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FROM EXILE TO TRANSCENDENCE: RACIAL MIXTURE AND THE JOURNEY OF REVISION IN THE WORKS
OF LYDIA MARIA CHILD, HANNAH CRAFTS, KATE CHOPIN, JAMES WELDON JOHNSON, AND JEAN
TOOMER

BY

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Abstract

My study, entitled *From Exiles to Transcendences* focuses on five authors: Lydia Maria Child, Hannah Crafts, Kate Chopin, James Weldon Johnson, and Jean Toomer. It examines each author’s effort to represent the mixed-race character as a constant “process of becoming” (Hall, *Questions of Identity* 4). This study aims to convey the distinctiveness of the American mixed-race character in American literature and to provide a thorough reading of how this distinctiveness is portrayed and sustained throughout the scope of the selected texts. My dissertation identifies the mixed-race voice as experientially distinct from other American raced voices while acknowledging the mixed-race character as one who demonstrates a connectedness to a plurality of racial cultures. The following chapters span a period of approximately 100 years and illustrate a common concern among them, albeit from differing perspectives and influences, regarding how home and family function as fluid spaces of racial subjectivity. My study maintains a position that the above authors questioned the presumed irreversibility of an entrenched understanding of family ties; that they challenged and rescripted the historically defined self with a self that privileges experience and discovery over pre-given identities; and that they depicted their characters as evolving subjects who created themselves with name and identity as they moved toward their “process of becoming.”
To my Mother with love and to all those who live on the thresholds of neither/nor
Thanks to my best friend Robert Funk whose emotional support helped get me through the many challenges I faced during the writing of this project. Thanks to my mother who made sure I never lost sight of my goals and to whom I owe so much more than this simple dedication can provide; and thanks to my advisors for their guidance and patience.
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Introduction

Although the mixed-race character has garnered much attention in the last two decades, my dissertation argues that this attention has been limited in scope. While serious consideration has been given to recognizing race as a construction of economics and/or as an identity category that is much more fluid than it is stable, I argue that much of this emphasis does not go far enough to make clear the distinctiveness of the mixed-race character as an American icon. But more importantly, I argue that the lack of attention to the manner in which this distinctiveness is portrayed and sustained though individual texts, more often than not eclipses the effort of some reformist authors who use these characters to suggest new ways of thinking about race. My dissertation thus illustrates how the mark of difference for mixed-race characters, which often comes in the form of an invisible racial sign or as uncommon racial experiences, becomes its own specific challenge for these characters who occupy a world where identity and racial history are inextricably intertwined.

In an effort to demonstrate how an agenda of racially-mixed characters differs from that of the unmixed and to interpret the significance of this difference as it relates to the study of race in American literature, my project examines the work of five writers. These writers I argue look at the interconnection of cultures and races as an act that holds the potential to transform and refigure the construction of families and identities through a lens of character self-conception. My analysis of these authors’ texts concludes that the efforts of these writers to
acknowledge America’s racial diversity might be seen as their way of envisioning a new American culture that grants racially plural subjects an element of power and agency while simultaneously illustrating the possibilities of restructuring the social fabric of America that positions mixed-race subjects as inferior and dangerous.

In contrast to Judith Berzon’s theory that characterizes these characters as singular subjects who experience a racial awareness that often comes through a signifying moment of realization, I approach these subjects as fluid and evolving constructions. Rather than viewing them as static identities that so easily lend themselves to readings that depict mixed-race characters as subjects cataclysmically vulnerable to the occurrence of change, I see these characters as subjects who illustrate change as a constant “process of becoming” (Hall, *Questions 4*), or as Kathleen Pfeiffer argues, as subjects who engage in racial and cultural diversity from the experience of “individuation.” Throughout the following chapters, I argue that this “process of becoming” and/or “individuation” is specifically useful in characterizing the experiences and constructedness of the mixed-race character. It is this approach to “becoming” that I rely on in my interrogation of the scholarship of this character who I contend has traditionally and restrictively been subsumed in

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1 Judith Berzon, who draws heavily on the work of Everett Stonequist in her ground-breaking book *Neither Black Nor White: The Mulatto Character* (1978), states “virtually all fictional characters who undergo “the crisis experience” also undergo a profound social and psychological change in their lives” (120). In referring to the mixed-race character, she goes on to say that this experience includes the character’s “discovery that he belongs to a despised minority and that his identity and place within the lower caste are problematic.”

2 Pfeiffer explains this concept as a liberation from racial restrictions and an act of “self-actualization.”
the culture of blackness by various scholars who more often than not chose to read these characters as “crisis” characters (Berzon 122). I offer instead that if we view these characters as the cross-racial/cross-cultural/cross-experiential characters who defy racial expectations and embrace plurality, we might come to understand how they might function to provide a substantive counter discourse to those discourses that Julie Cary Nerad identify as “reinforcing biological definitions of race” (817) despite the effort by scholars to “destabilize the idea [of race] as a biological and authentic identity” (817).

My work, which is heavily indebted to theorists such as Paul Gilroy, who argues for a “renewed critique of race thinking” (8) and Stuart Hall, who advances the idea that we are always in the “process of becoming” (“Cinematic Representations" 70), seeks specifically to explore the distinctiveness of the mixed-race character as illustrated by their authors. My goal is to bring visibility to characters of racial mixture by reclaiming them from their submersion in the races of others, a position that I claim has contributed to the overlooking of their authors’ unique contribution to American history and literature. The static, one-dimensional view of these characters as racial betrayers, which is so common to their reading, implicitly obscures the existence of the positive and substantive contributions their

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3 Berzon makes the claim that the mixed-race character almost always experiences an “existential crisis of redefining himself” (122) and it is this “trauma” that provides the basis for his reconstituted identity.

4 For examples of these readings, see Robert Stepto’s discussion of Johnson’s Autobiography, George Hutchinson’s discussion of how Toomer and his work has been characterized in “Jean Toomer and the American racial Discourse,” and Barbara Christian’s discussion of the near white character in Black Women Novelists.
authors attempted to voice about the means by which their characters “rescue liberty” from an oppressive system (Child Romance 424). I argue that the mixed-race character, much like the early “literary domestics” of whom Mary Kelley states that “historians and critics have not known how to either characterize them or place them properly in history” (ix), falls subject to a similar treatment of “effacement.”

Through a discussion of selected texts by Lydia Maria Child, Hannah Crafts, Kate Chopin, James Weldon Johnson, and Jean Toomer, I demonstrate how the work of these writers might be read as a type of platform for a revised discourse about race during a time when the Civil War and Reconstructive aftermath led to contentious racial debates, which often found their foothold in the discourses of religion and science. My dissertation approaches these writers as social reformers (or, more accurately, in the case of Chopin, social reporters) who use their characters to argue in favor of a personal racial agency free of historical confinements. In other words, my dissertation takes the position that the works of these selected authors represent a section of voices that examine and argue in favor of the idea of operating outside and beyond established racial paradigms.

Although my dissertation operates under the popular idea of many current theorists that “race’ has never been a stable idea or a fixed concept” (Nelson, Black and White viii), it also takes into account that during the antebellum period through much of the Post-Reconstructive years (and beyond), the concept of race was seen as a fixed biological certainty and achieved “widespread circulation” and legitimacy within the general public (Miles 34). The idea of various races as being distinct and
separate thrived through the works of men as early as those of Peter Camper (1803) who argued that the facial angle of apes, blacks, and Europeans illustrate a gradual continuum from the least evolved to the most evolved (Jordan 226). Although this theory did not gain much footing, it was again taken up by Samuel Morton (1839) who espoused the idea that specific races could be distinguished by a distinct variation in cranial size (Miles 35). By the mid-nineteenth century the stage was set for medical men such as Josiah Clark Nott and social writers such as Joseph Arthur Gobineau (1853) to popularize the idea that blacks and whites derive from different species and, when combined in union, produce offspring that is either sterile or ultimately atavistic, with a leaning towards the baser human characteristics (Miles 34). A few years later in 1859 when Charles Darwin published his evolutionary theory of natural selection in his book entitled The Origin of Species, many theorists interpreted his findings as a way of “endors[ing] the conception [of discrete biological races] and the classifiers of human species [who] continued to produce their typologies” (Miles 37). From Darwin’s theory, the idea of Social Darwinism was later formed and propagated, which argued the potential (or lack of it) for intellectual and civilizing capacities of various people based on race (Miles 37). These ideas helped spawn the impetus to create new antimiscegenation laws and to reinforce old racial laws that attempted to prevent the mixing of the races. Operating under the assumption that by limiting the ability of the “baser” races to corrupt the white race through sexual encounters, these laws helped to maintain the social, economic, and political superiority of whites.
It should be noted, however, that this goal of maintaining racial distinction and of reserving valuable privileges for whites did not begin in the nineteenth century. From the inception of American settlement, the colonists established laws designed to inhibit racial mixing. One of the earliest laws, put forth by Colonial Virginia legislature in 1662, focused on mixed-race children, identifying them as an “abominable mixture and spurious issue” and essentially denying them the right of freedom. This law which held that “all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother” (Higginbotham, Matter of Color 13) was, according to A. Leon Higginbotham Jr. and Barbara Kopytoff, an effort to maintain “the system of slavery that depended on a clear separation of the races” (117) while, of course, attempting to foster a sense of hopeless alienation for the mixed-race individual.

As individual American colonies joined the Virginia Company, they followed suit of the older American colonies in restricting the right to cross racial borders. In 1705 Massachusetts passed a law to ban interracial fornication. In 1725 Pennsylvania forbade interracial marriage and cohabitation. In 1728 Maryland extended its already existing laws to prohibit intermarriage (Sollors, Neither Black Nor White 396-97); and by the “nineteenth century, as many as thirty eight states prohibited interracial marriage” (Ibid). The need to therefore identify clear divisions between black and white became an imperative for many states, with the vast majority of states submitting to the definition that “less than one-fourth of Negro blood left the individual white” (Chestnutt 38). With what was considered a concrete definition of who is black and who is white, the states attempted to justify
their prohibition of marriage between targeted people while denying rights and privileges to blacks and mixed-race individuals. This act of marital exclusion, according to Christine Hickman, also provided the additional benefit of establishing definitive racial markers designed “to curb ’[t]he constant tendency of this [mixed-race] class to assimilate to the white”’ (qtd. in Hickman 107). Unfortunately for the white ruling class, however, the new laws which were enacted to silence the voices of those opposed to racial oppression and to further solidify efforts of racial segregation, functioned instead to bring to fruition the worst fears of whites. As a result of “extra legal practices ... developed to enforce the hundreds of segregation laws, the motivation to pass for white grew” (Davis 56) with many mixed-race individuals crossing the color line both temporarily and permanently, a practice, which according to James Davis, “probably reach[ed] an all-time peak between 1880 and 1925” (56).

The American mixed-race character thus becomes particularly important as a tool in understanding the legacy of race in America. S/he exposes the problems of assigning racial terms based on scientifically dubious criteria and illustrates the unspoken truth of America as a country with a much more diverse racial composition than its many racial laws might suggest. The mixed-race character thus symbolizes the real but unacknowledged heritage of race mixing in America, inclusive of the legal and social contradictions that accompany most representations of mixed-race subjects.

The following chapters discuss how writers as early as those of 1820 recognized the need to expose the history of racial mixture in America as real and
significant to the history of the United States. In these chapters I also show how these forward-thinking writers worked to liberate America from what Anthony Appiah identifies (in a similar context) as racial “falsehoods.” And finally, I illustrate how these writers provide legitimacy and agency to characters that have traditionally been seen as “passers” or disloyal subjects by scholars who perceive them as “black” or read them as characters consistent with the tragic mulatta genre that became popular in the late nineteenth century. In short, I argue that writers such as Child, Crafts, Chopin, Johnson, and Toomer rescript the commonly assumed profile of the mixed-race characters from that of passers, often depicted as opportunistic characters, to that of activists, who push the limits of discourse to represent something new.

