this fictional setting but throughout the nation, of the strict segregation in the armed forces that largely relegated black Americans to menial roles regardless of their skills, talents, or education (SL, *KR* 11). Although he does not consider himself a bigot, Neil bemoans the fact that he is no longer being treated as a “little massa” and concludes that the “whole biological and psychological make-up of the Negroes is different from that of white people, especially from us Anglo-Saxons,” thus buying into the scientific propaganda of men like Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant who proved that “all Negroes have smaller brain-capacity than we have” and are, therefore, innately inferior (SL, *KR* 12, 13, 14).

The main character, like many other white Americans, is unable to face or even acknowledge the grim reality of American racism and discrimination when he unequivocally states that he is “glad that in the North there’s no discrimination against ‘em—going to the same public schools with our own white kids” (SL, *KR* 14). Lewis hints at future narrative developments when he has Neil comment on a “black” schoolmate of his who could have passed if he “hadn’t *told* us he was part Negro. Still and all, when

you knew that, you *thought* of him as being black” (SL, KR 15), recalling a similar scene that was captured so eloquently in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

The author acknowledges--and accepts and promotes--the changes championed during the civil rights activism of the 1940s and presents a contrast to this movement through a character named Mac, the African American headwaiter at the local country club who plays the fool, scrapes, and bows to the white patrons. Mac states that his “race will never have any trouble with high-class white people. I keep telling these colored agitators like Clem Brazenstar that they do more harm to my race than any mean buckra, and then they laugh at me and call me an ‘Uncle Tom’” (SL, KR 31). Mac, too, will soon find out just how little the white country club members think of him. He is actually, in their minds, just another lowly black man rather than a valued human being.

Lewis’s narrative bends farther toward being a race novel. To please his father, Neil goes on a quest to prove that their last name—Kingsblood—is truly indicative of royal heritage. This myth has been passed down through generations; Neil agrees to look into the tale and eagerly anticipates proving his Anglo-Saxon descent and blood relation to the King of England. The irony of the situation and the family’s surname are applied with a very broad satiric brush by Lewis and is unknowingly commented upon by Vestal when she murmurs her support of the new venture by saying: “I love trying to think of you as a king, but I can’t do it. You’re so obviously just what you are: a one-hundred per cent, normal, white, Protestant, male, middle-class, efficient, golf-loving, bound-to-succeed, wife-pampering, Scotch-English Middlewestern American” (SL, KR 40).

Neil naïvely imagines that his ancestors, if not actually royal, will undoubtedly be heroic, brave, and strong leaders. But, through his research and discussions with his

grandmother, he not only learns that an ancestor named Xavier Pic was both French and a drunkard but also that at least one of his forebears was Native American. Neil is “unhappy to suspect that his rare Biddy, that bright being of crystal and rose and silver, was less certainly cousin to English princesses and to demoiselles” and that his family would suddenly become, in his mind and in the minds of the other residents of Sylvan Park, “Mr. and Mrs. Injunblood” with a daughter named “Elizabeth Running Mink” (SL, *KR* 55, 56). But he decides to deny this startling possibility and suppresses his thoughts. Little does he suspect that greater racial complications are looming.

A visit to the Minnesota Historical Society, purportedly on behalf of a “friend,” reveals that the swarthinness of his grandmother is not attributable to American Indian heritage but to the fact that Xavier Pic was a “full-blooded Negro” (SL, *KR* 59). The society’s official prattles on, making things even worse in Neil’s mind: “Of course you know that in most Southern states,” he comments, “and a few Northern ones, a ‘Negro’ is defined, by statute, as a person having even ‘one drop of Negro blood,’ and according to that barbaric psychology, your soldier friend and any children he may have, no matter how white they look, are legally one-hundred-percent Negroes” (SL, *KR* 59).

Neil stumbles away. “He was in a still horror, beyond surprise now, like a man who has learned that last night, walking in his sleep, he murdered a man” (SL, *KR* 60). He feels that he will be the same kind of man he was before he uncovered his racial heritage but realizes that “*They* would say that he was a black man, a Negro” (SL, *KR* 60). He sees himself being defined stereotypically by others, as he himself has always done. Lewis iterates phrases to emphasize the chaos and terror running through Neil’s mind. “To Neil, to be a Negro was to be a Belfreda Gray,” he writes, “to be Mac the porter...or a clown...dancing in a saloon for pennies and humiliation” (SL, *KR* 60). “To be a Negro



was to live in a decaying shanty or in a frame tenement... To be a Negro...no matter how pale you were, was to work in kitchens.... To be a Negro was to be unable—biologically, fundamentally, unchangeably unable—to grasp any science beyond addition and plain cooking” (SL, *KR* 60-61).

Neil’s mind continues to reel, repeating the slurs and prejudices he has believed all his life about being a black person in America: “It was to be an animal physically. It was to be an animal culturally.... It was an animal ethically, unable to keep from stealing and violence, from lying and treachery. It was literally and altogether to be an animal, somewhere between human beings and the ape” (SL, *KR* 61). Robert E. Fleming characterizes this scene in his “*Kingsblood Royal* and the Black ‘Passing’ Novel” as a “staple of the Afro-American novel. Even when the black protagonist is intellectually aware that he or she is black, such a scene brings home to the character just what it means to be black in America” (214). After the revelation and “once the secret is known,” Fleming continues, “the passing character finds his features being transformed, either in his own eyes or in the eyes of beholders, and he turns into an obvious Negro” (218). Neil’s reaction not only fits Fleming’s rubric but mirrors that of false Tom in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* when he, too, found he had a taint, barely more than one drop, of the dreaded black blood in his veins.

Sinclair Lewis lays bare white America’s feelings about its black citizens and the illogical legal, social, political, and economic barriers it had erected between the races based on an unsupportable presumption that one’s “race” is always physically apparent and easily definable. By portraying Neil as a “black” man, Lewis attacks the underpinnings of racism and the discrimination and segregation that accompanied it. “If Neil’s white-skinned, freckled, ruddy-haired body can become ‘Negro,’” critic Newlyn similarly

contends, “what does this suggest about the territorial boundaries and sanctity of whiteness?” (Newlyn 1064-65). It suggests that there are, in fact, no such boundaries and sanctities.

Sadly, Neil concludes, being black was to “know that our children, no matter how much you loved them or strove for them, no matter if they were fair as Biddy, were doomed to be just as ugly and treacherous and brainless and bestial as yourself, and their children’s children beyond them forever, under the curse of Ezekiel” (SL, *KR* 61). But Neil then has an almost instantaneous epiphany and concludes that, perhaps, all he had previously thought about black Americans; all the ways in which he had condemned them regardless of their skills, talents, or virtues; and all the ways he had discriminated against them and defined them as inferior, worthless human beings, was wrong. Perhaps, if his darling Biddy is black, “then everything I’ve ever heard about the Negroes—yes, and maybe everything I’ve heard about the Jews and the Japs and the Russians, about religion and politics—all of that may be a lie, too” (SL, *KR* 62).

Neil resolves to find out more about African Americans so he can more accurately assess them, and himself, too. He also ponders whether or not he should tell his family about his new-found blackness. He, like Twain’s false Tom, realizes that he can keep his secret and continue to pass as white. It is because he has enjoyed white privilege all his life that he believes he has a choice in terms of his racial identity (Newlyn 1042). Like the fictional characters Clare and Irene in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Neil Kingsblood realizes that he can dine and stay in a “white” hotel but will, all the while, be hoping that no one will challenge his “whiteness” and ask him to leave.

He wavers. He worries. He ponders the state of race relations. He lists all the things he will lose if Grand Republic’s white community finds out this new truth about Neil

Kingsblood. He studies his fingernails and his curly hair for hints of his racial heritage. He chastises himself: "Quit acting like a white boy trying to pretend to be a Negro. You *are* Negro...*and* Chippewa, *and* West Indian spig, and you don't have to pretend.... It couldn't be, could it, that what I needed, what Grand Republic needs, is a good dash of sun-warmed black blood?" (SL, KR 66). His examination of his nails is comically tragic, as readers' minds imagine a scene of Neil frantically checking his hands for proof of blackness while, at the same time, searching for offsetting proof of his whiteness. But amidst the humorousness, the subversive Lewis is forcing his readers to confront harsh racial truths—truths about illogical myths and stereotypes and truths about the fluidity and permeability of America's "impenetrable" color line.

The young man comes to the naïve conclusion that many of the town's white inhabitants will stand by him and rise to his defense, rather than reacting to him as bigots and potential lynchers. "All this simple happiness" is what Neil stands to lose should he tell Vestal and the rest of his family the truth about Xavier Pic (SL, KR 74). But although his world of white privilege has been shattered, he begins to question the ways in which his white neighbors, friends, and business partners speak and feel about black Americans. Neil decides to stop calling their dog Nigger and changes his name to Prince in an attempt to be less overtly racist. In the bank, he considers a loan application by a chemist named Dr. Ash Davis and "for the first time in his life he really looked at a 'colored man.' He had never looked at Belfreda, at Emerson Woolcape who had been in his class all through school, at Mac, at the Negro soldiers; he had not looked at them but only been impatiently aware of them," he realizes (SL, KR 78). "Certainly he had never looked at the Negro callers who had arranged with him for bank loans," Neil shamefully recalls, because they "had been merely dark hands holding paper, dark voices that were over-ingratiating" (SL,

KR 78). He is, as Bucklin Moon perceptively writes in his 1947 review of the novel that appeared in the *New Republic*, being “forced to become a Negro” (27). Soon, the young man embarks on a mission to discover what black life is like.

Neil’s naïveté--a mixture of innocence, obtuseness, romanticization, and lack of interest in the realities of both black life and the world at large—is fully on display as he begins to immerse himself in local African American culture. At first, he characterizes the area called Five Points as “like any other lower-middle-class” area of town until he suddenly experiences it as strange because he “did not see one white face on the crowded sidewalk” and because he is being perceived by the black inhabitants as an “intruder” and unwelcome outsider (SL, KR 84). He, Neil Kingsblood, has become the “other,” not only in his own mind but also to the black community. “The street was more alien to Neil than Italy in wartime,” Lewis writes, and “it seemed to him that every dusky face, every rickety wall, hated him and would always hate him, and he might as well go home” (SL, KR 85). But, with what becomes a characteristically sudden reversal of thoughts and feelings, the young man finds himself “among people who, though their faces were more beloved of the sun, were like any other group of middle-class church-going Americans” (SL, KR 85).

Neil’s ignorance about his fellow black citizens is emblematic of virtually all white Americans. There exists a “remarkable lack of correct information about the Negroes and their living conditions,” Gunnar Myrdal contends as he posits that “one need not be a trained student of the race problem to learn a lot in a couple of days about Negroes in a community which is not known by even its otherwise enlightened white residents. To an extent this ignorance is not simply ‘natural’ but is part of the opportunistic escape reaction” (vol. 1, 40). The sociologist also writes that the “ignorance about the Negro is not...just a random lack of interest and knowledge. It is a tense and highstrung restriction and

distortion of knowledge.... The blind spots are clearly visible in stereotyped opinions” (Myrdal, vol. 1, 42). There is, Myrdal purports, an “opportunistic desire of whites for ignorance. It is so much more comfortable to know as little as possible about Negroes” (vol. 1, 48). Neil Kingsblood—and the other white residents of Lewis’s Grand Republic—perfectly reflect the willful ignorance Myrdal describes. Lewis need not resort to comic ridicule or to exaggeration to drive this point home to readers.

In an African American church, Neil spots several “black” people who are as white as he is and, upon sitting between “two colored people,” he feels that he has had “another First in his career as a Negro” because “they seemed to him very much like people” (SL, *KR* 86). Neil is blissfully unaware of the ironic nature of his thoughts and feelings. Lewis demonstrates that, yes, in fact, black Americans are actually just people, that they are human beings and not apes, and that they are more like white Americans in important ways than the vast majority of white Americans is able to admit or comprehend.

The minister, Evan Brewster, is an imposing man who has the “shoulders of a roustabout” and looks, to Neil, like “every primeval brute who regularly assaults fatherly white policemen. He was everything that would give a petal-pale white lady a shock” (SL, *KR* 85). But Lewis juxtaposes Brewster’s physical appearance with his temperament. Gazing on the minister, Neil “slowly permitted himself to see that never, in any human face, had he known such gentleness, such kindness, such honest and manly sweetness, such outpouring love for all living beings and all life” (SL, *KR* 87). Virtually overnight, Neil has developed a sense of decency, an absence of racism, and an ability to “see” the good in people, despite their color or physical characteristics. He can now “see” the humanity in each individual and has “discovered that his sense of their being ‘colored,’ being alien, being fundamentally different from himself, had evaporated. Their similarity

to one another...was so much less than their individual differences that they had already ceased being Negroes and become People, to wonder about, to love and hate” (SL, *KR* 89). This sudden, swift change has overwhelmed the young man and he is no longer just an “amused tourist” but, self-identifying with the dominated society rather than with the dominant one, has become someone “desperate...to know his own people” (SL, *KR* 89). In a further ironic twist, he spots a man, “pale and heavily freckled and almost as red-headed as Neil himself, about whom you nevertheless felt certain that he was a ‘Negro,’” replicating the way he is beginning to feel about himself (SL, *KR* 89).

