

THE MULATTA AS CULTURAL AND POLITICAL TEXT, OR  
“IT CAN’T BE TOO EASY TO BE ONE OF A KIND”

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

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Advisor: Jane Marcus

Mixed race figures appear in many late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century texts, particularly in the United States. The use of these characters, often female, is deliberate, allowing the authors to actively explore and mediate the anxieties raised in the ante- and post-bellum periods around race, class, nation, and sexuality. By employing two novels (Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun and Nella Larsen’s Passing, published in 1928 and 1929, respectively), as well as the 1949 film Pinky, the first chapter illustrates the ways mixed race female or mulatta characters are necessary in understanding the formation of the collective American cultural imagination.

It is, then, important to consider silences that occur in texts by iconic literary figures like Willa Cather. Her last novel Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) has proven discomfiting to critics who cannot place it within her larger body of work. Yet, the author’s use of the mixed race female character in her ante-bellum Virginia-based novel invites the need for renewed discussion. In a similar vein, Martha Gellhorn is commonly known as a journalist and Mrs. Ernest Hemingway. However, her 1944 novel Liana, set on a fictional French island, furthered demonstrated her desire to be known primarily as a novelist. Both Cather and Gellhorn are each engaged in their own white female imperialist projects, working out their preoccupations with a shifting political landscape through their mixed race female characters in violent ways. The second and third chapters also examine how these two authors are shaped by dominant ideologies as anyone else. From their writings, I interrogate the unconscious effect these ideologies have on what they put into their work.

It is essential for literary critics to revisit and interpret these foundational texts as artifacts of the cultural past to make history more legible. Mixed race female characters are critical to the discussion. Neither black, white, and certainly not male, they dredge up a troublesome racial past that is actually closer to the present day than most would think. The final chapter unveils these themes reinvigorated and reimagined in contemporary narratives like Patricia Powell’s The Pagoda (1998), Emily Raboteau’s The Professor’s Daughter (2005), Heidi Durrow’s The Girl Who Fell from the Sky (2011), and Danzy Senna’s Caucasia (1998), ultimately underscoring that a mixed race canon does exist.

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I have spent the majority of my professional life at The New School, in both faculty and administrative roles. I am exceedingly grateful to those individuals, colleagues and students alike, who often unknowingly supported and inspired me.

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## INTRODUCTION

Western literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries commonly dealt with the many complexities of the intersections between races in a changing world. It is natural, then, that mixed race figures would appear in these works. The presence of these figures was no accident. With the introduction of characters that were the living embodiment of race relations in the United States, the authors featuring these characters actively explore and mediate the anxieties raised by political tensions in the ante- or post-bellum periods around race, class, nation, and sexuality. In many of these texts, mixed race figures are often used as scapegoats for their “polluted” bloodlines, at the same time that they are objectified, even prized, for their unique beauty. Most often, the mixed race character is a female. This character, generally fatherless, has much more to lose politically in a shifting socio-economic landscape, thus heightening the tensions raised by her. The state offers little, if any, enfranchisement to her.

This dissertation explores overlapping histories and currents in fiction, theoretical texts, history, and film through the figure of the mixed race woman or “mulatta.”<sup>1</sup> The result of this inquiry is a portrait of the mulatta as a key or signpost to modernist culture’s fixation on race. Throughout this project, I will be articulating and analyzing the terms of that fixation as it plays itself out in different contexts, and asking what lessons we, as scholars and teachers, can take, learn, and use from these texts. I will uncover how anxieties raised by the presence of the mixed race woman enable discussions and rethinking of national subjectivity, gender, color, and politics. In addition, I will discuss power dynamics in relation to the mulatta and boundaries that

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the term “mulatta” should signal only the term’s circulation in the works discussed in this dissertation. For more information on the etymology of this term, see “A Miscegenation Vocabulary and the Coining of an Americanism” in Werner’s Sollors’s anthology, *Interracialism*. I use the term mulatta where necessary but also employ the descriptor “mixed race” at times when referring to these characters.

she transgresses by her very presence in literature and film. The heightened tension within the text pushes these narratives to explore other issues more deeply, such as colonialism and/or globalization.

When I began thinking about this project, I was certain that I would include a lengthy exposition on whiteness studies and the relationship it has to understanding the position of mixed race female characters. However, my ideas about whiteness problematize the tendency to explore how this notion is transmitted and replicated in relation to race. That is, whiteness “has emerged in the context of, and very frequently in direct response to, critique of racism and the racial order” (Frankenberg 2). It is because of this belief that some discussions of the complexities of whiteness are never brought to light here. Because the dominance and naturalness of whiteness appears to be evenly distributed and homogenous, there is an assumption that it does not have an effect in seemingly homogenous settings, particularly among members of a similar ethnic or racial group. To the contrary, as Maurice Berger articulates in White Lies that “The strengths and limitations of one’s own whiteness depend on many factors; its power and privileges are not awarded evenly or evenhandedly” (166). For the purposes of my dissertation, this discussion of “intra-racial whiteness” is important in terms of thinking about the moments in which whiteness becomes visible, as it is constantly shifting, changing, and adapting itself to situations as the players change. For example, critical race theorist Theodore Allen articulates how whiteness is socially constructed, in the illustration that Irish individuals share the same phenotype as the English – and yet were subject to discrimination and violence (22). And, yet, not even a century later, as Valerie Babb observes in her study, Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness, “heterogeneous European communities increasingly would coalesce into a white race that viewed itself as prototypically American” (37). Whiteness becomes

synonymous with being American. The advent of white privilege fashioned a racial imaginary of common ancestry, cement[ing] “varied white European populations into a unified nation-state and located social power in one group” (49). Basically, the authors I reference highlight the arbitrary and tricky enterprise of attempting to wrap privilege into phenotype.

Whiteness also contributes to oppositional racial constructs and characteristics commonly identified as confused, exotic, and Other. In this dissertation, I show the intervention of white privilege on the cult of true womanhood,<sup>2</sup> which affects black women and their experiences. However, true whiteness is best described as white-skinned, non-ethnic, male, heterosexual, middle-class, and able-bodied. One who embodies all of these characteristics is benefiting the most in this society from the privileges attached to whiteness. It could be argued that individuals who pass for white are making use of the assets that align them more firmly with true whiteness (or, more plainly, privilege). Further, whiteness elucidates how using alternating forms of social control and privilege aids in “the establishing [of] a social distinction among the oppressed...[which ultimately] transforms its system of social control from racial oppression to national oppression” (Allen 36). One consequence of the construct of whiteness is that all people are pitted against each other. This kind of system also creates the need for what I will call “policing the boundaries” of whiteness.

The arbitrary nature of race reinforces the necessity of policing boundaries. In the book Who Is Black? One Nation’s Definition, F. James Davis discusses this concept. One good example is how Americans still apply a form of the one-drop rule to American blacks and mixed race blacks, but must find more creative ways to discriminate against immigrant groups. He writes, “there is a certain stage [at] which you cannot tell who is white and who is black” (1).

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<sup>2</sup> The term refers to the dominant ideology which dictated all 19<sup>th</sup> century women’s behavior. For more information, see Hazel V. Carby’s Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Women Novelist.

This “problem” is what the laws, statutes, and acts of this country were trying to prevent in the eighteenth century when white privilege and power (now the basis of whiteness studies) was beginning to take shape in the United States. A black person is “any person with *any* known African ancestry” (5). Yet, Davis claims, that three fourths of American blacks have some white ancestry (21), that “millions of people whose origins are more European than African [are] defined by the general public, by law, and by themselves as black”(32).

This analysis of race connected to whiteness provides a valuable focus of analysis for a wide variety of literatures. To this end, I focus on the way mixed race females encounter whiteness in passing literature and film. The exploration of passing had phenomenal popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in many novels and subsequent movies like Imitation of Life (both versions, 1934 and 1959) and Pinky (1949). Their success was directly related to the melodrama that characterized the plot – elaborate tales of loss of identity, slavery, illicit sexuality, miscegenation, mysteries of birth, abandonment, and racism.

The authors included in this dissertation tried to capture the legacy of slavery in their fiction. And, I indicate this legacy (and visual and legal realities) of interracial contacts within these texts. I have chosen certain texts because of their specific treatment of race and the mixed race female, as well as their interrogation of whiteness. In the next chapter, I discuss two female authors, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, in detail. Fauset’s novel, Plum Bun (1928), addresses the issue of passing and demonstrates that race and gender are inextricably interconnected. Nella Larsen’s artistic creativity leads her 1929 novel Passing beyond the melodramatic limitations of most passing fiction to delve into other themes – a scathing critique of the black middle class and a forthright discussion of sexuality and eroticism. Both Fauset’s and Larsen’s novels present

educated and aspiring blacks desperately intent on ensuring their own economic and social mobility.

This striving is also visible in major motion pictures of the early twentieth century. In 1949, the film Pinky adapted a novel by Cid Ricketts Sumner for the big screen and attempted to address the complex of issues around the mulatta through the dramatization of the title character. Sumner's 1946 novel, Quality, explores a light-skinned black woman's attempts to navigate race, which become more fraught once she stumbles into passing. The work fits in with larger cultural concerns over using novels and movies to educate the American white mainstream population on social issues like racial discrimination. These kinds of popular fictional treatments, geared toward women, were based on "social problems." They allowed for a window into another world without requiring the audience to engage in direct contact with actual members of the population which they address. In Pinky's case, she is living an alternate life, denying her heritage and creating a new history to avoid discovery. Like Clare Kendry in Larsen's novel, Passing, Pinky is planning to live the rest of her life as a white woman (in Pinky's case, after marrying her white fiancé). On a final trip home, Pinky's struggle to claim her inheritance awakens a racial pride and results in the heroine claiming her rightful place within the black community.

Studies of passing have concerned the considerable (and undocumented) numbers of blacks with fair-skin and European features that "disappeared" into the white community. This social phenomenon suggests the arbitrary nature of race in America. It also reveals that passing, at its core, involves the lack of access to (or uneven distribution of) privilege and opportunity. The racist ideologies that create passing reveal the extent to which the treatment of those perceived as different or "Other" is based on visual markers and cues. (Interestingly, Arthur

Miller explores this theme in Focus (1945), in which an American man of English descent named Newman becomes the victim of anti-Semitic persecution because he begins to wear glasses.) Because it has a direct relationship to illicit sexual activity – miscegenation – the erotics of racial passing raises anxieties about that which we often take to be fundamental or essential, like gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation.

It is here that I shift my discussion to include the phenomenon of dominant whiteness in a global (and sometimes, more contemporary) context. I explore diasporic connections among African American and Caribbean characters by locating whiteness within a discourse of national subjectivity. Sapphira and the Slave Girl is Willa Cather's last book, published in 1940, and unlike any other work in her oeuvre. Though Cather, one of the great American writers of the twentieth century does not suffer from lack of creativity or vision, her portrayal of the mixed race character is one-dimensional and oblique. Examining the historical context in which the text was written will reveal the particular issues and resulting anxieties Cather confronted. The novel operates on multiple levels, for example, in the way that the author represents the mixed race woman's relationship to and confrontation with the construction of white womanhood. This tension is usually absent from passing fiction, as it is not central to the plot (although it is explored somewhat in Pinky). And, it is in this tension that discussions of national identity, particularly that of a crumbling nation built on slave labor during ante- and post-bellum America (or, as I discuss later, post-emancipation fictional Caribbean island paradises) can be explored.

Discussing the historical interdependence of constructions of race and identity reveals that the mixed race woman serves as a vehicle for many authors. This leads me to Martha Gellhorn's Liana, an essential text for the analysis I provide in this dissertation. Published in 1944, Gellhorn's novel levels critiques against all the players in this colonial drama. The action

converges in the character of Liana, the mulatta heroine of the book. Liana is the wife of Marc Royer, a leading businessman and landowner in the fictional French island colony of St. Boniface. Marc marries the incredibly beautiful Liana, not out of love or affection, but as a means to exact control over *something*. As a mixed race woman, Liana is more a possession than a person. The “marriage” of Marc and Liana further isolates her from the island’s inhabitants, white and black. Here she becomes what I call the “Other’s Other.” As a mixed race woman, Liana “belongs nowhere” (Gellhorn 183). Liana, like the other mulattas I analyze, “was a sort of invisible freak” (105) – not white, not black, not male, and without clear allegiances, she should just disappear. In fact, my dissertation title points to the isolated nature of early mulatta characters (as they are written or portrayed) and evolves from a statement made by Liana’s tutor. The tragic isolation of these mixed race characters further articulates their marginality and lack of belonging – even at “home.”

The character of Liana allows for a discussion of the movement from former colonies to independent island entities. Liana reveals the islanders’, particularly her husband’s, tenuous connection to whiteness. In addition, the entire relationship between Marc and Pierre, Liana’s tutor and brief love interest, is based on desire by each for the significant yet ancillary value they believe the other can provide (Marc’s desire for racial legitimacy and Pierre’s desire for information on World War II France and subsequently, the ability to return home hopefully, through Marc’s money). This interconnection between the two men embodies the “attraction-revulsion” of which post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha speaks in his discussion of the colonized and colonizer (95). Strikingly, in the fictional island world of St. Boniface, Gellhorn’s characters live in a delusional Caribbean peace while a war rages just across the ocean in Europe. It is worth noting that Gellhorn herself is fleeing World War II Europe at the time she is writing

Liana. As a result, it appears that she can only see the residents of St. Boniface through the lens of 1940s Europe. Therefore, only stock snippets of Caribbean life come through in this work. War correspondent Gellhorn seems obsessed with men and the war, as this is certainly evident in the attention she pays to Marc Royer and Pierre. They receive more of a multi-dimensional treatment in the book than her title character Liana. Through Gellhorn and Cather, I intend to show the diasporic connections of two white American female authors working out their respective (and related) anxieties through mixed race characters.

Lyn Di Iorio Sandín's 2004 book, Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity, articulates the dangerous or unassimilable traits of characters in U.S. Latino/a fiction, causing them to project desires that are unacceptable in the U.S. mainstream (1). While Sandín' is exploring literature within a different socio-cultural context, there is a resonance in her discussion, particularly around scapegoating and the unexplained deaths of those naughty female characters. I speculate on the motivations of white female authors writing about the mixed race female character. In the case of Gellhorn, Liana is a departure from the journalistic writing for which she is more commonly known, and it allows her to "play in the dark," so to speak. This cheeky phrase, coined by Toni Morrison in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, shows the author's intent to "put forth an argument," a "contemplation" on the further study of American literature.<sup>3</sup> I use Morrison's sole collection of literary criticism to issue a close reading of many of the romantic fictions produced in film, literature, and life in the historical context of twentieth century globalization of the natural white figure and the unnatural "black."

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<sup>3</sup> Though Morrison's focus is American literature, one can easily see that white female authors have been "playing in the dark" for quite some time. See Oroonoko (1688) for Aphra Behn's depiction of the prim Englishwoman, noble male savage, and silenced black female.

The texts that I examine fall into the genre of women's popular fiction, which is known to be highly melodramatic and, as a result, often dismissed. The melodrama, I argue, functions on deeper levels in these novels and enhances the treatment of other issues. In Janice Radway's 1987 ethnographic study of romance fiction, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, she finds that women readers placed a good deal of emphasis on 'the pleasures of the act [of reading] itself' (86). However, Radway also discovers that these women learn concrete 'facts' about geography, history, and the world (the more obscure the better) from reading the novels. I would further argue that the importance of these texts and the intimate relationship of these readers to the books intensifies the threat of the infiltration of mixed race individuals into the culture, making it that much more palpable.

It is not my intention to rehash the considerable criticism that has emerged in the last twenty years on passing and the tragic mulatta. I find it necessary, however, to underscore the point that the tragic mulatto/a remains an important figure in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and culture. The mulatta is central to these discussions because of her position at the nexus of early black-white encounters. Although Africans first arrived in the United States in 1619, it was not until the latter seventeenth century that African blacks were imported specifically for the purpose of the slave trade. With particular regard to African women, their treatment physically and psychologically was inextricably linked to their femaleness, and differed in critical ways from the treatment of their enslaved male counterparts. They are devoid of the benefits attached to male-gendered people or whiteness (neither black men nor white women), thus making their experiences quite distinctive. The mulatta's position is evoked in the title of this dissertation, spoken by a character in Liana: "It can't be too easy to be one of a kind" (Gellhorn 193). The mulatta is written is a solitary character, often marginal. Issues of race, authenticity, and

belonging are raised by the mere presence of mulatta figures in such literature. At a time when nations are immersed in discussions of personhood and citizenship, I hope to uncover the continuities and contradictions in the treatment of the mixed race female character. Finally, I believe that the authors discussed here took great pains to reveal their characters, and, ultimately offer a window into the American collective cultural and political psyche and the fraught relationship that exists between the races.

## CHAPTER ONE

### PASSING STRATEGIES IN THREE EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TEXTS

#### Introduction

Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, laws, statutes, and acts in the United States actively enforced the arbitrary nature of race, in effect policing its boundaries. To be considered black in the United States at that time not even half of one's ancestry had to be African black. In essence, one drop of black blood, provable or not, made a person black. This definition became the basis of the "one-drop rule" which addressed one of the perceived problems of miscegenous activity – whites having to share the benefits of citizenship with people of known African descent. The one-drop rule, then, protected the foundations of white privilege and power beginning to take shape in the U.S.<sup>4</sup> In the book, Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition, F. James Davis notes that "millions of people whose origins are more European than African [are] defined by the general public, by law, and by themselves as black" (32). The policing of racial boundaries reveals the economic realities and advantages to whites in a slave system and later, through Jim Crow segregation.

In some cases, individuals who appeared to be white were actually descendants of three white grandparents. A generation later, an octoroon, or 1/8<sup>th</sup> black person, has seven white great-grandparents out of eight and usually looks white or almost so. The one-drop rule is unique; not only does it apply to no other group than American blacks, but *is* apparently unique to the United

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<sup>4</sup> Americans still apply a form of the one-drop rule to blacks and mixed race blacks. Ironically, the campaign to add a "multiracial" category to the Census of 2000 was ultimately defeated because black civil rights leaders feared the decline in the numbers of "official" blacks, arguing that anyone with even one known African ancestor was black. The latest census allowed people to check multiple boxes.