In Gayle Wald’s text analyzing what she identifies as “passing narratives,” she acknowledges that American social structures authorize and legitimize the economic authority of white men, a fact that she contends serves as a viable incentive for blacks and mixed-race subjects to cross the color line. Her work, which considers the act of passing as a “struggle for control over racial representation” (6), examines how the cultural narratives of America are revealed through the various discourses of race as a fluid state. Her examined texts, she states, offers opportunities to imagine “new narratives of identity, agency, and subjectivity [..., and to] explore various imagined alternatives to the color line” (7). However, the alternatives to racial oppression, that she explores through the agenda of her various texts, according to Wald, often “end up being no alternative at all” (7). Citing James Weldon Johnson’s narrator as one example of ineffectual alternatives, Wald
characterizes the narrator’s decision to reject any racial assignment and to “let the world take [him] for what it would” (Johnson, *Autobiography* 136) as “a sign of a ‘wasted’ (that is effeminized) masculinity” (40). The argument that Wald, Robert Stepto, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and others have made regarding the narrator’s inability to live up to racial expectations is an argument I claim that fails to see the narrators’ birthright, which he claims he has “sold for a mess of pottage” (Johnson, *Autobiography* 154) as a dual birthright that converges in the dream of making music. Although this claim of self-denial and race betrayal is a common claim made of the protagonist, I situate my argument with the position of Julie Cary Nerad who argues that by “[r]ejecting the assumption that [characters whose are not depicted as having a black upbringing] are passing allows us to better recognize the complex representation of race in novels of passing in U.S. culture” (818).

My project therefore takes a slightly different approach to the familiar readings of American mixed-race character of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century. I do not read the mixed-race character from the dominant reading of him/her as a singularly-raced subject who fails to rectify his/her racial confusion and consequently lives the remainder of life in torment; nor do I see him/her as one who realizes the error of his/her decisions and returns to the black community with an appropriate “homecoming.” My project looks at my selected authors as strategists who use their characters to demonstrate the complexity of race through the ways in which they experience and interpret the outside world. From this perspective race does not function from protocol but rather works to accommodate the discordant attitudes of an intolerant society primarily by rewriting the culturally
available stories of black and white so that they express a more positive discourse of racial mixing. I therefore ask how these authors’ view of race sets them apart from many of their contemporaries, concluding that their approach to the racial mixing as a positive element of family and individuality privileges a movement towards the transformation of racial ideology over the employment of literary convention.

I illustrate how these authors take specific aim to subvert the “tragic mulatto” theme. By depicting their characters and speakers as viable and surviving agents of change who circulate ideas of racial rethinking through the conscious rebuilding of family and community, these characters signify the development of a culture that works to establish the terms by which it will be viewed. Without withdrawing from the mainstream culture that naturalizes race as a biological fact and views racial mixture as an aberration “suffused with negative connotations” (Rosenthal 226), the characters and speakers of Child, Crafts, Chopin, Johnson, and Toomer offer the representation of a culture free of racial boundaries and defined by the way which subjects narrate themselves across a range of expectations and traditions.

My dissertation examines a variety of literary texts from the antebellum period through the late Harlem Renaissance. I look at the fiction of Lydia Maria Child and Kate Chopin, the fictional autobiography of Hannah Crafts and James Weldon Johnson, and the poetry of Jean Toomer. Although these texts span a period of

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5 Debra Rosenthal’s article entitled “Floral Counterdiscourse” seeks to examine the use of plant imagery in Lydia Maria Child’s Romance. She argues Child’s use of such imagery served to present a counterdiscourse of hybridity to that of the “prevailing postbellum prejudice which was constructing African American woman and mixed-race people as animals” (222).
approximately 100 years, I see them as sharing a common concern in which home and family are defined as fluid spaces of racial subjectivity. In this same vein I see these texts as social commentaries that contribute to and build on the discussion of race with a view towards seeking solutions for a culture and country fragmented by racial ideas born out of a racial legacy designed to discount the validity of racial mixing in America’s bifurcated society. By grouping these varied texts together in one project, I trace the trajectory of a discourse that calls for a recognition of the textual and conceptual space of multi-layered identities. I also see these texts as sharing a similar approach to the process of racial awareness, which is reflected in the initial innocence of the characters until compounded experiences awaken them to a gradual voice of self-authenticity, or a “coming out,” so to speak. I argue that through their experiences and their immersion in an unsheltered world, these characters come to a gradual awakening, a realization of their position as racially plural subjects who must renounce the ordinary and/or socially stagnant ideas of racial singularity. They thus present themselves as fluid racial subjects whose diverse experiences fail to conform to the scripting of any one race. In the end, they reach an awareness of the possibility and the reality of all races and cultures integrating and coexisting in an unconventional, yet open spirit of what I refer to as their *interbeing*.

At this point, I should mention that my goal in this project is not to fit every mixed-race text into one defining mold of agency, for while I realize the importance of grouping like fiction into an important body of work, I also realize the dangers of
highlighting common features at the risk of replacing one homogeneity for another. These texts therefore have been specifically chosen for their approaches in addressing a racially uncompromising culture. Child is chosen for her bold chastisement of a rigid Puritan community that lays the groundwork for her later rebellious characters, Rosa and Flora; Hannah Crafts for her open confrontation with what she depicts as a clearly inverted racial philosophy; Kate Chopin for her exposure of the patriarchal oppressive lie used to deny family members from family; James Weldon Johnson for his narrator’s public confession of a life no one dares admit; and Jean Toomer for his offering of a racial transcendence achieved through a spiritual awakening.

While numerous scholars including Elaine Ginsberg, Cassandra Jackson, and Teresa Zackodnik have attempted to reclaim the mixed-race character from the margins of obscurity by focusing on this character’s near-whiteness, which provides them with accessibility to whiteness and thus personhood, I chose instead to read these characters as subjects for whom the color line has no definitive marker. In discussing my selected texts, I draw heavily on the analytical insights of scholars such as Kathleen Pfeiffer and Samira Kawash and others who have been leaders in the discussion of the mixed-race character and who have argued for a fresh perspective of those characters who “cross the color line.” My reading of these characters attempts to move beyond the traditional interpretation of what is seen as black and what is seen as white; and although I employ the technique of race-reading in that I sometimes resort to reading characters from a perspective that
assumes a given group history, my analysis relies on this type of reading in part as an attempt to illustrate the differences in the set of psychosocial challenges experiences by unmixed characters and mixed-race characters. In doing so, my goal is to contribute to the alternative readings that diverge from the many readings which take the theme of tragedy, self-hate, or character weakness as the central point of analyzing and presenting mixed-race characters of the antebellum period though the post-Reconstructive period. In my effort to highlight the voice of the mixed-race character and to show him/her as one who has not only crossed the color line, but has, in many ways, transcended it through the consciousness of choice, I recognize the importance of acknowledging the critical distinctions that contribute to readings of whiteness and blackness and take a view of the mixed-race character as being both inextricably bound with the history of his/her sisters and brothers and distinctively separate from them. Much like Werner Scollars, I view the mixed-race character as one who is at once black and white and neither black nor white. In the texts that follow, I show how selected characters illustrate the idea of racial consciousness as a fluid process in which black and white separate and converge, reflecting the coincidence of unity and change through an autonomy of will and mind.

While I am indebted to Kathleen Pfeiffer and Samira Kawash for their valuable discussions of selected mixed-race characters who embody the concept of “individuation” (Pfeiffer), a concept grown out of the idea that “the color line is as transient as ever” (Kawash 3), I find myself still troubled by their use of the term
“passing” despite their clarifications of the difference with which they use the term commonly associated with acts of disloyalty. My discussion therefore deviates slightly from their agenda in that I choose not to read my specified characters as “passers.” Despite Kawash’s clarification that a character’s passing is not predicated on the “passer’s” belief in the premise of a racial essence underlying identity” (136), or on Pfeiffer’s idea that “literary characters who pass for white demonstrate the liberation available to Americans seeking self-actualization” (14), I choose to see my selected characters as subjects who, in their varying degrees, transcend the color line as a whole persons, and who, as George Hutchinson says of Jean Toomer, “breaks the silence as [they bring their] ‘fragments’ to ‘fusion’” (389). Despite valuable readings that view these characters’ passing as a statement of liberation (Pfeiffer) or as an outcome of a personal assumption of what is whiteness or blackness (Kawash 144) rather than the more common reading as an act of subversion, I contend that one cannot pass if one understands one’s self to be a product of plurality. The characters selected for my dissertation illustrate an embracing of their dual heritages, which I argue that they do either privately or publicly and are, in turn, depicted as having the ability to function as whole characters, unfettered by the psychosocial shackles of passing. Child’s Rosa Royal, for example, acknowledges her position as both slave and woman and chooses to embrace the latter in a country that allows her the freedom to do so. She, however, does not negate her American slave status, nor does she conceal it from new friends. Instead she openly accepts her position and invites her new friends into her borderland world where they speak for themselves, from their own context, and on
their own terms. Similarly, Johnson’s narrator, who has frequently been labeled a passer by many critics because of his choice to live a life of dignity rather than one of poverty and strife (which so often accompanies the life of the fictional black man), chooses not to choose a race. Instead he lives his life as a man, allowing “the world to take [him] for what it would” (139).

Child, Crafts, Chopin, Johnson, and Toomer are authors I argue who, in many cases, demonstrate efforts to express a new consciousness of race in America. Their characters stand as evidence to Franz Fanon’s idea articulated in his often-cited sociological analysis, entitled *Black Skin White Masks*, which concludes that although “the black man is overdetermined from without” (116), or in other words, he is what others see him to be, he is also a product of his own making. The above writers I argue express the idea that the act of racial denial, seen by some as an act of disloyalty, might more appropriately be read as an act that makes clear the distinction between the public space of race and the private space of experience where characters define their own being. Characters such as Johnson’s narrator, who denies any racial classification, but who has traditionally been read as black because of his trace of black heritage (and his interest in black culture) thus becomes a black man for many critics, because as Fanon states, the black man is more often than not read in relation to the white man (110). Consequently, if one is not white, then one must be black (or other). And if one is black, then he is, without question, held responsible for “[his] body, [his] race and [his] ancestors” (Fanon 112). A similar fate might thus characterize Crafts’ Hannah, or Child’s Rosa and
Flora, or Chopin’s Désirée as well as a number of other characters whose “one drop” of black blood defines them as legally black. This definitive categorical labeling, however, is a perspective that harkens back to the racialist thinking that Fanon attributes to colonial attitudes and which he states “had to be destroyed at all costs” (117). Although the mixed-race identity that I explore in these nineteenth and twentieth century texts differs from the black “non-being” of Fanon’s colonial reference, the point remains relatively the same: to be whole, respected, and purposeful, one must be white. This is not to say, however, that critics who read these “near-white” characters as opportunists fall under the racist umbrella that Fanon characterizes colonial Europeans; it is, however to say, as Nerad has fittingly stated, that “recent critical work on race often illustrates the degree to which the one-drop rule still has a toehold on American racial consciousness” (814).

Without doubt, American history has not been kind to its black inhabitants, nor has the authoritative communal voice recognized much difference between the mixed-race individual and that of the unmixed black – a custom that one might appropriately attribute to the legacy of the “one-drop” rule. One chief historical difference between these two groups, however, has been the intensely uncertain social position for any person whose history includes practices of miscegenation. Laws, which paid particular attention to the role of white in women producing citizens, reinforced the idea that “any sexual intercourse between a white and a black was twice as evil as fornication between two whites” (J. Davis 33). Punishment for such a crime was thus instituted, which ranged from fines to
imprisonment to banishment from the colony for white women who disturbed the racial foundation on which the hierarchal system was based (J. Davis 33). However, when miscegenation occurred as a result of white male lust, it was tolerated under the condition that the consequence of such lust maintained a safe distance from the ability to corrupt the racial purity of whiteness. Thus Virginia’s legislative decision “to classify mulattoes with blacks, [served to solidify the idea that] the mulatto child of a white mother was an assault to on white purity [...] whereas the mulatto child of a black mother merely exhibited ... the range of skin color or the lower racial caste” (Higginbotham and Kopytoff 119).

This history underlies the claim critics such as Dana Nelson, Eva Sacks and others have made regarding the heavy political burden the mixed-race character carries in making visible the paradox between American idealization of family and the laws that attempt to deny that unity. Understood in this light, one might argue that in some respects the mixed-race character has been represented as having a much more tragic life than the unmixed black. In his 1845 Narrative, Frederick Douglass writes “the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father,” concluding that “such slaves invariably suffer greater hardships, and have more to contend with, than others” (17). He gives as his evidence “the master [who] is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife” (17) and insinuates that because the mixed-race slave is denied from claiming his full racial heritage, he becomes
little less than nothing with no history of his own, no family, and no belonging. This is the foundation of the “tragedy” of the mixed-race subject.