Lewis’s portrayals—of Neil, of the Kingsblood’s housekeeper, of the Rotarians, of the black residents Neil seeks out, and of the enforcers of Sylvan Park’s restrictive covenants—are not brilliantly original but, instead, veer too often towards the stereotypical. This does not enhance Lewis’s heartfelt attack on racism as it often renders his characters and the events into which they are drawn seem unrealistic and almost unbelievable. Walter Lippmann chastises the author for this, writing: “Mr. Lewis has an extraordinary talent for inventing stereotypes. This talent is uninhibited, for he is wholly without that radical skepticism which might make a man of equal, or even greater, genius hesitate at substituting new prejudices for old” (85). The narrative is further hampered when Lewis writes long, dogmatic passages espousing a more open-minded view of black Americans and their plight.

Neil then recognizes a childhood classmate of his—Emerson Woolcape—and joins him and his family for further discussion. While the young white-now-black man has not yet fully jettisoned the stereotypes of black Americans he has held since childhood and he ponders whether or not he is going to “be a Negro,” he reaches the conclusion that “This is my history...this is my people; I must come out” (SL, *KR* 91, 92). Like false Tom in Mark

Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Neil has actually been "passing" as white—however inadvertently—but now, still red-haired, blue-eyed, and white-complected, is suddenly "passing" as black. He has nothing in common with the parishioners and his sudden conversions and revelations, while not disingenuous, are naïve and emotionally-based. Kingsblood quickly decides that passing for white will no longer be an option for him. He determines to join the African American community despite the consequences and potential fallout from his decision.

However, as he peppers the parishioners about black American life, he keeps his new-found African heritage a secret from them and is, therefore, passing as an interested white man. Neil still, somewhat ridiculously, asserts that life for black Americans cannot be too bad in the North and that there cannot be prejudice against them in Grand Republic, sublimating his own actions and the feelings he had had towards all "others" just a few days before. Mrs. Woolcape sets him straight about race relations north of the Mason Dixon Line, stating for Neil's edification:

...up here we're told that we're complete human beings, and encouraged to hope and think, and as a consequence we feel the incessant little reminders of supposed inferiority, the careless humiliations.... Especially we who look white get humiliated here.... But those who are visibly black---No discrimination in the North? No, merely looked at like rattlesnakes.... Admitted grudgingly to restaurants because of the law, and then insulted or neglected there.... Humiliated till we get broken. (SL, KR 102-03)

The horrifying reality of being black in a white-dominated society is further driven home when she tells Neil that her college-educated son was beaten to death by police in Georgia.

As Mrs. Woolcape sobs, Neil blurts out that he, too, is black and he has decided to “face it” (SL, *KR* 105), eliciting further explanations of racial realities by the Woolcapes.

Although both elder Woolcapes are physically able to pass as white, they both decided early on not to do so, despite the hardships they faced as black Americans. When Neil asks if those African Americans who choose to pass are hated by their community, John Woolcape replies that “there’s a general rule that if our old friend goes by you on the street, with white folks, and doesn’t know you, you don’t even wink—not in public. Just as we’d cut our tongues out before we gave *your* confidence away” (SL, *KR* 110). Their son Ryan admits that he passes occasionally, but only to gather information on local racists and their plans, much like the historical Walter White. Through Ryan, Neil is forced to face the fact that many black Americans truly hate white Americans. Again, Neil displays a willful ignorance of racial relations, thinking to himself that he “wanted to get out of this. It wasn’t *his* race problem!” when the reality is that it is all of America’s “race problem” (SL, *KR* 113). He goes home, dispirited and conflicted, “unknowing what and where and how Neil Kingsblood was going to be,” reflecting the observation of one black gentleman who opines that “I knew that Hell has the sign ‘For colored only’” (SL, *KR* 115, 130).

Every conversation of his and every waking moment of Neil’s life now revolve around issues of race. He is consumed with thoughts of the treatment of black soldiers, with lynchings, and with segregation. He questions whether black Americans are truly different and inherently inferior—mentally, physically, morally, and ethically—and he questions the life he and his friends are living. He continues meeting with the Woolcapes and other African American community members. He insists that life cannot really be bad for African Americans in places like Grand Republic. He concludes that the people with whom he is meeting “talked like the people he knew, like all the people he had ever



known.... Only, more gaily!” (SL, *KR* 136).

Neil also meets a young nurse, a black woman named Sophie Conrad, to whom he is attracted. Kingsblood, perhaps innocently, perhaps obtusely, perhaps unknowingly, envisions Sophie stereotypically, seeing her not as a well-educated and capable individual but as an exotic, a primitive. He sees her as everything Vestal is not. Sophie challenges the fictions he is creating, chastising him for imagining her as a “beautiful convent trained New Orleans octoroon, that passionate slave-girl with the lambent eyes and long raven tresses, standing on the block with her hot blushes, and practically nothing else on, before the leering planters” (SL, *KR* 138). Yet, once again, Neil is convinced, even though he is still reacting to new situations through the lens of white privilege, that “I love these people” (SL, *KR* 139). He soon confesses his racial heritage to Ash Davis who has become a friend as well. This time, as he goes home, he concludes that “if he was still nervous about a conceivable future as a Negro, he no longer hated anything in it in spirit” (SL, *KR* 144).

Neil considers telling Vestal but worries about the effects of his conversion to a “black” man on his daughter Biddy. He has come to realize the sad truth of American life--that “all the cheerful little viciousnesses of common belief among nice people are more devastating than bombs and great wings” (SL, *KR* 144). Neil compares his wife to Sophie and, reflecting one of Lewis’s frequent condemnations, concludes that Vestal is just a bland Midwesterner who is totally lacking in individuality. As Vestal sings a song about coons—one she knew from her youth—Neil decides to pass back into the world of whiteness.

The young banker decides that his “racial adventure had been a dream, perhaps a nightmare” (SL, *KR* 153). But, soon, he is once again visiting his new African American friends and, not surprisingly, decides to pass back into the world of blackness. He

straddles the two worlds—torn between them and what he perceives to be his duty, his calling, and his true self. As Andrea K. Newlyn incisively points out, “Neil’s claim to a black identity—his very ability to *decide* which racial identity he wants to adopt and his capacity to *shift* his racial self-identification—reflects Neil’s privileged position as a white subject, as well as his racially romanticized assumptions about blackness” (1042). The protagonist presumes a fluidity in the color line that most Americans—or, at least, most white Americans—still wanted to believe could not be crossed, despite all evidence and testimonies to the contrary. While Newlyn’s contention accurately reflects Neil’s position in *Grand Republic*, it is conversely true that “black” Americans who choose to pass as white *also* decide which racial identity they want, even though they are approaching the decision from a societal position vastly different from Neil’s and may be doing so for survival or better economic opportunities.

One day, the young man takes Vestal to hear the Reverend Dr. Jat Snood, described as a Ku Klux Klanner and who is depicted as resembling both the Reverend McPhule and the Imperial Grand Wizard in George Schuyler’s *Black No More*. Snood is described as “illiterate” and “dull” but who, nevertheless, possesses a “magnificent voice” and a “yet more magnificent lack of scruples. He was indifferent as to who got lynched, so long as he made six thousand dollars a year” (SL, *KR* 167). Snood hates Jews, Muslims, Soviets, Hindus, Catholics, and unionists but reserves his greatest contempt for the “black and accursed Sons of Baal, whom God turned black for their ancient sins and made into the eternal servants of the white man” (SL, *KR* 171). Vestal does not like Snood but her dislike is rooted in his vulgarity, not in the hate he preaches. She becomes a less sympathetic character as the narrative progresses, condescendingly and heartlessly laughing at black preachers—rather than being horrified by the words of a white one. Neil

sadly concludes “that it was less the horrors of Snood than the pleasantries of wives like Vestal that would make him join forever that ‘clown of a nigger preacher,’ Evan Brewster” (SL, KR 171). And the young man’s racial pendulum swings back towards blackness yet again.

Neil’s new black friends consistently urge him not to come out as a black man. Yet, despite seeing his white business associates as “generous friends and neighbors,” he chafes at the stereotypes they draw about African Americans. The feelings of his neighbors, friends, and colleagues mirror those of many white Americans in 1947--as well as the white propagandists and pseudo-scientists including Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard, and Theodore Bilbo--who feel:

All Negroes, without exception, however pale, are lazy but good-natured, thieving and lecherous and murderous but very kind to children, and all of them are given to singing merry lyrics about slavery.... All Negroes so revere the godlike white man that no Negro wants to be mistaken for a white man.... Negroes are not human beings but a cross between the monkey and the colonel.... All Negroes constantly indulge in ferocious fighting with knives, but all Negro soldiers are afraid of and abstain from ferocity.... All Negro males have such wondrous sexual powers that they unholily fascinate all white women.... All mixed breeds are bad.... [A] mulatto invariably lacks both the honor and creativeness of the whites, and the patience and merriment of the blacks..... Any writer who portrays any Negro as acting like a normal American is either an ignorant Northerner or a traitor who is trying to destroy civilization.... *The Negro Problem Is Insoluble*. (SL, KR 178-81)

Neil gathers his family together to tell them the truth about their lineage. He is greeted with shock, dismay, denials, shouts, and allegations that he is crazy. His father

suggests that the family will overlook the matter if Neil agrees not to tell non-family members. But when Dr. Kenneth says that Biddy should now be considered a “low-down nigger tramp,” Neil angrily replies: “*Negro!* And she wouldn’t be low-down; she’d be just what she is now. She won’t change; it’s your ideas that have to change. And would you please quit saying nigger?” (SL, KR 192). Reluctantly, Neil decides it is better to go about his life as a white man. He does not say anything or stand up for black Americans, other than walking out of a particularly racist exchange. He does not protest when his brother states, ironically, that he would make it illegal “for any man with a single drop of nigger blood in him to pass for a white man” (SL, KR 182).

However, the young “white” man soon begins to self-identify as black yet again and he admonishes whites about the ways in which they should think and talk about black Americans. His family members blame other family members for the situation, throwing around racial epithets, denying the possibility of what Neil has laid out, and blaming their spouses for the situation in which they find themselves. His brother Robert, unable to acknowledge that blacks can be decent people, cries to his wife: “Don’t you *see* I’m white, darling. It’s a lie, and I’m white and our kids are white! They are! I’m not going to be ruined by any lunatic like Neil! I’m white” (SL, KR 196). Neil’s only ally is his sister while Vestal says she needs time to think things over.

Neil’s wife tries to make him feel guilty for ruining their daughter’s life. She proclaims: “I know you wouldn’t let anyone hurt or shame *her*, and even if the story about Pic being a colored man were true, you wouldn’t tell the world, wouldn’t torture her, to satisfy your vanity about being so truthful” (SL, KR 197). Vestal continues, stating: “I’m as sure as I ever can be of anything, I’m sure as I am of our love or of our immortality, that the story is not true!.... Will you look at that child—all rose and sating and gold. There’s

no Negro blood in *her!*” (SL, *KR* 197). Vestal is refusing to consider the ramifications of America’s one-drop rule. She soldiers on with her life and works on creating a picture-perfect Christmas, tamping down her fears and refusing to face reality. The rest of Neil’s family does the same, exacting promises from him that he will not tell others.

But at the Federal Club’s party, Neil blurts out the truth in reaction to openly racist comments by his friend—at least the man he had long considered a friend. Rod Aldwick, who served in the War as Neil did, firmly states that “I have no prejudices, the Army and Navy have no prejudices, I presume God has no prejudices.... And if there was any segregation, it was always and only at the request of their own colored leaders” (SL, *KR* 206). Aldwick laughs about killing a black soldier for drunken insubordination, calls for complete segregation of non-whites from American society, rails against educated blacks, and calls for the preservation of the “pure, clean, square-dealing, enterprising, freely-competitive America of the Founding Fathers,” obtusely overlooking the ownership of slaves by numerous Founding Fathers who, ironically for those who demanded freedom for all, enshrined the peculiar institution in the Constitution they wrote (SL, *KR* 209). As he defends the contributions of both black soldiers and local African American leaders, Neil reveals his own ancestry. While one of the men defends him as the “whitest man here,” the others are outraged and call for ousting him from the Club (SL, *KR* 212).

Sinclair Lewis exposes that these men feel emboldened to be overtly racist because of their white privilege and its attendant benefits. But it is the utter complacency of white Americans in not-so-grand Grand Republic and not-so-sylvan Sylvan Park—and their unsupportable smugness and hypocrisy—at which he aims his sharpest slings and arrows in his satirical novel of passing. “Nothing in the higher social events of the year in Grand Republic was more significant than the Federal Club’s Auld Lang Syne Holiday Stag,” he

contemptuously pens (SL, *KR* 204). These men, and the wives they treat as child-like adornments, lead lives in which they “were never affronted by salads or ice cream. The whole affair resembled a bachelor-dinner given by J.P. Morgan the Elder to King Edward VII, but it was called Supper, and spread in the Pillsbury Grill, which had a bold atmosphere of oak tables, Flemish tiles and pewter mugs,” Lewis disparagingly and transgressively condemns with ruthless abandon (SL, *KR* 204).

George Schuyler, in a 1925 essay entitled “The Negro and the Nordic Civilization,” also ridiculed the whites of America’s country clubs who held themselves up as superior to black Americans in every way. In his trademark tongue-in-cheek style, this man of “decidedly sable hue” deems the lives of the others worthy only of comic ridicule, penning that:

The proof lies in Africa. One can travel from one end to the other.... I seriously doubt if there is a single Rotary Club or Y.M.C.A on the continent, and such hall-marks of civilization as toothpick shoes, bell-bottom trousers, French heels, derby hats and corsets are conspicuous by their absence.... While such refinements as the Ku Klux Klan, automats, and Comstockery are of course non-existent. Aye, ‘tis a dismal picture, but we must be courageous enough to face the facts.