Paradoxically, the one-drop rule does not apply to Native Americans who have to prove blood quantum in order to access federal benefits.

States. In addition, the United States found creative ways to deal with other ethnic and immigrant groups (F.J. Davis 13). To put it more plainly, it would be a rare occurrence in the United States for an individual who is  $\frac{1}{8}$ <sup>th</sup> East Asian to be identified as such. It is thus possible for others with fractional non-white blood to assimilate into whiteness in the United States. While they might not achieve all the privileges of true whiteness, as discussed in the introduction, they sometimes escape the persecution and occupation of a lower status. In her book, Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature, Valerie Babb illustrates this point in her analysis of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century settlement houses, like Hull House and the Henry Street Settlement, founded by Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, respectively. Babb notes that in putting forth an ideology of American-ness inextricably tied to the white skin of Jewish, Italian, Irish, and German immigrant populations, they “subtly validated notions of a monoracial American identity....White-skinned European immigrants were thus introduced to the benefit of skin color as an aid to social and economic access, and they could measure their progress against those who did not have white skin” (140-1). More succinctly, these immigrant populations have, over time, successfully eluded being aligned with blackness.

The phenomenon known as “passing for white” further reveals the many inconsistencies and ironies of race. In its traditional sense, passing refers to the crossing over of blacks from their own race to become identified as white people. It should be understood that such an act can only be accomplished by light-complexioned blacks, light enough to be mistaken for some kind of Caucasian.<sup>5</sup> As “white” people, these individuals anticipate that they will achieve a degree of happiness denied to them as blacks. Conceptual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper explains that

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<sup>5</sup> See F. James Davis’s Who Is Black? One Nation’s Definition and Joel Williamson’s New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States.

this concept of happiness directly relates to the desire for “higher social status, entrenchment within the white community and corresponding isolation from the black one, and greater access to rights, liberties, and privileges the white community takes for granted” (Piper 244). Thus, to a great extent, the goal sought by individuals who pass corresponds to the desire for political, economic, and social opportunities. Whiteness and white privilege thus create the need for passing since traditionally, in the United States, individuals who were provided with and held these opportunities were white.

Yet, there is a sacrifice for those who pass in their search for the power and privilege associated with whiteness. They live with a constant fear of discovery, that is, identification as a member of the black race. Thus, in order to orchestrate this act successfully, the individual must distance herself/himself from all relations to black culture, often relocating several hundred miles away from the community in which s/he was raised. The act of passing is common knowledge within the black community, but it would be unspeakable for a black person to publicly reveal a deserter mostly out of feelings of loyalty to the black race.<sup>6</sup> Studies, such as Adele Logan Alexander’s Ambiguous Lives illustrate this practice of severing ties to the black community; around 1900, her great-uncle, Tom Hunt, whose diverse racial heritage consisted of Cherokee, Anglo-American, and African American mixtures, moved to California, married a white woman, corresponded infrequently with his “colored” family located in Georgia, and only saw one of his sisters by appointment at undisclosed locations (Alexander 196). This case illustrates the secrecy shrouding passing on both sides of the color line. The individual effectively disappears from official records, which accounts for the lack of historical documentation.

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in a most public revelation, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. details in the pages of a 1996 *New Yorker* article that writer Anatole Broyard “was born black and became white.” Gates’s revelation, made several years after Broyard’s death, is all the more striking because Gates was purportedly aware that Broyard’s daughter, Bliss, was interested in penning a memoir about her father. Her book, One Drop: My father’s Hidden Life – A Story of Race and Family Secrets, was eventually published in 2007.

It would be more accurate to say that a person who is passing as white is white, or nearly all white, and has previously been passing as black. Or, to be consistent, shouldn't we say that someone who is one-eighth black is passing as black? Or, why is there so much concern, since the so-called blacks who pass take so little Negroid ancestry with them? (F.J. Davis 14). These questions suggest the arbitrary nature of race in the United States and reveal that "passing" is much more a social phenomenon than a biological one, reflecting one nation's unique definition of what makes a person black.

In most cases, the financial and social benefits for those who pass are reasonable, to say the least. For example, as a "white" man, Tom Hunt attained an agricultural faculty position at the state university at Berkeley; until he decided to pass, he could only secure work as a public gardener (Alexander 196). In many cases, a fractionally black person cannot escape the obstacles to full U.S. citizenship without passing as white and cutting off all ties to the black family and community. The pain of this separation, and condemnation by the black family and community, are major reasons why many or most of those who could pass as white choose not to. Loss of security within the minority community, and fear and distrust of the white world are also factors.

Passing, at its core, involves the lack of access to privilege and opportunity, the privileges and opportunities afforded by the founding principles of the United States. The racist ideologies that create passing reveal how much is based on visual indicators. Other markers like linguistic, social, or regional cues appear to underscore the visual in most instances. (Interestingly, Arthur Miller explores this theme in his novel Focus (1945), in which an American man of English descent named Newman becomes the victim of anti-Semitic persecution because he begins to wear glasses. Miller's exploration shows how tenuous white privilege really is in U.S. society.)

Because it has a direct relationship to illicit sexual activity, miscegenation, and what I will call the “erotics of racial passing,” raises anxieties about other factors that most people take to be fundamental. Race is just one issue. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship (both legal and cultural) are all locations where most are inflexible about what many people wish to see as clearly defined dualities. And, of course, because of its intimate relationship to whiteness, passing undeniably relates to power, privilege, and access.

This analysis of race connected to whiteness provides a valuable focus of analysis for a wide variety of literature and film. To this end, I will be discussing specifically the way mixed race females encounter whiteness in “passing” literatures. The exploration of passing had considerable popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in many novels.<sup>7</sup> Their success was directly related to the melodramatic plot features. I argue that there is still more to be learned through the mulatta or mixed race character. Literary and filmic representations of mixed race females employed these characters to ruminate on anxieties of race and citizenship, as well as access to white privilege. The mixed race female, then, is a marker of modernist culture’s fixation on race.

Although some of these novels were authored by white writers, this genre was dominated by black writers. The popularity of these works was directly related to the melodrama that characterized the plot, embodying the formulaic quality typical of the genre. The melodrama of the generic passing plot is also characterized by the “tragic mulatto/a,” a key narrative figure in passing fiction. According to the fiction,<sup>8</sup> the tragic mulatto/a is torn between the sweet, simple ways of the black community and the intellectual strivings of the white middle class. In these

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<sup>7</sup> Representations of mixed race characters became that much more palpable in subsequent movies with passing plots like *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959), *Pinky* (1949) and *Lost Boundaries* (1949).

<sup>8</sup> See studies like Hugh M. Gloster’s *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1965) and Robert Stepto’s *From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979).

novels, the confused racial hybrid is often a woman (thus increasing the marginality of the character). The mulatta character uses her sexuality, her only marketable asset, to secure a position for herself as a white woman, through marriage. While the mulatta lives in fear of being discovered as black, a perhaps more insidious fear was having children who were noticeably black. There is more at stake for the mixed race woman than others because of her gender (as such, her livelihood is based on her marketable assets, often her beauty, and her proximity to whiteness). The tenuous nature of the passing situation, as well as the danger and betrayal surrounding the act itself, often cause the fictional mulatta's life to end unexpectedly and tragically.

I argue, however, that authors like Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset issue a critique of the system that creates the situation or need for passing and the singular way in which women are affected by the racial caste system. For example, the dramatic episodes of their novels, though predictable, also address the longing for "the better life," and of circumstances unattainable by the chief protagonist. The person inevitably chooses passing in an effort to attain these goals. The passing plot presents this decision, but often highlights the disillusionment with the lifestyle of the white person, the irreparable damage to the psyche, the insistent longing to return to the black community, and sometimes, discovery and tragic loss.

The mulatta is central to the discussion of passing because of her position at the nexus of early black-white encounters. Although Africans first arrived in the United States in 1619, it was not until the latter seventeenth century that African blacks were imported specifically for the purpose of the slave trade. With particular regard to African women, their treatment physically and psychologically was inextricably linked to their femaleness, and differed in critical ways from the treatment of their enslaved male counterparts. In her chapter, "The Nature of Female

Slavery,” Deborah Gray White has noted that “[m]ale and female slavery was different from the very beginning” (104). For example, in the slave passage, females were free to roam the upper decks, leaving them open to the “whims and sexual desires of [white] seamen” (104). Very little was done on the Middle Passage to protect African women from the crew members, and so began the sexual exploitation of women of African descent even before reaching the Americas.

In the eighteenth century, slaveholders realized that in order to increase profits, they would have to exercise more control over the reproduction of female slaves. White notes, “Once slaveholders realized that the reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the manipulation of procreative sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of female slaves” (68). They would have to breed their slaves, similar to the reproducing of livestock. This practice instituted forced sexual activity among slaves, as well as the inception of the system of chattel slavery. Slave women were an integral part of chattel slavery, as they were responsible for the constant replenishment of the slave labor force. Based on demographic accounts in the pre-Civil War period, White reports, “the crude birthrate exceeded fifty per one thousand, meaning that each year more than one fifth of the black women in the 15-to-44 age cohort bore a child” (69).

Further, the sexual violence perpetuated against slave women by their masters is responsible for much of the stereotypical notions of black women’s sexuality still prevalent today. At the same time that slaves were viewed as property, many white men, including planters, overseers, drivers, and slaveholders forced sexual liaisons onto black women. The products of these illicit unions were mulattos/as whose light complexions could be “rewarded” by serving as coachman, butler, lady-in-waiting, and maid. Each subsequent generation tended

to be lighter in complexion, and it was commonly believed that the introduction of white blood would tame the natural savagery of the Negro.

Generally speaking, the mulatta offspring worked in the home, with the more attractive female slaves laboring in close proximity to the mistress and master. In this scenario, the slave woman found herself in a difficult predicament, wedged between the Master's caprice and Mistress's jealousy. In her 1861 slave narrative, Linda Brent (the pseudonym of Harriet Jacobs) articulates the precariousness of a slave girl's life when she describes her mistress's reaction to learning of her husband's "interest" in young Brent:

... [The mistress] had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed.  
...My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. (Brent 32, 34)

Brent, a fair-skinned woman herself, is able to demonstrate to her largely white readership the difficulties of her life as a slave, and the effect that her slave status had on her decisions as a woman. Since all of her "prospects had been blighted by slavery" (54), she chooses a lover (who eventually fathers her two children) to protect herself from her master's sexual advances. Linda determines, "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (55). Brent's revealing narrative does much to explode the myth that "Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white men" (A. Davis 182). These myths about black women's sexuality abounded in slavery and that continue to this day, were created not only to justify the increase in white-fathered slaves, but also to echo the behavior of the sexually insatiable black male. As historian Patricia Morton observes in her study, Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women, the "slave woman [is imagined as] a sexual animal – not a real woman at all" (10). In her slave narrative, Brent attempts to counteract these stereotypes by appealing to the Christian sensibilities of her female readers. She reiterates that

she is a decent young woman at heart but for her unfortunate circumstances: “I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect” (54). Yet, Brent is actually in a more precarious position because she is devoid of the benefits attached to male-gendered people or whiteness (i.e., she isn’t a white man, black man, or white woman), thus making her experience in the United States quite distinctive.

Authors of so-called passing fiction tried to capture the legacy of slavery in their fiction. Yet, they also seemed to realize the inheritance (and visual and legal realities) of interracial contacts. I have chosen to examine novels by Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen because of their specific treatment of passing and use of the vehicles particular to the genre itself, the interrogation of whiteness, and the focus on gender and social mobility. Fauset’s novel, Plum Bun (1928), addresses the issue of passing and demonstrates that race and gender are inextricably interconnected.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Nella Larsen’s artistic creativity leads her 1929 novel Passing beyond the melodramatic limitations of most passing fiction to delve into other themes – a scathing critique of the black middle class and forthright discussion of sexuality, desire, and eroticism. Both Fauset’s and Larsen’s novels present educated and aspiring blacks desperately intent on upward mobility.

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<sup>9</sup> I should of course note several wonderful male-written novels that are useful to a complex understanding of the mixed race character or passing and go beyond what some critics would call the limitations of the genre. Charles W. Chesnut’s novel, The House behind the Cedars (1900), is considered by many literary critics to be the first authentic study on the phenomenon of passing. In this text, he constructs a post-slavery world in which the black characters must fit into a society that denies them a place. James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912), until recently the first Black-authored first-person novel, is narrated by a man whose light skin enables him to pass for white. Throughout the course of the novel, the “ex-coloured man” whose identity is never revealed, lives as both a white man and a black man, illustrating the complexities of his identity. Finally, Walter White’s 1926 novel, Flight, presents a female character that passes for all the “right” reasons and is transgressive in a “modern” way (she refuses marriage and gives up her baby).

It is not my intention to rehash the considerable criticism that has emerged in the last twenty years on passing and the tragic mulatto/a.<sup>10</sup> It is necessary, however, to underscore the point that the tragic mulatto/a remains an important figure in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and culture. Issues of race, authenticity, and belonging are raised by the mere presence of this figure in texts. Finally, I argue that the writers and filmmakers discussed here take great pains to reveal their characters' dependence on whiteness for survival and the lengths to which they will go to protect it. They, ultimately, offer a window into an American collective cultural psyche that aggressively refuses to deal with race and mixed race people.

Passing fiction continued to have currency during the Harlem Renaissance. Several writers took up the phenomenon of racial passing in their texts in part due to the marketability of the mulatta. But for some writers, the mulatta enabled them to issue larger critiques of race, racial politics, and race relations. Jessie Fauset was one such writer who introduced these topics into her publications.

### Plum Bun

Jessie Redmon Fauset played a pivotal role in the Harlem Renaissance. Although she was in her early forties at the height of the Renaissance, she played a dual role of creator of her own body of work and mentor to a younger group of writers of the period. She is often referred to as an “older sister figure” to such younger writers, or as the “midwife” of the Renaissance.<sup>11</sup> While

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<sup>10</sup> See Deborah McDowell “The Changing Same”: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory; Judith Butler “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge” in Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (Eds. Abel et al.); Gayle Wald Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture; and, Elaine Ginsberg Passing and the Fictions of Identity.

<sup>11</sup> See a discussion of Fauset, for example, in David Levering Lewis’s When Harlem Was in Vogue (1997).

her mentoring services and other contributions to the movement were invaluable, her novels are also integral to black literature. Her books feature a well-established black middle class, which had not been portrayed in the past. Fauset's novels are essentially domestic romances in the vein of 19<sup>th</sup> century African American writers like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Hopkins.<sup>12</sup> Within the middle class milieu of her 1928 novel, Plum Bun, however, Fauset thwarts the "happily-ever-after plot" in which her female protagonist marries the nice young man at the end of the narrative. Rather, she attempts to give her young female heroine, Angela Murray, a life that includes a potential marriage relationship based on shared goals and partnership, as well as an articulated career path. Plum Bun thus can be read as a reflection on unequal power relationships in the United States.

Critics often read Fauset's characterization of Angela as naïve and simplistic. These readings are true to some degree. However, they fail to understand how necessary it is to the plot that Angela have a limited understanding of the world, driven by fantasy in her impulses. For example, Angela and her mother, Mattie, with their creamy complexions, often pass when frequenting stylish tea rooms and hotels on Saturday afternoons so as to "enjoy" their shopping expeditions. Mattie, however, "had no desire to be of these people, but she liked to look on" (Fauset 15). Her passing is described as "play-acting" and a momentary feminine "weakness." Yet, Angela is quite affected by these experiences and sees these excursions, rather, as "the great rewards of life," pitying her father and sister for having lost the melanin lottery (17). (Junius and Jinny are brown-skinned.) Her Saturdays with Mattie open up to her the possibility of freedom which she equates with a kind of racelessness. Angela adopts a "take me as I look" attitude, a rejection of the racial caste system in which who one is is not based on how one looks,

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<sup>12</sup> Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted (1892) and Contending Forces (1900), respectively.

but is decided upon in a complicated, over-determined way. She tries desperately to convey this idea by saying, “I’m sick of this business of always being below or above a certain norm...we have a right to be happy simply, naturally” (54). Angela emphatically believes whites are a raceless people and she soon pursues her desire to stay out of a liminal existence, an existence predicated by being on the wrong side of the racial caste system.

Light-skinned enough to pass for white, Angela is able, however naïve her thought-process, to gauge the advantages and disadvantages of shifting racial identities. As a “white” woman, she has access to “the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness” (14). These “possibilities for joy and freedom” are crucial to Angela’s decision-making process. As a black woman, she would be faced with the social and psychic limitations of racial oppression, like those she imagines imposed on her sister, Jinny. In addition, Angela finds her parents’ brand of blackness limiting; Opal Street (where her parents live) is described as “[n]arrow, unsparkling, uninviting...an unpretentious little street lined with unpretentious little houses, inhabited for the most part by unpretentious little people” (11). Angela wants to distance herself from the elements that make her an ordinary middle-class black woman, including being associated with Opal Street and with her sister. (Conveniently, her parents die early in the narrative, freeing her from filial guilt.) Her goal of being an artist supports her theories about racelessness. In Philadelphia, Angela has to withdraw from art school when her race becomes known. As she makes her decision to leave home, it is as if Angela is privy to a comment her mother makes long before her birth. Mattie notes, “And anyway when I am alone what can I do? I can’t label myself” (31). People view Angela as white when she is “unencumbered” by the social or family markers of race. The difference is that Mattie seeks the protectiveness of blackness and Angela craves the modernity of

racelessness. Angela soon seeks out those “paths which lead to broad thoroughfares, large, bright houses, delicate niceties of existence” (12).