In 1937 Sterling Brown characterized the depiction of antebellum mulatto character as a tool of political propaganda that writers used to argue either for or against the cause of slavery. A mixed-race character’s “white blood,” Brown argues, gives him “his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; [and] from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery” (279). Brown suggests that the mulatto, in his “divided inheritance,” was a tool used to pander to white racism by representing whiteness with positive virtues and insinuating that “any achievement of a Negro is to be attributed to the white blood in [his] veins” (279). It is this representation that Teresa Zackodnik identifies as the controlling image of the mixed-race character, “revised by critics who followed [Brown]” (xv) and who “continu[e] to determine our readings of the mulatta figure and our assessment of the writers who employed her” (xv). The cliché of the “tragic mulatta/o,” she argues, remains persistent in contemporary criticism. Such reading might be seen in Arthur P. Davis’s essay, “The Tragic Mulatto Theme in Six Works of Langston Hughes.” In this essay, Davis notes the “rejection theme” (320) as one the more substantive defining points of tragedy expressed in Hughes’s work centered on the biracial character. Darwin T. Turner notes how the “failure to sustain delusion” of identity in Toomer’s Cane results in tragedy for many of the women who give into their natural sex drives, over and despite the “the attitudes of the society” (209) that refuse to accept what they deem as aberrant. Similarly, in her
article entitled "Desire and Death in Quicksand," Claudia Tate recognizes Nella Larsen's Helga Crane's “fate as tragic” (240), owing to the idea that the only place that Helga can achieve her desire for wholeness is in death. Deborah McDowell reads Larsen's Passing as a “story of 'the tragic mulatto,'” which she states “is clearly supported by the novel's epigraph from Langston Hughes’s poem ‘Cross’” (xv11) – a poem about a mixed-race man who contemplates what role his race will play in his burial. The narrator of Hughes’s poem ends his contemplation with an unanswered question about his identity, leading McDowell to conclude that this open question is the source of the narrator's racial confusion (possibly emanating from his efforts at passing). Through this uncertainty -- which Arthur Davis characterizes as a “fruitless search for a father and a home” (319) -- McDowell makes the connection of tragedy between Clare's abrupt death and the narrator's eventual death. Other characters such as Jessie Fauset's Angela Murray, Langston Hughes' Bert Lewis, Charles Chesnutt's Rena Walden, Frank J. Webb's Clarence Garie, and Walter White's Mimi Daquin are also commonly noted for their “tragic” end, precipitated primarily by their “crossing of the color line.” Although Hughes's Bert Lewis stands apart from the group in that he does not surreptitiously “pass,” his insistence in claiming the privilege of his whiteness has been read as directly relating to his “downfall and mak[ing] his 'exorcism' at the hand of whites all the more tragic” (Bienvenu 341). In regard to the remainder of the characters mentioned here, Barbara Christian makes the case that “in most of the novels of the Renaissance, the passer returns to her race convinced that her loss of identity as well as the values she must adopt to be in the white race is too high a price to pay” (44-45). Christian further argues that
“social traumas” experienced by the mulatta “resemble [those of] the tragic mulatta of the antebellum novels” (45). These reading make clear that the convention of the tragic mulatto/a is not one that is easily erased despite the nuances that accompany many readings of the mulatta as a literary trope.

My treatment of the American mixed-race character while acknowledging the dominant mixed-race paradigm – whether it be the representation of the tragic mulatta who is unable to reconcile the two warring racial worlds, the powerless loner, the marginalized outcast, the inauthentic, or the beautiful but ill-fated – assumes a multi-dimensional aspect of these characters. I see their burdens and social fates as their authors’ method of bringing attention to the limitations of viewing characters and individuals from the narrow perspective of an either/or while showing how these burdens also function as a means of empowerment. Through the selected readings of these authors, I seek to form a discourse of racial inclusion that widens the concept of race to include the sometimes invisible histories of borderland characters. My project does not work towards negating the concept of race as much as it works towards identifying the problems of reading characters from a position of pre-given histories. I therefore am particularly interested in exploring what happens when bodies and subjectivities meet in a space of racial neutrality -- one that does not predicate itself on the underlying assumption that racial histories inform characters in specific and predictable ways. Through the characters of Rosa King, Mary Conant, Hannah Crafts, and Désirée Valmondé, to name a few, I illustrate how the willingness to openly confront and
challenge the expectations derived from a given racial past creates a much more fluid character than one that places emphasis on the means by which heredity defines and influences character and action. In short, I see these characters as revising the discursive field of race and racial identification. And while I understand the fictiveness of the personalities that provide the basis for the foundation of my argument, my premise also assumes that these American characters provide us with a tangible window into both the present and past world of fluid racializations and the lived experiences that make fluidity possible.

Recent work by scholars such as Werner Sollors and Anthony Appiah invites a renewed attention to the way in which literary scholars read identities. Appiah’s *In My Father’s House* focuses on how the overlapping philosophies of Western and African tradition require us to “face questions, that prior to reflection, have not been addressed” (100). His work seeks to demonstrate the productivity of forging one’s own identity and argues that the concept of race and history, when used to ally people though the belief in essential nature, are “falsehoods” that leave us unprepared to deal with ideas and identities that fall outside the simplicity of binary categories. From a different, less controversial perspective, Sollors, through his two primary works, *Interracialim* and *Neither Black nor White*, introduces us to what he describes as “the special quality” (*Neither* 3) that gives interracial literature its significance. Sollors’ discussion of the prevalence of interracialism in literature also makes note of the paucity of critical inquiry that focuses on the representations of cross-cultural and cross-racial identities and reasons that “the time is right to
examine the strange ramification of this fear of mixing, particularly odd in a melting pot culture” (*Interracialism* iv).

My project attempts to look at the mixed-race character as one who functions as an uncomfortable outsider to both the black and the white race in this oddly balanced “melting pot” culture. By recognizing the mixed-race character’s ability to seek and to develop his own individuality through directions that might provide him a role in creating his own authenticity, I seek also to offer this reading as one means of possibly motivating an arena of fresh political thinking that takes a collective American identity as its focus. In illustrating how the social environment functions as an active agent in contributing to the creation of a fluid identity, my goal is in part, to demonstrate how one’s ability to move in and between racial worlds as both insider and outsider, however permanent or temporary that environment might be, provides a unique ability to speak as both black and white and as neither black nor white. My argument rejects the idea that the mixed-race character is a “concession to a white audience” (Carby 63), which is a claim Hazel Carby states has been made by critics of African-American literature. Barbara Christian points out that although near-white characters serve the purpose of making racial difference more palatable for whites through the depiction of their “positive attributes, they also pose a serious threat to black progress directed by the New Negro Philosophy” (47) of the Harlem Renaissance. This is an idea that might also be seen in Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,”

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*I use the male pronoun to refer to both genders when speaking generally.*
in which he states that "the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America [is the] urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (1311).

America has long been a culture of divided races but at the same time we are also a culture of plurality. The question becomes how to negotiate that delicate balance between maintaining the integrity of a culture and becoming full participants in an integrated American culture. Hazel Carby suggests, the mixed-race character “allow[s] for movement between two worlds, white and black, and act[s] as a literary displacement of the actual increasing separation between black and white” (90). However, this character is, of course, not a solution to the issues that both Christian and Hughes raise concerning the difficulty and necessity of maintaining a pride in blackness within a culture that elevates white over black because the mixed-race character is, as I have argued, fundamentally different from both blacks and whites. Because the mixed-race character is often cut off from full inclusion in the mainstream culture of both blacks and whites, her ability and willingness to worship either culture will, if at all, become a strained worship; however, we must also remember that she is not irreconcilably different from the separate American cultures with which she is commonly identified. She is both black and white despite the cultural narrative affixed to her. In short, the mixed-race character offers an opportunity to see the overlappings between the cultures of black and white as a new voice of racial independence.
The chapters that follow look at the mixed-race character as a blended subject, one whose ability to move in and out of communities almost always demands a rethinking about what we do as scholars in regard to how we speak about race. The fact is that race, whether stated or unstated, is never far from the American mind. Our history consists of an extended list of abuses and subjugations of the non-white which, until relatively recently (following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965), has long been accepted as practice as usual. The separation from our past practices and from the belief that whiteness and goodness form a concrete synthesis is far from complete and is reflected in the way in which many scholars continue to separate literature as “raced” or American (insinuating white American).  

Anthony Appiah’s discussion of “the myth of the African world” (73) as a packaged place that gives meaning to racial nationalism in America and Europe is one such example which suggests that acknowledgement of a multidimensional culture serves a useful purpose in recognizing individuals who hold simultaneous memberships with different groups throughout the course of a history and a life. African writers, he states “cannot take for granted a common stock of cultural knowledge” (80) because the “relationship of African writers to the African past is a delicate web of ambiguities” (76). Appiah goes on to explain that while many African writers (such as Wole Soyinka) communicate through the Anglo-European

7 In her essay titled “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Toni Morrison makes a compelling point that literature is often raced or cultured. In her effort to argue for the recognition of a African-American presence of its own, separate from the agenda of whiteness in American literature, Morrison discusses this in context of the idea that “the canon of American literature is ‘naturally’ or ‘inevitably’ white” (380).
language of English, which in many African countries has operated as both the
language of domination and academic intellectualism, this language also sustains the
dual function of speaking for and about a widely varied culture while confirming a
relationship with a colonial past that is both distant and near, both brutal and
giving. In viewing diverse African cultures as a unit where various indigenous
conceptual frameworks meet in the experience of past and present to negotiate how
race and culture inform illusion and knowledge, Appiah attempts to empower
African identities with the knowledge that “race and history ... do not enforce
identity: that we choose ... what it will mean to be African in the coming years”
(176). Although this concept of purposefully and publically choosing or choosing not
to choose is a relatively new theoretical concept in regard to race, I argue that
writers have long been exploring the varying subjectivities that shape human
engagement and social perception because as Elaine Ginsberg notes “identities are
not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent” (4). My project explores
how the mixed-race character represents the effort to confront time-worn scripts of
singular identities by means of the intervention of choice.

In the following chapters, I discuss the differently raced space of what has
become known as the space of “neither/nor.” Much like Paul Gilroy who argues
“against race” as an organizing principle in human relationships, I too am
interested in exploring “what might be gained if the powerful claims of soil, roots,
and territory could be set aside” (111), or at the very least, minimized in their
influence to “regulate social conduct” (Gilroy 108). Each chapter in this project
engages an analysis that looks at the concept of choice delivered through each author's character(s), and offers the idea that racial choice, although a much contested position by current theorists, is an act of empowerment that constitutes the fulcrum of a character's becoming. My analysis rests on the position that a character's choice almost always begins as a personal quest which leads to a necessarily critical reflection marked by an interconnection between historical expectations and experiential engagements. This process of choice, I demonstrate, begins with the conflict of attempting to combine an often incongruent relationship between the historical self and the experiential self, until it reaches the final stage in which one pursues a course towards a deliberate intervention of shaping one's self into what I have earlier described as a racial and/or cultural *interbeing* – that is, an individual of fluid growth, who sees him/herself as a non-dualistic being, open to the work of reconciliation and invested in the knowledge of the interchangeability of one and all.

Through what I identify as a working concept of an *interbeing*, I attempt to address the position of characters who speak from a voice where racial discourses inform each other to create interlocking approaches to seeing and speaking about race. And while I read these texts as products of the critical history out of which they come, where tragedy characterizes the experience of their characters, my task in reading these characters against the grain of the critical studies that define them is to contest the idea that the space of racial and cultural intersection signifies an
agenda of confrontation where one “reality” is challenged against the other at the loss of one over the other.

Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s popular novel *Hope Leslie* (1827) might be read as one such antebellum work that challenges the status quo of representation through her two-sided story of the Pequot War, examined though a series of debates between her two protagonists. Sedgwick challenges the representation of the Indian as savage (though I am hesitant to say that she goes as far as her forerunner Lydia Maria Child in demonstrating how two cultures might exist as one harmonious whole). Through her text, Sedgwick returns to the past, against the grain of James Fenimore Cooper’s literary trend and popularity in boasting America’s frontier experience. She redelivers America’s past with a different and renewed dignity, intersecting two cultures and planting the seeds, through her primary characters, Magawisca and Everell, of a future possibility where cultures peacefully live in respectful harmony. Dana Nelson, however, contends that “[Hope Leslie] succumbs to the same process of historical representation that it formally condemns in the Puritan account of the Pequot massacre” (*Black and White* 77), citing what she sees as a “mixed bag,” with Sedgwick torn between seeing the necessity of re-envisioning racial constructs and being “clearly invested in Anglo-American historical inheritance” (77). My work in the following chapters identifies a shared agenda among writers who I claim see revisioning American racial landscape as a primary focus by which to achieve social and political change. I consider many of these
writers as reformers who openly spoke against political conformity in their public pose, diaries, letters, and autobiographies.

Lydia Maria Child stands out as an exceptional example of one whose fictional work vividly portrays the racial sentiments expressed in her personal and public letters. Whether calling for the rights of Indians or for the abolition of slavery, Lydia Maria Child believed that “[c]ontempt, whether expressed or implied, alienates all men” (Karcher Reader 89) and repeatedly illustrated this conviction through her mixed-race characters who are almost all near-white characters and who behave with the manners and habits of whites. However, because Child depicts her characters with these attributes, she and her contemporaries who share similar persuasions have been packaged with other authors whose near-white characters function primarily as a condemnation against slavery rather than as a tool for racial inclusion and individual agency. If we take for example William Wells Brown's Clotel, whose “divided inheritance” should presumably earn an element of shelter from the immoral condition of perpetual slavery, we learn it provides her little sanction. Instead Clotel’s divided inheritance awards her with grace and beauty that further locks her in a position of secrecy where she can neither claim her husband or her child as individuals to whom she belongs. Clotel’s tale ends with her flight from imprisonment in an effort to reclaim her daughter, but she is once again caught and chooses the silence of suicide in the Potomac River in a symbolic gesture of a tortured soul. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the character of Cassy reaches a similar fate where because of her near-whiteness, she gains the love of a
man who saves her from the horrors of slavery but dies unexpectedly of yellow fever. After being put up for sale once again, she is bought by a kind master with whom she has a child but this time decides to kill her new born soon after birth rather than allow him to live in slavery. These mulattas are, as Nancy Bentley states, “the figure[s] who most distinctly locate the internal contradictions of domestic ideology” (Bentley 503). However, I caution readers to see this classification as a finite and totalizing marker for all mixed-race characters, and instead, I offer the premise that we see it as a necessary starting point for any critical study of the mixed-race character and/or America’s racial society.

In his insightful essay entitled “The Changing Rhetoric,” William Andrews makes the point that “[Harriet] Jacobs’s … [1861 Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl] serves as the culmination of several major traditions in the antebellum slave period, particularly those that identified the South as one great harem of interracial libidinousness and epitomized the evil of slavery through the image of white men’s domination and demoralization of black women” (474). Given these terms, the mulatta can become nothing but tragic. But if we allow ourselves to see her in the same “revisionist” way that Andrews states we might view those who characterize the postbellum slave narratives, who “keep the past vital and serviceable to the community’s evolving sense of its best interest”8 (474), we might complicate the definition of some of these early slave characters of “tragic” to include the quality of

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8 Here Andrews refers to the character Iola Leroy who although has the ability to pass of white chooses instead to remain in the black race and work toward its uplift.
one who is shrewdly cognizant of her own multifaceted ability and mixed-race status, which is a quality that might be seen in Harriet Jacobs’s Linda Brent.

Following Dr. Flint’s edict barring her from seeing her black lover, Linda Brent forms an intimate relationship with a prominent white man named Mr. Sands and bears two near-white children from this bond. In her only discussion of the relationship with Mr. Sands, Linda tells us that “there is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (385). Her choice of the word freedom to describe her relationship is interesting in that her relationship is and must remain a secret, thereby curtailing any freedom that Linda might gain from it. Yet Linda uses her relationship with Mr. Sands to combat the force behind the powerful source of authority. Her relationship with Mr. Sands undermines and even mocks societal law against miscegenation. Linda further makes it publicly clear that Mr. Sands is the father of her children, thus rejecting the authority of the land and exposing the truth about racial heritages in America. By providing the reader with the tangibility of Mr. Sands as her children’s father, Jacobs begins to reconfigure her culture’s racial experience. Her children form a new reality. They are children with a heritage of both black and white, however “tragic” that may be.

My first chapter of this project begins with a discussion of Lydia Maria Child’s 1820 Hobomok and her last novel, A Romance of the Republic (1867). In this chapter I discuss Child’s characters as subjects who voice resistance against the identification of them as marginal – a position bell hooks terms “a site of
deprivation” (“Marginality” 341). Although hooks insists that marginality must be maintained in order to “counter the hegemonic discourse ...” and “nourish one’s capacity to resist” (341), Child seems to demonstrate that productive resistance comes in knowing the alternative to both the center and the margin. In many ways this chapter comes as the result of the inspiration of Mary Kelley's Private Woman Public Stage, which advances the idea of constructing the story of the “literary domestics” “anew in the hope of achieving a better understanding” (xii). 9 This chapter looks at the means by which Child creates a domestic space, valuing the authority of women and equipping them with the ability to name themselves and others, thus liberating them from the typical doctrines of family and gender. In Child’s domestic space families are formed through an active participation in the process of alienation and disclosure of secrets. Her work, which imagines new communities constructed through the willing participation of its people, introduces readers to spaces of overlapping culture and races where families become so intertwined that they seem to generate a need for a surrogate concept of culture and race. In this chapter, I explore how Child envisions a collective community (albeit an imperfect one) as a solution to America’s debilitating racial discord. This chapter seeks to illustrate an interiority of the characters by addressing the means by which their border crossings inform their complexity and their work to dismantle the old tropes. This chapter seeks to analyze the means by which Child offers new images of

9 In her book entitled Private Woman, Public Stage, Kelley addresses how the discourse of sentimentality, commonly used to discuss twelve early nineteenth-century female writers, limits their depth and reduces them to the margins of American literature.
resilient mixed-race women who replace the legacy of silent women dominated by fear with stories authored by women who write their own character and tell their own history.

In Chapter 2, I continue my examination of the antebellum female character. My focus here is the 1855 novel of Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Here I explore Crafts’ narrative as a text whose paradoxes provide a multi-dimensional view of the mixed-race slave. I argue that the consistent reversal of norms present in the narrative each become their own confrontational moment in which the reality of the self is challenged and must either submit to old norms or fashion new ways of thinking about the self. This chapter seeks to address the means by which scholars confine literature to its various racial subcategories and explores the costs we pay as a result of such practices. I make this argument through the character of Hannah Crafts who contrasts her womanhood against the ideological image of “true womanhood,” and in doing so, presents herself with a superiority that asks readers to revisit their expectations of the conventional slave narrative and consequently their knowledge of the diversity that exists within the slave population. Crafts’ text actively works against creating vicarious entertainment for the reader in that she is not the typical slave nor is her narrative one that specifically emphasizes the humanity of all slaves and/or the need for the abolition of slavery. Instead her work functions more pointedly as an exploration in which her juxtapositions at every turn force a renewed conception of Hannah as the voice of what Pfeiffer refers to as “American individualism.”
Chapter 3 advances the notion of America’s inevitable confrontation with itself regarding the way it views its own racial “authenticities.” Through a discussion of Kate Chopin’s 1894 “Désirée’s Baby,” I look at the means by which Chopin challenges stereotypical ideas of reductive white femininity through the depiction of Désirée as a racially fluid character, who, through her circumstances, also learns to challenge the restrictions of family. I also expose how the practice of denial and deceit functions to maintain white maleness. In documenting the means by which Chopin criticizes Anglo-American masculinity, I examine the role of knowledge and ignorance and its use in this text as an organizing principle employed to expose the machinations of dominance and manipulation in white patriarchal America. I further argue that through the ownership of knowledge, Chopin rescripts the “tragic mulatta” from that of victim to that of owner of one’s fate. However, it is in the gaps that the text speaks most loudly, for if one accepts the idea that Désirée is cognizant of her husband’s racial heritage, then, to that extent, we must also consider Chopin’s use of her protagonist as a means of suggesting that this interracial family is a creation built by women who understand the home as a separate haven from the public world. By examining the balance between Désirée and Armand’s knowledge and ignorance and the shifting patterns of engagement with these skills, I attempt to make clear Chopin’s illustration of interracial relationships as complex unions influenced and complicated by societal judgments, of which she seems to suggest that we are all complicit.
Chapter 4 extends the discussion about self-identification expressed in the previous chapters. In this chapter I focus on James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 narrative, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, arguing that the narrator’s lack of belonging and racial history is what provides him with the authority to cross borders and to make statements about the habits, qualities and practices of both the black and white race. This chapter, however, is most interested in contesting the theories that discuss the narrator as a “passer” who demonstrates no loyalty to the black race. It argues that the narrator is not so much a “passer” as one who passes through cultures without any investment to the practices that inform that culture. My reading plays this construction of the narrator against the reading of others, illustrating the idea that the concept of cultures and races require on-going negotiations for borderland characters. In my discussion of the narrator, I see his story as a mirror image of the emotional and psychological spaces occupied by the racially undefined. What others view as “unreliability,” I read as a complex terrain of the colliding culture of races. In particular, I view his belief in his narrative objectivity as an outcome of his expressed values in which he “neither disclaim[s] the black race nor claim[s] the white race” (Autobiography 139), and in this regard suggests an alternative view to America’s dichotomous conception of race.

My final chapter focuses on the poetry of Jean Toomer, paying specific attention to his long spiritual poem “Blue Meridian,” published in 1936. I demonstrate how Toomer’s poetry reflects a spiritual and racial transcendence, achieved through an acceptance of a meditative power, which carries the ability to
strip away prejudices in replacement of what Toomer refers to as a “higher consciousness.” My interest in Toomer’s poetry is a genuine fascination with his ability to address the forces of racial injustice with a voice of reason that imagines and philosophizes the integration of our past, present and future. My choice to end these chapters with a discussion of Toomer is in part an indulgence in my own personal reckoning of moving from the space of borderland to one of an integrated wholeness. In looking at Toomer’s work I address the ways in which the work relies on a spiritual evolution to advance Toomer’s conceptualizations of a perfect humanity.

My journey through these works has been a chronological journey, from the antebellum concerns of America through the agenda of the early twentieth century, in which I have attempted to define the distinctiveness of the mixed-race experience as one that is at once individual and inclusive. The authors I have laid out here certainly do not suggest that they are the only authors who might be used to explore the plight of the racially complex. They have, however, been selected for what I see as their specific resistance to the act of “passing” as a subversive betrayal of one’s race. The works of Child, Crafts, Chopin, Johnson, and Toomer, move the discussion about race from one in which characters embody racial cultures and reflect national history to one that argues for the recognition of the mixed-race character speaking with a voice capable of transcending the fixities of an either/or culture. And while I consider the mixed-race character as having a legitimate psychological and political character in and of itself, I am also cognizant of the argument that in attempting to
dismantle what I see as an unjust system of difference, I possibly create yet another
system of racial competition. This, however, is not my objective, for in identifying
my characters as *interbeings*, my goal is in part to dispel the spirit of competition
between the races as I recognize the positive contributions that may derive from
acknowledging our interconnectedness.
Chapter 1

Exiles and Revisions: Lydia Maria Child’s “Alternative” Republic

On September 3, 1862, in a letter to the editor of the New York Daily Tribune, Lydia Maria Child writes "legalized amalgamation can never become common so long as there is a prevailing prejudice against color; and when that ‘phantom dynasty’ passes away with the centuries, its disappearance will harm no one, and posterity will wonder at the power it once exercised, as we now marvel at the terror our ancestors had of witchcraft” (Karcher, Reader 264). Almost 150 years later, posterity, unfortunately, still marvels with its power, and the phantom dynasty continues to strategize ways with which to maintain its power. Thus, when non-white academics such as Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith, and Ann Ducille publicly struggle with how to balance claiming their own voices against what bell hooks terms “the comodification of otherness” (Black Looks 21), one might argue, that the “monster” of slavery (Child, June 1856) although dead, still lingers in a powerful dynasty that time has yet to fully extinguish.