Wherever these evidences of an advanced civilization are present, we must thank the white man for them. (GSS, “Negro and the Nordic” 198)

Neil has outed himself and, by extension, his wife and daughter. They are now suddenly and irretrievably “black” by the fiction of law and custom; her own family members urge her to leave him and annul the marriage. Friends begin to drop the couple from their social circle. Representatives of Sylvan Park encourage Neil to sell his house and leave the development. Biddy is snubbed and ridiculed by her playmates. The

couple begins receiving hate mail. Drawing a sharp distinction between the lives of educated black men like the fictional John Woolcape and Ash Davis and the real-life Walter White and James Weldon Johnson, Lewis's novel includes a letter written by an uneducated white man, one who obviously has never actually seen what Neil looks like, that is addressed to "Dear Mister Smart Nigger Kingsblood," ranting and threatening:

...all these years you been pretending to be a decent white man and now...you are nothing but a nigger and you are trying to get away with it and claim where niggers are just as good as white men.... He gave them that disgusting black color like yours to show they inferior dont [sic] you see that.... The next time you wont [sic] get off so easy we dont [sic] give you coons a second chants [sic] trying to look like a white man. (SL, *KR* 225)

Neil's father dies suddenly and other family members blame the protagonist for his death. His black friends, however, support Neil and attend the funeral. He loses his job at the bank and, to make ends meet, the family is forced to give up the luxuries they had once enjoyed and sell their car. Neil's job search is hindered by the fact that he is now often known to be a "black" man but he refuses to pass as white to find employment. Even when one or two kindly white men do give him jobs, they are pressured by the rest of the white community to let him go. Vestal is socially ostracized as well, having committed the "crime" of being "married to a Negro" (SL, *KR* 251).

Neil begins to become more self-aware, realizing that he had acted as a condescending white man when he was trying to learn about African American life from people like Ash, John, and Sophie. As life continues to deteriorate for Neil and his family, he starts to reflect the growing sentiments of a large portion of the black community during the 1940s who believed that "it was time for a Negro, even one so newly born, to be defiant

or be broken” (SL, *KR* 263). But an elderly black man, a man mired in the past, urges him to be humble instead: “Neil, it don’t make no difference what you were *once*. Now you’re nothing but another colored man. Play safe, like me” (SL, *KR* 265). But whites in Grand Republic, feeling threatened by the growing civil rights activism in the United States, go on the offensive and fire educated black men like Ash Davis, found an organization much like the Ku Klux Klan, and display white “liberal” hypocrisy at its worst. The result is that Neil is being “driven into violently embracing his crusade. It was his bride, his sword, his crown, his scourge, his victory, his defeat. It was his busy little fad and it was his prayer and his madness, his crucifixion and his glory” (SL, *KR* 277).

Vestal’s support and love for Neil increase due to what she is undergoing as the wife of a newly-black man and because she becomes pregnant. Then, one evening, “four solid citizens,” as Lewis ironically describes them, who are members of the “Neighborhood Committee” but are anything but neighborly, arrive at their home (SL, *KR* 277). They are the “Former Friends” of the couple, people Neil now likens to Nazis who—smug and clueless—feel that they are acting unselfishly and on behalf of the common weal when they ask the Kingsbloods to leave their home (SL, *KR* 278). The four hint of violence to come: “Lots of folks around here don’t want colored neighbors, and that’s the clux [sic]...of the whole matter!.... So maybe you would be happier in some other neighborhood...and a whole lot safer.... They simply will not tolerate a non-Caucasian living here and lowering the social tone of the community” (SL, *KR* 279). Another expresses his anger at “darkies living as nice as I do, after all the hard work I put in to get where I am” (SL, *KR* 279). Lewis satirically deconstructs the blatant hypocrisy of such claims by whites, men who were able to achieve the middle-class dream of owning a home in a community like Sylvan Park less because they worked hard and more because they were white. At the



same time, these white community members—feeling themselves secure in their superior societal position--fail to acknowledge or even consider the torturous lives of black slaves and the physically-demanding and menial jobs to which most African Americans were condemned during the Jim Crow era. Not even Neil--a man who looks white, a man who was raised as white, a man who fought for his country and was wounded in the War, and a man who was thought of as white until he discovered that he remained a human being even after he had become a “black” man, is worthy of or entitled to reside in a pleasant, little home next to them.

The confrontation moves Vestal into standing wholeheartedly with Neil. She, like him, is naïve, but she is also, like him, resolute. “Oh, Neil, we’ll live now, even if we die from it!” she exclaims (SL, *KR* 281). But when she has several African American couples to their home for dinner, the evening does not go well. Vestal is not yet able to let go of her misconceptions and stereotypical views of blacks. She even briefly considers terminating the pregnancy because she “can’t stand giving birth to a Negro baby!” (SL, *KR* 287).

Things go from bad to worse. Neil is fired from his latest low-paying job due to pressure from the Klan-like group and Vestal is forced to find employment outside the home because her husband—now seen as a “black” man—is not hireable. In a reversal of the tragic mulatta literary motif, Neil’s wife constantly reminds him that she is “the tragic white woman [who] was toiling to support a vagrant Negro, and that such heroism was too uncomfortable to last” (SL, *KR* 299). More and more black citizens of Grand Republic are being fired from their jobs. Reflecting changes in civil rights activism and how black Americans were growing in confidence and defiance during the 1940s, the younger African Americans in the town, Lewis pens, are “less friendly than their fathers might have

been.... They had demanded then only a roof and sidemeat and not to be lynched. Now, they were demanding every human right.... The black crusade had never seemed so risky as now” (KR 301).

Neil and Vestal are visited several more times in attempts to force them from their Sylvan Park home. Restrictive covenants, “those gentlemanly agreements whereby white purchasers of property agreed never to sell to any Negro, not even to Dumas or St. Augustine” will be used to do so (SL, KR 303). These restrictions, Lewis satirically reports, “have been the most delightful of devices for tactfully saying to all clean and ambitious Negroes that the better whites preferred them to be dirty, unambitious, and distant” (SL, KR 303). But Neil continues to resist, taking a stubborn stand and declaring that “I want to fight out the whole business of restrictive covenants. We’ll make ‘em illegal. Now that they’ve forced me to be a Negro, I’m going to *be* one” (SL, KR 309).

Actual events that occurred in Detroit in the 1920s eerily foreshadow those in Lewis’s fictionalized Grand Republic. The Michigan State Supreme Court “upheld the constitutionality of restrictive covenants (agreements restricting the use or occupancy of a residence by a person of a particular race) in *Parmalee v. Morris*” in 1923 and the decision was not overturned until 1948 (Wolcott 24). The lawsuit arose after a house in a mostly white neighborhood was sold in 1925 to an African American family and, as a result, the local inhabitants created the Waterworks Improvement Association “exclusively for the purpose of maintaining a ‘whites only’ neighborhood” (Wolcott 23). Ossian Sweet and his family moved in, despite legal and violent efforts aimed at preventing them from doing so. Sweet and his friends took up arms from inside his house, killing one member of the mob and wounding another; all the defenders were arrested for murder. The NAACP and Clarence Darrow rose to their defense, as did Walter White (Cooney, “WW and SL” 67),

and, in 1926 the jury found Henry Sweet not guilty and dropped the charges against the others.

Another incidence of white mob violence being used to enforce a restrictive covenant also occurred in Detroit, more than three decades after the travails of the Sweet family. *Time Magazine* reports in April, 1956, that “on Detroit’s comfortably middle-class Robson Avenue one evening last week, 500 angry people acted out a savage syllogism: 1) Negroes are not welcome on Robson Avenue, 2) the new family is Negro, 3) the new family must get out” (“Buyer” 24). The neighbors had refused to believe that Mr. Rouse, the homeowner, was partly Native American and not black and, therefore, felt justified in throwing rocks at the house. And, just as in the fictional scenes in *Kingsblood Royal*, the Rouses were “visited by officers of the neighborhood improvement association” who questioned the family’s right to live in the neighborhood and who demanded they sell their home back to them (“Buyer” 24).

In Lewis’s race novel, Neil begins to experience the two-ness of being a black American. Vestal challenges his choice, crying that “you’re two people: the boy I married and a Negro I don’t know at all. Which of them am I married to now?” (SL, KR 307). Tensions both inside and outside the home escalate. The *Kingsblood*’s beloved dog is killed and threatening messages are painted on the family’s garage. While things look marginally better economically when Neil is offered a job by a man descended from abolitionists, Vestal is being pushed beyond her limits of tolerance and events begin moving towards a climatic confrontation.

The racism that had been somewhat sublimated in the white community—overt without being violent and extant without being physically explosive until a “black” man is discovered living among them—is gone. Long-simmering problems and discriminatory

attitudes coalesce in a vortex of hatred when Neil's "blackness" is unmasked. And, just as in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho*, Sinclair Lewis juxtaposes a seemingly benign scene with the true ugliness of racism and with the violence of which white Americans are capable when they feel threatened. Before Neil and Vestal are attacked in their sylvan home, he writes, the "background of suburban street could not have been more placid, with the branches in a gently moving screen across the cool lamplighted windows over the way" (SL, KR 318). But, then, suddenly and grotesquely:

...against this background, the menace grew rapidly. Dozens and then scores of men and excited women filled the yards opposite, oozed into the street.

Aggressive men pushed forward in the center, men whose killer faces were the more grotesque above their pert ties, their near-gentlemanly tweed jackets. They ceased to be human beings; they became bubbles on a dark cataract of hate. (SL, KR 318)

After moving Biddy to safety and, unlike previous decades when black citizens did not take up arms to defend themselves against white violence, Neil and Vestal bring down his rifles to defend themselves and their home. To her credit, Vestal has chosen stand by her husband, despite the fact she is now a social pariah. She proudly proclaims: "I'm not going! I stick" (SL, KR 315). While the local policemen choose not to respond to help them, a diverse group of people comprised of members of the African American community and a small number of well-meaning liberal whites join together to fight for social justice and come to the aid of the embattled family. As Sterling Brown characterizes this type of resistance, "[T]hey have heard the threats.... But getting hurt in a stand-up struggle for justice is one thing; getting hurt merely because of the color of your

skin, while lying down, is quite another” (“Count” 385). Critic Fleming concludes about this scene: “Lewis contends that times have changed since the 1920s, that one’s race is no longer something that has to be hidden, that black people will defend their rights if necessary, and that well-meaning whites will join their Negro neighbors in a just cause” (220). But the sad reality is that the vast majority of the white residents of Sylvan Park side with the attackers who seek to oust the Kingsbloods from their home by whatever means it takes. The white inhabitants of this Grand Republic have become the incarnations of the apelike, animalistic animals they presume all black Americans to be.

During the midst of the mob violence, Vestal’s arm is grazed by a bullet. Neil, an excellent hunter and marksman, shoots the Reverend Dr. Jat Snood in his leg. Further gunfire erupts. Finally, the police move in and begin arresting Neil and his supporters, yelling to Vestal that “We don’t want you. We just want these niggers—starting all this riot, shooting prominent citizens!” (SL, KR 320). But Vestal insists that “you’ll have to take me. Didn’t you know I’m a Negro, too?” (SL, KR 320). When they refuse, she hits a policeman on the head with her gun and, as a result, is loaded into the waiting police van with the others. As the policeman urges Vestal to “keep moving” into the wagon, Lewis’s satirical, subversive novel of passing—*Kingsblood Royal*--ends with Vestal’s cry of “We’re moving” (321).

Vestal’s statement that “We’re moving” can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The phrase could refer to the forward march of civil rights by and for African Americans; a shift towards the blackness that Lewis appears to value over the negative traits of whiteness; to a physical resettlement in another community; or to a repudiation of the shallow complacency, bigotry, and seemingly benign banality of Sylvan Park. Her words and sentiments echo those of Richard Wright in his “12 Million Black Voices” who

writes that “Men are moving! And we shall be with them” (147).

Over their lifetimes, both Mark Twain and Sinclair Lewis changed in their understanding of race and its implications for American society. Lewis’s journey towards a better appreciation of the condition of America’s black citizens—and of systemic discrimination, racism, and bigotry—evolved over years. Like Mark Twain had before him, Lewis gradually developed a heightened awareness of race relations and came to blame whites for America’s “Negro problem.” By 1934 he had joined the NAACP and was supporting the organization financially; he was also among the judges of their Spingarn Medal (Lingeman 494). Lewis formed a friendship with Walter White that “lasted for nearly a quarter of a century and to some extent was reflected in Lewis’s novels,” although their relationship waxed and waned at different points over the years (Cooney, “WW and SL” 63).

Lewis met White in the fall of 1924 after having written a few lines praising White’s *The Fire in the Flint*. The white novelist soon met numerous African American authors and civil rights luminaries through White including Claude McKay, Thurgood Marshall, Roi Ottley, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson (Cooney, “WW and SL” 65, 69). White even arranged for the author to read the NAACP’s files in which he “found incidents illustrating the kinds of discrimination Negroes were facing in the North as well as the South—restrictive housing covenants, for example” (Lingeman 496).