Angela trades in the drab streets of her childhood for the grand streets of Manhattan to pursue her craft. The city gives her the opportunity to live “on the crest of a wave of excitement and satisfaction which would never wane, never break, never be spent” (87). However, at the same time Angela is experiencing this love affair with New York City, the novel offers a reflection on the social hierarchies that constrict contemporary society. Angela remembers the expression “free, white and twenty-one,” defining it as “this sense of owning the world, this realization that other things being equal, all things were possible” (88). These sentiments expand on ideas introduced on the second page of the novel: “[T]he good things of life are unevenly distributed...[c]ertain fortuitous endowments, great physical beauty, unusual strength, a certain unswerving singleness of mind, – gifts bestowed quite *blindly and disproportionately* by the forces which control life...” (12, emphasis mine). Through Angela, the narrative highlights the disparity in the United States between social and legal realities and cultural myths. Freedom and opportunity are unequally distributed along racial, gender, economic, and social continua. The novel puts forth a critique of a system in which “men had a better time of it than women, coloured men than coloured women, white men than white women” (88). Individuals have greater or lesser access to their inalienable rights depending on the arbitrary meting out of race, gender, and social and economic class. Further, these lines are is an acknowledgement of the limitations imposed on individuals in a system predicated by white privilege. Angela’s decision to pass – to make use of one of her assets – seems a logical decision in light of her aspirations. Due to the manner in which the narrative relates social ills to Angela’s passing, I argue that she is supported in her choice.

Angela goes to New York City to pursue her “Art.” She enrolls in a class at Cooper Union where she encounters several students. The one visibly black student, Rachel Powell, is gifted, yet isolated, consistently addressed as “Miss Powell.” Angela is passing as is her friend, Anthony Cross. To their classmates, both Angela and Anthony are of some indistinct ethnic whiteness. While neither knows the origin of their names, the dupe is plausible because their white classmates cannot imagine the existence of black artists. The novel presents the conundrum of the black artist in 1920s New York, particularly.<sup>13</sup> The author also reveals a scathing critique of the unique social and professional circumstances facing her young female protagonist.

Angela Murray, now Angèle Mory, is living her dream of being an artist in the city. Indeed, being raceless, in her opinion, is modern and artsy. Back in Philadelphia, she notes that “[a]rtists were noted for their broad-mindedness” (63). As a raceless individual in New York City, she feels empowered to seize “the freedom and independence...which now lay in her hand” (88-9). Bold in her naïveté, Angela has a flirtation, followed by a full-blown affair with a wealthy white man, Roger Fielding. “Roger! She had never seen anyone like him: so gay, so beautiful, like a blond, glorious god, so overwhelming, so persistent” (129). Ever living in a fantasy world, Angela believes that she can get her prince to propose marriage to her and then live happily ever after. She consults her classmate, Martha Burden, who cynically advises her: “It is a game, and the hardest game in the world for a woman, but the most fascinating...you have to be careful not to withhold too much and yet to give very little. If we don’t give enough we lose them. If we give too much we lose ourselves” (145). Angela is certain that her sexual

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<sup>13</sup> One such instance in the novel is the withdrawal of Rachel Powell’s study abroad funding from the American Committee for the Fontainebleau School of Arts under the rationale that “enforced contact” with Miss Powell might cause others discomfort on the journey to France. The incident parallels circumstances surrounding the sculptor Augusta Savage in 1923, who was rejected from a French art program upon discovery of her race.

relationship with Roger will ensure a marriage proposal. In fact, I argue that her fears of not being marriageable propel her into his arms. Because she is unaware of her own precarious position – that as a woman she is subject to exploitation – she fails to anticipate the reality of her relationship or the complexities of whiteness. As Deborah McDowell has noted in an essay on the novel, Angela’s relationship with Roger is “a replay of the racial prehistory of concubinage and sexual exploitation that has long characterized black women’s relationships with white men” (67). For example, though he perceives Angèle as a white woman, the very sound of her name invoking purity, Roger must also marry well to someone in his social class. He may very well have genuine affection for his Angèle, but he cannot legitimate their relationship in the way that she expects. Roger intends to set her up in a “love-nest where I and only I may come” (182). Angela does “give a little,” as Martha advises, but her plan backfires on her. While race matters, class is also critical.

For Angela, marriage is the only attainable asset that she can gain. According to McDowell in the introduction to the 1990 edition of the novel, both marriage and passing are means by which two disenfranchised groups – white women and blacks – gain access to power (xvi). These inequalities cause certain tensions in the novel. Angela has to marry into the right situation to save herself from poverty and desperation, and she attempts to do so through passing. The novel articulates her pursuit of freedom as a tale without any meaning. Whereas her parents “who had known poverty and homelessness” (12) prize their journey as African Americans from slavery to freedom, Angela is depicted as having a more modern sensibility, more concerned with her own individual happiness than racial allegiances. The novel’s subtitle, “A Novel without a Moral,” suggests as much. Because Angela becomes estranged from her family and Christian faith, she has lost herself.

Earlier in the novel, Angela's mother articulates a similar episode of being lost, and subject to the advances of a white man. However, her husband Junius saves her – with his blackness – from potential exploitation as a white-skinned black woman. Mattie notes, “[I]t was partly on account of his colour that she loved him... ‘my own colour has never brought me anything but insult and trouble’” (31). Cheryl Wall has made a similar observation about Mattie in her text, Women of the Harlem Renaissance: “Despite the convenience her own color affords, she does not place a premium on it; instead she minimizes issues of race” (77). To Mattie, Junius is like God, and upon his death, wills her own death. The novel presents the primacy of the family, and this particular family, very seriously and at the end reiterates Mattie's path. Somehow, Angela comes to her senses and ends the affair with Roger which has “left no trace on her moral nature” (245). This scenario is a rather “modern” take on black sexual subjectivity; in the past, she would have fallen into a life of ill repute, been shamed forever, or lost her life. However, in Plum Bun, Angela rehabilitates herself and has the possibility of a future. She redeems herself by reconciling with her sister and forging a wary sisterhood with fellow artist Rachel Powell. In order, to protest the retraction of Rachel's prize, Angela renounces her award and publicly claims her race. Having examined her earlier ambitions more closely, Angela considers marriage as a necessary end, “the method of achieving the kind of existence which once had been her ideal... From this state a gifted, an ambitious woman might reach forth and acquit herself well in any activity” (274). This mental turnaround also saves her moral nature. In a way, Angela embraces her mother's life and safely aligns with her vision. The narrative suggests as much during Angela's nostalgic trip to Philadelphia in the final pages of the novel. She finally sees what the reader is supposed to have grasped in the opening scenes. The house she visits “seemed a tiny island of protection [in] an encroaching sea of troubles... How

beautiful such a life could be, shared with some one beloved” (366). Her beloved is, of course, Anthony Cross, who has been passing as well. At the close of the novel, Angela and Anthony reunite in Paris and presumably live happily ever after.

Unlike other heroines in passing fiction, Angela does not fall victim to a mysterious death or banishment (banishment in these narratives, is a precursor to a mysterious death). Although her passing is described as unfulfilling, she has the potentiality for a life afterward with Anthony. However, the ending of the novel brings to light the problematic discussion of African American desire in the midst of white hegemony. Plum Bun articulates the very real limitations on the individual’s sense of self and the fulfillment of desires. Angela is modern in her sensibilities and pursuit of her artistic ambitions. However, the novel reminds readers that to express her desire, she is subject to punishment. To use her attributes to achieve her desire, she is subject to punishment because she has transgressed the boundaries of acceptability for a black woman – seeking a modern career and having premarital sex with a white man – to say the least. Angela’s predicament also brings to light the interlocking oppressive forces facing black women, namely race, sex, and class. Yet, instead of having Angela fall victim to what sociologist Deborah King has called “multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness,” Fauset puts her heroine within the context of the marriage plot. She situates Angela where her desire can be kept in check. This story is reminiscent of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Iola Leroy (1892), in which the heroine is safely in a marriageable situation in the final pages of the novel. The eponymous mulatta title character (further transgressive because she has experienced life as a white woman) might be tempted to seek social mobility unless her energies are channeled into the proper situation. For the “refined mulatto” Iola Leroy, her relationship with Dr. Frank Latimer is based on shared ideals and morals. Harper describes their love as deeper than that which romantic love offers.

“Kindred hopes and tastes had knit their hearts; grand and noble purposes were lighting up their lives; and they esteemed it a blessed privilege to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom” (Harper 271). Nearly fifty years later, Fauset is writing a similar plot conclusion for Angela Murray. Her desires are moved into a “safe” realm, and overseas to Paris, where she and Anthony have the possibility of artistic freedom. (This possibility of freedom being realized is revisited in Nella Larsen’s Passing through Brian Redfield’s desire to move his family to Brazil where he imagines race relations to be better.) The novel also suggests that when and wherever Angela and Anthony establish a home, it will be upright and virtuous and racism will be kept at bay. There is no space for African American desire, and in this case, African American female desire even within the progressive, so-called modern 1920s in the United States. McDowell’s essay arrives at a similar sentiment. She notes that the narrative’s ending suggests a “clear ambivalence” to the themes it presents (70). Angela is a modern character in the sense of her pursuit of and attempt to fulfill her desires. However, in the end, Plum Bun situates the decision to pass as a kind of trespass and inability to keep the desire for self-fulfillment in check. She reimagines Angela in a context where she should seek out her sense of self – marriage – and anticipates the tensions surrounding the female heroines of Nella Larsen’s Passing.

### Passing

Nella Larsen leads her 1929 novel, Passing, beyond the melodramatic limitations of most examples of passing fiction to include a class conscious critique. In Passing, Clare Kendry, one of the primary characters, effectively passes as a white woman for all of her married years. The author places Clare in opposition to Irene Redfield, a childhood acquaintance, who is also very

fair-complexioned. Irene, however, marries a black physician, portraying herself as a self-sacrificing wife, mother, and “race woman.”<sup>14</sup> On the surface, Larsen discusses and critiques the larger issue of passing by charting the reacquaintance of these two apparently diametrical opposites. The novel, however, implicitly manipulates the surface theme and central metaphor of passing in an effort to highlight the artificiality, hypocrisy, and hollowness of Irene Redfield and the Harlem bourgeoisie to which she belongs – and its necessary relationship to whiteness. In this way, I highlight the women’s fear of destabilizing their privilege, which is actually a cover for the way they adhere, maintain, and reproduce white privilege or, more plainly, a system of whiteness.

The action of the novel develops around two women, Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew. Both women, black by nature of birth, culture, and law, are light-skinned enough to be mistaken for white. At a chance meeting, Irene renews her friendship with Clare, a childhood acquaintance who has effectively passed in the white world for the last twelve years. Through a series of flashbacks, Larsen presents a rather comprehensive portrait of these two women. Irene is married to a successful black physician, living in a fashionable section of Harlem. Clare, married to a wealthy white man, is increasingly attracted to Irene’s Harlem milieu. Much to Irene’s envy, the extraordinarily beautiful Clare is eagerly accepted by the Harlem bourgeoisie, becoming an immediate subject of wonder and delight among them. The climax occurs when Clare’s husband, John Bellew, very outspoken about his racist views, follows her to a social gathering at the residence of a black couple, where he quickly surmises his

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<sup>14</sup> I employ this term to signify an individual within the African American community who achieved a certain degree of economic success and social standing and was involved in uplift programs and activities for the betterment of the black race as a whole.

wife's racial origin. During his angry outburst and the resulting confusion, Clare mysteriously falls to her death through an open window, bringing the story to its tragic conclusion.

In a novel that typically reflects conventions of the passing genre, Clare would be ostracized for leaving the black race. However, in this case, it is Irene's rather than Clare's values which are rejected. Detail for detail, Irene manifests the same faults which she so harshly observes in Clare. For example, when Clare and Irene become reacquainted at the Drayton Hotel after a twelve-year separation, it appears that Irene's commitment to racial consciousness is ambivalent. She is herself passing in order to use the hotel's services. She describes her passing as a feeling of "being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote..." (147). She condones passing to the extent that it fulfills her needs. In fact she later admits that she often passes "...for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that" (227). In this incident at the Drayton Hotel, she is actually upset by the fact that she might have been recognized as a Negro, when she is usually mistaken for "an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy." She comments to Clare that she is "odiously and hatefully familiar" with the feeling of being suspect. "[A]nger, scorn, and fear slide over her" (150) at the thought of being discovered a Negro. It is as if Irene has been caught with her hand in the proverbial racial cookie jar. Yet, when confronted with Clare's passing, she is full of disdain. In Irene's mind, they were "[s]trangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousnesses" (192). Yet, after the incident at the Drayton it seems that Irene has questionable racial and moral values. This initial incident with Clare also introduces Irene's nuanced dependence on whiteness, especially when she chooses to pass.

Further, the encounter at the Drayton reveals how normalized whiteness is in the world of the novel. Both women are perceived to be white because of the assumption that black women do not have access to such spaces. As Robert Jensen observes in his book, The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege, “whiteness consistently conveys certain privileges” (8) or assumptions about who can be white. This is most evident in Clare’s husband’s assumption that his wife and her friends are white. John Bellew, referring to his wife’s skin getting darker, declares, “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” (171). Bellew’s blunt statement maps nicely onto a statement made by cultural critic Michele Wallace in a letter to Maurice Berger: “[W]hite folk are incessantly engaged in doing and saying things to identify themselves as a part of the dominant racism... There is a lot of suspicion for any white person who consistently doesn’t do this” (183). Indeed, the three women present during Bellew’s declaration – his wife, Clare, Irene Redfield, and Gertrude Martin – are all black, accounting for some of the nervous energy in the face of such a matter-of-fact avowal, but they are powerless to assert anything other than a silent acquiescence. And, yet, it shouldn’t go unmentioned that Irene herself mistakes Clare for a white woman when they first reunite. While Irene is black and passing to gain a respite at the Drayton, she too cannot conceive of another black woman sharing this privileged space. It then becomes necessary to consider how tied race and gender are to social mobility.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rena Walden, the ill-fated heroine of Charles W. Chesnutt’s 1900 novel, The House behind the Cedars, reveals this conflict in even starker terms. Rena, the product of an illegitimate miscegenous union, dies trying to secure a better life for herself through passing. In contrast, her brother, John, successfully passes into whiteness and the privileges of white masculinity.

With this in mind, Clare's decision to marry a white man is not as despicable as Irene would make it appear. She explains to Irene, "For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem....Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass'" (Larsen 159). After such a declaration, it becomes apparent that Clare's underlying motive is to establish herself firmly in the middle-class. Like most other women of the 1920's, she achieves middle-class status by virtue of the status of the primary male figure in her life. Clare's father, her sole male relative, could offer his daughter little in terms of class advancement; he was an alcoholic janitor, though college-educated. Because of the family's status, Irene notes that "Clare had never been exactly one of the group" (154). In this way, I argue that for the goals that Clare has, the best thing her father could have done for her was to die. With her father no longer alive, Clare can marry into the status she desires. Clare believes, as Barbara Christian notes in a general statement on female passers, that "through her marriage to a wealthy white man, she might gain economic security and more freedom of mobility" (Christian 45). Clare does not differ from other women (black, white, or other) who believe that they can cement their futures according to the men they marry. In Clare's mind, it seems easier for her to gain her middle-class objectives through passing. To a race woman such as Irene, however, Clare's passing is repugnant. She feels that "[b]etween them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood" (Larsen 192). In her own estimation, Irene radically differs from Clare because she marries a black man, achieving her social standing by staying within the black race. Larsen soon illustrates, however, the ambiguity of Irene's racial consciousness, and that Irene has herself passed into a mechanized, middle class lifestyle.

Consequently, Irene has consciously arranged her position in the black middle class to her satisfaction. Her husband is a physician, thus giving her both economic security and secure social standing. Irene wants her middle-class life to remain intact at any cost. Irene offers that “Above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life” (Larsen 229). Deborah McDowell notes, “Despite her protestations to the contrary, Irene with a cold, hard, exploitative, and manipulative determination, tries to protect her most cherished attainment....Moreover, Irene resorts to wily and feline tactics to ensure that illusion of security” (McDowell xxv). For example, her husband has yearned for years to leave racist Harlem to practice medicine in Brazil where race relations are better. Irene refuses to hear any such talk about moving. She manipulates and assuages “his dislike and disgust for his profession and his country” (Larsen 187) by rationalizing that she has done this “[n]ot for her, oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for him and the boys” (Larsen 186-7). She cannot understand why her husband, Brian, would want to disturb “the life which she had so admirably arranged for them” (Larsen 187). Her refusal to relocate is based partly on a consideration of what she feels is best for her family, but the primary reason is comfort with her own personal security. There is nothing inherently wrong with Irene’s desire for a comfortable life. It *is* inherently problematic that she wishes to control access to the privileges she enjoys, which is proof that she has bought into the wages of whiteness.

In painstaking detail, Larsen reveals the hypocrisy of the manners and morals of the black middle class through her presentation of Irene Redfield’s carefully ordered life. A typical morning in the Redfield household is routine middle-class activity:

They went into the dining-room. He drew back her chair and she sat down behind the fat-bellied German coffee-pot, which sent out its morning fragrance, mingled with the

smell of crisp toast and savoury bacon, in the distance. With his long, nervous fingers he picked up the morning paper from his own chair and sat down. (184)

This morning, certainly like many others, is drenched with the hollowness of their class. There is barely any conversation and the couple appears distant from each other. Likewise, Irene's activities are restricted to her own class and include attending teas, shopping expeditions, and frequenting parties. These functions similarly reflect the careful orchestration of this lifestyle:

There were the familiar little tinkling sounds of spoons striking against frail cups, the soft running sounds of inconsequential talk, punctuated now and then with laughter. In irregular small groups, disintegrating, coalescing, striking just the right note of disharmony, disorder in the big room, which Irene had furnished with a sparingness that was almost chaste, moved the guests with that slight familiarity that makes a party a success. (219)

Prior to the successful, elaborate dance depicted at the party, Irene irrationally concluded that her husband, Brian, and Clare Kendry are having an affair. Although she is devastated at the suggestion of this liaison, there is no space for emotion, neither at the tea Irene hosts nor among her social circle. Irene won't allow it herself. In this way, I argue that Larsen's exquisite descriptions capture the nature of Irene's ordered life.

Furthermore, Larsen questions the humanitarian motives of the black bourgeoisie, again through the actions of Irene Redfield. As a member of the black bourgeoisie, she is required to be involved in the advancement of the race. Thus, she arranges various functions apparently designed for the good of the race, based on her own unselfish personal feelings and inclinations. In actuality, they are an extension of her constant desire to solidify her own middle-class position. She belongs to racial uplift programs, such as the Negro Welfare League, because it is expected from one of her class. E. Franklin Frazier suggests that women of the black bourgeoisie "are constantly forming clubs which ostensibly have a serious purpose, but in reality

are formed in order to consolidate their position in ‘society’” (Frazier 222). Irene organizes and heads the ticket committee, but she is annoyed at the responsibility she has assumed.