Child’s letter, written to a largely mainstream audience in its attempt to slay the monster, acknowledges the hypocrisy of fearing legal amalgamation. She states, “Anyone who knows anything about slavery is well aware that amalgamation is the universal and inevitable result of that system” (Karcher, Reader 262). The amalgamated result to which Child refers is, of course, the increasing presence of the mixed-race individual who, through her overlapping discourses of race, exposes
both the site of fear associated with her increasing presence and the ideological contradiction she represents in so much of early American literature. The mixed-race character disrupts the boundaries of race, and in her neither/or state, she becomes the literal symbol of physical and/or emotional exile. The borders and walls erected out of fear to define and separate black from white and family from property, based in an immutable construct of race, challenge her existence and force upon her a marginalization that frequently leaves her floundering between worlds of black, white, and “other.” Here she becomes subject to an onslaught of oppositions and contradictions, which she must either consistently tolerate in secrecy (such as we see in the case of William Wells Brown’s Clotel or Frank Webb’s Mrs. Garie, to name a few), and thus die the tragic death commonly assigned to mulattas or choose a new consciousness that creates a life-affirming position—one that operates from an agenda of plurality where no experience is denied.

This inclusive racial paradigm where the mixed-race character (or “othered” character in the case of white Mary Conant, who marries the Indian Hobomok) radically disturbs essentialist ideas becomes the focus of Lydia Maria Child’s work. Credited as a literary revolutionist who has been noted for, among other things, her introduction of the first mixed-race female slave into American literature, beginning with her 1842 short story “The Quadroons,” which details the unfortunate circumstances of mixed-race love in an antimiscegenated culture, Lydia Maria Child becomes the focus of a provocative contemporary debate that examines her use of cultural and racial mixture as an effective means of affirming
racial respect. This chapter endeavors to establish Child as one who registers an awareness of the connection between an identity based in a racial history and an individual self developed from personal experiences. It presents Child as an author who, although very much a part of the sentimental tradition in her portrayal of her domestic females, offers a persuasive rationale for a revisioning of the traditional mono-racial family, which she does through the depiction of characters who willingly engage in building community bonds that support the renaming of subjects, the creation of memory, and the evolution of a community.

Writing at a time of cultural and racial modernization during the 1820s when the impetus to extinguish the Indian claimed popularity, Child wrote *Hobomok*, a short novel about a Pequot Indian and a Puritan woman who marry, exile themselves from their former community, and bear a son together. Shortly following the adoption of the Emancipation Proclamation and its promise of newness and freedom for blacks, Child's last fictional work, *A Romance of the Republic*, written in 1867, introduces the vision of a workable alternative culture to that which segregates families and insists on blackness as a defining symbol of inhumanity. Child’s emphasis on racial rescripting and racial inclusivity, however, has received little attention, with the majority of the critical discussion focusing on Child’s acknowledgement of racial injustice to the exclusion of her literary campaign to dismantle what she refers to as our “long indulged ... feelings of pride and contempt towards those whom we are pleased to call ‘the subject races’” (Karcher, *Reader* 82). In her essay titled “W/Righting History,” Dana Nelson notes that
“Although Romance has demonstrated the inherent unfairness of racial categorization, it does not transcend the color line ...” (87); similarly, Carolyn Karcher argues that, “though able to diagnose the cultural impoverishment resulting from racial exclusiveness, Child proved unable to extricate herself from conceptions rooted in the very systems she sought to discredit” (“Child’s Romance” 99). Without doubt, Child’s novels lay bare America’s continuing attempt to create a social death for the black and mixed-race individual. However, I contend that her novels do more than reveal the injustices of an artificially imposed binary and see her works as a representation of an idealized America, which she fashions through a rescripting of the space of interracialism. Here mixed-raced subjects engage in a transition as they move from a position of banished exile to one of voluntary exile. In this process they create their own belonging, which in part contributes to their definition as subjects with agency and voice in a world otherwise hostile to their plurality. Child thus earns her name as one of the harbingers of a literary movement by women who use fiction to reveal the hypocrisy and contradictions inherent in a divided democracy, which she describes as “the tyranny that has so long trampled on us” (Child, Wayland 1856). In doing so, she not only “represents miscegenation as a fusing of bodily signs that would eventually nullify systems of racial categorization” (49), as Cassandra Jackson argues, but also imagines an alternative America that gradually grows in both deed and thought to “uphold the scales of Justice ... evenly poised” (Romance 440).
Child’s mixed-race characters, as well as her full-blooded characters who cross racial lines, illustrate the potential of the nation she imagines and tell the story of how, why, and to what benefit racially fluid characters rupture oppressive traditions of race and culture. Her two most prolific critics Carolyn Karcher, and Dana Nelson, who praise Child for her “sophisticated critique of the patriarchal structure of US society” (Nelson, The Word in Black and White 80), also carry the banner that many other critics have helped support, which maintains that Child’s work falls short of its goal to provide a change to the social order and “[i]nstead merely provides a means of gradually absorbing people of color into the white middle class mainstream” (Karcher, “Child’s Romance” 83). While Nelson and Karcher’s arguments are compelling in that their readings corroborate the traditional interpretation of the near-white female character as being somewhat weak in her ability to affect change, I am interested in proposing an alternative view to the resolutions these scholars provide. Julie Cary Nerad offers the idea that “she who does not know she is passing isn’t” (817), making the claim that “in novels of unintentional passing, the passer’s choice to claim a black identity constitutes a turn, not a return” (818). She suggests that Flora and Rosa’s end does not, as has been suggested, absorb people of color into the culture of whiteness. Instead she sees Flora and Rosa’s interracial family as a reconstructed white family, which is “not a false one” (823) because, as she says, they were never black. Nerad’s argument that “Child’s novel never attempts to make us see Rosa and Flora as really black” (822) is also quite persuasive but seems to fall short of reconciling how the experience of blackness that Rosa and Flora experience contradicts all that we expect of
whiteness. I offer instead the idea that the social and intellectual position that Child provides her characters throughout the course of her novels gives credence to my reading of them as subjects who publically dismantle the old racial America, defined by segregationist policies, through the introduction of a new family whose individual mixtures and diverse experiences become their significantly defining feature as a unified and racially plural family. Through an examination of the author’s first novel Hobomok and her last, Romance, I seek to enlarge the scope of the discussion regarding the function and voice of the mixed-race/near white character in Child’s literature, considering especially how her characters’ voluntary exile, inclusive of their scripted secrecy and disclosure, by which they confront and subvert their proscribed positions, finally grant them a place for their voice and the agency to actively oppose time-worn ideas, which they ultimately replace with new representations of family.

Among the work of current racial theorists, Stuart Hall’s theory of “becoming” as a process of one’s experience seems most useful in attempting to understand the process by which Child’s work revises the “marginal” character from the space of assimilation and/or objectification to a space of one’s own. Because Child’s characters inhabit a space of resistance made tangible through their voluntary exile from the world of pre-given identities to the world of subjective freedom, they also upset the standard dynamics of margin and center. Their vision of reality conveys a public articulation of a revised self, based on knowledge gained and lessons learned. Hall argues that “[identity] is not determined in the sense that
it can always be ... sustained or abandoned” (Questions 2) because identity, in his view, remains “conditional, lodged in contingency” (3). A permanently assimilated identity would therefore imply a stable core, one that privileges sameness at the expense of memory and individual growth. His concept of identity exposes a strategic process that builds from experience and prioritizes constant movement in and out of discourse, practice, and positions as a means of narrating the self as a collective whole. My reliance, therefore, on Hall’s model of identity becomes relevant in fashioning my view of the mixed-race character as a voluntary participant in the constant process of becoming, which in the case of many of Child’s characters is achieved primarily through a privileging of the exilic state.

Child’s 1824 novel Hobomok and her 1867 novel A Romance of the Republic, revises the discourse of white patriarchal power through a reversed ownership of this discourse that defines and limits. Through a deliberate practice of speech and silence, seen specifically in Romance, the characters create themselves as autonomous individuals according to personal belief rather than social conventions. Child’s work takes the act of confession as its focus, establishing the exchange of secrets about who is slave and who is free as a primary means of communication. This circulation of secrets, accompanied by shared interests and values creates an intimacy between the characters that contributes to their liberation from the confines of patriarchy, an effect which Karcher and Nelson suggest characterizes the strength of Child’s work. It is, however, the characters’ exiles that mark them as a unique group. Identified by their interconnectedness with their past and present,
Child’s characters recreate racial discourse from their position of displacement and facilitate the building of a new community that imagines new ways of seeing and of speaking about race.

Child’s *Hobomok*, told from the perspective of a third-person narrator who identifies himself as “a young author in his first attempt” (4), shares a noticeable similarity with Lydia Maria Child who at the age of twenty-two began writing her first novel *Hobomok* after reading a review of *Yamoyden, a Tale of the Wars of King Phillip*. Using her narrator, whom Child describes as someone who brings a bit of his “enlightened vision” to history and who Molly Vaux sees as Child’s ruse “to not only mask her gender but also [to] support herself with a double,” Child seems to juxtapose fiction with personal conviction and tells the story of a rebellious Mary Conant, who, as many scholars have already noted, represents the defiance of women from the strict ideals of the Puritan patriarchy.

The story of *Hobomok* centers principally on the character of Mary, who, having been brought from England in the early days of colonial settlement to the miserable, undeveloped colony of Naumkeak (now called Salem), finds only distress in her forced exile and pines for the forbidden love of the Episcopalian Charles Brown. Feelings of emptiness pervade her new home, and the harsh reality of settlement conditions seems only to exacerbate her feelings of loneliness and longing. The young Indian Hobomok, who early in the tale befriends the English Americans and assists them in maintaining the safety of their village, brings the only excitement to Mary through his stories of wars and spirits. Mary, however, is
unable to permanently escape the sadness of her removal from England, and following a series of losses, including the loss of her mother and the object of her romantic love, Charles Brown, in a chaotic state of mind, she proposes marriage to Hobomok who had previously enticed her youthful imagination. Shortly thereafter she bears him a child, but upon learning of Charles’ reappearance, Mary returns to her former home with her child, leaving Hobomok “to a fate that had more than wretchedness” (140). Without friends and family, Hobomok becomes an unspoken memory of the past and “forever passed away from New England” (141).

The novel’s closure that depicts a forgiving of Mary’s past by the Puritan community and the integration of her half Indian son into American society, allowing for a fresh beginning with a new marriage to the Episcopalian Charles Brown, forms the basis for much of the criticism regarding Child’s alternative view of American’s cultural politics. Much of the criticism, which views the ending as assimilationist, to paraphrase one critic, Harry Brown, seems to neglect the value of experience, which according to Stuart Hall, shapes and reshapes disciplinary discursive practices, ultimately condensing a range of subjectivities in one individual (Questions 2-3). Within the gaps created by the narrator’s silence and in Mary’s current voluntary exile and marriage to Hobomok, Child seems to privilege a private community of condensed subjectivities that operate free from a commitment to the structure of American political and social life. By becoming “intimate” with native Americans, Mary engages in what Sabina Matter-Seibel refers to as “[t]he most radical way [of leaving ] the sphere of power and authority dominated by
white men” (429) and symbolically becoming a new American, one that “regenerate[s] ... society” (Child, Reader 28) by cleansing it of its prejudices.

Mary’s life with Hobomok therefore functions to symbolize the possible workability of a new American family. Child provides few details regarding how this union functions in private, and her New England narrator leaves the interpretation of their lives during this time “to the reader’s imagination” (137). He gives no information following these several weeks “Mary remained in her stupefied state in which she had been at the time of her marriage” (135). Instead the narrator gives what he calls a “general view of things” (136) and “pass[es] over” (136) time until he arrives at September, 1633, almost three years following Mary and Hobomok’s wedding, where he picks up his story. Now the mother of a two year old son and fully entrenched in a culture quite different from her Puritan culture, Mary tells her old friend Sally, who is her only visitor from her former community, “I have no doubt that you think I must be very miserable; but I speak truly when I say that every day I live with that kind, noble-hearted creature, the better I love him”(137). At this point Mary’s double movement of dislocation from her Anglo upbringing, to her Puritan home, to her new Anglo-Indian home, has effectively changed the former Mary into a woman who finds no shame in espousing confessions of love for her Indian husband, a position which radically differs from her former community’s perceptions and traditions regarding these sanctified institutions. Her dislocation and reinsertion in a new community creates new ground for new stories and new visions (held at bay from the reader); but more specifically, her continual movement
in and out of cultures creates an indeterminacy of her being, perpetuated by her compounded experiences, resulting in her emotional and social growth.