In 1945 Lewis published an essay in *Esquire Magazine*. In his “Gentlemen, This is Revolution,” he writes that his changing views on race had been affected by Richard Wright’s books *Black Boy* and *Native Son*; by the civil rights activism of a man he called a friend, Walter White; by Gunnar Myrdal’s treatise on race in America, *An American Dilemma*; and by the writings of men like George Schuyler (Lewis, “Gentlemen”

148-152). The novelist also strongly states that his personal views of race relations in America had evolved, penning that the “unwritten manifesto of this revolution states that the Negro...is no longer humble and patient—and unlettered; and that an astonishingly large group of Negro scholars and journalists and artists are expressing their resolution with courage and skill. They are no longer ‘colored people.’ They are *people*” (“Gentlemen 150).

Lewis began researching a book about race—the one that became *Kingsblood Royal*--several years before its publication. As he prepared to write the novel, the author investigated black life in a variety of ways, emulating Neil’s own journey towards achieving a better understanding of black America. “His legwork included trips to the south, inspections of ghetto areas in the north, and long conversations with as many Negroes as he could get to talk to him,” according to James Lundquist (120). Introduced by his bartender Edward Nichols, Lewis met with dozens and dozens of black citizens in Duluth, Minnesota where he was living in late 1945 when he seriously began undertaking writing his race novel; the people he encountered ranged from the local NAACP leader, to African American ministers, and to former soldiers (Lingeman 495, 497). While he was in Duluth, Lewis employed a cook, chauffeur, and housekeeper—all of whom were black--and, on several occasions, went to services at a local African Methodist Church with them (Manfred 171; Koblas 131-32).

Lewis expresses even stronger sentiments about race in an article originally published in 1947 in *Wings*. In his “A Note about *Kingsblood Royal*,” he states that “What will be cried from the housetops is that I have written a novel which is so frantically devoted to racial controversy that it will entail a new attack on Fort Sumter. Actually, the ‘race question’ is only a small part of *Kingsblood Royal*, but it is the part

which will stand out” (37). Lewis continues, stating:

I don't think the Negro Problem is insoluble because I don't think there is any Negro Problem. The races of mankind in every country run through a gradation of color from intense black to the almost pure white.... No one has ever determined just where the line in this shading is to be drawn.... The mad, picture-puzzle idiocy of the whole theory of races is beautifully betrayed when you get down to the question of 'Negroes' who are white enough to pass as Caucasians.... None of the profound and convincing nonsense of race difference can be made into sense. ("Note" 38)

Sinclair Lewis's satirical *Kingsblood Royal* is centered on the shocking choice of a “white” man to self-identify as “black.” Perhaps because of this, the subversive work was the eighth best-selling fiction book in America in 1947 and sold nearly one and one-half million copies. It is a race novel, one that Lewis hoped would change the hearts and minds of his fellow white Americans. But despite the fact that it is uneven, lacks lofty prose, has stereotypical characters, veers towards the propagandistic, and contains numerous preachy passages, the novel was given *Ebony Magazine's* “award for the book that has done the most to promote interracial understanding in 1947” (“Ebony” 2684).

Success notwithstanding, contemporary reviews were justifiably mixed, with critics alternately panning and praising the literary merits and advocacy goals of Lewis's work. A *Newsweek* reviewer addresses its impact on the racial divide, writing that “it is doubtful if the guns will crackle as a result of Lewis's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but all the advocates of White Supremacy will pop at him” (“America's” 98). Frank Marshall Davis's 1946 essay deals with the reaction of white readers to the novel, suggesting that “if I were white and possessed the usual quota of prejudice against colored people, and then by



chance happened to read *Kingsblood Royal*, I think I would be scared almost witless by the fear of Negro forebears” (61). He does feel that Lewis achieves his dogmatic aims and decides that “this is the kind of story that everybody should be forced by law to read and discuss, particularly white Americans” (Frank Marshall Davis 62). The 1947 review in *New Masses* entitled “The Broadaxe of Sinclair Lewis” looks at both the quality and opinion elements of the novel, concluding that *Kingsblood* is “not merely a good or interesting book, but as important a document on the subject as anyone has written this past decade. Be damned with those who say it is poorly written! When a man cuts down a tree, he doesn’t use a penknife but a two-edged ax” (Fast 24). James McInteer strikes a similar note, praising the work for its attack on America’s racial *status quo* as he states that Lewis has “struck vehemently at the most controversial and explosive social question facing Americans today. Criticisms may be leveled at the book, but the deep-rooted prejudices, superstitions, and ignorance are revealed with shocking honesty” (62).

Interestingly, reviewers did not address Lewis’s use of the passing theme in *Kingsblood* nor whether or not the genre was effectively utilized by the author as a means through which to address America’s “color problem.” But they did discuss its doctrinaire approach. P. L. Prattis, in the African American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*, for example, writes that the renowned author has “written a startling book (for white people) and he has his complete armor on as he sits at his typewriter to do battle on the race problem” (7). In the *New York Times*, Orville Prescott roundly condemns the work, stating that the “race prejudice he denounces is a cruel injustice, a serious threat to the welfare of our country. But *Kingsblood Royal* is effective only as a sociological tract” (21).

In the provocatively-titled article “5 Million U. S. White Negroes,” published in

*Ebony* in 1948, Roi Ottley provides a synopsis of race and racial identity constructions in American history after beginning his discussion by asking: “What is it that makes a man a Negro?” (22). He lays blame for this issue being raised to new heights on Sinclair Lewis, writing that his “best-selling novel *Kingsblood Royal* has forcefully brought the question before the white community and many whites are looking around their circle for the elusive ‘mulatto in the woodpile’” (Ottley 23). James Baldwin’s consideration, however, focuses not on the reaction of white readers, despite the fact that the Nobel Laureate knew that most white Americans had to be shocked into re-appraising their own bigotry and racism, but instead condemns the work for its “presupposition...[that] black is a terrible color with which to be born into the world” (“Many” 80). In contrast, Eslanda Robeson, wife of the famed Paul Robeson, wrote to Lewis: “It is a beautiful job, and one which Negroes could not have done, because it just isn’t our side of the medal” (qtd. in Lingeman 507).

The controversy raged on. Soon after the book’s publication, *Ebony* trumpeted Lewis’s work, opining that the novel “presents an idea which, to most Americans, is revolutionary—that Negroes are nothing more nor less than human beings” and that “Lewis has painted a down-to-earth, penetrating, complete portrait of Negro life in America through the medium of a dramatic, heart-rending story” (“*Kingsblood*” 9). But Alain Locke disagreed with *Ebony*’s assessment. He comments in “A Critical Retrospect of the Literature of the Negro for 1947” that “it cannot be easy when a veteran novelist like Sinclair Lewis all but fails and has to resort to periodic dashes of the satire and in the end, inconclusive melodrama to keep his story vital and moving,” although Locke does acknowledge that Lewis has performed a “great service toward breaking down or through psychological walls of American pride and prejudice” (4, 5).

Condemnation of the novel’s obvious literary shortcomings was the focus of other

reviewers. Malcolm Cowley's *New Yorker* piece judges it to be poorly written and a "long step down the ladder from *Arrowsmith* and the four other big novels that Lewis wrote between 1920 and 1929" ("Books: Problem" 100). Similarly, James Baldwin, writing in *Commentary*, eviscerates the novel, penning that "with *Kingsblood Royal* we descend abruptly into a kind of lugubrious, sentimental nightmare. This is an ill-tempered, tasteless, condescending novel" ("Books" 379). And, in his "How Good is Sinclair Lewis?," Warren Beck concludes not only that the novel is poorly written but also that it is utterly incongruous that the author received the Nobel Prize; he castigates *Kingsblood Royal* for being filled with "irresponsible exaggerations" and for its "tendency to betray his protagonist into incongruities which discompose theme and shatter the reader's evolving illusion" (175).

Walter White rose to Lewis's defense, citing his personal experience as a "black" American who could and did pass as "white" on occasion. "Nearly three decades of experience along the color line from the somewhat perilous vantage point of one with one half the Negro blood which was Neil's," he writes, "compels me to take my stand with Sinclair Lewis" (White, *Hails* 6). The renowned civil rights activist continues, writing that "whatever literary or structural or problematical faults *Kingsblood Royal* may possess, it is beyond all doubt one of the most important and prophetic books of our time" (White, *Hails* 6).

Readers of the novel were as divided in their opinions of it as were the critics, writing letters to Lewis to express both admiration and dismay. "I finished it with nothing but disgust and wonderment that such could ever have come from your gifted pen!...Negroes were glorified at the expense of the white people," wrote one, while another asks: "Is this your announcement to the world of your 'coming out'? Are you a negro, Mr.

Lewis? Indeed, I can not [sic] imagine anyone but a negro having such a deep love and admiration for the colored race” (qtd. in Fisher, “Desegregating” 125-26). But at least one man did confess that, after reading *Kingsblood*, he had “been guilty (even as your hero was before he discovered his ancestry) of treating colored people quite differently than I would any of the other races” and that he was ashamed for having treated blacks as something “separate” and “not human” (qtd. in Fisher, “Desegregating” 126). The book was considered so controversial and contentious by some that, as renowned Mark Twain critic Shelley Fisher Fishkin reports, a large number of letters were sent to the FBI complaining about it; the organization “considered *Kingsblood Royal* so subversive that it even stamped ‘SECRET’ a book review” of it and placed it in the file the organization had been keeping on Lewis since 1923 (“Desegregating” 127).

In the twenty-first century, criticism of Lewis’s satirical and outrageous passing novel *Kingsblood Royal* has undergone a re-evaluation. Fishkin contends, in a 2002 article entitled “Desegregating American Literary Studies,” that *Kingsblood Royal* “is nearly forgotten today by all but a handful of scholars. This is unfortunate, since it represents more than the bold and controversial efforts of a canonical, white, Nobel Prize-winning American author to understand the dynamics of racism in American race relations” (125). Deems Delton in 2003, “Lewis found a path out of the soul-killing existence of modern life” in his *Kingsblood Royal* “by repudiating something called whiteness and accepting the sacrifices that entailed. Reading the novel today, one is struck by both its forward-looking critique of white racism and its inability to transcend the phenomenon it purports to critique” (311). She additionally comments on Lewis’s subversiveness in the novel, contending that he transposes the “common literary equation of blackness with sin and whiteness with salvation” (Delton 311). In a similar vein,

Catherine Jurca maintains in 2001 that Neil's conversion to self-identification with the African American community means not only that "blackness is not just an identity" but also that the new-found allegiance has "simultaneously introduced him to middle-class self-pity, which is by definition white in *Kingsblood Royal*, and offered him a way out of it" (73).

As the debate about the merits and demerits of Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal* demonstrates, America's obsession with race and passing continued unabated in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s—in scientific circles, in essays, in novels, and in political tracts. Despite John H. Burma's 1946 claim in the *American Journal of Sociology* that "probably all Negroes who can pass do so" but also that there is generally "no disposition to become permanently identified with the white group" (22), "black" Americans continued to pass as "white" for entertainment and travel, for better economic opportunities, and to permanently escape the conditions in which many African Americans found themselves.

Renowned author Langston Hughes—who employs the passing theme in a number of his essays and short stories—admits that "in the United States there are some advantages in being or pretending to be, any kind of colored person but an American Negro.... If, by passing, one can get a better job, I say 'Go for it'" ("Passing for White" 10). And go for it did numerous African Americans according to Herbert Asbury in a 1946 article entitled "Who Is a Negro?." Asbury states that "more than 2,000,000 persons with colored blood have crossed the line since the end of the Civil War" and also that "between 15,000 and 30,000 persons classed as Negroes go over to the white side every year" (72, 12). His article details responses from black Americans in New York City to questions they were asked about passing; the respondents were selected to be physically varied and both those with lighter and darker complexions were questioned. One gentleman replied that "I pass,

myself. Every day from nine to five I'm a white man.... Nearly every night I come home to Harlem because my folks and all of my friends are colored," while another asks, "What's the matter with white people, anyway? They seem to have no pride in race. One dash of black blood makes a man a Negro, but a dash of white blood won't make a man white" (Asbury 12). Asbury states that when white women marry black men the wife usually "follows the husband into the colored community" (12), just as Josephine Cogdell did when she married George Schuyler and moved to Sugar Hill in Harlem with him. The author then goes on to weigh the pros and cons of passing for work and financial opportunities as opposed to passing permanently and leaving the African American community behind.

Writing to counter Asbury's article, E. W. Eckard disputes the other's findings and presents his own statistical evidence of how many black Americans pass. He concludes that only a small number of eligible African Americans do so--less than 2,000 per year in his estimation--and that the "notion of white assimilation by the black is unrealistic and without factual ground" (Eckard 500). Eckard's essay is then cited in a 1956 *Jet* article entitled "Have Negroes Stopped Passing?" Its author concludes that "passing among light-complexioned Negroes was nearly passé almost a decade ago, according to Dr. E. W. Eckard.... And the steady annual decrease in that figure is directly linked to the constant improvement of the Negro economic standard" ("Have" 12).

While the numbers of African Americans who passed as white in the decades surrounding the Second World War may be debatable and although the amount of passing may have slowed by the late 1940s and the 1950s, it did continue, as did interest in the issue by both black and white citizens. An article appearing in the April, 1949, edition of *Negro Digest*, written by a white Southern man named John Hewlett, is entitled "Four Who Are

Passing.” The author briefly describes the situations of four unidentified African Americans who are passing as white, one of whom says that the choice was worth the negatives, stating that “being a Negro in a white world that puts so much emphasis on ambition, personal power, glory and making money, is hard. When white people made the rules, they made them for themselves” (Hewlett 12). Hewlett feels that he must explain this to his reading audience and, without a touch of irony, adds that passing is a “new American idea” that “means to...change from one race to another” while deciding that black people who choose this life are “silly” for doing so (8-9, 13).