Subconsciously, she recognizes the more subversive responsibility she has. Irene wishes “that she had not been born a Negro...she was unable to disregard the burden of race” (Larsen 255).

Slightly frowning, she remarks, “Thank heaven it [N.W.L. Dance] comes off tomorrow night and doesn’t happen again for a year” (Larsen 197). Thus, even Irene’s outwardly humanitarian efforts are manifestations of her middle-class existence. Deborah McDowell concludes, “The social functions that Irene arranges, supposedly designed to aid the unfortunate black masses and to give them a sense of belonging” (McDowell xxv) are in fact self-serving.

I argue that it is also necessary to analyze Larsen’s work through the prism of class, particularly via her representation of Irene’s sexuality. Critical of Irene’s sexual repression, Larsen suggests more than once that she is to blame for it. Within the novel, women participate in lives devoid of sexuality and sensuality. To Irene, sexuality is not an inherent human quality, but a definite indication of one’s social class. Consequently, Irene’s marriage is sexless; she and her husband sleep in separate bedrooms.

Furthermore, Irene tries to protect her sons from schoolyard discussion about sex. Irene even finds it distasteful to discuss the subject with her husband. Thus, Irene presents the actual issue in abstract terms. “I’m terribly afraid he’s picked up some queer ideas about things – some things – from the older boys, you know” (Larsen 189). Brian correctly deciphers “queer ideas” to mean sex, which in his opinion is “...a grand joke, the greatest in the world.” Irene then wants to remove her son from his present school because the boys are talking about sex. In this sense, Irene embodies the “culture of dissemblance” as discussed by Darlene Clark Hine. She suggests that in lieu of the pervasive and derogatory stereotypes concerning black women’s sexuality it

was necessary for them to create a “culture of dissemblance,” in an effort to “downplay, even deny, sexual expression” (Hine 918). Irene, proud of her middle-class life must repress her sexuality in order to maintain her self-image as a successful representation of black bourgeois culture which is an imitation of repressive white values.

Additionally, throughout the novel, the reader sees a lack of sexuality equated with lack of passion for life in general. In this sense, Irene lacks all spontaneity, freedom from convention, and zest for life. This is evident in the very first paragraph of the novel. Irene is opening up her “ordinary and clearly directed” mail when she discovers a letter from Clare:

...The long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender...Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (143)

Although the identity of the writer is unknown at this point, Irene finds this sensuality expressed through the colors of the envelope and ink threatening evident in her description of the letter as “a thin sly thing.” As Mary Mabel Youman notes, “[f]or Irene, events have to be orderly, not mysterious; open, not furtive; conventional, not flaunting” (Youman 237). This statement is revelatory in a narrative that generally equates Clare’s passion – usually demonstrated in her fashionable, colorful clothing – with not being from the same class upbringing.

In addition, Clare’s passion has been linked to her apparent sexual transgressions: rumors that she was seen in the company of white people at a fashionable hotel soon after her father’s death, and Irene noting that the man she saw with Clare at the Drayton hotel was not her husband. All this leads Irene to conclude that “Clare always had a—a—having way with her” (153). Clare’s sexual and sensual vitality disturbs the conventionality that Irene clings to, further

evident in the way that she likes her life to be run. “Irene didn’t like changes, particularly changes that affected her smooth routine of her household” (Larsen 188). On one occasion, Irene very briefly suspects that the life she has constructed is incomplete. She recognizes that Clare has a humane quality that she is lacking. Clare is “capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known” (Larsen 195). However, Irene quickly rejects this thought; her loss of feeling is not as important as her gain – security. In effect, she has “passed” into a sterile, comatose state to keep her desires in check.

Several critics have read the absence of sexuality (and, alternately, the sensuous actions in the novel) as the novel’s flirtation with a lesbian subtext. Critics like Deborah McDowell put forward that Larsen’s use of fire imagery suggest Irene’s desire for Clare. Irene has for Clare a “fascination, strange and compelling” (161). Clare’s voice is “so appealing, so very seductive” (165). Irene also spends much time describing Clare’s arresting beauty, including “her full red lips.” Clare is described more than once as being “a shade” too good-looking. Further, Clare’s presence causes Irene some emotional and physiological discomfort, for example, in her predictable shivers and shrinking from Clare’s touch. While studies of imagery and language like McDowell’s are compelling, I prefer the reading offered by Ann duCille in which she proposes that the interactions between Clare and Irene reflect a “homosociability”:

...The interaction between Clare and Irene may reflect the moment’s preoccupation with the always-already-sexual black female body, or...reflect a woman’s way of talking through the body – of expressing material or experiential desire in bodily terms. (438)

I further read the novel’s sensuality as the inherent and necessary erotic component in discussions of passing and mixed race individuals that in turn complements the racial and social aspects of the novel.

Irene's feelings toward the lower-class are reflected most prominently in her relations with her servants. She describes Zulena, the maid, as "a small mahogany-coloured creature" (Larsen 184). This description implies that Zulena has uncultivated, animal-like qualities as a member of the lower class thereby casting Irene as completely alienated from blacks with a lower station and blind to her own racism and classism. In addition, Irene apparently thinks that there shouldn't be any interaction among the classes because she is disturbed by Clare's frequent conversations with the servants. In an apparent role reversal, Clare embodies what Irene rejects. Clare "would descend to the kitchen and, with – to Irene – an exasperating childlike lack of perception, spend her visit in talk and merriment with Zulena and Sadie" (Larsen 208). Clare, savoring the black spirit, is unaware that one is not supposed to be friendly with the hired help. Irene is completely horrified and states boldly, "I've no intention of being the link between her and her poorer darker brethren" (Larsen 185). Irene's feelings are best described by John G. Mencke's theory on some mulattoes, which I will extend to Larsen's fair-skinned protagonist. He writes that they are plagued by a sense of "shame, a feeling of superiority to the mass of blacks, and an intense individualism [which] drive him from the black race" (Mencke 168). Irene, the ultimate "race woman," embodies this statement, firmly believing that the classes should not mix.

There is also another not-so subtle criticism by Irene of Clare's very existence at work. From the earliest mention of Clare, readers can surmise that she is from the "wrong side of the tracks." On the second page of the novel, we learn that her father has been "killed in a silly saloon-fight" (144). And, due to the way Irene describes Bob Kendry, the reader has little sympathy for his "familiar pasty-white face," or for Clare, by extension. F. James Davis notes in his study that "very light mulattoes have often been considered illegitimate and trashy if they

cannot demonstrate respectable family connections” (133). One can identify this estimation in Larsen, perhaps. The author herself felt slighted by the upwardly-mobile African Americans of secure social status that she encountered due to her own mixed race heritage, the product of a union between a Danish mother and possibly black West Indian father.<sup>16</sup> Detached and sensitive, young Nella Larsen seemed keenly aware that whiteness is made powerful by all the people unable to achieve it. In this way, it seems that Larsen writes sympathetically about young Clare, yearning for a better life with her “nose pressed up against the glass.” Clare observes about Irene: “You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others” (159). The “others” that Clare refers to in her conversation with Irene is freedom, the kind of freedom only present in true whiteness. Yet, she finds a way to get the things she wants without all the extra responsibility. She doesn’t want all that because, as she explains, ““Rene, I’m not safe”” (210). Clare isn’t safe anywhere, and her situation is reminiscent of Helga Crane in Larsen’s other novel, Quicksand. (Biracial Helga doesn’t quite fit in within the sterile educational environment of a Southern college, the Harlem middle class, or as an exotic in Copenhagen. A living death as the constantly pregnant wife of a Southern preacher is her fate.) Similarly, Clare cannot “have it all.” Clare wants to have blackness on her own terms, a transgression that could be worse than passing – a black woman with money and mobility dipping into the black upper echelons of society without all the baggage of racial uplift. Her passing, including her forays into the black community, represents the ultimate freedom (reserved for “authentic” whites in the novel represented by Hugh Wentworth and his wife<sup>17</sup>) and

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<sup>16</sup> Larsen was notoriously circumspect about the details of her childhood and interior life. Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, A Woman’s Life Unveiled by Thadious M. Davis and In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line by George Hutchinson are two definitive biographies that attempt to piece together Larsen’s past.

<sup>17</sup> These characters are loosely based on Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff, to whom the novel is dedicated.

threaten to upend a precariously constructed racial and class system. Further, Irene's passing for convenience, as well as her money and privilege are also suspect. I do believe that Irene's own "catlike" manner toward Clare – hoping to be free of her, wishing her dead – also means that she too cannot have it all. As readers, we can begin to imagine all Irene has sacrificed for her lifestyle – and the rage she feels that Clare or anyone else could also have material means without the extreme efforts. Neither woman is safe, as their possibilities are tragically restricted.

Thus, through a rejection of Irene Redfield and her values, one sees Larsen highlighting the emptiness of the emerging black middle-class through its imitation of white, repressive, opportunistic values, and most importantly, the race-hatred [which is implicitly self-hatred]. The manipulation of the constructs of the passing novel and the tragic mulatta heroine enable this kind of analysis. Though Clare is the literal passer, Irene who remains black has effectively passed into a banal prototype of whiteness. It is crucial to note that while Larsen does not condone Clare's passing, she condemns Irene's hypocrisy. Irene's credibility as a narrator deteriorates when she consistently enacts what she condemns in Clare. Even Irene passes when she is certain to receive the benefits of being white. In these instances, her passing takes on an even more hypocritical tone. She joins racial uplift programs under the guise of racial consciousness while refusing to interact with certain blacks. Irene's altruism, however, is self-serving, as it is required activity of one from her social class. Larsen's use of passing is an intentional stylistic device that allows her to critique systemic whiteness and the limitations placed on mixed race women. Ultimately, in her novel, Passing, Nella Larsen's artistic vision reveals that a lack of legible desires leads to a kind of "death" for both Irene and Clare.

## Pinky

It is here that I would like to shift my discussion briefly to include the relevance of film representations of mixed race female characters. Nowhere is the anxiety level caused by the mixed race female more evident than in the major motion pictures of the early twentieth century. Similar to the novelistic depictions of her, movie narratives painted the mulatta as an archetype. She is often sullen and bitter about her lot in life, particularly with her ties to her always visibly darker family members. Larger questions of racial loyalty are whispered about her. She passes as white, but is punished eventually for that pesky strain of black blood that makes her greedy for a higher station in life. Even though it is human nature to want comfort and freedom, these movies essentially cast the mulatta as a villain for existing as a visual reminder of this country's racial issues.

The 1949 film Pinky attempts to understand the complexity of issues around the mulatta through the characterization of the title character. In the end, however, the controversial film takes the safe route. Patricia Johnson, or Pinky as she is pejoratively called, has been introduced to the possibilities of a middle-class life as a white woman, but, ultimately, escapes a tragic fate due to her decision to claim her blackness. She accepts her assumed place in the United States and within the black community. As a result, she is rewarded handsomely with an inheritance and her own business.

The film opens with Pinky returning to her family's Southern home after having studied for some years in the North. She also has become wise about business, money, power, and privilege, and their direct relationship to whiteness. As such, although she doesn't mean to, she begins to pass for white and soon is engaged to be married to a white doctor. She lives an alternate life, denying her heritage and creating a new history to avoid discovery. Like Clare

Kendry in Larsen's novel, Passing, she is planning to marry her fiancé and live the rest of her life as a white woman. On a final trip home, Pinky comes into some money by way of the older white woman who employs her grandmother. The struggle to claim her inheritance awakens a racial pride and results in the heroine claiming her "rightful" place in society within the black community.

With the box office success of earlier independent movies dealing with topics such as racial discrimination, the United States government was keen on using the power of film to educate the population on social issues, like racial discrimination. Hollywood executives also saw the power of these films, as well as the financial rewards for the studios. The public clearly had an interest in seeing dramas based on "social problems," as it allowed for a "window into another world" without having to be sullied by direct contact with "the other." Elia Kazan had established himself as "...one of the foremost directors of social problem films in the late 1940s" based on his best director Oscar win for On the Waterfront (Benshoff and Griffin 181). With its adventure through the life of a visually white woman, Pinky is an example of a social problem film. Pinky, adapted from the novel Quality by Cid Ricketts Sumner, attempts to confront racial issues, through the title character. The irony, of course, is that the film really confronts racial issues from a white perspective. For example, to avoid the 1934 Production Code which discouraged suggestions of miscegenous activity, Pinky is portrayed by white actress Jeanne Crain. This decision ensured box office success, allowing white movie patrons to suspend reality about how Pinky had derived her lack of melanin and to keep the issues presented safely in the realm of fantasy.

Yet there is still much to be gleaned from Kazan's film as it provides a window into the anxieties and misconceptions about mixed race people. For example, Granny/Dicie, played by

Ethel Waters, sends Pinky up North to obtain a good education. Because of her light complexion, Pinky is assumed to be white, and it seems that it was easier to pass in her new surroundings. Pinky tries in vain to explain, “I didn’t mean to, Granny. It just happened.” Although Granny has a negative response to Pinky’s admission, it is important to note that when Granny sees her granddaughter after several years of separation, she doesn’t even recognize Pinky at first. This encounter is critical because Pinky visually is indeed white. As stated earlier in this chapter, an individual’s whiteness becomes challenged and understood through reports of known black ancestry. The fact that Granny doesn’t know her own family member whom she raised suggests in the opening moments of the film that Pinky is not black enough. Audiences are soon reminded that she isn’t white enough either.

Pinky, the mixed race figure, is juxtaposed with the mammy figure of Granny. Both the mammy and tragic mulatta are stereotypical depictions of black women. For example, Pinky is constantly fanning and dabbing at her neck with her handkerchief. I read this action as a physical discomfort of returning to the humid Southern heat, but also as the psychic discomfort of returning to blackness. (By the end of the movie, Pinky is no longer swooning from the temperature, fully re-assimilated.) She is now a Northern lady, trim in body and ambitious. Granny, on the other hand, is personified by her more substantial body and large breasts. The film also provides more shots of the exterior of the ramshackle cabin in which Granny lives and the chickens that roam freely in her yard as compared to the modest and neat interior. What is striking is that sometimes the clucking is the backdrop for the movie’s dialogue, in place of and sometimes louder than the musical score. Further, Granny occupies her space within her town comfortably. Known also as Aunt Dicie, she takes in laundry and cares for Miss Em, a wealthy white woman on whose property she lives. While popular actress Ethel Waters imbues her

portrayal of Granny with “ambiguities and contradictions” as film historian Donald Bogle has noted in Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, it still seems the intention of the film that the fair-skinned, ambitious mulatta be in direct comparison with the darker-skinned, God-fearing mammy.

As stated earlier, Pinky has been passing for white in the North using her given name of Patricia. She has been exposed to white privilege; Pinky herself notes, “I’ve been treated like a human being.” Two early scenes in the movie reveal, I argue, how blacks are considered to be not human. Soon after arriving home, Pinky learns that “ignorant, no-count, good for nothing” Jake Waters has cheated Granny out of some money and the granddaughter goes to his house to retrieve it. Unfortunately, his girlfriend, Roselia, doesn’t take too kindly to seeing Pinky in the company of Jake Waters and a disagreement ensues. Two white policemen (who just happened to be patrolling the black neighborhood) break up the “fight.” Their interest in the trio stems from their mistaken impression that Pinky is white and Jake has “molest[ed]” her. When marked as a white woman, respect for Pinky is a given and her chastity is assumed. Though she is fair-skinned, Roselia is visually not white so she is forced to lift her skirt for a rather public search for weapons. When Pinky’s race is revealed, the police officers immediately become abusive towards her and she has to lift her skirt as well. Pinky, the black woman, no longer has the assumption of innocence or the protection of the state. In a later scene, she is set upon and nearly sexually assaulted by a carload of young white men who determine her race because of where she is walking. I read both encounters with multiple white men as potential rape scenes that reinscribe the notion that black women are available for rather degrading sexual advances (the same notions responsible for the abuses black women encountered as chattel slaves during the period of American slavery). When Pinky returns home after being nearly assaulted by the

young white men in the car, Granny doesn't even notice her granddaughter's soiled, ripped dress and dirty face.<sup>18</sup>

To the film's credit, there are some critical moments in which the messiness of the racial caste system is momentarily unpacked. Because of Miss Em's insistence on calling Pinky by her childhood nickname and her grandmother's undying loyalty to her employer, there are tensions between the two women. And, yet, Miss Em and Pinky have a revelatory conversation that eventually opens up alternate possibilities for the young woman. Pinky angrily observes:

“What am I then? You tell me. You're the ones that set the standards. You whites. You're the ones that judge people by the color of their skins. Well, by your own standards, by the only ones that matter to you, I'm as white as you are.”

Pinky exposes a key fallacy within the system of white privilege; that is, as Maurice Berger has observed in his book, White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness, “While the social implications of whiteness remain mostly unspoken today, race is no less meaningful to white people who continually reinforce their own authority and social standing by seeing themselves in positive contrast to an inferior, negative, or even *dangerous* blackness” (166, emphasis mine). I argue that Pinky's fair skin makes her all the more dangerous because she troubles “legitimate” claims to whiteness. Later in the movie, there is a telling exchange between Miss Em and her cousin by marriage, Mrs. Melba Wooley, which reveals this very discomfort with “the other” who isn't visually marked.

Mrs. Wooley: “My goodness! She's whiter than I am.”

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<sup>18</sup> The viewer is meant to understand that the black woman is an ineffectual mother, an American mythology. In actuality, the scene underscores that Granny/Dicie doesn't understand how her granddaughter's mediation of the color line places her in an untenable situation within the film. It underscores how unprotected Pinky is; even her grandmother's home fails to be a haven.

Miss Em: “Prettier, too.”

Mrs. Wooley: “Well, it just gives me the creeps.”