At this point it becomes necessary to establish the connection Child makes between the Mary she depicts as a child and the Mary she images as an adult, who appears little different at the core of her conscience in her adulthood as she did in her childhood. Mary’s first experience with exile comes in her leaving England for the untamed lands of New England where her emotional and physical survival depend on her ability to adapt. Because this experience comes at the impressionable age of a “silly heart” (9), Mary, in her half-rooted Puritanism, finds herself abandoning her spiritual training that indoctrinates her to the belief that she is one “ligament” “that knits all … parts to [God]” (Winthrop 152), and becomes attracted to Hobomok who “was all vigor and elasticity” (84). Hobomok, who from the beginning of their meeting served as her protector, even as she performed surreptitious practices of wedding “witchery” (12), which initially served to relieve Mary’s “silly heart” of boredom by replacing it with the adventures of love and newness. The narrator tells us that in Mary’s search for anything beyond the restrictions of her Puritan life, “She plunged into the thicket and taking a knife from her pocket, she opened a vein in her little arm, and dipping a feather in the blood wrote something on a piece of cloth…” (13). She then marked a large circle in the ground, “walked round three times” (13), then three times backwards before calling on a force unknown to the white male narrator to bring forth her bridegroom. This introductory passage launches the idea that renegotiating identities is a
fundamental outcome of exile (Said 365) and positions Mary as the enlightened exile who blurs the fickle line between white and “other.” Her rituals invoke her secret world where desire and belief reside, but her fear in performing these rituals, which comes as a result of her Puritan upbringing restricts her full participation in a blended culture presumed to offer her hope, indulgence, and freedom.

Nevertheless, Mary demonstrates an overlapping of cultures, contrary to the rigid Puritan belief that “New England is no place for such [different] spirits to dwell within” (72). In her world of fantasy she creates what Homi Bhabha refers to (in another context) as “interstices” (2)—a liminal space—in other words, “a terrain for elaborating strategies for selfhood ... in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1-2). Although Mary approaches this world of ritual with some trepidation, indeed, she succeeds in opening that “space of intervention” (7) that Bhabha argues makes room for interruptions between past and present and that refigures revised traditions to include a greater portion of reality than of myth. The Mary of England after arriving at her new home in Salem begins performing wedding witcheries and the Mary of Salem voluntarily exiles herself to become Mary, the wife of an Indian: “For three years [she] ha[d] lain in [Hobomok’s] bosom” (139) and slept in the tent of the man who had “loved her many long moons” (121). The Mary who surfaces following the three years emerges as a complex individual who establishes her own subjectivity, yet remains as both an insider and outsider to her former Puritan community. As the wife of an Indian and the friend of a Puritan, Mary locates herself on the margins of two cultures, belonging to both and denying neither.
Mary’s marriage to Hobomok therefore may be read as that “space of intervention” where chaos and order blend into a world of reality without fixed cultural and racial myths. From the outside looking in, Mary’s lot, according to the narrator (who uses the familiar reference to refer to Hobomok as a “savage”), seemed “desolate” (135), and “Hobomok’s connection with her was considered the effect of witchcraft on his part” (135). But this is the reading of a biased narrator who sees the new world as a place of one-dimensional “darkness, ignorance, and desolation” (7). In recounting the events of Mary and Hobomok, he notes that the couple loses most of their former friends following their marriage and that they retreated into a world of their own. Despite his fascination with the couple, he cannot however see the “suturing” (Hall, Questions of Identity 14) of their lives that they begin. Mary and Hobomok’s world remain an incomprehensible anomaly to those who live outside of it because together the couple can be neither fully Indian nor fully Christian, and therefore remain unreadable to a community built on the certainty of knowledge.

What begins as a relationship born from a “bewilderment of despair” (120) and perceived “witchery,” evolves into a state of fluid sensibility marked by a daily change that “added romantic fervor to [Mary’s] increasing affection and thus made life something more than endurable” (13). Their alienation thus produces a special bond, a type of interbeing, where values and practices intersect and alter their recognition of both themselves and each other. One of Mary’s only friends notes that Hobomok “has altered so much, that he seems almost like an English man” (137).
But the reader knows he is not an Englishman, for neither his language nor his practices represent him as such, although his three years with Mary and their son must certainly Anglicize the Indian in some manner as much as those years must equally Indianize Mary. The Puritan Sally, however, lacks the insight to read Hobomok, or Mary for that matter, as individuals representative of the multiple influences that characterize an exiled self. She knows Hobomok is not English, but her discursive position that he is “almost like an Englishman” legitimizes Mary’s marriage for her and produces the Englishman she sees and needs him to be in order to accept Mary as an unpolluted English/American. Put another way, Sally writes onto both Mary and Hobomok an English identification as a means of making him intelligible to her within her Puritan frame of reference.

*Hobomok* certainly is a book well before its time and one that many scholars find troubling as they attempt to reconcile Child’s life of crusading against bigotry with what some scholars such as Susanne Opfermann see as a work that seemingly presents interracial contact and union as “cultural genocide” (33), which she reasons comes as the result of Child’s still undeveloped awareness of the political implications of the Indian question (33). Similarly, Lucy Maddox argues that “Child makes it clear ... Hobomok can never be more than a sort of older protective playmate for Mary” (100), and Carolyn Karcher sees Hobomok, in much the same vein as those previously mentioned – as a man without agency and without permanence. Karcher interprets Child’s resolution as a vision of “assimilation in lieu of Indian genocide” (Introduction xxxii), which in the end “succumb[s] here to the
familiar white fantasy that the Indian will somehow disappear” (xxxii). Although Karcher heralds Child as a reformer, and claims that “reformers far more seasoned than [the twenty-two year old Child] also failed to stem the forces that mitigated against the Cherokee” (Reader 28), these readings seem too quickly to favor Child’s youth over her very subtle strategy of creating a viable discourse of resistance from the margins of exile.

In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said notes that exile serves most people by elevating appreciative sympathy: “Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of visions gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that ... is contrapuntal” (366) and equally valid. In this regard, both Mary and Hobomok might be seen in their exilic state to reform the boundaries of social and political implication. Their space of existence is neither defined nor structured, neither past nor present, but rather is the meeting point where history and present experiential knowledge converge to produce subjectivities that create their own discourse. We might therefore see the discourse of Hobomok and Mary as a reflection of an indulgent alternative to racial and cultural absolutes, demonstrated first through their marriage and subsequently through the birth of their son. Their discourse might also be said to demonstrates a struggle for personal freedom through a disengagement of cultural politics and an acceptance of an intimate interbeing. Through these characters, who operate under the conditions of absolute dependency, exile, and trust, I argue that Child establishes the workings of a
community and a family whose code of belonging functions quite differently from that of the traditional norms of American belonging. This new community necessitates the redesigning of a home that comes as a process of interdependence, filled the with possibilities and the capacity to signify beyond the self. Thus we see Hobomok courageously choosing to endure every insult for Mary’s sake (136), while Mary knew and accepted that “her own nation looked upon her as lost and degraded” (135). Together in their exile they reverse the public/private hierarchy of traditional Puritan order and privilege the private over the public. By attending to the private world of Mary and Hobomok instead of offering themselves up for public scrutiny of Puritan judgment, they relieve some of the anxieties of repression and make room for the subtleties of a blended language that balances, without question or prejudice, the intention of love embedded in the words “Take care of yourself” (137), which Mary “affectionately” (137) advises Hobomok on his way out to find deer. In return, Hobomok guarantees he will return “before the sun hides his face” (137) to protect and care for his family. As Seibel notes, “[Hobomok’s] sentiments are both civilized and natural; they are what Indian and whites have in common” (419). Although their means of expression may differ from that of Puritan whites, Mary and Hobomok certainly reflect the means by which love may become a transcending force beyond borders.

Privileging psychology over politics, Child resists surface identifications that assume an already given interior and images Mary and Hobomok in their exile as a civilized union “far preferable” (121) to the zealous intolerance of Puritan life. Exile,
however, must inevitably create a confrontation of ideologies, declares Said: “Exiles feel ... an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people” (360). For Mary and Hobomok, this confrontation culminates in different ends with Mary restoring herself to the Puritan community and Hobomok choosing the proud penalty of being “buried among strangers” (140).

Although their end figures as an unworkable union, as a “sad but necessary solution to the problem of racial incompatibility” (Maddox 102), the two produce a “hopeful son” (Hobomok 136) who seems to promise a future possibility for a union in a world ordered on a consciousness of experience rather than race. Child’s disruption of racial tradition thus seems to come in the form of unstated possibilities. But even more specifically, it comes in the form of a biracial, bicultural child, who although “seldom” (150) hears of his father, remains a product of an ideology yet to be acknowledged.

Indeed, on the surface, Child’s text exhibits an ambivalence between confronting the pervasiveness of racism and giving into those racisms that Harry Brown concludes “are tantamount ... to cultural genocide” (141). However, what Brown’s analysis and similar analyses that favor a reading of a return to the status quo fail to acknowledge is the permanent nature of an exilic state, which compounded by more exiles, creates a space for resistance in which Mary will permanently reside in private, if not in public. This is the beginning of Child’s continued pluralism, which Scott L. Pratt argues “presents a vision of cultural co-
existence rather than cultural genocide” (95). The consequence of Mary’s return to Puritan culture -- which the character greets with tears as Charles describes little Hobomok as “a brave little boy” (148), echoing the “last words his father said to him” (148) -- seems therefore to reinforce the ideology of love as the foundation and core of human beings whether they be Indian or Anglo. Moreover, they infer an inherent sameness between the two cultures. Thus, while Child seemingly gives a sympathetic nod to the idea of an unchanged reclaimed community, she also simultaneously acknowledges the obvious contradictions inherent in such an idea.

Although little Hobomok will discursively be stripped of his Indianness in order to become an English/American, this act will not mitigate the reality of his past. Paul Gilroy puts it best in his reflection on the concept of racial mixture: “when national and ethnic identities are represented and projected as pure, exposure to difference threatens them with dilution and compromises their prized purities with the ever-present possibility of contamination. Crossing as mixture and movement must be guarded against ...” (105), because, as he goes on to say in an effort to show the manipulation and calculation that informs nationalism and racism, “to have mixed is to have been party to a great betrayal” (106). Indeed Gilroy’s work considers how “transcultural experiences” reshape political communities and consequently demand a renewed critique of race thinking. He insists that we revisit old stories, opening them up to the contradictions inherent in them. Child’s work, a prime example of the exilic experience, and one that opens up the space of marginality to include the effort of resistance must by the very nature of the coupling of marginality with resistance address the exposures and contradictions inherent in
Hobomok's end that introduces a biracial/bicultural child into an expanding English society as one of their own. It must also address the process of a reacculturation that rescripts little Hobomok from the half Indian boy Hobomok to the little English Charles. It therefore follows that Charles Hobomok Conant whose “Indian appellation was silently omitted” (150) and whose father was mentioned, albeit “seldom,” must bear some witness to his mother's exilic consciousness, if not outwardly, then certainly inwardly. In other words, Charles Hobomok Conant is the site of resistance that refuses the erasure of the past and the personalities that speak of the intermingling between various races and cultures as an important feature of American history.