The true story of the Johnston family of Keene, New Hampshire, was not only published in newspapers, magazines, and a book, but was also turned into the play and film entitled *Lost Boundaries* (1949). The father, Dr. Albert Johnston, and his wife passed for over twenty years--and his children for all their lives--before their mixed-race heritage was uncovered. In an article and photography spread published in *Look* in 1949, Dr. Johnston revealed that he decided to expose the family’s racial background when his son praised a classmate as a fine young man “even if he is colored” (“This Family” 38). Ironically, to a reporter for the *Afro-American*, Dr. Johnston admitted that “if he could start all over again he would begin in the same community by telling everybody his racial identity” (Hicks C8). *Washington Post* reporter Howard Mansfield reveals in 1989, one year after Dr. Johnston died, that the family not only passed as white but that Mrs. Johnson, who was Catholic, passed as Protestant. “The citizens [of Keene] wanted to be sure they had only the ‘best’ people living there—no Jews or Catholics, for example—so they sold to us at a ridiculous price,” Dr. Johnston is quoted as stating; “they seemed to think that since we were Protestant and white, we were just right” (Mansfield 2). The “rightness” of these realities is reflected in the fictional pages of Lewis’s passing novel, *Kingsblood Royal*.

*I Passed for White*, published in 1955 under the pseudonym of Reba Lee, is a book-length revelation of a woman who chose to pass for good. She married a young, upper class, white executive and claimed that it was the “Cinderella dream come true. The fairy tale ending. Married and lived happily ever after” (Lee 140). “I *was* white,” she claims, and “I had a place and a position” in white suburbia (Lee 157). But, after giving birth, when Lee asks if the baby is black, her life of lies spirals out of control. She decides to return to being an African American without telling her husband about the deception.

In addition to scholarly and scientific articles about passing being published in the mainstream media, titillating exposés on the topic appeared in the popular press. The ostensible author of a lurid tell-all entitled “Dark Secret,” published in *Tan Confessions* in 1951, confesses that she used her racial ambiguity—and good looks—to move to a better level of society. The story’s protagonist, Laurette Ford, begins dating a young white man and does not reveal her racial background to him. They go to swanky establishments and are entertained by the wealthy and, as she breathlessly reveals to *Tan*’s fascinated readers, “no one was able to see through the veneer of my deception. I too became surer of myself, satisfied that this was the world I wanted to belong to,” even though her mother warns her not to continue the deception (“Dark” 48). Laurette confesses her secret but her lover still asks her to marry him. However, the young woman decides to end the relationship because it had been her “own selfishness, more than anything else, that prompted me to turn my back on my own heritage” (“Dark 49). She soon began dating an African American man and realized that this was a healthier relationship because she felt “a nearness and closeness that can only be shared by two people who want the same things: acceptance and an opportunity in life—as a Negro” (“Dark” 49).



A similarly prurient tale is told by “Betty” who relates how she passed for “the dream of getting a little cottage for mother, who had slaved to the point of endangering her health, so that her ‘white’ daughter could ‘pass’” (“I Passed for Love” 33), circumstances not unlike those described in the fictional narrative *Gulf Stream*. Ironically, to the delight of both the young man with whom she falls in love and of Betty, both of them reveal that they have been passing as white. Once they admit their true racial backgrounds and are freed from the constraints that passing imposes, Betty and Steve announce their love for each other and find true happiness.

Black Americans who could have passed as white—but chose not to—were also interviewed and their experiences published in both black and white periodicals. These articles served a variety of purposes, depending on a reader’s interest in and opinions about racial issues. They fed America’s obsession with its “race problem,” serving to prove or disprove white opinions about black Americans while, at the same time, working to inculcate self-pride in the African American community. Like his fictional and real-life counterparts, a St. Louis man proudly reclaimed his African American heritage in 1958 after passing for over thirty years for economic benefits. Although the reporter condemns the passing as a “clever masquerade,” Fred Demery asserts that he “wouldn’t want to go through that again” and explains that his passing “was done on a strictly business basis.... I wanted a job.... [T]hey were hiring few whites and no Negroes. I lost a lot of pleasure in life just to keep a job. It was hell” (“I Lived” 157). Telling her own tale of passing, a young “black” American reveals in a 1951 issue of *Jet* that she passed both for her mother’s sake and also for a better job. She, too, rejects “white” life for the African American community, declaring that “I, too, once thought that going over into the white world was a simple way out, an answer to my own personal problems. But after 12 years

of having been ‘white’ I can truthfully say that I’ll never make that choice again. I’m through with passing” (“I’m Through” 22). A tantalizing addition to this *Jet* article is a photographic array of seventeen young women; the magazine asks readers to identify which one of those pictured is the young woman who had successfully passed for many years.

Like the heroine in the 1949 film *Pinky*, actress Janice Kingslow refused to pass or deny her African heritage. What she writes, instead, is that “I too look white...and I was once offered the same choice as Pinky. I was offered a chance that millions of American girls have dreamed of. A chance of fame, of respect, of fortune in exchange for those same five words. ‘I am not a Negro.’ And I, too, refused” (Kingslow 22). Kingslow also recounts that, when she revealed her racial background to a producer, she saw not only “bewilderment” in his face but a “look of vulgar and insulting familiarity. As though by the single admission that I was a member of the Negro race I had immediately changed, in their eyes, into an entirely different person—a person apparently devoid in their opinion, of self-respect” (Kingslow 25). Despite losing out on acting opportunities because she refused to pass as white, Kingslow states that she did not regret her decision.

Similarly, a 1951 issue of *Life* details the story of Herb Jeffries, a man described as having “smoky blue eyes and a vaguely Latin...look about him. He could pass for, and is often mistaken for, a Spaniard, an Italian, a Mexican, a Portuguese, an Argentine and occasionally a Jew. He has scrupulously elected to ‘pass’ for nothing but what he is—a light-skinned Negro” (R. Williams 81). Jeffries, married to a white woman, explains his decision: “I decided some time ago that Negro people need all the good, intelligent, unbelligerent representatives they can get in this world, and I’m trying to be one” (R. Williams 82).

A 1952 article entitled “Why ‘Passing’ is Passing Out,” published in *Jet Magazine*, recognizes the example set by Janice Kingslow and other African Americans who chose not to pass as “white.” Its author states that many younger black Americans who could pass are opting not to do so for reasons including a decrease in obstructions placed in their way; an increase in economic and educational opportunities; and better access to social amenities, travel accommodations, and entertainment for black Americans (“Why ‘Passing’ Is” 13-15).

Although the passage of decades and increasing employment opportunities led to a decrease in the number of African Americans who opted to join the “white” race, some continued to do so. Author and critic Anatole Broyard, who finally admitted to his children on his deathbed that he had passed as white his entire adult life, writes, without a hint of irony, a 1950 essay entitled “Portrait of an Inauthentic Negro: How Prejudice Distorts the Victim’s Personality” in which he states:

...the Negro usually cannot conceal his identity.... Since he cannot hide from society, he often hides from himself. In fact...in many cases, the inauthentic Negro almost entirely occupies himself with either affirming (ingratiation) or denying his behavior...until his personality is virtually usurped by a series of maneuvers none of which has any necessary relation to his true self. (57)

Broyard goes on to aver, hiding the paradoxical nature of his own words in what may have been an apt description of his own life, that “worst of all, the inauthentic Negro is not only estranged from whites—he is also estranged from his own group and from himself” (63).

Reverse passing—“white” Americans choosing to identify as “blacks”—was rare but still occasionally took place. Investigative reporter Ray Sprigle, a white man working

for the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*, tanned himself deeply, traveled throughout the South, and then wrote about his experiences as a black man in 1949. His *In the Land of Jim Crow* opens with these lines: “I was a Negro in the Deep South.... For four endless, fear-filled weeks, along with the ten million other Negroes of the South, I lived under the burden of the Jim Crow system, with its iniquitous pattern of oppression and cruelty and discrimination. I ate, slept, traveled, lived black” (Sprigle 1). Rather naïvely, and not unlike Lewis’s fictional Neil Kingsblood, Sprigle paints Northerners in a much better light than Southern whites, although he does acknowledge that there is discrimination and prejudice above the Mason-Dixon Line. He contends that “discrimination against the Negro in the North is an annoyance and an injustice. In the South it is a bloodstained tragedy” (7). Among the many experiences he chronicles, Sprigle notes that “everywhere I went in the South, I encountered scores of Negroes as white as I ever had been back home in Pittsburgh” and that “there are many thousands of Negroes in the South who can ‘pass’ any day they wish. I saw hundreds and talked to scores of them” (22, 22-23).

Authors of fictional novels also continued using the passing genre. Like Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal*, some of them are filled with satire, irony, and paradoxical situations. Both Chester Himes’s 1945 novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and his 1952 work *The Third Generation* are distinctively different from Sinclair Lewis’s race novel. Written by an African American, rather than by a white man who travelled to the South and interviewed black people to gain insight, however well-intentioned, Himes’s works are modern in tone and spirit and employ black vernacular. In the vibrant, urban world of *If He Hollers*, there is none of the blandness, homogeneity, and complacent smugness of Lewis’s white suburbia.

*If He Hollers* is told from the perspective of an African American ship worker who

struggles with the rampant racism of his era. Violence and a bleak outlook about the conditions in which most African Americans found themselves during the 1940s due to their racial heritage are woven into the novel. The novelist rejects the tragic mulatta theme used for so many decades and, while he incorporates passing among his other discussions of racial issues, passing is not used as a safe way to discuss race or as a method of demonstrating that blacks are proven to be the equals of whites when one cannot visually determine who is who. To Himes and his black American contemporaries, blacks *are* the equals of whites--it is American society that keeps them from being considered to be so and from being treated fairly. In its condemnation of America—and all the ills that emanated from slavery--*If He Hollers* seems more akin to Mark Twain and his *Pudd'nhead Wilson* than to Sinclair Lewis and his *Kingsblood Royal*.

Himes's work features Robert "Bob" Jones as its protagonist, a man from Ohio who has some college education but who has found a decent, blue-collar job in Los Angeles. The other two main characters are women—Madge, a white woman who refuses to work for Bob, even though she is sexually drawn to him, and Alice, Bob's light-complexioned girlfriend whose family is modestly successful and upwardly mobile.

Racism and white dominance are the targets of Himes. Hints of passing are then incorporated into the work as are discussions about the differing skin tones found within the black community. A housemate of Bob's chides him for having the "whitest coloured girl you could find," a woman who is "rich and light and almost white" (Himes, *IHH* 47). Alice's mother is described as a "very light-complexioned woman with sharp Caucasian features and glinting grey eyes.... She was aristocratic-enough looking...but she had that look of withered soul and body that you see on the faces of many old white ladies in the South" (Himes, *IHH* 49).

When Bob takes Alice out one evening to a nice establishment, she is uncomfortable because Bob is so much darker than she is. She admits that “with you everybody here knows just what we are” (Himes, *IHH* 60). Bob accuses her of passing, exclaiming that “you mean when you go in with the white folks the people think you’re white” (Himes, *IHH* 60). The two argue and are asked not to return to the restaurant. As she drives him home, Alice tries to explain that “I like to go places in a party.... Then to the theatre and a night club afterward” to which Bob responds, “With the white folks” (Himes, *IHH* 62). Alice drives faster and faster and, when they are pulled over by motorcycle policemen, she is asked whether or not she is white. She is self-confident due to her family’s social status and feels empowered to question and challenge the policemen but is rattled by the encounter and by the lack of respect she is shown by the pair. Bob tries to placate her but defiantly asks: “You’re not just finding out you’re a nigger?,” sentiments that do nothing to ease the situation (Himes, *IHH* 64).

Black-white relations and racial tensions fill the novel. The friends and acquaintances of Bob and Alice seem to speak of little else, discussing such topics as white women who marry black men and women who look like Alice who prefer white men. When he sees Alice on a date with another man, Bob realizes that “her skin looked too white, as if she had powdered it with chalk. I got the evil thought that she was trying to make herself look as white as possible so people would think she and Leighton were a white couple” (Himes, *IHH* 64). The protagonist’s anguish at the sight mirrors the other difficulties he is undergoing simply because he is black in a white-dominated society. He thinks to himself: “It really galled me to have a white guy take my girl out on a date. I wouldn’t have minded so much if he had been the sharpest, richest, most important coloured guy in the world; I’d have still felt I could compete. But a white guy had his

colour—I couldn’t compete with that. It was all up to the chick—if she liked white, I didn’t have a chance” (Himes, *IHH* 142).