The film offers no reason why or when Miss Em develops a soft spot for Pinky. And, she takes the young woman’s advice to write a will as she respects Pinky’s Northern education has made her “smart.” The will leaves the bulk of the estate to – a plantation mansion and 20 acres of land – to Pinky. The document itself states, “This bequest being an expression of my genuine regard for her and my confidence in the use to which she will put this property.” I posit that Miss Em’s action, while it provides material security, serves the function of keeping Pinky tied to the segregated South in “lasting service for the race,” to borrow a phrase from Iola Leroy. Miss Em’s cousin Jeffers and his wife Melba Wooley quickly decide to contest the will on the grounds of undue influence. There was no other way to stomach a “practically white” colored girl inheriting more than they did.

Due to the sensational nature of the proceedings, Pinky’s court case is reported in all the papers, especially the Negro Press. One headline screams, “Negro Heiress Defies Lynch Law,” which states that black people cannot inherit property. The case doesn’t even escape the attention of Dr. Thomas Adams, Pinky’s fiancé. He travels to the South to reason with her to consider a life with him in which she will pass for white. He says, “The rest we can work out between ourselves. It’ll be our secret. No one else will have to know.” Later Pinky wonders, “You can change your name. I wonder if you can change what you really are inside.” Sadly, the movie abandons earlier scenes (like Pinky’s interaction with the police officers) that questioned the racial caste system favoring instead a more essentialized notion of identity.

In the end, though, all is not lost. Pinky no longer needs the relative security of marriage to Tom for her survival since she wins her court case. The unlikely position of having property

and material wealth makes her blackness more palatable – and she stays “home” to open “Miss Em’s Clinic and Nursery School.” As heart-warming as the ending may be, there is something troubling about the movie’s conclusion. First, Pinky is giving up (at least within the future presented in the film) any promise of adult sexual desire. Such a rendering allows her to be safe and legible to the viewers of the movie. Miss Em, in making Pinky a self-sustaining property owner gives the young woman social mobility that simultaneously ensnares her. Pinky is, like other mixed race characters in this time period, freakishly alone, the virginal and refined mulatta who lives by the cult of true womanhood with a life based on her Christian piety and charitable nature.

### Concluding Thoughts

The three texts explored here show how the analysis of passing narratives allows for a deeper meditation on race, gender, and class. The heroines stumble into whiteness and its benefits, as if a deliberate act of agency would be transgressive. In the case of the two novels, Plum Bun and Passing, the authors try to problematize the genre itself to offer options for mixed race female characters. In Pinky, the heroine’s issue is resolved with the bequeathal of economic status by the white mother/savior. This idea of the virtuous white mother juxtaposed with the ineffectual black mother<sup>19</sup> is one that I will explore in the next two chapters.

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout the movie, the audience sees Dicie as kindly, simple, loving, and faithful to a fault. But, I think the audience is also meant to read Dicie as a clueless black mother. Pinky seems to know this intuitively as her business is named for Miss Em not Dicie/Granny.

The next chapter will explore the mixed race woman in American fiction beyond the subject of passing. In Willa Cather's 1940 novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, the author explores the concept of nation through slavery. In order to do so, she employs the mixed race woman who operates as a key figure in a melodramatic plot of abuse. In addition, Cather represents the mixed race women's relationship to and confrontation of the construction of white womanhood. This tension is usually absent from passing fiction, as it is not central to the plot. And, it is in this tension that I explore discussions of American national identity, particularly that of a nation built on slave labor during ante- and post-bellum America.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WILLA CATHER'S STATE OF THE UNION: SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL

Willa Cather's final novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, rewrites the classic setting on the Nebraska prairie that typifies the novelist's work and moves to the "Virginia backwoods." Though published in 1940, the text takes place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in 1856, and with the epilogue set in 1881. A complex text with slavery at its center, the novel's action focuses on Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, a wealthy heiress, and her relationship to those around her. Despite deteriorating health and confinement to a wheelchair, Sapphira powerfully controls the operations of the Back Creek farm. But, there are greater implications presented by Cather's novel. The marked, incapacitated white woman *is* the United States, swollen with all the unresolved mess of slavery. Unable to erase or effectively deal with this past, the issue erupts in Back Creek – and continues in all other kinds of backwaters. It is no wonder, then, that Sapphira is busily arranging the rape of Nancy, the slave girl of the title, finding violence to be the only way to continue controlling black bodies. To this end, I argue that Back Creek is a metaphor for the United States, a cultural and political backwater obsessed with race and slavery.

Despite physical limitations, Sapphira finds success in a world hostile to female success as a landowner and property manager. Sapphira herself remarks that "even from an invalid's chair she was still able to keep her servants well in hand" (54). Her marriage is largely a formality; her husband, Henry, spends his days running the Mill and usually sleeps there. Based on information she has overheard and increasingly frustrated by her lack of mobility, Sapphira determines that her husband is having an affair with Nancy, the mixed race daughter of her favorite slave. As a result, she arranges to have Nancy raped by one of her husband's nephews.

Before the plan reaches ultimate fruition, Rachel Blake, Sapphira's own daughter, affords Nancy an opportunity to escape to Canada. The novel concludes with an epilogue detailing Nancy's return to Back Creek twenty-five years later (and some years after Sapphira's death).

### Back Creek (of the United States)

Though mitigated by gender, Cather's Sapphira is the possessor of power and privilege in the novel. Her family lineage and financial holdings make her the wealthiest person to have ever lived in Back Creek, as well as one of the only remaining slaveholders in Virginia. Though she has resided there for more than 30 years, she is not native to the area, having come from east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. As a wealthy heiress and landowner with slaves, Sapphira sees the people native to Back Creek as simple, "very poor" people. More plainly, her favorite slave, Till, describes the people of Back Creek as "poor farmers and backwoods people," among whom her finer domestic service skills "had little chance" (69). Because of their status within the community, Back Creek residents seem to be wary of the Colberts' wealth and influence. At the same time, people view their whiteness as the only leveling agent in their poverty. David Fairhead, the preacher at Rachel Blake's and Henry Colbert's church, observes that some of the poorer "mountain boys" resort to stealing and petty crime rather than work alongside black laborers because of their white skin and the belief that it grants them a certain degree of privilege. "It's the one thing they've got to feel important about – that they're white" (81). The

residents of Back Creek cling to their whiteness as a marker of their privilege much as Sapphira exercises her privilege to be a propertied slaveholder and arranges her household as she sees fit.<sup>20</sup> Back Creek folks are also painfully aware of the gradations of whiteness. It is noted that Henry Colbert “had grown up in a neighbourhood of English settlers [and had adopted their speech patterns]...This was not, on Back Creek, a friendly way of talking” whereas his wife is allowed to speak as she likes because “a woman and an heiress had a right to” (5). At the same time, the Back Creek residents tolerate Sapphira Colbert. They don’t have to like her, however. Cather’s portrait of the United States (as represented by Back Creek) illustrates that that wealth and privilege are held by a limited few, in this case, one crippled white woman.

It’s important for me to further deconstruct the gradations of whiteness presented in the novel. The residents of Back Creek may think Sapphira and Henry an odd pairing, but Sapphira also sees herself very differently from the other members of her immediate family and is a beneficiary of the gradations of whiteness. As cultural historian Maurice Berger says in his book White Lies, “whiteness is not a univalent category. The strengths and limitations of one’s own whiteness depend on many factors; its power and privileges are not awarded evenly or evenhandedly” (166). Sapphira<sup>21</sup> is of English heritage, her ancestors having come from the British Isles, whereas Henry Colbert and his family are considered “immigrants” because their

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<sup>20</sup> The dynamic among the residents of Back Creek is reminiscent of what MSNBC commentator Chris Matthews called “tribal tensions” in the 2008 election cycle in the United States. According to Matthews, these tensions are in evidence among non-college educated whites in relationship to changing demographics in the U.S. related to job losses and the economy. In Back Creek, the tensions are on display in the relationship between the only slaveholder (who is also female) and other white people.

<sup>21</sup> Sapphira’s uncontested whiteness is fascinating because that is not the first impression given upon reading the character’s name. Sapphira evokes Sapphire, a character from the Amos and Andy radio program. On a quick glance, one could mistake the name for the titular slave girl. In fact, the name Sapphira belongs to a woman in the New Testament who, along with her husband, defies the teachings of God (Acts 5: 1-11). Cather states in a 1940 letter to her brother, Roscoe, that Sapphira is “an old English name made from the Bible name with the ‘i’ made short (587).

grandfather came from Flanders (part of modern-day Belgium). The people of Back Creek “never forgot that he was not one of themselves,” (5) implying that, like Sapphira, they too were of English ancestry. In addition, Henry is Lutheran, and not of the Church of England like his wife. This fact seems to be of note since the reader is informed that there were “disadvantage[s] of having been raised a Lutheran” (108). The difference in religion suggests a kind of character defect as we understand that Henry’s ambivalence about slaveholding (though he supports it, in essence, by not exercising his own ability as a male to free the slaves) is related to his upbringing and religious background.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the newlyweds’ relocation to Back Creek allows Sapphira to avoid questions about Henry’s “vague ancestry, even his Lutheran connections, [which] would have made her social position rather awkward” (25). I see a critical point here about gradations of whiteness and privilege, one that can be demonstrated through John Hartigan, Jr.’s “Locating White Detroit.” Hartigan astutely explains that in the United States people are attempting a discussion of “an irregular terrain in which some whites always sit insecurely in the larger body of whiteness...the gap between whiteness and whites opens distinct horizons of social and political contexts” (204). This statement underscores the need for the incisive analyses of class, which certainly plays a significant role in discussions of whiteness. In Cather’s novel, Sapphira is living in a white community, and yet is among foreigners. The reader, then, can problematize the privilege of Cather’s title character and how that privilege goes unchallenged. By the same token, I assert that Sapphira and the way her privilege operates within Back Creek are symbolic of the evolving racial dynamics in the United States.

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<sup>22</sup> Mr. Fairhead is another character who is against (“hates”) the institution of slavery – and his beliefs are linked to his Quaker upbringing. After Fairhead reflects on Sapphira’s prized slave Jezebel’s life, the narrator observes that, “In the North there were many people who called themselves abolishers” (108).

Additionally, Sapphira's privilege is a consequence of her marriage, which is one of convenience and formality. The text supports this notion often referring to the title character by her maiden name, "Sapphira Dodderidge." For example, "Sapphira Dodderidge usually acted upon motives which she disclosed to no one. That was her nature" (22). The author's intention might be flattery of her title character, but the use of Sapphira's maiden name implies she acts alone and is not beholden to the typical strictures of 19<sup>th</sup> century marriage contracts. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's work on gender in the plantation south is useful in demonstrating that Sapphira's world is an anomaly. "[T]he lady, like other women, remained bound by a broad vision of appropriate gender relations... In a world dominated by male strength, women could not aspire to be the head of a household" (203). The novel takes pains to describe how the heiress winds up in Back Creek, Virginia. As a child, she inherits a rather sizable Back Creek property<sup>23</sup> from her uncle, part of an area that is described as "nameless except for [its] unpronounceable Indian [name]" (26). She is unable, though, to make use of the land because she is female. So, though she barely knows Henry, four years her junior, a marriage seems serendipitous. It is possible that her partnership prospects are dismal because, unlike her two younger sisters, she is unmarried well into her twenties.<sup>24</sup> For fifty years, the land, which included a water mill, had been rented by various tenants. Henry, for his part, had been serving as a business advisor to Captain Dodderidge after the older gentleman became incapacitated by a riding injury. Perhaps,

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<sup>23</sup> The provenance of the Back Creek property also connects to larger issues of whiteness and privilege. One Nathaniel Dodderidge, was deeded a tract from the "original" owner Thomas, Lord Fairfax, in 1747. Fairfax's actual land holdings were some "five million acres of forest and mountain." The only reason he releases some parcels to "desirable settlers" is to placate dissatisfaction in the Virginia Assembly over individuals holding such a large estate. The Native Americans who previously occupied the land are deemed unimportant and an afterthought. Until Sapphira moves to Back Creek, no Dodderidges live on the farm, vacant for some hundred years. It is important to note that, according to Ann Romines, author of Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South, Cather was born in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, on family property deeded by Lord Fairfax around 1750 (2).

<sup>24</sup> It may also be possible that Sapphira is unmarried due to unfulfilled lesbian desire as several theorists have speculated. These ideas will be explored shortly.

even more conveniently, Henry, as well as his father before him, is a miller. Though Back Creek is several days journey from her friends and family, Sapphira increases her status and mobility through her marriage and subsequent acquisition of property. As a female in an early nineteenth century economy, she cannot claim the Back Creek property unless married. Henry provides something invaluable to his wife: the ability as a female to dictate much of the day-to-day course of her life, including their move to Back Creek. Henry's "vague ancestry" and convenient ambivalence about slavery further contribute to his powerlessness. Because of 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes about gender, Sapphira's marriage and relocation offer a palliative to the sting of the realities of being female. Or, as Judith Fetterley notes in her essay, "Willa Cather and the Question of Sympathy: An Unofficial Story," "[Sapphira] married a man willing to let her be the master" (19).

### Entitled Impotence

Many theorists have written about the underlying motivations for Sapphira's problematic plan for Nancy ranging from an inability to act on her own lesbian desires to an attempt to enact her power, literally using Martin Colbert as a phallic substitute.<sup>25</sup> Part of the horror of her aging and declining body rests in the inability to be intimate with another human being or to be procreative. However, the violence of the sexual act that she arranges for Nancy indicates, perhaps, Sapphira's feelings about her own sexual life. It is possible that she remained

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<sup>25</sup> For discussions of sexuality and homoeroticism in Cather's work, see Judith Butler "'Dangerous Crossing': Willa Cather's Masculine Names" in Bodies that Matter, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others" in Displacing Homophobia. Marilee Lindemann also presents a helpful argument against readings which focus solely on homoerotic desire in Willa Cather: Queering America. And, noting "the Sapphic pun in the name of Cather's heroine," Lisa Marcus offers a smart reading that considers the implications of race, gender, and sexuality in her essay, "'The Pull of Race and Blood and Kindred': Willa Cather's Southern Inheritance."

unmarried as long as she did because she is unable to act upon same-sex desire. In addition, though Sapphira was a vital young woman, she could also have been asexual. There is also the possibility that Sapphira is feeling the sting of realization that she still has to follow the proscriptions of white ladyhood and, in the case of Nancy, has to receive her husband's permission to take action. However laced with sexual tension her decision may be, the novel provides evidence that Sapphira's motivation lies in the Back Creek world she has constructed for herself.

Very early in the text, Sapphira offers, "I ought to be allowed to arrange Nancy's future" (8). And, why shouldn't she control Nancy's body? As Toni Morrison notes, "It is after all *hers*, this slave woman's body, in a way that her own invalid flesh is not" (23). In a violent text, articulating the struggle for women's legibility mediating slavery's continuance in a United States backwater, Sapphira is trying to arrange a mate for Nancy as she did for the slave girl's mother, Till. Till is characterized as being exceedingly loyal to Sapphira – even to the detriment of her relationship with her own daughter. But, Till's behavior can be better explained as a consequence of how slavery distorts interpersonal and, particularly, family relations. Due to the nature of female slavery and the difficult circumstances under which they were required to accommodate the sexual advances of white males, it is not clear that Till's liaison with Nancy's father was consensual. However, it is interesting to contemplate that Nancy's father could be the Cuban painter who visited Back Creek some years earlier to paint the portraits of the Colberts that hang in the parlor.<sup>26</sup> The novel reports conspiratorially, "He was a long while doing them" (73). One wonders if this line is about the Cuban painter's portraits or his sexual liaisons with

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<sup>26</sup> The character of the "Cuban painter" is a fascinating, ghost-like presence in the novel. He is another "mulatto" figure, passing through Back Creek and the issues of race presented therein. He paints white people, but beds black people. The fact that he is unnamed is intriguing, as well, in a text that names various tangential characters. Finally, I have no proof, but I do wonder if the Cuban painter could be a reimagined Wilfredo Lam, *the* Cuban painter working in the time period Cather was writing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

female slaves. Whatever significance can be derived from the line, the union between Till and the portrait painter can be imagined as the only agency or defiance Till exercised after her arranged marriage to Jefferson. And, regardless, Nancy's paternity is not known, this "in spite of her resemblance to the portrait painter from Cuba" (66). The identity of her father continues to be the subject of wide speculation on Back Creek, again due to certain presumptions about the nature of slavery. To imagine a consensual union between two people of color destabilizes the social and legal prescriptions of slavery in the United States. The preferred narrative (because it is the more commonly "accepted" one under slavery) is that one of Henry's brothers is Nancy's father: "The Colbert men had a bad reputation where women were concerned...Nancy was often counted as one of the Colbert bastards" (66). Nancy's paternity is more likely connected to the Cuban painter, yet, time and again the story is reinforced that the young slave girl is a Colbert. Certainly, Till, as Sapphira's property, is subject to her mistress's will, a familiar American narrative that Cather works hard to reinforce. I assert, however, that for all the blather about the male Colberts' inability to control themselves sexually, an "inter-American" paternity narrative that ices out the Colberts, including Sapphira, is quite compelling. Their lack of masculine potency in relation to Till and control over the American narrative is unsettling. With Jacob Colbert as Nancy's alleged father, Cather writes a paternity story that cleaves more to the United States' narrative of miscegenous activity between black female slaves and white men.<sup>27</sup>

The other issue that these speculations raise is regarding the ways that whites are able to control the narrative and the circumstances of black family construction. For example, Sapphira "married [Till] off to Jefferson" who was many years her senior. In fact, he is chosen for Till by Sapphira because he is a "capon man," or sterile. He is also described as having certain

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<sup>27</sup> If that's the case, then, Sapphira is arranging to have Nancy raped by her half-brother, Martin, further reinforcing narratives about liaisons involving white men and enslaved black women.

“incapacities [that] were well known among the darkies” (72). At a time when slaves were not permitted to marry each other (or anyone of their choosing, for that matter), it is interesting that Sapphira chooses a sterile man for her prized parlour maid once, presumably, Till is sexually viable. She doesn’t want Till to be distracted by her own sexuality and/or children. The underlying tension, in fact, is that a sexually active Till would be distracted from her focused attention towards her mistress. Perhaps, more pointedly, Till’s sexual viability would also prove emotionally maddening for her ailing and dependent mistress.