Given Karcher's observation that “[Child's] alternative (to the mainstream concept of race) was radical enough to warrant a counterattack aimed at expunging it from the historical record” (Introduction xxxiv), it seems fitting to read this text as a radical work that attempts to revise social consciousness rather than to see it as a restoration of a disturbed social order. To therefore say, as Karcher has said, that “the happy ending that [Child] has provided represents a betrayal of the alliance with people of color” (xxxii), is, at the very least, to discount the privilege and influence of memory on the present. Such a statement obliterates the voice beneath the public text that radically upsets ideas of self and “other.” It ignores the creation of a new blended self, and discounts the potential of revision that Child's work posits.
There is no debating the issue of whether little Hobomok has become Anglicized, for certainly he has. What requires serious attention in this text is not primarily the process of his Anglicization or the erasure that this course of action entails, as has been the focus of so much Hobomok criticism. To be sure, what demands crucial attention is the last image of the novel which focuses on Hobomok as a permanent image in the mind of both Mary and in future generations. Child’s text ends with an example of the permanence Hobomok represents in the “tender slip which he protected, that has become a mighty tree, and the nations of the earth seek refuge beneath its branches” (150). Once again, Child brings the margin to the center, giving Hobomok the value of a central guardian of future generations. Figuratively speaking, the “tender slip” Hobomok protects becomes the “mighty tree” of his adult son who although a Cambridge graduate – a fact that Seibel states “bears out [Child’s] statement ... that Anglo-Saxon American because of its intolerance towards blacks and Indians is not a suitable teacher” (435) – will always be a reminder of “the devoted, romantic love of Hobomok” the Indian (150). Little Charles Hobomok Conant enables a small segment of American racial history to remain intact because he is the seed Hobomok plants which does not end in extinction, but rather grows in potential. Fittingly, the last words of the novel: “though the tender slip which he protects, has since become a mighty tree and the nations of the earth seek refuge beneath its branches” (150) bring the reader back to the title character Hobomok and to the undying influence he casts on the present.
As Child’s first novel, *Hobomok* might certainly lend reasonable validity to much of the discussion that positions it as a novel that fails to represent racial mixture as a desirable attribute. In contrast to this, one might also argue that in no other novel is Child, more blatant and courageous in her observations and her understandings of the organizations of this insular mixed-race community than in her last novel *A Romance of the Republic*. In *Romance*, Child presents the establishment of a multi-racial community derived at primarily through the appropriation of the patriarchal discourse and exilic state of its main characters Flora and Rosa. Through them she rescripts the commonly tragic end of mulattas, resolving them as viable characters who produce their own stories though their voluntary alienation and subsequent building of a community that provides for a gradual inclusion of all Americans. Much like Mary Conant, the two protagonists of *Romance* appear initially happy in their youth and in their naivety regarding issues of race and culture that comprise the core of their community. Not until their exile do issues of race and culture become important to them, thereby configuring into the text the concept of the pervasive dominance of whiteness and its subtle power to grant personhood and meaning, without, as George Lipshitz puts it, “hav[ing] to speak its name ... [or] acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (61-62).

The introductory chapter of *Romance* sets the stage for much of the subsequent drama that unfolds under the power of the patriarchal discourse, will, and ability to manipulate social and cultural situations. Child opens her first chapter
with an introduction to Mr. Royal, the father of Flora and Rosa, and to Mr. King, the future husband of Rosa. Upon meeting, Royal immediately recognizes the similarity between the young King and King’s father stating, “I can hardly realize that you are not he himself, and I a young man” (1). This instability of visual markers, where illusion plays the larger part in creating one’s identity, comes to take on greater meaning as the sisters find themselves in the precarious position of claiming their own identity within a society whose patriarchy insists on the practice of discursively constructing its subjects. The young girls’ position in society therefore becomes somewhat constrained by those authorities who identify themselves not only in name (such as King and Royal) but also as guarders of the republic’s standards and principles. In a playful banter between the two men on their first meeting, Royal immediately recognizes King as part of the larger family of rulers: “[Your father] was a King, and I was of the Royal family” (1), he tells the younger Royal, jokingly acknowledging his authority as ruler and controller of his subjects. And although the two men do not rule despotically, through them Child establishes the practice of naming subjects and producing meaning for the subjects they name.

Royal’s young girls throughout much of the text are, as Karcher notes, “in every sense the property of the household’s male head” (“Child’s Romance” 91). They are their father’s entertainment, whom he politely commands to perform for him on a moment’s notice. They are his show toys that he parades to perspective suitors who gaze at them and indulge in “pleasure[s],” of the girls’ presence. Thus, when Dana Nelson notes that Child’s Republic reveals the “exploitively sexual nature
of the Anglo male subjectivity” (Black and White 82), she captures what Child identifies as that underlying problem of a culturally stagnant America. However, as the text unfolds, Child represents the girls, specifically Rosa, as women who grow to take control of the manner in which they are viewed and named. Rosa, for example, escapes the bondage of her first husband who once referred to himself as “the Grand Bashaw” (12), but not before switching her baby, which the two had together, with the baby of her husband’s legal wife Lilly. This act positions an adult Rosa to reconstruct herself from an object of possession to a subject with direction. In her first act of control of her life, she takes what she refers to as “revenge” (353) for the deception that had become her life and claims her former husband’s son (by his legal wife) as her own biological son. This act, which comes in the middle of the text is the turning point in which Rosa dons her slave status for herself and her child.

With this act, Child seems to reject the tradition of positing her mixed-race protagonist as having no agency and submitting to the will of the men who seemingly control her. Rosa, in this regard, represents the reverse of what Andrea Newlyn sees in Child’s text as the “failure of paternal authority to protect “ (53) and instead privileges the insight of women to defend against what Newlyn refers to as the text’s “uncomfortable proximity between property and progeny” (53). With a maternal determination, Rosa embarks on a revolutionary change to protect her child with the power of paternal authority. By endowing Rosa with the foresight to give her child voice, even if she must do so through deceptive means, Child’s text works to demonstrate how the power of maternal love usurps patriarchal power
and indeed begins to right the wrongs of an uncompromising nation unable to see the roots of its own family.

_Romance_ tells the tale of two generations of marriage where a partnership of business, love, and lust combine in family. Beginning with the death of Royal, the chief patriarch, who neglects to manumit his octoroon daughters before his death, the novel moves toward the much-told story of innocent young girls who become victims of devastating racial practices. Alfred Royal, whom Karcher refers to as Child’s symbol of the ostensibly “benign” patriarch (Karcher, “Child’s Romance” 91), maintains a household organized around and through concealment. Having purchased his daughter’s quadroon mother from a Spanish gentleman in the French West Indies as a favor to him, “thus enabl[ing] him (the gentleman) to cancel a debt to a troublesome creditor whom he suspected of having an eye upon his daughter” (20), Royal returns to New Orleans with his wife Eulalia. Although the couple never marry (because Louisiana law prohibited such a union), Eulalia and Royal form a world of their own in seclusion with their two daughters whom they name Flora and Rosa. The daughters, however, have no knowledge of their African heritage: “Their connection with the enslaved race is so very slight, that it might easily be concealed” (18) Royal tells Alfred King, who has recently been given knowledge of the girls’ racial status. This deception begins the innocence imposed on the girls. Their blind assumption of their whiteness, which some critics such as Newlyn see as “particularly problematic” (54), in a text that attempts to argue for equality, is, however, not only the point by which Child attempts to illustrate the absurdity of
America’s color system, but also by which she exposes the unfairness of white men whose discourse of control and manipulation lies at the heart of a blind and stagnant society. Throughout the novel, the girls’ movement in and out of racial categories is the vehicle by which Child posits the radical idea of racially-mixed Americans socially constructing their own identities and reflecting on their own condition as they come to define it.

Because Romance opens with the innocence of Flora and Rosa who have no means of owning their history as young girls, they become prey to the fabricated story that allows their father to manage his present world. He gives them nothing of their mother’s history: “their only idea was, and is, that she was [his] honored wife” (21). Royal therefore controls their discourse of identification. For them, there is no racial mixture: no octoroons, no quadroons, and certainly no potential for this existence. He erases their history through an engagement of secrecy; he obliterates their access to the past; he imposes his power over their definition by stifling the language that defines them. Royal’s manipulation of what is known and what is spoken seems to illustrate the potential for the unraveling of a culture built on secrets and contrived at the expense of those vulnerable to the exploitive power of the Anglo male.

In confessing his children’s past to King, Royal prepares for his inevitable end, bringing a patriarch of his choosing into the regime of discourse that persistently circulates the untold stories. Unbeknownst to Royal, however, King does not submit to this practice of discourse as Child later makes clear when King
tells Rosa “my hope is that the devotion of my life may enable you to experience the true and tender reality” (251). Although King’s confession speaks specifically of love, his sentiment also speaks of his desire for truth as a means of a new beginning. With this wish King becomes the champion of a new social reality, not only for Rosa, but also for the “life of the Republic” (424). In a sense, he becomes the voice of Child, whose wish it is to extinguish what King refers to as the “phantom dynasty” (421). He fulfills an alternative to Alfred Royal’s discourse in that he participates in a rewriting of knowledge and does so by entering a world where a new community, born out of exile exposes old silences and appropriates the language of those who formerly rendered their members speechless.

Gerald Fitzgerald (King’s malignant rivalry), on the other hand, maintains the old discourse of privilege and subjugation. He forcibly exiles the girls to Nassau and then to Georgia under the pretense of saving them from the auction block following the death of their father. As a means of achieving his end, he marries Rosa, but only under her stipulation that she “would never leave home with any gentleman unless [she were] married to him” (61). Their marriage mimics much of the story of her father and mother’s illegal marriage, with the exception of Fitzgerald’s disloyalty to Rosa and of his simultaneous legal marriage to the daughter of wealthy white businessman. The breakdown of the “family,” however, begins not with Fitzgerald’s marriage to Lily, but rather with his lascivious desires, which he directs toward Rosa’s sister Flora. Soon after Fitzgerald begins his sexual fixation with Flora, she decides to flee the Georgia cottage, where he held the girls in seclusion. In her
search for freedom, she seeks refuge with a new friend Mrs. Delano, who readily takes her in and claims the young girl as her daughter.

Mrs. Delano’s immediate acceptance of Flora despite the young girl’s open admittance of her slave condition begins the grounds that establishes Child’s alternative community: “I don’t know how to begin, so I won’t begin, but tell you outright,” Flora tells Mrs. Delano. “You see, dear Mrs. Delano, I am a colored girl” (100). Her disclosure of her secret becomes her defense against the forces that previously reduced her to an all-inclusive category of mulatta slave, thereby controlling both her body and her mind. By bringing Mrs. Delano into her troubled world of secrets, subjugations, and resistances, Flora makes a conscious choice to include her in what Amy Robinson might call a “community of knowlegeability” (720). While Flora’s community does not rely on an “intuitive apparatus of recognition” (720) that divides the insider from the outsider as Robinson contends, it considers “knowledgeability” an essential ingredient in community building. In other words, knowledgeability not only informs but also forms. It surrenders the old to the new and allows for a radical revision of the social and discursive process. In surrendering her truth to Mrs. Delano, the woman responds in kind by surrendering a truth of her own and tells of her love many years ago for Alfred Royal, coincidentally Flora’s father, who was then a man of paltry means. Forbidden by her family to marry such a man, she was “carried off to Europe” (103) and disconnected from all contact with him. Years later she married Mr. Delano, she tells Flora, although “I ought not to have married him, because my heart was not in it” (103).
This give and take of long held silences collapses the space of difference between the two women, building an “in-group” that forms a community of \textit{interbeing} and belonging. Contrary to the nineteenth-century segregationist discourse on race which was formulated based on the ideas that science demonstrated a biological difference “that determined the range of psychological and sociological capacities of each group” (Miles 32), the community of \textit{interbeings} blur the distinction between these absolutes to reconceptualize race as a complicated experience that leads to the invention of the self. The participants of this community reclaim the old discourse of secrecy for themselves, bringing a new understanding to its significance and a new means of its circulation into an evolving community. In her flight from the Fitzgerald cottage, Flora sheds the name of “slave” and renames herself a “colored girl,” signifying the importance of the self in informing and shaping identity.