The other major female character, Madge, proudly proclaims to her co-workers that “I ain’t gonna work with no nigger” (Himes, *IHH* 27). Bob and Madge are on a collision course, swirling around each other in a heady mixture of revulsion and attraction. She goads him into coming to her house. They tussle, things get more violent, and Madge threatens to get him lynched but, challengingly, she then begs him to rape her, an act that would fulfill the stereotypical characterization of the hypersexualized black man. Bob insults her and leaves. To avoid being sent to jail when he is accused of raping Madge, he flees from the police even though he is innocent of the charge. Once caught, he agrees to join the army and the novel ends. All Bob’s hopes for a better life, a life free of racism and white oppression, have been obliterated. He comes to this tragic conclusion about the precariousness of African American life:

*Nigger, you haven’t got a chance.... I knew with the white folks sitting on my brain, controlling my every thought, action, and emotion, making life one crisis after another, day and night, asleep and awake, conscious and unconscious. I couldn’t make it. I knew that unless I found my niche and crawled into it, unless I stopped hating white folks and learned to take them as they came, I couldn’t live in America.* (Himes, *IHH* 150)

Himes self-assesses his narrative and his reasons for writing it in the February, 1946, edition of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, stating that he wrote the novel “for the sole purpose of showing a tiny facet of the frustrations inherent in the lives of present-day Americans, both black and white, and the compulsive behavior resulting therefrom” (“If He Hollers” 13). This frustration is given voice in the novel *If He Hollers* by Bob, a

character who muses: “If I couldn’t live in America as an equal in the minds, hearts, and souls of all white people, if I couldn’t know that I had a chance to do anything any other American could, to go as high as an American citizenship would carry anybody, there’d never be anything in this country for me” (Himes, *IHH* 154). Bob ends his conclusion by stating: “And I knew I was a fool. That was the hell of it” (Himes, *IHH* 154).

The author contends that “it is my small, self-appointed task to write the truth,” a truth that includes the “refusal of Americans...to look upon the grim actualities of their own lives, the depths of their own depravities, the dangers of their dissatisfactions, and the extent of their brutalities” (Himes, “If He Hollers” 13). Horace R. Cayton, reviewing the novel for *The Pittsburgh Courier*, deems it a “great piece of literature” and a “courageous and strong book” in the tradition of Richard Wright (“If He Hollers” 7). The critic acknowledges that “lots of people will think that the book is sexy, even pornographic” but challenges them to look beyond any perception of sensationalism and, instead, to realize that the young author “pours all of his insight which he has gained about the paralyzing fear and hatred which Negroes have developed toward their white suppressors” (Cayton, “If He Hollers” 7).

Chester Himes deals with even darker subject material in *The Third Generation*, the title of which alludes to the number of generations of African Americans since the end of slavery. This novel is centered more on the passing theme than *If He Hollers*. In *The Third Generation*, young Charles Taylor’s parents are a dark-complected father who is a professor at a Mississippi university and a light-complexioned mother who not only likes to pass but who prefers the white race over her own. “It seems to her,” the omniscient narrator informs readers, “that at times their own white blood should predominate and they should want to be palefaces.... She wanted them to grow up to love and respect fine white



people as she did” (Himes, *Third* 10). Lillian Taylor judges her husband as inferior because he is of darker hue but softens her intra-racial condemnation when she also concludes that the “stigma of his blackness was relieved somewhat by his well-formed head, large, hooked nose and flaring nostrils, which she liked to think of as being Arabic” (Himes, *Third* 10).

The author deals with the color distinctions within—and the corresponding stratification of—the African American community. Mrs. Taylor dotes on Charles not only because he has a charming personality but also because “his skin was of a lighter complexion. She thought of it as ‘olive-colored,’ similar to the complexions of southern Europeans” but “in reality it was the rosy, sepia hue common to mulatto children” (Himes, *Third* 11). Her “deepest regret” is that her sons had not “inherited her own soft, straight hair, which, to the same degree as her straight nose and fair complexion, was indicative of her white blood. She had been reared in the tradition that Negroes with straight hair and light complexions were superior to dark-complexioned Negroes with kinky hair” (Himes, *Third* 11), not unlike a number of real-life “black” men and women and their fictionalized counterparts. Lillian even feels that both her parents “would have been accepted as white in a northern state” but unfortunately, in her way of thinking, they lived in the South (Himes, *Third* 15).

Mrs. Taylor invents tales about her background and racial make-up, creating “the fiction of being only one thirty-second part Negro deliberately. It symbolized her contempt and disdain for all the Negroes she felt had tried to hurt her” (Himes, *Third* 18). It is ironic, Himes points out through his narrative, that it is the very fact that Lillian Taylor has at least one drop of black blood that she is defined legally and in every other way an African American by the dominant white society, rather than how she prefers to identify

herself. She considers herself better than those with whom she lives and socializes because “none of them could possibly be her superior, and but a very, very few her equal, because she possessed the very maximum of white blood a Negro can possess and remain a Negro” (Himes, *Third* 18). Lillian passes as white, on occasion, passive-aggressively flaunting her ability to do so to her husband and attributing this as proof of her “whiteness.” Sadly, she is a woman oblivious to the fact that other women in the black community resent both her physical attributes and her ability to pass.

The newly-married Mrs. Taylor has unrealistic expectations of marital intimacy and, when her husband reacts badly to this on their wedding night, their relationship suffers. Years later, when she pushes her husband too far and belittles his sister because she is dark rather than light, William confronts his wife, shouting: “[W]ho do you think you are, a white woman!.... You’re a colored woman, too, just like my sister.... You’ll live to see the day you’ll wish you were black as me” (Himes, *Third* 27). Despite the successes Professor Taylor achieves in life, it is “only his wife [who] could make him feel inferior.... [S]he was so conscious of her white blood she kept him constantly on the defensive.... She seemed destined to bring out the worst in him” (Himes, *Third* 35-36). However, he continues to love Lillian, they remain married, and they raise a family together.

Despite the racial truths that Lillian refuses to acknowledge, she “wanted to rear them [the children] in the belief that they were, in large part, white; that their best traits came from this white inheritance. He wanted to prepare them for the reality of being black” (Himes, *Third* 36). In a tale that addresses the wide range of understanding and conceptualization of what makes a person “black” in the eyes of the white and black communities, Himes has the sons begin to understand their place in America and the strictures and definitions that white society places on them. Much like the young boy in

Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Himes writes, "they had never thought of the rest of them as Negroes. Tom was yellow, William was brown, Charles was tan, and their mother was white. Only she wasn't white like other white people, because she lived with Negroes" (*Third* 95). The boys argue with their mother and she admonishes them not to use the word "nigger." "You mustn't think of yourself as colored," she cries, "your mother is as white as anyone. You both have white blood—fine white blood—in your veins. And never forget it" (Himes, *Third* 99). In making this statement, Mrs. Taylor's words iterate those of Mark Twain's Roxy when the enslaved woman proudly proclaims her linkage to the seemingly-aristocratic First Families of Virginia.

The rest of Himes's tale is tragic and melodramatic. The lives of the family members, and particularly those of the boys, are not easy. William becomes blind and Charles is badly hurt in an accident. As an adult, Charles lives a dissipated life, turns against his parents, and eventually serves time in jail. At the novel's end, Professor Taylor dies, but when Charles sees his mother kissing his father goodbye, he realizes that their relationship was complicated in ways he did not understand and finally matures himself.

Langston Hughes joined Sinclair Lewis and Chester Himes as authors using a variety of literary tools during the post-War period to heighten their attacks on the racial *status quo* and on institutionalized injustice. He penned a series of short stories in the passing genre to address these issues. One such tale is a short 1942 work entitled "Jokes on Our White Folks." In "Jokes," Hughes explains that "we colored folks have our little jokes on them, too--purely at their expense" and he then lists several humorous examples of how this is done (97). A young "black" man with a pale complexion passes and joins an all-white Army company in the deep South because the "clerk put him down white in the beginning so he simply carried the joke through" (Hughes, "Joke" 97). But an "even

better joke,” Hughes explains, is when many “blacks” who are able to pass donate blood and, because it is marked as being “white” blood, the “white plasma and colored plasma must be hopelessly scrambled together, and it amuses me to wonder how the Red Cross will ever get it straightened out” (“Jokes” 98). Hughes laughs at the illogic and irrationality of white Americans when he reveals that the “charming mulatto ladies of Jim Crow Washington [are] putting on their light makeup and baring their lovely arms to the needle for the sake of the patriotic and harmless little joke on unscientific Nordics” (“Jokes” 98).

In 1950, Hughes again uses light-heartedness to assault racial prejudice, stereotypes, and dogma. “Because our American whites are stupid in so many ways, racially speaking,” he explains in “Fooling Our White Folks,” “and because there are many things in this U.S.A. of ours which Negroes may achieve only by guile, I have a great tolerance for persons of color who deliberately set out to fool our white folks” (314). Hughes briefly discusses both permanent and temporary passing and then disingenuously declares:

Our white folks are very easily fooled. Being so simple about race, why shouldn't they be? They have no business being prejudiced with so much democracy around. But since they are prejudiced, there's no harm in fooling the devil, is there?.... Most colored folks think that as long as white folks remain foolish, prejudiced and racially selfish, they deserve to be fooled. (“Fooling” 317).

But readers of Hughes's 1952 “Who's Passing for Who?” may find themselves laughing out loud at the various ways the author plays with racial expectations. Hughes skewers and lampoons everyone in this essay, ranging from whites to the snobbish literati of the Harlem Renaissance movement, to blacks who preach racial uplift, and to people

who are boring. As the story unfolds, an African American social worker named Caleb Johnson travels to Harlem one evening with several white teachers from Iowa, people who “appeared amazed and delighted to meet all at once two Negro writers and a black painter in the flesh” (Hughes, “Who’s” 30-31). Johnson invites the artists to join them and friendly banter about race ensues.

A dark-complexioned man and a blonde woman are arguing at the next table and he strikes her several times. The Iowan then hits the African American man and tells him to “Keep your hands off that white woman” (Hughes, “Who’s” 31). Ironically, the woman proclaims that she is “colored” and is, in fact, married to the man. The fighting escalates so Johnson, the two black authors, and the white couple are asked to leave. The group argues about whether the white man would have intervened if the blonde woman had been obviously African American. A discussion about passing follows and Caleb Johnson urges the teachers to read the passing novels of Nella Larsen and also James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* in order to become better educated about the issue of passing.

The Iowans appear to be shocked and amazed but the woman and her husband suddenly tell the group: “Listen, gentlemen, you needn’t spread the word but me and my husband aren’t white either. We’ve just been *passing* for white for the last fifteen years.... We’re colored, too, just like you... But it’s better passing for white because we make more money” (Hughes, “Who’s” 33). Johnson and his friend are amazed by the joke the couple has played on them, Caleb having “thought all the time he was showing some fine white folks Harlem—and they were as colored as he was” (Hughes, “Who’s” 33). They dissolve into laughter and begin kidding around as fellow African Americans.

Hughes final ironic touch is applied as the story ends. As the couple leaves, they

stop their taxi and the woman grinningly proclaims: “Listen, boys! I have to confuse you again. But, to tell the truth, my husband and I aren’t really colored at all. We’re white. We just thought we’d kid you by passing for colored a little while—just as you said Negroes sometimes pass for white” (Hughes, “Who’s” 33). They drive away as their “dumbfounded” companions are left “not knowing now *which* way we’d been fooled. Were they really white—passing for colored? Or colored—passing for white?” (Hughes, “Who’s” 33). Through the laughter he has invoked and the multiple masquerades he has incorporated into his “Who’s Passing for Who?,” Langston Hughes has yet again depicted the permeability of the purportedly impermeable color line and any and all attempts to definitively determine who is “white” and who is “black.” Mark Twain, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Sinclair Lewis, and George Schuyler would have been proud.

Passing novels—and fictional works that include characters who pass--continued to be written in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, although not in as great a quantity as during the Harlem Renaissance decades. Examples include J. Saunders Redding’s 1950 novel *Stranger and Alone* and Allen Tate’s 1938 *The Fathers*. Even white supremacist Thomas Dixon uses a passing character in his 1939 work *The Flaming Sword*, although not to promote the idea that black Americans are the equals or superiors of whites but to demonstrate that African Americans are rapists and murderers from whom white women need to be protected and from whom all whites need to be separated.

Cid Ricketts Sumner (1890-1970) wrote *Quality: A Novel* in 1945 and it was turned into the 1949 film *Pinky* starring Jeanne Crain and Ethel Waters in 1949. Much like Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, *Quality* begins in what appears to be bucolic setting. Although Sumner’s passing novel contains not a single satirical or transgressive note, it

nevertheless challenges rigidly-cast racial boundaries and racial bigotry. The heroine is a young woman named Pinkey<sup>23</sup> who was sent North at a young age to pass as white so she could have better opportunities than her small-town, poor, laundress grandmother could provide. The seemingly-white girl had not been allowed to play with neighboring black children when she was young although her grandmother's plan was for Pinkey to return one day to provide nursing care for the black community. Decades later, she does return and, as she walks to her home, is heckled and jeered at by whites and is also misunderstood by the local black residents who "see" her as an intrusive white woman.

Pinkey is spurred into action to retrieve her grandmother's savings that had been stolen from her by a local black man. Jake, the swindler, is somewhat redeemed when he returns part of the stolen money and then also engages in a discussion of how the lives of all blacks will be improved when the War ends. Jake declares that there will be "no more Jim-Crowing. Not in the movies. Nor the schools. Nor the eating places. Nor nowhere.... No more bowing and scraping.... [F]ree and equal. Like it say in the law" (Sumners 67). When Jake's girlfriend pulls a knife on Pinkey, the police intervene and all three are arrested.

As she is driven to the police station, Pinkey begins to feel a greater affinity with the black community. "She was the same person she had been a few minutes earlier when they thought her white. Why, because she was not white, should she be at once assumed guilty, ordered to the car, arrested?.... And now, thinking back, she understood that terror-struck withdrawal of the crowd, the chill that had permeated the air," writes Sumners (82). Pinkey decides to stay to help her "people who had so little and needed so much" (Sumners 180), just as the characters in racial uplift novels did in previous eras.