It is also necessary to note that Cather neglects to imagine Till’s feelings of having to live with Jefferson (or even the previous sadness of having to leave the intimacy of her relationship with the Devonshire housekeeper Mrs. Matchem, who served as Till’s mentor in the art of domestic service). The reader is informed that “Till accepted this arrangement with perfect dignity” (72). Closer analysis reveals that Till might be retaliating in the only way she can. The Cuban painter is commissioned “Some years after [Till] had moved her belongings from her attic chamber in the big house over to Jeff’s cabin” (72) and she is pregnant soon after. Till’s decision to have a liaison with the Cuban painter, if she did indeed do so, would be her only known act of retaliation against Sapphira’s efforts to control the people and action around her. Sapphira suffers from an “entitled impotence,” asserting herself in the only arena she can control. The potential circumstances of Nancy’s coupling with Martin only provide additional evidence of the Sapphira’s desperation to assert power and authority.

Sapphira has betrayed Till twice, having separated the young woman from Matchem and attempting to arrange her sexual future. And yet, Till remains exceedingly loyal to her mistress. Till has a congenial relationship with Sapphira, very different than Nancy’s. She counsels Nancy on how best to placate Sapphira’s recent bad humor with her. Yet, their banter reinforces the

master-slave relation because their relationship is predicated on Sapphira's needs and Till tending to them. For example, Till suggests that she will "wear the kid shoes around the house a few days more an' break 'em in for you," so that the new shoes will not pinch her mistress's swollen feet (32). Sapphira is even described in one of her direct addresses to Till as having "joked" with her slave. The text describes her interactions (of the "pleasant" kind, that is) as "contemptuous indulgence." Still, for all the apparent good humor, there is an utter selflessness within Till with respect to her relationship to Sapphira.<sup>28</sup> "Anything that made trouble between her and the Mistress would wreck the order of the household" (219), which resonates with Irene Redfield's statements about her life in Passing. Ultimately, Till's service props up her mistress's white ladyhood, making it possible for Sapphira to effect her plan for Nancy's sexual life. It doesn't even occur to Sapphira (and Cather who writes her into being) that Till would have feelings about her daughter's fate. As Toni Morrison notes, "That condition could only prevail in a slave society where the mistress can count on (and an author can believe the reader does not object to) the complicity of a mother in the seduction and rape of her own daughter" (21). How does Cather come up with such an inexplicably violent text?

One of the key events in the novel is the illness and death of Jezebel, an older slave on the Back Creek farm. After Jezebel's funeral, Henry has a moral wrestling with himself about slavery. He reminds himself that he has the "legal right" to free all of Sapphira's slaves, but it is not a serious thought. Practical questions like "Where would they go? How would they live?"

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<sup>28</sup> Till and Sapphira's relationship resonates with that seen between two characters in the movie Imitation of Life (1934). While the nature of the relationship is different (master-slave vs. business "partners"), Delilah also subsumes her needs, which don't appear to be known to her, beneath Miss B's immediate desires. For example, in an early scene, Delilah cheerfully offers to rub Miss B's feet, sore from pounding the pavement and looking for a job all day. Miss B does not reciprocate the foot-rubbing even though Delilah has been laboring all day in the home. In fact, one could read the scene as the difference in perception between male, white, and external production (Miss B) versus female, black, and internal pursuits (Delilah). Both Sapphira and the Slave Girl and Imitation of Life, construct a mixed race daughter (Nancy and Peola, respectively), who disrupts the natural course of this primary relationship.

(108) allow Henry to trade the slaves' individual liberty for his wife's good humor. He eventually comes to the conclusion that "Nowhere in his Bible had he ever been able to find a clear condemnation of slavery...nowhere did his Bible say that there should be no one in bonds, no one at all" (110). That Cather has Henry Colbert ruminating on slavery for several pages, examining the moral and religious underpinnings of the institution, is curious. The book is set in the 1850s South, but Cather is writing the book in the late 1930s, well after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. What is Cather up to here? Jim Crow segregation is the unofficial law of the land, as is the disenfranchisement of the citizenship rights of "Afro-Americans." Perhaps, Cather is questioning what transpired in the tensions of the pre-Civil War period, as well as the outcome. I posit that Cather is considering the legacy of the south, post-slavery, in a late 1930s world being ravaged by fascist aggressions. Sapphira's husband is described many times in the novel as being different, almost foreign, in comparison to his wife. He's even in opposition to his blood relatives with respect to their views of how to treat black people. "She had married the only Colbert who had a conscience, and she sometimes wished he hadn't quite so much" (108). In the end, though, Henry's ruminations do little to affect race relations in Back Creek. In fact, his comments and actions reveal a willful blindness to his social responsibility, not unlike other white people who avoid examining their role in the oppression and violence against black people.

Henry settles upon an observation he has made, seemingly over many years, that the Bible seems to justify the slave system. He further comforts himself by recalling a recent interaction with the well-formed mulatto slave, Sampson. When Henry offers his head mill hand an opportunity to work as a free man among the Pennsylvania Quaker mills, Sampson begs beseechingly to stay a slave, citing his wife and children as the reasons he wishes to remain a

slave. In this way, the reader might interpret Sampson's humanity, particularly by wanting to keep his family together (though there was certainly no guarantee that the Colberts would honor a commitment to them). However, Sampson further reveals "he'd a'most sooner leave the chillun than leave the mill" (109) suggesting that his loyalty is actually more to the mill and Henry Colbert than to his love for and commitment towards his family. There are real material and interpersonal concerns revealed through the characters of Henry Colbert and his slave Sampson. And yet, Sampson's statement makes plain Cather's connection to other nostalgic treatments of slavery and enslaved persons like those in Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind (1936), and contradicts accounts contained within 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives. Authors like Mary Prince articulate how freedom – even that which is granted in foreign places with the clear knowledge that there will be no reunion with family in this lifetime – is the only reasonable end to the barbaric institution of slavery. Prince says more than once, "to be free is very sweet" (94). Sampson, however, cannot imagine freedom within the world of the novel, suggesting, ultimately, the lack of humanity and intelligence in slaves, and by extension, black people. In the end, Sampson's unwillingness to be freed assures Henry of the rightness of slavery – and its continuance in Back Creek. Where is Willa Cather in all this, we ask?

In fact, Henry's passing conversations with his wife about slavery, specifically what to do with Nancy, begin to lay the groundwork for Sapphira's drastic action. Further, because Sapphira is unable to imagine any kindnesses being bestowed upon her slaves, except within the narrowly prescribed guidelines of her own mind, she begins to have suspicions about Henry's late-night musings and goings-on at the mill. Cather writes that Henry had "forgotten himself" in his brief post-funeral interaction with Nancy. Has he exceeded the prescribed nature of master-slave relations? The thing is, there are **no** legitimate rules in a practice as despicable as

slavery. Much like Irene Redfield in Passing, Sapphira Colbert decides that her husband's ideas about slavery are related to an adulterous, not to mention miscegenous, liaison with Nancy. In both texts, the object of fascination, scrutiny, and envy is a mixed-race female. More specifically, Sapphira is horrified by "[t]he thought of being befooled, hoodwinked in any way," which she viewed as being "unendurable to her" (106). Again, this expression of dread reads much like Larsen's Passing in that Irene Redfield is loath to imagine how she has been cuckolded right under her very eyes. The preoccupation with adultery in both texts, however, allows these characters to refocus attention away from issues that are more uncomfortable.

### The Body's Politics

While there is no excuse for Sapphira's despicable plans to "arrange Nancy's future," I would locate her declining health as one motivating factor for her actions. The first descriptions of Sapphira's appearance place her in direct contrast to Nancy. Sapphira's hands are plump compared to Nancy's "slender, nimble hands" (18). Further descriptions of Sapphira's body indicate that she is not well: "The Mistress had dropsy and was unable to walk... all the more cruel in that she had been a very active woman" (10). In these lines, the reader can understand how devastated Sapphira might feel about her failing health and deformed lower limbs. Dropsy, more commonly known today as edema, is a pooling of fluid in certain areas of the body (frequently in the limbs) symptomatic of other medical issues. Her condition, literally, has her housebound and dependent on others, which in some ways may intensify her frustration. Previously able to be mobile or manipulate modes of mobility, the level of despair might also be amplified by the realization that she has become like many 19<sup>th</sup> century women – tied to the home. The evidence of her physical deterioration, which is masked to the public with "dresses

[that] touched the floor,” also signals Sapphira’s mortality. Is Cather giving a portrait of the 1930s? I argue that Sapphira’s incapacitation and swollen legs are indicative of the state of the union. She is what is left over, an incapacitated white body unable to reproduce. Almost a century after the novel’s publication, the United States is still a backwater, unable to live up to the promises of its founding principles.<sup>29</sup>

It may be useful to consider the effects of contemplating the temporal nature of one’s existence through work on bodies and illness. Sociologist Arthur Frank has done considerable research on the relationship of illness to the body and the individual. While his work is not dealing with literature, Frank’s unique way of articulating his theories in the chapter, “The Body’s Problem with Illness,” provides an interesting lens with which to consider Cather’s novel. Frank observes that people who are suffering from illness have unique ways of understanding the world. He notes that “their bodies give their stories their particular shape and direction” (31). In this way, Frank is suggesting that illness has a correlating effect on the way that individuals view and influence the world around them.

Frank’s theories allow us to read some vulnerability into the characterization of Sapphira. Early in the novel, she reflects on illness, divulging her feelings about her father’s debilitating illness in relation to her current physical condition. “In those days she had not known the meaning of illness. To be crippled and incapacitated, not to come and go at will, to be left out of things as if one were in one’s dotage” (105). I would posit that their shared illness, one passed down in families, is the illness of racism and white privilege – and the loss of them. Sapphira never characterizes herself as “crippled and incapacitated,” until after she witnesses Nancy and

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<sup>29</sup> The continued obsession with controlling behavior through women’s reproductive rights, marriage equality, and voting privileges are all examples. These issues, which appear unrelated at first glance, relate to the disenfranchisement of some groups, as well as and maintaining certain other groups in power.

Henry in conversation at Jezebel's funeral. After she asks Henry to stay in the house that evening and he rebuffs her, Sapphira is brought to her room by Washington and Till prepares her for bed. If nothing else, these pages depict Sapphira's lack of mobility. The masculine tendencies within her (mobility, willingness to explore, trying to create her own destiny, etc.) are thwarted by incapacitation, similar to the state of Captain Dodderidge in his final days.

However, Sapphira's deteriorating physical condition provides additional information for the reader. Back Creek is a white Southern utopia where slavery still exists, in which a white woman in deteriorating health can be the sole slaveholder. Cather's imagined Back Creek, then, is revealed as what is safely hidden in the American imagination about race – and the desire for the continued oppression of black people. There is evidence in the text to argue that this meditation is central to the novel, and causes the kind of violence and hysteria evident in Sapphira's plan for Nancy. There is an extended, bucolic description of Back Creek making reference to white flowers and trees, particularly the dogwood with "their singular whiteness" (116). These are lasting memories shared by "[e]very Virginian" subtly evoking the shared experiences of whiteness as it relates to slavery and the subjugation of black people.<sup>30</sup> Further illustrating the lasting impression of whiteness and slavery is the appearance of a five year old narrator in Book IX who refers to "our Nancy" (281). Though this section occurs some twenty-five years after the main events of the novel, the child is intimately acquainted with Rachel, Till, and Nancy. The use of the first person in this section also suggests the immediacy of the child's connection to slavery and the Civil War.

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<sup>30</sup> See also James Baldwin's short story, "Going to Meet the Man," which explores intraracial bonding through the communal experience of lynching.

Were Sapphira to truly believe that her slave was having an affair with her husband, she could easily sell Nancy away from the familiarity of her surroundings and make a profit. Before she hatches the rape plot, Sapphira devises an elaborate scheme to take Nancy on her annual spring visit to her sister's through the Easter holidays because "[i]t would smarten her up, to see how people do things" (51). The trip doesn't provide the desired lessons, evidently, so more drastic means are necessary. More tellingly, Nancy is a threat to Sapphira because of her youth, beauty, and mixed race status, symbolic of a new America. The novel informs the reader that "Nancy came into the world by accident..." indicating that the circumstances of her birth were unusual (connecting back to her likely Cuban paternity). Being mixed race, Nancy might have more mobility (something Sapphira is literally lacking) than the other slaves on Back Creek. Slavery, we are told, "was their natural place in the world" (219), and yet the very existence of Nancy communicates otherwise. Bluebell, another slave, suggests that the very mixture of black and white (if you believe the popular narrative of her origins), come together to make Nancy dangerous: "she's stuck up, havin' white blood...dat set all de culled folks agin her" (185). Individuals standing at the crossroads of black and white can be read as symbolic of a new America.

The novel further shows this preoccupation with mixed race people even when apparently attempting an unrelated discussion. By way of explaining how Rachel Blake is different from her mother, Sapphira, Cather offers a lengthy section depicting Rachel's life in Washington with her husband Michael. There is mention in this section of a mulatta named Sarah, from New Orleans, a free woman of color who gained her freedom from her dying master. Sarah is mentioned three times in as many pages in the text, each time accompanied by the information that she is a mulatta. She is in service, but free from slavery in New Orleans. Furthermore, the

novel presents a world that is completely upended by abolitionist stirrings. Sapphira's nephew, Martin, observes, "The niggers here don't know their place, not one of 'em" (182) after interactions with Sampson and Nancy, both mixed race persons who do not behave according to their prescribed roles. These racially mixed persons are part of the new or evolving United States, but that country is unrecognizable to most white people. Valerie Babb has noted that "filling cultural institutions with representations only of whites...all generate a spontaneous, if subconscious, recognition of the supremacy of whiteness and sanction the perception that whites intrinsically have more right to what is American than do other groups in the United States" (42). I argue that Cather is refining away the confusion of changing political dynamics, much in the way the family mill is in the business of growing wheat and making white flour from it. She constructs a world in which things do make sense, a world in which an invalid mistress can oppress those around her, denying citizenship and agency to those perceived as Other.

In this way, Sapphira's actions are a perverse attempt to create a lasting history, even if only in an isolated hamlet like Back Creek. Tucked into the end of a long discourse on Rachel's marriage and relationship with her mother, the reader sees that Rachel and the postmistress Mrs. Bywaters have enjoyed a long friendship, "drawn together by deep convictions they had in common" (145). That Mrs. Bywaters subscribes to the New York *Tribune*, despite being a poor government employee, suggests that she was aware of abolitionist endeavors reported at the time. And, Bywaters shares the papers with Rachel, giving further evidence for why the young woman would assist Nancy in gaining her freedom. As Bywaters notes, the papers "were handy to start a fire with," alluding to the incendiary nature of the actual papers and their content. There are no slave children on the plantation; the child would follow the way of the mother according the laws of the United States at the time – gradual emancipation. Sapphira is the only

slaveholder in Back Creek, so through her plans for Nancy she could leave a lasting imprint because slavery would endure long after her death.

The novel further articulates that slavery distorts all relationships. Cather cannot imagine any intimacy in the dyads within the text: mother-daughter, slave-slave, female-female, or husband-wife. Between mother and daughter Till and Nancy (or Sapphira and Rachel, for that matter), there is a void of feeling or emotion. In their first scene together, Cather has them cleaning in a flurry of activity in the service of Sapphira. There is no conversation of a personal nature between them (or between married couples like Henry and Sapphira, for instance). Cather seems unwilling to imagine any relationships that are not adversarial or involve various forms of deceit and manipulation. Only Rachel's marriage depicts affection, but she too operates in service to her husband and the reader learns of their relationship in oblique summary: "self-abnegation which...took the form of untiring service to a man's pleasure and of almost idolatrous love for her first-born" (141). Rachel has two older sisters that Sapphira has "married very well" (132). Yet, Sapphira takes to her room to deal with the shock that Michael wants to marry sixteen-year old Rachel. She cannot imagine that she was not the architect of Rachel's life prospects. The novel informs the reader that "even from an invalid's chair she was still able to keep her servants well in hand" (54). Given that Till thwarts her plan (and gets pregnant by the Cuban painter or Jacob Colbert) and Rachel frustrates her marriage plot (by wedding Michael Blake), she must turn her attention to Nancy. One wonders if Sapphira's motives don't also relate to complicated feelings of jealousy around Nancy's looks and beauty. Regardless, this tension speaks very clearly to the lack of sisterhood among the women in Sapphira's household and Nancy's incredible vulnerability. Toni Morrison notes that "The absence of camaraderie between Nancy and the other slave women turns on the device of color fetish...The character

[Cather] creates is at once a fugitive within the household” (23). To further the point, we can turn to Cather’s recently published letters in which she reveals that the real life “meeting between Nancy and Aunt Till...was one of the most moving things that ever happened to me when I was little” (592). Cather is unable to imagine any empathy or compassion among the black women, because this is *her* book, certainly not the nameless slave girl in the novel’s title. Any camaraderie that exists is between Cather and her eponymous title character.

Because Sapphira has made so much of the Colbert curse, one wonders if Henry Colbert is suppressing his desire for Nancy. The novel explains that he had inherited the Colbert curse (192-3), but that he has gotten a handle of it since being married. The knowledge of his nephew’s sexual plans for Nancy threatens to undo Henry; he is described as not being able to look at Nancy for awhile because she suddenly becomes a woman. Then, he seems to be proving his virility/reclaiming his Colbert masculinity and viability as a man while plowing the wheat fields (209); right after this action he begins obsessing about Martin’s designs and how his relationship with Nancy isn’t the same. In fact, I argue that the novel portrays him as seeing Nancy *for the first time* through Colbert eyes because Martin has awakened something dormant within him. Perhaps, the change in how Henry sees Nancy is why he contributes to her escape. Henry is involved, but can’t face the reality of his action: “Hush, Rachel, not another word! You and me can’t talk about such things. It ain’t right...I can’t be a party to make away with your mother’s property” (227). But, he does make “a way” for Nancy to escape by financing the journey. He admonishes his daughter with the following statement, “[N]othing must pass between you and me on this matter; neither words nor aught else” (227).