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<sup>23</sup> The 'e' in the name of the character Pinkey in Sumner's novel is dropped from the title of the movie *Pinky*.

She performs odd jobs and then secures a position working for an elderly white woman named Miss Em. The young woman is visited by her white fiancé from the North, a man who loves her and wants her to return with him but only if she will resume her life as a white woman. She turns him down.

Along the way, Pinkey has met a black doctor, Dr. Joe, who encourages her to help the local African American community. The young woman then discovers that she has been named in a will and, determines to turn the inherited property into a hospital and teaching institution for African Americans, decides to sue when she is denied her inheritance by powerful forces in the white community. Reluctantly represented by a retired white judge, Pinkey is triumphant when the judge hearing the case decides that the will is valid and that she will inherit. Local whites burn down the big house in protest but some of the belongings are saved. The novel ends with Pinkey, her grandmother, Dr. Joe, kindly Judge Walker, and others gathered around the dying fire. As she stares into the embers, “Pinkey felt stirring in her heart the warm persistent beat of life and hope” (Sumner 286). Granny then turns “triumphantly to Pinkey. ‘It isn’t ever going to be easy, children, but you’ll make out all right. Quality can do anything’” (Sumners 286).

Another passing novel written during the same era which, like *Quality*, eschews the satirical, mocking ridicule of Lewis, Himes, and Hughes is Willard M. Savoy’s only novel, *Alien Land*. Published in 1949, it contains echoes of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. In *Alien Land*, Savoy’s protagonist is caught between the black and white worlds, agonizes in interior monologues, achieves success despite his racial anguish and indeterminacy, and marries a white woman. The author (1916-1976) was educated at Howard University, Fisk University, and the University of Wisconsin and served in the Second World War as a navigation expert in a bombardment



squadron, attaining the rank of First Lieutenant. In the early 1950s he served as part of the government's Marshall Plan efforts before moving into the private sector.

As the novel opens, a nineteen-year-old Kern Roberts is staring into a lake and, despite his white appearance, he calls to his reflection: "Nigger! The word was a thought—a compulsion—deep buried in him.... [T]his word caught at his throat with tight fingers, and hot waves of shame ran through him. But he must say it!.... He must say it over and over again. Until it was hard with scorn and hot with contempt" (Savoy 11). But the young man resolves: "Never again must he know the sick shame of being a half-man in the eyes of other men. Nigger! A hated word. A fighting word" (Savoy 12). But, yet, the hated word is a "hoarse-spoken denial of what heritage there was for him of race" (Savoy 13). He then obliterates his image in the water and enters the world of whiteness, rejecting the mixed-race father who had disavowed him and fleeing from the South to what he feels will be a haven in the North.

Passing as white, Kern Roberts becomes Kern Adams. As Savoy characterizes the change: "He was no longer a Negro. He was white" (17). He travels to Harlem and finds that not many of its residents look like him: "Mostly they were dark faces, in shades of sepia and tan and brown and black.... Faces in a ghetto. Of every color.... Faces dull with hopelessness and twisted with an inner, as yet unrecognized, anger" (Savoy 23). Savoy then writes a propagandistic passage into his novel as Kern ponders his place in a world dominated by whites, the world he had pledged to join but which, he also realizes, has unjustly and often brutally treated the very black Americans he opts to leave:

Man's inhumanity to man. An inhumanity which, as practiced against the American Negro by his fellow man, was as harrowing as any exquisitely refined medieval torture.... No act of man is more totally damning than this—none more

ruinously destructive to the doer and to the victim. No deed of men denies so completely as does this one the teachings of all ages and all faiths. Nothing else assails with such brutal directness—assails and questions and denies—the ultimate worth of men on earth.... Nothing else tears so cruelly at the taproot of mankind's existence as does this inhumanity. (Savoy 28-29)

Savoy addresses racial issues other than passing in his novel; events and discussions range from race riots to white supremacy, to bigotry, to restrictive covenants, and to the unfair jury system. But it is passing—and the disparity between the world of whites and blacks—with which Savoy most often deals.

Kern finds his way into an academy in Vermont but his passing is unmasked and he is accused of being a “half-white nigger!” (Savoy 119). In anguish, he rails against the unfair American racial caste system and asks an unanswerable question: “Why? Why am I a nigger?” (Savoy 117). He leaves school, but when his father learns that his son has been passing, the elder accuses him of being a “traitor to your race. I have only contempt for traitors. You are a Negro—lighter skinned than most—but a Negro all the same.... You cannot escape reality” (Savoy 142). This outburst and condemnation are ironic because it has been revealed earlier in the novel that Charles Roberts had, for a while, passed as white himself before rejecting this life choice and opting, instead, to actively serve the African American community.

The protagonist then decides to become active in the black civil rights movement and works for the Freedom League in Washington. He returns to the world of the South, the “alien land” of the book's title and one that is still defined by its Jim Crow laws and practices. But, when his cousin's husband is brutally tortured and killed in defense of his wife's honor, Kern rejects blackness yet again. Rather than taking a stand or continuing to

fight an unjust system, he flees back to Vermont. Echoing the novel's opening, Kern momentarily decides that:

Never again would he undergo the humiliation that was heaped on a Negro—nor experience the fears and hatreds which shredded his feelings to tatters. He fled from the bestiality that had twisted men in Valley View—from the cruelty that had killed Jake.... Slowly, timidly, he began to realize that he was free. He had escaped from the South with his life. He had escaped the tearing brutality that he knew now was real and not just angry, distorted words on the lips of Negroes. He had done that much. (Savoy 298)

While Cid Ricketts Sumner and William Savoy used the passing genre in a traditional manner in their novels, Sinclair Lewis, Langston Hughes, and Chester Himes did not. These three iconoclasts chose to follow the path set by Mark Twain, Rudolph Fisher, George Schuyler, and Walter Thurman instead and wrapped truths about the status of race relations, discrimination, segregation, unequal treatment, and rampant racism inside satire, *reductio ad absurdum*, and transgressiveness.

“To write satire is to perform a miracle,” according to novelist Rebecca West, and “one must hate the world so much that one's hatred strikes sparks, but one must hate it only because it disappoints one's invincible love of it” (qtd. in D. Brown, 51-52). While Lewis, Hughes, and Himes did not necessarily hate the world, they surely hated elements of it. They hated how African Americans were treated, they hated how people of color were deemed apelike inferiors, and they hated how non-whites were relegated to the lower rungs of American society.

Sinclair Lewis, in *Kingsblood Royal*, tries to expose just how unjust and unfair America has been to her black citizens. While his novel may not be great literature,

relying too often on stereotypes and unrealistic situations, it is a heartfelt attempt to expose a white audience to the wrongs that had been codified and defended in America for far too many centuries. His “sardonic bitterness” (Baldwin, “Stranger” 90) and his satire, deconstructions, iconoclastic style, irony, and ridicule contemptuously attack American racism and the willful ignorance and complicity of complacent white Americans. As much as he ridiculed and criticized the small-mindedness, hypocrisy, and unfounded superiority of white middle-class Americans, Lewis felt that “racial prejudice is another manifestation of the oppressive will toward conformity that he saw as so much a part of the American state of mind” (Lundquist 120).

In his *Kingsblood Royal*, Lewis forces white readers to look critically at themselves and at their own beliefs. Unwilling to allow the racial relations as they had, he crafts baseless stereotypes, ruthlessly attacks one-drop rules, and creates seemingly unbelievable situations to prove, subversively, just how unfounded, illogical, and ridiculous white assumptions about persons of color truly are.

Lewis, like Mark Twain, held a negative view of America and of Americans. In her 2003 essay entitled “Before the White Negro: Sin and Salvation in *Kingsblood Royal*,” Jennifer A. Delton writes that “all of the evils that afflicted America, that kept it from its rightful destiny, stemmed from white Americans’ insistence on seeing themselves as white. Lewis, though, offered a way out. Through the crucible of blackness, white Americans could make themselves human again and perhaps redeem the lost promise of democracy” (317). America could be redeemed, in Lewis’s estimation, only by acknowledging that, in the words of James Baldwin, that the “story of the Negro in America is the story of America.... It is not a very pretty story.... The Negro in America...is a series of shadows, self-created, intertwining, which now we helplessly battle.... Our dehumanization of the

Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves” (Baldwin, “Many” 24-25).

What we see is not always what is. Neil Kingsblood, white but not white, black but not black, is not perceived by his white neighbors and colleagues as the man he becomes after he identifies himself as black and is willing to suffer all that such an admission entails. Although the white residents of Sylvan Park are unable or unwilling to “see” the authenticity and honorableness of his choice of blackness, once Neil acknowledges his racial heritage he has a “chance to become a *self*, an individual” and becomes a “different person as a Negro, a better man than he was before,” rather than just another bland, deluded, and hate-filled white suburbanite (Wandler 84; Matheson 15).

Neil Kingsblood, the creation of a Nobel Prize-winning author whose best works and fame were behind him by the time *Kingsblood Royal* was published in 1947, was a naïve, unobservant, steady, middle-class, bigoted, wife-loving junior banker who underwent a revelation that changed his life. To his detriment, he had been just another complacent racist in a community named Sylvan Park—like the thousands of Sylvan Parks that existed throughout America—in a Grand Republic that practiced and supported racial discrimination and prejudice. That the young man eventually arms himself against the powerful white forces arrayed against him is significant. That Sinclair Lewis used satire, comic ridicule, transgressiveness, irony, and parody to expose his viewers to an enlightened and subversive point of view is commendable, critiques of his style notwithstanding.

Sinclair Lewis is irreverent. He destabilizes and challenges societal norms. He unveils white hypocrisy, smugness, complacency, and willful ignorance. He uses the passing genre to expose the vast gulf between the ambitious goal of American democracy

and the reality of American racial relations. It is our country's sad racial legacy that Lewis attacks in his *Kingsblood Royal*. Like Twain, Fisher, Schuyler, and Thurman before him, Lewis chooses satire, rather than a more traditional use of the passing novel, to juxtapose the hope of America against its racial reality and its "Negro problem." His 1947 work is a subversive novel and, despite its obvious literary flaws, one that should not be relegated to the dustbin.

Conclusion:  
To Bodymore

“A man is free when he can determine the style of his existence in an absurd world.”<sup>24</sup>

“Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.”<sup>25</sup>

“The house of blackness has many doors. Not everyone chooses the same way in.”<sup>26</sup>

After the Second World War, civil rights activism grew and race-related issues began to change. President Truman’s Civil Rights Commission issued a report entitled “To Secure These Rights” in 1947, courts ordered the desegregation of schools including Little Rock High School in Arkansas during the 1950s after the *Brown* decision, a Civil Rights Act (dealing with voting rights) was passed in 1957 as were the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the National Voting Rights Act of 1965, the 1968 Civil Rights Act, and the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act. In 1962, federal troops were ordered to ensure the safety of James Meredith after deadly riots erupted when he registered for classes at the University of Mississippi. Judicial decisions altered the racial landscape. Bans on interracial marriage were struck down in the case of *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, the 1978 decision in *University of California v. Bakke* by the US Supreme Court allowed affirmative action but not race-based quotas, and the courts sustained the affirmative action policy of the University of Michigan in 2003.

African Americans made notable strides in various spheres of American life. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* was published in 1952 to great acclaim. In 1955 Marian Anderson became the first black soloist at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City and Berry

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<sup>24</sup> James Cone, qtd. in *African American Quotations*, p. 145.

<sup>25</sup> Lyndon Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University: ‘To Fulfill These Rights,’” p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Jess Row, *Your Face in Mine*, p. 158.

Gordy, Jr. founded Motown Records a few years later. Martin Luther King, Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In 1967, Thurgood Marshall became the first African American appointed to the US Supreme Court. Black Entertainment Television (BET) was founded in 1979 and the *Cosby Show* debuted in 1984 (Painter 372).

Despite the civil rights victories that were achieved and the societal, legal, cultural, and political gains that were made, America's sad racial history continued, just as it continues to this day. Emmett Till. Rosa Parks. Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Medgar Evers. Assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcom X. Freedom Riders. Riots. Restaurant counter sit-ins. Lynchings. Massive resistance. Police dogs and water cannons. Ku Klux Klan. Protests. Four little girls in a Birmingham church. Picketing. Marches. Restrictive covenants. Black Power. Black Panthers. Black is Beautiful. Black History Month. Black Lives Matter. Rodney King. Toni Morrison. Tiger Woods. Trayvon Martin. Colin Powell. Serena Williams. Condeleeza Rice. Sandra Bland. Oprah Winfrey. Tupac Shakur. Barack Obama. Charlottesville.

America's racial history still casts a pall over our lives. Innumerable books, plays, articles, films, paintings, online posts, and media reports demonstrate our ongoing obsession with race and, although they have changed in tenor and focus over time, works and discussions about race have not diminished. Rather than trying to quantify how many African Americans recently passed into whiteness or to determine who is white and who is black by a fiction of law and custom, Americans have been offered thousands of works about race and racial-related issues that range from the scientific to the political to the fictional and more. And, although as Allyson Hobbs explains in her exploration of racial



passing across multiple generations of family members, the “friendly embrace of hybridity [mixed-race heritage] in the twenty-first century neither signals the achievement of a ‘postracial’ age nor supports the colorblind thesis that race no longer matters. On the contrary, the increasing acceptance of hybridity underscores just how germane race continues to be to contemporary American society” (277).

While the reasons for crossing the color line by black Americans literally passed away in the late twentieth century due to societal, cultural, legal, and political changes, fictionalized tales about it “endured even though the practice of passing arguably declined” (Elam 751). For over a century, the passing novel represented a safe way through which authors could address racial issues, attack the racial *status quo*, and present black Americans as the educated, thoughtful, well-mannered, and talented peers of white Americans. As decades passed and the twenty-first century loomed, use of the genre waned. But it did not disappear entirely nor become irrelevant. Narratives featuring passing protagonists and stories about persons of racial indeterminacy were and are still being written. Robert Penn Warren’s *Band of Angels* was written in 1955 and Walter Sullivan’s *Sojourn of a Stranger* appeared in 1958. Ralph Ellison’s *Juneteenth* was posthumously published in 1999 while Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) and Nell Zink’s *Mislaid* (2015) carried the tradition into this century. Books dealing with real-life passing, although a mere handful compared to those written between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, include Bliss Broyard’s *One Drop* (2007) and *The Gilded Years* by Karin Tanabe (2016).

Jess Row’s 2014 novel entitled *Your Face in Mine* is a twenty-first century re-imagining of the passing novel. In his tale, two protagonists choose to reject whiteness

and embrace new lives as their true racial selves—one as an African American and the other as Chinese--through surgical and chemical procedures. Echoing George Schuyler's fictional *Black No More* and the scientific processes touted in 1929 by Dr. Yusaburo Noguchi and in 1949 by Walter White, Row's novel is about racial reassignment as a way to embrace one's true racial identity. But, in Row's tale, as Neil Kingsblood does in Sinclair Lewis's passing novel, the movement of both men is away from whiteness, not towards it, unlike most of the racial passing narratives of the past.

Row's fictional Kelly Thorndike was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. He lived and taught in China for several years, speaks Chinese and other Asian languages, and was married to a Chinese woman. He fondly remembers the year that the newlyweds lived with her family in China as the happiest of his life. The deaths of his wife and daughter in an accident have left him emotionally devastated. He ekes out a living at a failing radio station and talking with his deceased wife's ghost, admitting that he returned to Baltimore only because "I needed to start over" (Row, *YF* 32).

One day, he is approached by a black man who he comes to recognize as someone he knew in his teens--Martin Lipkin, a Jewish classmate and bandmate. As they talk, Kelly learns that Lipkin has become Martin Wilkinson, a successful black man who is married to a black woman. Martin's voice, facial features, skin color, body sculpture, and scalp shape have all been altered. Through a series of interviews, the man who claims to have Racial Identity Dysphoria Syndrome reveals that he has also created a new identity and background story for himself. He likens his transformation to the surgery and hormonal treatments transsexuals undergo to achieve gender reassignment, claiming that "I'm the Christine Jorgensen of the twenty-first century" (Row, *YF* 34). Kelly realizes

that his own life, despite his affinity for all things Asian, has been one of white privilege. He ponders: “A white face.... There are so many parts of myself that I can change, that I have changed, but who spends time assessing the givens?” (Row, *YF* 27).

Unlike Schuyler’s Max Disher, a man who continues to think of himself as a black man even after he has been chemically altered to look like a white one, Martin tells Kelly that he felt he was trapped in his white body when he was—socially, culturally, and emotionally—a black man instead. He details how his affinity for black culture and desire for a black identity grew over time, leading up to the momentous decision to change his life forever.

Racial reassignment is not casual, day-time, just passing for a better dinner table, but is permanent, Martin explains. “Come on.... Look at me, Kelly. I’m *black*. If you want to be along with this ride, you have to make your peace with it. Black and never going back,” he states (Row, *YF* 36). Martin also differs from previous generations of real-life passers and most characters in passing narratives because he wants to come out and tell his story, have his passing made known, and be recognized for what he is now. To do so, he asks Kelly to write a book about his experiences and a series of interviews ensues.

Later in the novel it is revealed that Martin is a con man, although not in the trickster and Br’er Rabbit tradition. Martin derives no joy from his get-rich-quick scheme nor any glee from making fun of the dominant race—he is in it purely for the profit. Kelly concludes that the other is a “real fake black man” (Row, *YF* 199). The former Martin Lipkin, it turns out, is the founder and primary owner of the clinic where racial reassignments are being performed in Thailand. Kelly also uncovers other lies and deceptions through his research, including the facts that Martin had been a drug dealer, was

arrested numerous times, and had assumed various aliases, one of which was “BodyMore” (Row, *YF* 228). The man who was previously a white Jew plans to return to Baltimore and open the Center for Black Transformation, a modern-day version of Dr. Crookman’s clinics. As he reminds Kelly, “if there’s one thing Baltimore’s got, it’s blackness.... Baltimore. New Black City” (Row, *YF* 320-21). Just as in *Black No More*, societal chaos will likely ensue because, as Martin admits to Kelly: “Americans are stuck on the idea of race no question. *Here* we’re going to be facing some serious hysteria” (Row, *YF* 34). Nevertheless, Martin—revealed to be much more than just the earnest, suffering racial reassignment pioneer he originally held himself out to be—urges Kelly to undergo racial reassignment himself.

Book Two is entitled “Exodus,” representing Kelly’s decision to leave whiteness and his life in Baltimore behind. Although he was disappointed when he uncovered Martin’s deceptions, he travels to the reassignment clinic in Thailand. There, he meets others who are also changing their races—some transitioning into whiteness and others leaving it. He edges closer and closer to a decision, musing: “Is there such a thing as a self *before* there’s a racial self, a male or female self?” (Row, *YF* 293). Talking himself into the procedures, Kelly concludes: “Privilege flees from itself. *Whiteness* flees from itself” (Row, *YF* 297). He hears the voice of his former wife one more time, urging him that it is “*Time to come out. Time to come out*” (Row, *YF* 289). He wistfully realizes he had “forgotten the simple gladness of waking up in Asia” (Row, *YF* 243).

Kelly admits that Martin made a choice, not unlike the choices that thousands of black Americans made who looked more European than African; they, too, wanted to change their lives. He becomes Curtis Wang but then ponders his decision, asking

himself:

Why would I choose that? Why would I step out of the circle of belonging, where I've always been? The gilded prison house of whiteness, with its electric fences, its transparent walls? Being the most visible, therefore the most hated, to all? The one who can always condescend, not the one condescended to? Reader, doesn't the question answer itself? (Row, *YF* 358)

He will not be Martin's poster boy for racial reassignment. Instead, as his plane is ready to land in China where he plans to rejoin his wife's family, Kelly knows that "I'm home" (Row, *YF* 370).

Discussing his novel during the question-and-answer period following his presentation of *Your Face in Mine* at Drew University in 2015, the author was asked what made him decide to use racial reassignment as a theme and if he saw any connections between racial passing and racial reassignment. Row responded that "he became interested in racial reassignment but didn't set out to write a passing novel," although he did see reassignment as a "twenty-first century way of completely remaking yourself" (Row, "Reading").

The issue of racial passing still exists. When one of the young men pictured in Yada Blay's prose and photography work entitled *(I) Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race* who bears no African characteristics is asked whether or not he would choose to pass as white, he responds by stating that the "question is why would I not? Why should I not be who I am?" (121). The book's photographs show the myriad faces of contemporary blackness, forcing readers to literally "see" that "blackness" is not what many white Americans continue to presume it to be--it is social and cultural and an identity to be viewed positively,

not abandoned. Blay challenges people to “envision multiple possibilities for Blackness above and beyond the one-drop rules. Perhaps if you *see* Blackness differently, you will see *Blackness* differently” (39). Unlike the legal, social, and judicial attempts to define blackness by what can literally “see,” Blay explains that, at least in the twenty-first century, “blackness is not merely color. It’s color plus perception plus experience” (136).

Less than a year after the publication of Row’s fictional tale, the Rachel Dolezal story transfixed the nation and certain parallels can be drawn between the two. Dolezal, a social justice advocate who was the president of the Spokane NAACP, was outed. Although she had made changes to her physical appearance and identified herself as a black American, she did not have any inherited, physical African heritage. Media and social firestorms erupted with many whites angrily reacting in disbelief that a “white” woman would choose to be “black,” echoing the 1947 question asked by Walter White when he posited that “the reversal does not work for whites, for whites can see no reason for a white man ever wanting to be black; there is only reason for a black man wanting to be white” (“Why I” 14). Conversely, many blacks attacked Dolezal for her claim to share in the suffering and disenfranchisement that is the history of African Americans. Is she a charlatan who assumed the mantle of blackness for personal gain for years? Is she a mere fetishist? Is she guilty of cultural appropriation? Or, if her identification with blackness is genuine rather than presumptuous and self-serving, is she, like Kelly Thorndike and Christine Jorgensen, someone who is trapped in the wrong body?

In her resignation letter, Dolezal writes that it is “with complete allegiance to the cause of racial and social justice and the NAACP that I step aside.... I will never stop fighting for human rights and will do everything in my power to help and assist, whether it

means stepping up or stepping down, because this is not about me. It's about justice" (1-2). During an interview on *All in with Chris Hayes* that was conducted by Melissa Harris Perry on June 16, 2015, Dolezal answered "Yes" when Perry--an African American reporter who has a white mother—asked: "Are you black?" (*All in*). Perry challenged Dolezal's claim to blackness and explained that this had "enraged many of those listeners, many of those observers who are black are black women. Can you understand that anger?" (*All in*). The reply was "Yes, and I would say, and stepping outside of myself, I would probably be enraged.... But, they, they don't know me" (*All in*). Contrary to Dolezal's claims, Matthew Schmitz, in his "Rachel Dolezal and the Overearnest Uplifters" not only links her to Langston Hughes's essay "Fooling our White Folks" but also succinctly condemns her as a racial transgressor and as someone who "perpetrated her con largely at the expense of whites" (1). Schmitz continues: "Like Hughes' heroes, Dolezal suckered gullible whites. Of course, she also deceived blacks" (1).

Jess Row also spoke out about the Dolezal controversy, seeing linkages between the unfolding of her real-life story and his fictional *Your Face in Mine*. While writing his novel, Row contends in "Watching a Speculative Novel Come to Life in Rachel Dolezal's Story" that he had "assumed the term 'racial reassignment' already existed. It didn't" but also points out that there have been historical people who "at one time or another wanted to escape, deny, or modify their racial bodies" (2). He further explains that it "wasn't until I read...George Schuyler's Harlem Renaissance satire *Black No More*, that I felt emboldened to describe what seemed to be simultaneously a fantasy, a nightmare, *and* a logical extension of American racism" (JR, "Watching" 2).

American racism. Race in America. As Jim Wallis concludes in his 2016

discussion of race entitled *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*, "Race is about the American story.... The story about race that was embedded into America at the founding of our nation was a lie; it is time to change that story and discover a new one" (1). Can we change the narrative? If we can never be post-racial, can America ever be post-discrimination, post-mass incarceration, post-segregation, post-voter suppression, and post-injustice? Can America ever not have its Michael Browns, Eric Garners, and Freddie Grays? Can America ever not have white supremacists who proudly display stars-and-bars and swastikas? Can America ever escape its original sin and the repercussions of our slave-owning past?

These are the types of questions writers including Howells, Harper, Chesnutt, Johnson, White, Larsen, Himes, and Sumner have asked for centuries, each in his or her own way and each reflecting—or reacting against--the thoughts, sentiments, political trends, and legal decisions of the time period in which they lived and wrote. Each of these authors used the passing narrative to do so. And, while this literary trope may now be considered antiquated, it was used as a weapon to attack racism, illogical racial identity laws, the institution of slavery, and racial discrimination for over a century. Passing novels were used to subversively demonstrate that black Americans were the equals or superiors of white Americans, passing novels were used to show that African Americans should be granted full citizenship rights and privileges, passing novels were used to promote racial uplift, passing novels were used to poke fun at white people, and passing novels were used to make white Americans re-examine their feelings about race and question their self-anointed white privilege and all the benefits that had accrued to them because of it.



When men including Twain and Fisher added satire and irony, their passing novels became doubly subversive. When men including Lewis and Hughes added iconoclasm and juxtaposition, their passing stories became doubly subversive. When men including Schuyler and Thurman added comic ridicule and outrageousness, their passing narratives became doubly subversive.

Perhaps, someday, such transgressiveness and righteous indignation will not be necessary and the acid-tipped pens of satirists will be aimed at targets other than America's black-white racial binary system. Perhaps, someday, the shining citadel will actually cast its light on all Americans and not just on those who are white. Perhaps, someday, the Eden that the Pilgrims sought will be realized for all Americans and not just for those who are white. Perhaps, someday, acceptance for who one is and the talents one has will be extended to all Americans and not just those who are white. Perhaps, someday, we will fulfill the words of the Founding Fathers and grant life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all Americans and not just those who are white.

Perhaps, as civil rights activist Wallis optimistically contends, "We are not now, nor will we ever be, a 'postracial' society. We are instead a society on a journey toward embracing the ever-greater and richer diversity, which is the American story" (10). Perhaps, someday, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream that freedom will ring throughout our land—from the Steamboat to Harlem and from Main Street to Bodymore—and "from every city and every hamlet, from every state and every city" will be realized "so that every American—black or white—will be truly 'Free at last'" (6).

Perhaps.

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