Though Nancy escapes, there is a lasting effect of slavery on Back Creek. The first person child narrator of the epilogue shares that her lullaby evoked memories of Nancy: “*Down*

*by de cane-brake, close by de mill/Dar lived a yaller gal, her name was Nancy Till*" (281). Just over 100 pages earlier, Martin Colbert sings these lines in one of his first attempts to overpower Nancy. As he says, "There never was a finer morning for picking cherries or anything else" (179). That the child finds soothing words that originate in violence is not surprising due to the disconnect in the American psyche that cannot reconcile its past. It is also evidence of the extent to which slavery is part of the fabric of the United States.<sup>31</sup> For her own part, the child already has prejudices about black people. Though the child has no lived memory of slavery, she cannot embrace a fully realized black person. Nancy's words are described as "too precise" causing the child to be "repelled" (284). In Back Creek, as in the recesses of the American mind, there are behaviors particular to black people. Nancy's comportment and speech pattern are described as not being "friendly" in the novel. I argue that they aren't legible in a stereotypically racialized American narrative. There is a connective thread to earlier points in the novel about black women's position, such as the big fuss made over Jezebel's illness and death. Yet, the entire section of the novel devoted to the old slave's passing is bursting with descriptions of black men and women as creatures. The beloved slave is depicted as looking like a "lean old grey monkey" with a "cold grey claw" (86, 89). Most tellingly, Jezebel is descended from "a fierce cannibal people" (91). It's as if Cather thinks her readers may have missed that the only thing "Auntie" Jezebel craves in her dying moments is a "li'l pickaninny's hand" (89). Jezebel's deathbed revelation of cannibalism reveals the utter necessity of slavery to control black behavior. There

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<sup>31</sup> In her documentary, *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North* (2008), filmmaker Katrina Browne reveals that her New England ancestors were the largest slave-holding family in the United States. She also reveals the enduring effects of slavery on the psyche. As children, she and other relatives hummed a nursery rhyme taught to them presumably by older generations. She discovers that the subjects of the seemingly innocuous tune, Adjua and Palidor, were slaves owned by her family.

are erotic connotations to the old black woman desiring the child's hand, which are disturbing.<sup>32</sup> And yet, Jezebel has been intimately tied to Sapphira for so long that she could be channeling her troubled mistress's thoughts, which are too horrible to place on the white female. Jezebel's desire takes the place of Sapphira's suppressed longing to consume and control the flesh of her slave girl. And, Nancy is usually depicted negatively, for instance in descriptions of her "dreamy, nigger side" (178). Even when she's well on her journey to freedom, she "stood dumb all the while" (239). There can be little commonality across racial lines when black women are written in this fashion, particularly in a text which is simply using them. With all of this in mind, how do we place this work?

### Concluding Thoughts

One has to wonder why there isn't a robust critical discussion about all the troubling parts of Sapphira and the Slave Girl. In fact, critics avoid this text, focusing on those texts written by Cather that emphasize nostalgia for an earlier, simpler time on the American prairie. In fact, this year marks the centennial of the publication of O Pioneers, Cather's first novel. Her cultural currency as an iconic American author is at an all-time high. I argue, then, that Sapphira and the Slave Girl deserves to be part of the conversation about Cather's oeuvre because she is writing

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<sup>32</sup> Interestingly enough, archeologists recently reported finding evidence of cannibalism among English settlers at the Jamestown Colony site in Virginia. See [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/science/evidence-of-cannibalism-found-at-jamestown-site.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/science/evidence-of-cannibalism-found-at-jamestown-site.html?_r=0)

about what people want to read, a United States that doesn't actually exist. Therefore, Sapphira and the Slave Girl is consistent with Cather's other works.

Critics are often disquieted by Cather's racist articulation of blacks in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, which played a role in the lack of attention to the novel until recent years. Part of the discomfort derives from the American belief that the absence of formal, legal discrimination necessarily means the absence of any further complicated or troubling issues surrounding race. There is also the belief that pointed assertions on race should not happen in polite company, not certainly in the work of a celebrated novelist like Cather. Any illusions about Cather's intentions throughout the text should be quelled by the author literally entering the text. Cather offers a signed postscript following the epilogue indicating that her parents relayed stories of "acquaintances whom they had met" on their visits to Virginia, though they were "unknown" to her (295). She simply had a "lively fascination" for their names. Cather dispels the fiction of the story in her Letters, which reveal that this story and "darkey speech... was deep down in my mind exactly like phonograph records" (592). These views signal Sapphira and the Slave Girl as a major work, precisely because it is difficult and uncomfortable. No such discussions will call into question Cather's skill as an author. In the end, Sapphira and the Slave Girl shows the American white woman knowing and writing the disease of racism, leaving bare the gaps and omissions in a collective history yet to be addressed.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE OTHER'S OTHER: THE TRAGIC MULATTA IN MARTHA GELLHORN'S LIANA

In the summer of 1942, Martha Gellhorn was widely known as a seasoned war correspondent, having traveled to France, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Finland, China, and the Dutch West Indies, often during heavy military occupation and battle. According to biographer Carl Rollyson, Gellhorn “loved the kind of life where she could put what she needed in a suitcase” (131). She was quite successful at her craft, winning the envy and admiration of her fellow male journalists on the frontlines. She developed a distinct style, appearing at the same time a novelist, journalist and reporter. “Her innovative and persistent traveling and unrivaled perspective on war-torn places makes her reporting unique” (Hinton 2). She began to be known as Mrs. Hemingway, based on her recent marriage to the writer. And, although she was at a point in her life when a long-term relationship seemed inevitable, she had grown tired of the domestic tranquility of life in Cuba with her husband of two years. Her first love was hard work, followed closely by the war.

Gellhorn soon arranged for an investigative trip in the Caribbean to recalibrate her mind. She was on assignment for *Collier's* magazine, reporting on military preparedness. Exploring the Caribbean islands, Gellhorn found herself unencumbered and able to work on Liana, the 1944 novel she had attempted months earlier with little success. More importantly, she found inspiration for the three main characters in the book. Rollyson has noted that in these three characters “Gellhorn would produce a triangle that evoked powerful feelings about race, education, politics, and sex” (135). Gellhorn was mesmerized by her travels in the Caribbean, and felt compelled to write about questions of culture and identity. However, it seems that

Gellhorn's other motivation for writing was the war raging in Europe, and her experiences covering the Spanish Civil War. As her most recent biographer Caroline Moorehead has noted, "She remained obsessed by the idea that her generation had been deformed by what had happened in Spain, because it was in Spain that their hopes for a better world had been shattered" (166).

As I stated earlier, Gellhorn enjoyed covering the war, and felt cut off from the action, so to speak, by her life in Cuba with Hemingway. In Liana, then, I argue that Gellhorn unifies her competing interests and observations. She brings together the aims of the fascist and colonialist projects through the common lens of racially defined ideologies and motives. Clearly, these "projects" had vastly different motives: the National Socialist Party had, on the one hand, the immediate obliteration of the Jews in mind, and on the other, European colonizers fancied the prolonged subjugation of brown-skinned people. While I respect Gellhorn's motivations for bringing together colonialism and war, at times skillfully, she is leveling critiques against all the players in this colonial drama, including herself. I will articulate the ways in which Gellhorn becomes complicit in the subjugation of the colonized Other through the characterization of Liana.

The action converges in the character of Liana, the mixed race heroine of the book. Liana is the "wife" of Marc Royer, a leading business man and landowner in the fictional French island colony of St. Boniface. Marc marries the incredibly beautiful Liana not out of love or affection but as a means to show he has the ability to own her (and so that none of the other white men will have access to her). His other motivation is the rejection of marriage overtures by Marie, a childhood sweetheart, who eventually married Marc's brother. Though he continues to have occasional intimate relations with Marie, he marries Liana, with whom he has also been

having a sexual relationship. Liana, as a mixed race plantation mistress, does not fit in anywhere and is isolated from white and black people alike. In an ingratiating attempt to occupy Liana, he hires the new French schoolteacher, Pierre Vauclain, to tutor Liana. Though the relationship starts out platonically, Pierre and Liana eventually initiate an affair. After Marc and Pierre strike up their own uneasy relationship based on a shared interest in the war, Marc decides that he must “save” Pierre and assist him in leaving St. Boniface so he can return to fight alongside his countrymen in Europe. The novel ends with the tragic suicide of Liana, alone and confused about the actions that have transpired to bring about her death.

Gellhorn imagines St. Boniface as a French Caribbean colony, isolated from other island colonies as well as French resistance efforts. In the 1986 Afterword to the novel, Gellhorn states that she “settled in imagination on the perfect island” rather than reporting the war (224). If the island is indeed “perfect,” then Gellhorn is providing rich material for analysis of her own role in the colonial project. St. Boniface’s isolation allows for the unmitigated racist oppression of its colored population. It is important to note that there are a number of mixed race St. Bonifaceans. The reader is informed that “practically every white family on the island had cocoa-coloured half brothers and sisters” (19). However, Liana is set apart from the other residents of St. Boniface – mulattoes, blacks, and whites – due to her beauty and the arrangement that was set for her with Marc Royer. Various moments in the text capture her as uniquely beautiful just performing ordinary tasks like sitting or standing, even “her instep was faultless and exciting” (16). At the same time, she is described as “a sort of invisible freak” (105). And, how can she not be? Due to Marc’s intervention, “no negro girl on the island was as well placed as Liana” (9). Yet, Marc doesn’t intend for his marriage to be a true partnership. Their “relationship” begins when Liana is only sixteen and Marc decides to bed the “most beautiful mulatto on the island” (7). Marc is

motivated by the power to subject others to his will. Marie, whom he has loved for thirty years, rejects him repeatedly though she allows him to visit her three times a week for sex and/or conversation. He realizes that “Marie had never loved him nor loved anyone as far as he knew” (11). Worse, however, is that Liana “was something he had bought for use when he could not have what he loved” (24). To some degree, Marc is also motivated by the feeling that he lost the envy of other men, and “he needed to be envied” (13). The decision to wed Liana is a cruel bargain, motivated by the fact that he *could* buy her in this island economy.

Before Marc arranges the marriage contract, Liana left his home because her life with Marc relates only to sexual exchange. She explains to her mother, Lucie, that “He despises me except at night” (9). Liana’s romantic notions of what life would be like with the most powerful St. Bonifacean are shattered by the realities of that life. Once married to Marc, she feels suffocated by the knowledge and reality that “Marc had made her into a white wife and all the island must know she was still a mulatto mistress” (24). The house, of which she is the mistress, is a quiet prison. Liana is not allowed to have visits from her family or friends; there are no intimacies with the staff. She is alienated from the other mistresses who felt that Marc’s marriage to Liana “mocked the respectability of the white women” (7). Liana doesn’t quite fit in as the plantation wife, being that she is only half-white. So, to gain the affections of her husband, Liana studies how to be a proper French lady, poring through magazines and imitating styles she believes evoke the white wife she imagines that Marc wants. “Liana tried very hard...She waited with excitement for Marc to come home at night, to show him how much more she had learned” (22). Yet, her efforts are to no avail because she soon sees that “Marc never intended her to be as other wives” (23). Her imitations of French ladyhood only serve to set her apart from the other servants in Marc’s mind. Her reward is a renaming, much like other

enslaved persons of color. Instead of calling her by her name, Marc renames her “Julie” because “Liana” “was not a proper French name” (34). And, then there is that business of having a girlfriend he visits three nights a week. Liana’s relationship to Marc embodies the “attraction-revulsion” of which post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha speaks in his discussion of the colonized and colonizer (95). The “marriage” of Marc and Liana further isolates her from the island’s inhabitants, white and black, because she is the Other’s Other. Not unlike Nella Larsen’s Helga Crane<sup>33</sup>, Liana doesn’t quite fit in anywhere: “she was in prison wherever she was” (19). As Gellhorn writes this mixed race character into existence, Liana is the reminder of all that is a delusion on this island paradise.

Liana is sold to Marc for the paltry land and monthly allowance on which her family, containing four other children, lives. As she is written, Lucie does not appear to have natural affection for her daughter, Liana. In fact, Lucie takes stock of Liana’s assets as a means to explain her daughter’s responsibility to finance her siblings’ future. “None of them are light colored as Liana; none of them had a white father to give them loosely curling hair and a small pretty nose. Only Liana has a chance like a white girl” (10). Though Gellhorn suggests that Liana and Lucie lack the affection that typifies mother-daughter affection for each other, I’d like to consider Lucie’s motivation under the umbrella of *plaçage*, which historian John Blassingame describes as the “best-known institutional arrangement for miscegenation” (17). In this way, Gellhorn’s obtuse depiction of black female relationships can be explored given the extreme distortions that colonial power structures place on black mobility. Gellhorn herself enjoyed a close relationship with her mother, leaving Hemingway for months sometimes to visit her, so the author is not likely motivated from a lack of positive mother-daughter relationships. So, I would

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33 Through travels in the segregated American South, Harlem, and Denmark, mixed race Helga Crane struggles to find a place to fit in Larsen’s 1928 novel Quicksand.

remind the reader it is Gellhorn who writes Liana as alienated from her mother and their community. (This relationship is reminiscent of Cather's musings of Till and Nancy in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, also unable to imagine intimacies between black mothers and daughters.)

I think then, we have to question Gellhorn's motivations in depicting her heroine in an unfavorable manner. Gellhorn has long sections noting stereotypical descriptions of the Negro shacks, and by extension, blacks in general. They seem at ease with vermin, living with mosquitoes hanging over the old-rag Negro beds and flies constantly buzzing over their meager meals. "The morning air did not wash out the smell of the room. It kept the odour of their bodies and their beds, their food, the creeping smell that came in from the latrine which was too near the house, and the sharp, rotten smell of the garbage dump" (81). Liana is "sickened by her own people" (82), repulsed by her family and the way they live because she has had the experience of living as a white woman. In my opinion, Gellhorn expects the reader to be repulsed by Liana's family, and by extension, blacks, also. Lastly, Liana is an alien in her family because she is half-white. Her siblings see her, to use phrases from the text, as beautiful and rare, lovely and strange, in essence different from them, something foreign. Through these descriptions, Liana is juxtaposed with other blacks, especially the women in her family.

For Marc Royer, his mistress/wife reminds him of his own tenuous connection to whiteness. He is repulsed by what is "other" about her. Thus, Marc is always seeking acceptance, to be liked, to do the right thing. Doing right by St. Boniface is one way he comes to terms with his slippery identity. The only times his whiteness is not questioned is in relation to those with a more tenuous relationship to whiteness. For example, Marc can easily maintain his position of whiteness and masculinity in relation to Lucien Pinelli, even though Pinelli is married to the Mayor's daughter. Pinelli hails from a reputable Guadalupe family, but his surname is

described as “rather odd” and the subject of some speculation initially (7). In the final analysis, Pinelli is deemed to be a “dangerous fool” (8). In fact, Pinelli isn’t taken very seriously and is generally ignored. Pierre beats up Pinelli after the Guadelupean asserts that the teacher has been sexually intimate with Liana – though they have been just friends to that point in the novel. Mayor Berthold arranges for Pinelli (and the Mayor’s daughter, Geneviève) to return to Guadeloupe, but not before issuing an apology to Marc at every white household on St. Boniface. In my estimation, the incident with Pierre and Marc give the white male Bonifaceans an excuse to rid themselves of the danger to their masculinity.

Marc Royer’s tutoring arrangement for Liana also stems from a need to bolster his own fragile masculinity. While he is generally considered to be the most powerful man on St. Boniface, Marc seeks validation of his identity as a white French man. He sees that his childhood lover and erstwhile bedmate, Marie, doesn’t want him. And, while, I have previously discussed Marie in terms of her sameness with Marc, her very name resonates as synonymous with France, thus reinforcing the rejection. Liana, who finally experiences something akin to a reawakening, soon becomes useful in her husband’s own alternate pursuit of France, through Pierre. Marc is aware that Pierre is “an intelligent and attractive boy and he came from Europe” (26). More importantly, Pierre has something that Marc desperately needs: “authentic” whiteness or, in this case, “French-ness.” Pierre has a country to which he can return, a cause for which he can fight. Marc, on the other hand, has to convince himself that the island on which he has spent his entire life is his true home. He is a white Creole and despises it. Pierre holds the key to mending Marc’s tenuous sense of self.

Marc arranges tutoring for Liana, which becomes more than a teacher-student relationship. Liana and Pierre have a kind of spiritual kinship marked by being able to share the

wonders of each others' worlds with the other. Pierre shares French literature with Liana, and, according to Gellhorn, teaches Liana how to have a conscience and care about others. Liana, in turn, explains the landscape through excursions around the island. As Marc observes, "I am delighted to see them because they look so suitable together, so healthy and ornamental and the way everyone should look" (44). For a brief time, Gellhorn paints this relationship as idyllic – they are isolated in their platonic affections on an island cut off from the world. Gellhorn remarked to friends, "I am entranced by the furious miseries people make for themselves in their own heads" (Moorehead 196). One wonders if Gellhorn doesn't blame Liana for what transpires next in this island economy that is based on the legitimacy of racialized sexuality. Liana's marriage arrangement threatens to upend this system which boasts "four marriageable [white] girls" (27). "It is not as if [Liana] were white," the butcher observes. It makes perfect sense, then, for people to believe Pinelli's rumor that Pierre and Liana are carrying on an affair. As the novel states, "first he marries a black and then she puts horns on him" (52). That Liana and Pierre's sexual attraction explodes from the powder keg of sexualized racism on St. Boniface is no surprise, then.

Gellhorn would have the reader believe that Liana is incredibly trusting and has forgotten her place. But, what if Liana is simply a stand-in for Gellhorn herself? A Times Literary Supplement article reinforces the often made assertion that "Gellhorn saw herself primarily as a writer rather than a journalist" (McRobie 12). It is, then, an interesting exercise to imagine how Gellhorn, an ardent feminist, imagined herself as Hemingway's equal. Maybe, there is evidence in Liana to indicate Gellhorn is working out issues over her own role as mistress in another country on the racialized body of her heroine. Maybe, Gellhorn is "playing in the dark," much like Cather in the previous chapter, with a colonial twist. Gellhorn had remarked to friends that

“she felt bad to be writing such a very small story” (Moorehead 196). And, yet the novel and its heroine allow Gellhorn the space to think about the role of women in these twin conflicts, fascist domination and colonial racism. I argue that the violence of Liana’s death implies that one cannot return home after entering this game. Liana is tragically alone after her forays into Pierre and Marc’s whiteness. Cut off from other females, friends, and family, she has been playing in a man’s world with a partially developed European consciousness and with only isolation as her future.

As stated earlier, Gellhorn was consumed by the war, haunted by what she witnessed in Dachau. Of Pierre, it is noted, “He is a European; they are unpredictable” (73). As a result, she constructs what she has called a perfect island, free, ostensibly, of what had left a bitter taste in her mouth about humankind. And, yet, her island is filled with corruption, enslavement, and isolation, a place that fools with the minds of apparently rational men like Pierre: “This is a tricky place, he thought, it gives you romantic excited notions and you forget there is also tomorrow” (100). One romantic notion that Gellhorn dispels is that the subaltern can speak, to suggest the now famous question raised by post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak.<sup>34</sup> I argue that to save herself Gellhorn sacrifices her female heroine, averring that being half-educated and half-white cannot get Liana anywhere. It gets her nowhere. Edward Said has commented on the “West’s readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of empire” (348) when afforded the opportunity to oppress others. For all her consciousness, Gellhorn is just as guilty as the male characters she writes about and the men who decide war policy. The novel explains that Liana “had forgotten again that she was a negro: nothing separated [she and Pierre] now. They were the same one” (110). Liana is not in fact Pierre’s equal, though their relationship has been

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<sup>34</sup> See Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Marxist Interpretations of Culture.

constructed as such. An equally compelling exercise is to imagine what Hemingway must have thought about his accomplished, well-respected wife. As their quarrels increased, he famously shouted at her ““They’ll be reading my stuff long after the worms have finished with you”” (Moorehead 187). One must wonder if Gellhorn sacrifices Liana to avoid becoming a Liana. Gellhorn writes Liana as the pawn in the game to win over Pierre. She is, to Marc, “not even a woman, a beautiful mindless animal.” Similarly, for all his affection for Liana, Pierre shares a similar perception. “If she were white, it would be better; the way it is, it makes her like an animal” (55). Having reduced Liana to an extension of the “untamed” natural landscape of the island, she becomes a non-issue, non-human. Both men have aggressively colonized Liana’s body and mind. Likewise, Gellhorn sacrifices Liana in the process of making a name for herself as a novelist.

Once a shared pawn in a love triangle, Marc’s and Pierre’s common lust for war becomes the primary action of the novel. The reader soon witnesses Marc and Pierre sitting transfixed before the radio, hungry for the intermittent broadcasts from abroad. The homoerotic intimacy of their shared moments is heightened by the crackling of the radio broadcasts. The entire relationship between Marc and Pierre is based on their desire for each other, Marc’s desire for racial legitimacy and Pierre’s desire for information on the war and subsequently, to return home (hopefully through Marc’s money). Once Marc consummates his attraction for Pierre, Liana is ignored. Because of this, he still “would not admit to himself that he had been afraid to ask for the friendship from the new schoolteacher, for fear of being refused” (26). Marc, in essence, sacrifices Liana for Pierre. Marc believes Pierre “was worth saving,” so he doesn’t want Pierre to ruin his life over a silly enterprise like a woman, particularly Liana. He sees himself and Pierre, ultimately, as having the same interest – protecting their respective countries. He saves

Pierre and secures Liana's ruin. He states, "[T]he woman doesn't matter to either one of them" (190). Perhaps, Bhabha's theory of attraction-revulsion between the colonizer and colonized also can apply to the homoerotic game between Marc and Pierre. In the end, Marc may in fact have to save Pierre from himself, from being the object of Marc's physical desire.<sup>35</sup> The only way to escape this consummation is to finance Pierre's return to Europe to fight in the war. Assisting Pierre in finding his way back home does allow Marc to realize he can no longer entertain notions of going to France. He is hit by the realization that St. Boniface is his home and that he must do something to save it. "I love this island. This is my island" (175). In business, he uses his influence and fortune to create an enterprising shark meat industry. This is a boon to the failing economy of St. Boniface, floundering as a result of the war being fought by its mother country across the ocean.

What is striking, at the conclusion, is that the two men who have used Liana for their sexual pleasure (and gratification) are able to go home, ostensibly. Liana, who is home, cannot remain there. Once called "as beautiful as the island," Liana no longer belongs there. "[S]he was now this woman who belonged nowhere. Belonged nowhere and had no place to go" (199-200). To further underscore Liana's lack of agency, Gellhorn creates her suicide as an accident.

Gellhorn's writing, on the other hand, is deliberate in writing Liana this way. Caught in the trap of a society's anxieties, Liana slices her wrist, noting "[w]hat she did now was natural" (217). This action suggests that she actually has agency. But does she? In child-like fashion, once she has cut open her left wrist, she tries to stop her blood from spurting out, "still not understanding [why], but only knowing that she must stop this at once" (218). Liana, then,

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<sup>35</sup> One wonders if this isn't a reference to Hemingway's intimacies with other men. There is an interesting moment in the significantly flawed HBO movie *Hemingway and Gellhorn* (2012). Gellhorn returns to the love hideaway, Finca Vigia, after reporting in Europe to find her house full of men. In fact, she is greeted with a man urinating on the front portico. Is Gellhorn a non-issue in Hemingway's obsession with men?

doesn't mean to kill herself, so in her first or last great action, she is impotent.<sup>36</sup> She cannot save herself. She dies alone, as she lived her life, not one thing or the other, misunderstood and discarded by all.

Liana is the physical manifestation of all colonial anxieties. To quote Homi Bhabha, she is “a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (122). She is fair-skinned, but not white, educated, but not enough, mistress of a plantation, but part of an island economy that permits open-access to her sexually. She has to be destroyed because she embodies these anxieties of the colonial activity. I argue that Gellhorn's heavy-handed, narrow statement that it is useless to entertain that “black could be white” indicates as much (185). Is this what Gellhorn imagines the project of the colonized individual to be, to become white? Gellhorn does link the war with the crumbling empire. The figure of the mulatta allows this exploration, but why write the character of Liana in this way, as a woman without any resources, at the sexual whims of two white men who eventually, accidentally kills herself? Revisiting the Afterword to Liana might provide some answers. Gellhorn states that the National Theatre in London proposed making Liana creole for a stage production of her novel, but she was too busy to worry over such things as she was “deeply absorbed in more urgent affairs ([like]reporting the war)” (224). Gellhorn is giving voice to her two white male characters that have used Liana, and trapped her within the isolated colonial economy. Pierre observes that “surely no one ever asked to be *déraciné*” (184). But, this is only a passing thought for Pierre. To ease his conscience, he suggests that Marc plan for Liana's long-term care. “He would not let Marc condemn Liana to the negro shack and the negro life. He could not let Liana be destroyed” (186). Marc, in turn, proudly thinks, “I'm not mean, that's one thing” (195). Both men, satisfied that they have fulfilled their responsibility to

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<sup>36</sup> It bears mentioning that Gellhorn's own suicide was deliberate and well-planned.

Liana, move onto the “more urgent affairs,” Gellhorn references in her afterword. “Liana had been settled in her house and [Pierre] had been settled in his journey” (181), a casualty of war. This is reminiscent of Gellhorn’s frustration in her 1938 article, “Lord Will Provide for England.” In it, Gellhorn outlines her frustration with the overwhelming belief that England would be safe: “It rose from London like the mist; it was as real as London fog: everything’s going to be all right – somehow. And at last I thought, well, they certainly believe it, so maybe it’s true; the Lord will provide with England.” Still, Gellhorn destroys Liana to save Marc and Pierre because they live to fight wars and “their self-inflicted sorrows” (144).

It should be noted, however, that Martha Gellhorn was an ardent feminist. According to Moorehead, “she had never allowed the fact that she was a woman to interfere with anything she did; and she was not greatly impressed by the idea that other women could not do the same” (5). Rollyson calls Liana a feminist text, but I disagree. There is no sisterhood evident here. At the time Gellhorn completed the novel, she was becoming insistent on maintaining her own identity, separate from the Hemingway name. That she did not like her life’s work being reduced to “Mrs. Hemingway” or “Hemingway’s wife” is an understatement. In this way, we could read the sexist tendency to reduce women to spousal attachments as parallel to Liana’s imprisonment. This notion is further supported by the fact that much of Gellhorn’s journalistic writing focuses on the interests of women and children, particularly the costs of war to them. On the other hand, Rollyson notes that on her Caribbean trip “Gellhorn observed that each island took on the customs of its European rulers and the Europeans seemed largely oblivious to this phenomenon, preferring to maintain the fiction that the races were separate, that the mingling of minds and bodies did not result in profound consequences for humanity” (Rollyson 135). In her foray into

the fictionalized former colony of St. Boniface, Gellhorn embodies the colonizer's sexist and racist policies in the execution (in all senses of the word) of Liana.

### Concluding Thoughts

At the end of the novel, Gellhorn leaves Liana to suffer most viciously. Liana, then, could be seen as a necessary consequence or casualty of colonialism and imperial action. Gellhorn is deeply enmeshed in a sentimental tale of longing for the days when a small ruling class of white people controlled the lives of others. It would be easy, then, to dismiss Liana as a nostalgic throwback to days long gone by. As an American author, this alone links her to Cather's project of exploring the changing value of whiteness. That two white female writers have made use of black characters for their own motivations is nothing new. However, my analysis of Cather and Gellhorn has revealed the authors' investment in writing these stories. Finally, both authors worked for a time as journalists. Gellhorn ardently believed that those lucky enough to work in the profession had a responsibility "to record, to bear witness, and so perhaps to influence people with the strength of her descriptions" (120). One wonders the extent to which this journalistic approach affected the authors' fictional work. The discomfort and challenges raised by novels like Sapphira and the Slave Girl and Liana that reinforce the old order have relegated to them to the margins of literary criticism, and in essence, dismissed them. Both Cather and Gellhorn use the vulnerability of mixed race characters to articulate their frustrations over the horrors of World War II, and become aligned with the nascent imperialist project of the United States. To begin the work of exploring these tensions and ambiguities, it's our responsibility as students and teachers of literature to revisit biographies, letters, and other writings to understand more fully these authors' bodies of work.

## **CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON MIXED RACE WOMEN IN MODERN FICTIONS**

A careful analysis of work containing mixed race characters demonstrates how various tensions and anxieties around race and gender are often embedded in such fictional texts. These characters implicitly reveal what is entrenched in the American psyche. Moreover, in texts with disparate subject matters, one can see the crucial role that the mixed race character plays, even as authors attempt to minimize the importance of such characters (through the tropes that are implemented or lack of depth, morals, or substance they are afforded, for example). They are furtive characters because of what they represent – a revelation of the complicated nature of race in the United States. These particular characters are often the pivot point of the novel’s action. The texts used in this dissertation lack homogeneity and lend credence to the contention that further study is required.

### Next Steps

In the interest of time and economy, one cannot possibly answer all of the questions that arise. This dissertation is the starting point for a longer study examining the centrality of mixed race characters to the ongoing national conversation on race – and the assertion that it is a contemporary conversation.

I intend to further develop my discussion of Sapphira and the Slave Girl by more deeply examining the novel and its characterization of national identity. There has been a flurry of articles related to the recent publication of The Selected Letters of Willa Cather, containing around 500 examples of her personal correspondence. The editors note that “Cather’s reputation

is now as secure as artistic reputations can ever be, and her works will continue to speak for themselves” (Jewell and Stout ix). They are correct in their estimation of Cather’s stable and iconic position in the American literary canon and cultural consciousness. To wit, 2013 also saw the publication of a mystery featuring Cather and her companion Edith Lewis set on the island where they summered for over twenty years.<sup>37</sup> Although she was notoriously private, I think that poring over these letters will yield useful information about the author’s thoughts and conversations around the time she published her last novel. Furthermore, all of Cather’s novels have been reissued, including Sapphira and the Slave Girl in 2010. The book summary provided on the Random House website indicates that “the struggles of [the] strong-willed women provide rich material for Cather’s narrative art and psychological insight.” An April 2013 New York Times review of The Selected Letters avers that they reveal a Cather who is “modern and touchingly – if not always sweetly – old-fashioned” (Perrotta). I see these inherited misreadings as irresponsible. I don’t pretend to solve these issues, but I want to address the implications that the reissued novel, unprecedented collection of letters, and even a newly published mystery may have on Cather’s iconic status and the discussion that Sapphira and the Slave Girl invites.

Gellhorn’s Liana also invites more work into uncomfortable silences and anxieties within the author’s work. I will explore what Gellhorn’s novel reveals about a society that is in transition with certain social structures slowly eroding. I am especially curious about how Gellhorn writes the war into this text, which at once solidifies her desire to be known as an author, but is so different from any other novelistic writing for which she is known. In actuality, I think the author is appropriating patriarchy as a means to work out her frustration about how

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<sup>37</sup> Retired English professor Sue Hallgarth fictionalizes the Grand Manan Island, Canada, community in On the Rocks: A Willa Cather and Edith Lewis Mystery (2013). Cather and Lewis were well-known to the residents of Grand Manan. The cottage that Cather purchased there in the 1920s was the only property she owned.

male leaders are handling the war. While her writing here clearly indicates such appropriation, I think it is useful to invoke feminist theorist bell hooks here. She has noted that “To cross-dress as a woman in patriarchy...was also to symbolically cross from the world of powerlessness into a world of privilege” (145). Maleness serves as an unmarked and unchallenged right of entry and access if confined racially into segregated contexts. Liana is a violent, masculine novel that has allowed its author certain disturbing freedoms since its publication.

Texts like Sapphira and the Slave Girl and Liana exemplify the confrontation of the mixed race individual with whiteness, as well as the underlying discussions on race, sexuality, and nation. Their characters are the physical manifestation of significant national anxieties, particularly in a time period devoid of little, if any writing coming out of the black community featuring mixed race individuals. To quote Homi Bhabha, they are the “subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (122). These women are fair-skinned, but not white, educated, but not enough, set apart from the mainstream population, but part of an economy that permits open-access to their sexuality. In the end, as Morrison notes, authors have a particular responsibility to the characters they create: “An author is not personally accountable for the acts of his fictive creatures, although he is responsible for them” (86). The figure of the mixed race or marginalized woman allows for a nuanced kind of textual exploration that deserves to be discussed along with Cather and Gellhorn’s respective oeuvres.

I will also expand my analysis to include discussions of novels not used in this dissertation. I will employ Patricia Powell’s 1998 passing novel, The Pagoda, to show how a late 20<sup>th</sup> century text attempts to complicate the notion of identity within the context of history. The Pagoda is based on accounts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century migration of Chinese indentured servants and migrant laborers to Jamaica. Ultimately, I hope to better understand – through the use of

feminist, critical race, queer, and postcolonial theories – the slipperiness of identity and the transcendence of self-imposed and external boundaries that restrict women. The main character Lowe lives in a fully-constructed home with his octoroon<sup>38</sup> wife, Sylvie, while the patrons of his shop are all black Jamaicans. Living out other people’s dreams has caused Lowe to be essentially unknowable to everyone in his community, Black or Chinese. He poignantly reflects: “I feel as if I never lived [life] fully. I feel as if I lived it only halfway, only some of the time, and always sheltered, always through some kind of veil. I never embraced it fully, never ran with arms stretched out to meet it” (245). Lowe no longer knows who he is, a high price for the betrayal in which he long ago participated. He severs links with his mother-tongue or mother’s tongue in order to settle into his new lifestyle on the island, but also to temper the hurt caused by the rejection of his father. He is also unable to have interpersonal relations with anyone, including his wife and biological daughter. However, Lowe’s journey to these decisions is even more catastrophic. The ability to transcend borders, to illustrate the permeability of borders of identity is what resonates in Powell’s novel, and what I intend to explore.

Moreover, I want to begin thinking about how earlier texts, including Passing and Plum Bun, can be used in different ways to construct a continuum to more recent fiction. At the core of this research will be the acknowledgement of the tenuous nature of racial constructions in the era of post-race political correctness. Nowhere is this more evident in the racial construction of President Barack Obama. While Obama’s mixed race-ness made him palatable<sup>39</sup> and therefore electable to the United States voting public, upon his election he became the first black President. As a mixed race or black person, his presence in the White House has hindered

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<sup>38</sup> Again, the mixed race character plays an important role, in this case giving legitimacy through heterosexual marriage.

<sup>39</sup> President Obama’s parents were deceased at the time of his first election in 2008. In addition, his father’s African heritage resisted the stereotypes that typically cleave onto African American interracial encounters. As one commentator noted, Obama isn’t saddled with the burdens of African American notions of race.

conversation because he is a symbol of racism's end. And, yet, we know his racial story is illegible, so it becomes, in essence, illegal. The conversation about his birth certificate and status as not being a legitimate American has not quelled well into his second term.

Authors like Emily Raboteau, Heidi Durrow, and Danzy Senna<sup>40</sup> are working out these and other tensions in their novels. Literary critic Michele Elam posits that these three authors comprise part of a mixed race canon (47). I would further argue that these authors draw from the earlier texts explored in this dissertation like Larsen's Passing, especially in recasting the isolation of the mixed race characters. All three authors reveal race as a matter of particular personal absurdity and sometimes bewilderment, contradiction, and pain. They also, compellingly, explore siblinghood or twinning as a kind of social justice community-building. The mixed race female character is no longer cut off from her community (in fact, there is someone who shares her exact or similar genetic make-up) such that her presence destabilizes and unhinges our core beliefs about race, a reminder of the paucity of our public mediated discourse on race.

To conclude, this discussion of mixed race female characters provides just a sample of the fictions that contain them. As demonstrated in this dissertation, writers continually employ these mixed race characters, even as they often neglect to fully flesh out their significance within the text, not to mention the larger conversation. But, they are there. It would be easy to continue the silencing of this viewpoint due to racism and sexism. I contend that closer analysis of these characters will yield great insights about the national discourse of race, identity, and citizenship.

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<sup>40</sup>Respectively, their novels are The Professor's Daughter (2005), The Girl Who Fell from the Sky (2011), and Caucasia (1998).

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