Years later Flora’s sister Rosa also breaks the hold from Mr. Fitzgerald and renames herself Señorita Rosita Campeano after fleeing to Italy with the help of her only friends, Mr. and Mrs. Duroy. Following their escape, the girls’ voluntary seclusion and exile from full engagement with the world outside their intimate settings functions to shield them against what Judith Butler refers to as the “productive power” of a hegemonic discourse. Bent on producing and regulating a proscribed discourse of race and gender, those in control of property and subjects attempt to maintain their control by limiting and confining the mixed-race’s counter discourse of disconnection, which becomes vital to the reconstruction of the girls as
products of their experiences. Gerald Fitzgerald, for example, pursues Rosa with the authority of a “Grand Bashaw” (12). However, through her new discourse, beginning with a self-claimed name, Rosa becomes thoroughly unreachable to a man and a culture insistent on controlling her body, her definition, and her being. Fitzgerald can no more control the social condition of Rosa and/or Flora with his threats of enslavement than he can control his stripped state of slaveholder. Their freedom to claim themselves thus marks the freedom that begins the girls’ process of negotiating their subject position as they move between “homes” and “families.”

Towards the end of the novel, the idea of family is so thoroughly rewritten that little trace of the former discourse remains, except, of course, as a not so distant memory. This rewriting of the family, however, begins early in the narrative with the sharing of the secret discourse by Madame Guirlande, an old family friend who delivers the knowledge of their racial history to the girls following their father’s death, advising them of the importance of “know[ing] the state of things” (45). Mme. Guirland, with the protection of the girls in mind, begins a new discourse of secrecy and deception by informing the girls of the knowledge they had formally been denied. She cautions them regarding the exposure of this knowledge and “provide[s] them with long veils, which she requested them not to remove” (39). She does not, as Royal and Fitzgerald have done, shield them from knowledge. Instead, she puts the power of defense against the indignities of socialization in their own hands by providing them the understanding of the racial discourse that defines them. Flora’s later identification of herself to Mrs. Delano as a colored girl then
signifies both her understanding of the discourse that has previously defined her and her given authority to rescript her slave identity through yet another exile—albeit a voluntary one—requiring yet another transformation that finally places her at “home” with herself, not as “an octoroon...embodying bourgeois whiteness” (55) as Andrea Newlyn asserts, or as an essentialized colored girl, but rather as part of a “family of all ages and colors” (Child Romance 441). The community that Child therefore establishes presents the importance of the implicit and absolute meaning of a calculated discourse in building her mixed-race community, for it is through the circulation of this discourse based in experiences of exile and belonging that bonds are formed and ideologies are spread.

Frantz Fanon in his often-cited Black Skin White Masks addresses the necessity of claiming a space for the self in discourse: “to speak ... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization .... A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language .... Mastery of language affords a remarkable power” (17-18), he asserts. In this regard Rosa, much like her sister Flora, masters the language of her oppressor in claiming herself Señorita Rosita Campaneo. In short, she names herself, giving her a power formerly denied her. In her naming, she acknowledges her history publicly, accepting it as part of her and owning the language that once controlled her world. Señorita Rosita Campaneo is a revised Rosa who recalls the days of her slave mother who “when she was very loving” (5) used the Spanish diminutive for her little flowers Rosa and Flora. And although Rosa “seems hardly to know [herself] as La
Señorita Rosita Campaneo,” and “feel[s] as if [she] had died and passed into another world” (248), her other world is a world of power where she no longer performs at the command of men but rather chooses whether or not she performs at all. Despite her discomfort with her new public life, which presents her so differently from the image she held in her former “retired life” (249), Rosa succeeds as an opera singer on her own terms while allowing the public to make of her what they may. Rosa’s self-ownership places her in a position of authority. Having participated in her own naming, she divests herself of the value given to her as property; moreover, she endows herself with the power and potential to create her own “in-group” through the selective sharing of her secrets and her past.

When Alfred King comes to Rosa’s physical defense against the profligate Fitzgerald who attempts to reclaim her as his property after having searched tirelessly for Rosa, she gives King the opportunity of full inclusion into the community of racial mixture by disclosing how her past currently informs her present. King’s actions establish a trust that proves helpful to Rosa’s cause, thus permitting the forming of a relationship of cooperation and community. Rosa introduces him into her discourse, making it clear that the former discourse of patriarchal secrecy that once held her blind and captive has now been rewritten in her own voice, with her own agenda: “I suppose you are aware that my mother was a slave, and that her daughters inherited her misfortune” (251) she tells him. King appropriately answers, “I am aware of it.... But that only makes me ashamed of my country, not of her or of them” (251). This private knowledge that passes between
them as well as his own disclosure of his shame both ingratiates him to Rosa and stabilizes his position in the community. But more importantly, King accepts his own state of exile through an intimate association with Rosa, knowing that once he deviates however slightly from the rhetoric of white nationalism, he will forever remain on the margins of treachery and disloyalty. With his inclusion, as well as the inclusion into the community of racial mixture of other “unmixed” characters such as Mrs. Delano, the Duroys, Tulee and Tom, Child takes up the challenge of rebuilding the Republic. What begins with the sharing of knowledge eventually becomes a basis for establishing social connections linked to both an investment in social reform and emotional ties. These connections, through the language of secrecy and exposure, create and circulate a collective knowledge of the self as an independent self-defining subject: “I cannot but see your character has been elevated by your suffering” (251) King tells Rosa. This is an idea supported by the “in-group” that imagines a community where identity politics is most productively understood as a process of becoming in which the interaction between one’s knowledge of self and one’s experiences helps to create and define the authentic self.

As such, Flora, Rosa, the Kings, the Delanos, the Duroys, the servants Tulee and Tom become a new type of margin, one identified by their hold onto the difference as their means of resisting and imagining alternatives and new worlds. Thus, contrary to Dana Nelson’s argument that “the novel is not able to imagine a new society that could not countenance the rich cultural variety produced by
intersections of African cultural heritage in slave quarter communities across the south “(Xvii), I argue Child’s newly formed society does imagine a new society where nationalism is traded for the collectivity of a history acknowledged. Moreover, this history reconciles past, present, and future in one story, and although it does not immediately include Tulee and other dark-skinned servants into the sphere of power, the text suggests a future yet to take shape where the younger generation, illustrated through the character of Rosa’s daughter Eulalia “protect” (440) the community and its vision, inclusive of Tulee’s son Benny who “look[s] upward in thanksgiving” (emphasis added; 440).

The future of the new generation begins with the naming of Rosa and Flora’s children. Their naming recollects the past, and in this way the children become a presence of ancestors previously forgotten and a negotiation of a future that includes “the roots o’ things [that] wa’nt killed” (441). Rosa gives her daughter the name of her slave mother Eulalia, thus reclaiming a history and asserting its continuity through her daughter. Despite the girls’ lack of disclosure of their brutal past to their daughters, within their names lies the identification that with time and maturity is certain to reveal its history. Flora, on the other hand, the more playful and spontaneous of the two, names her son after her father and her daughter after her sister and in this way begins to tell her own story. In looking at her daughter, Flora playfully notes to her husband: “Your great grandmother gave her the flax and I suppose mine gave her the frizzling”(432). The past never seems far from the present which differentiates the mixed-race community from that of the full-
blooded Anglo-American community. Thus, contrary to the critics who see Child’s text as “absorbing people of color into the middle-class mainstream” (Karcher, “Child’s Romance” 83), I see Child’s text as creating a new mainstream that attempts to slay the monster of slavery though a community of people who realize that “[their] education is not finished” (Romance 424) and that only through equal education and training for all citizens will the Republic truly achieve its goal of greatness. In his mission to overcome the unreasonable prejudice that stunts the growth of the nation, King asserts: “If half a century of just treatment and free school can buy them all up to this level [speaking of the newly refined mulatta Henriet], our battles will not be in vein and we shall deserve to rank among the best benefactors of the country; to say nothing of the corresponding improvement of in the white population” (434). King’s words point the heartlessness of a forced exile from the greater community of America and suggests, not as numerous critics have repeatedly stated that Child’s solution to the racial divide is a whitening of blackness, but rather that “just treatment” creates a middle ground where blacks and whites grow equally in moral and intellectual development. That the noticeably dark skinned Henriet “readily adopted the language and manners of those around her” (433) and that this pleases her hosts, is a natural function of exile in which community members become more like each other than different from each other. But even more importantly, King’s statement that his “education is not finished” underscores, as Said states, exile operates as a state that brings “non-exiles [to] share in the benefits of the exile as a redemptive motif” (364), creating, as it were, a sharing of loss in the building of a new ideology.
Child ends her novel with a fully developed society, once begun in secrecy and exile now flowered into a productive working system of voluntary participation. She is careful to illustrate her society as a changing society that transcends the immediacy of initial participation, for within this society marriages are made, children are born, and attitudes are shaped, and a future is imagined.

In a significant scene of disclosure, young Gerald Fitzgerald, who although born a slave and who now bears the name of the respectable white Fitzgeralds, is brought into the mixed-race community. Rosa confesses to Gerald’s mother her past, inclusive of her life as the secret wife of Mrs. Fitzgerald’s now dead husband. Rosa tells her about her life with Mr. Fitzgerald and about the love that blinded her from his cruelty. She tells her of her gradual awareness of her captivity. She details her feelings of despondency during her awakening and confesses her manipulations to secure safety and comfort for her son. She discloses the switching of her slave child with Mrs. Fitzgerald’s free child and asks for forgiveness, introducing both Mrs. Fitzgerald and young Gerald into her community of racial mixture, providing them with a knowledge that might further shape how they see themselves in the convoluted past of slavery and freedom. Mrs. Fitzgerald declines the invitation to Rosa’s community, stating “I see no reason why the world should know anything about it .... It is very desirable that the secret should be kept between ourselves” (362). With these words Mrs. Fitzgerald seemingly enters into the community, but no sooner than she does this, she confesses that she cannot accept her biological son who has lived his life as a slave and is now married to the mixed-race slave Henriet,
confessing “I shall never recognize any person as a relative who has a colored wife” (420). Characters such as Mrs. Fitzgerald make clear the continued investment in polarization, dominance, and ownership, which this emerging community struggles against. And although young Gerald readily accepts his participation and position in this community, telling Rosa, “I am familiar with the thought of being your son” (364), and enlisting himself on the side of the North in the battle against “that deadly incubus” (423), the family to whom he had previously and singularly belonged refuses to recognize the inevitability of change. Both Mrs. Fitzgerald and her father Mr. Bell reject any affiliation with the natural heir to the Fitzgerald wealth and Mr. Bell can find no love in his heart for the grandson he knew as the continuation of his bloodline.

Child’s story of the gradual awareness of self and the romance associated with this finding, ambiguous as her message may at times appear, has paved the way for future thinkers like herself who refuse to submit to national ideas of ethnic and racial essences. Her characters such as Alfred King, a full-blooded white man stands as a model of progress. Not only does King represent the moral difference between finding pride in “a truly great man, [such as] Toussaint L’Ouverture, who was a full blooded African ... [and] that unprincipled filibuster called William the Conquer” (358), he also underscores the urgency of saving the Republic (423) from its course toward “moral bankruptcy” (Nelson, Black and White 84). King, as well as characters such as the Duroys, Ms. Delano, Rosa, and Flora, questions the cultural strategies that inform his knowledge of self: “What is my life compared to the life of
the Republic” (424), King asks Rosa, insisting and reasoning his need to fight for the moral elevation of his country. This statement, which comes at the end of the novel, spoken by a man who once was brought into the trust of the chief patriarch with the hopes of carrying on the legacy and experience of ownership, is revealing in that it definitively addresses the need for a continued reevaluation of knowledge. King admits to the understanding of himself as a constant process of experience and education. He concedes to the injustice of a cultural and racial fixity and further suggests that the continued life of the Republic lies not in the effort to maintain the old colonialist discourse, but rather lies in a gradual understanding that knowledge liberates, empowers, and opens doors to counteract the popular myths that stagnate the growth of the Republic.

Child’s text thus disrupts what Robert Miles refers to as a “common sense” discursive of race and proposes a reassessment of the established formulations of race. She introduces a critical perspective that values the power of language and intellectual vision as a necessary tool to counter racist ideologies and to construct communities built on mutual respect and the confidence in a community devoted to a changing culture. Child’s text does not, however, come without its shortcomings. Her protagonists, all near-white characters are, as Nelson argues, little different from those of the white middle class. But it would be disadvantageous for us to forget that inclusive of their outings, and their silences, and their understanding of

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10 Robert Miles documents how nineteenth-century racial discourse reinforces racist imperialist ideologies as a “common sense” concept, generated and authenticated by persistent scientific activity. See Robert Miles Racism (1989).
themselves as eclectic mixtures of past, present, and future, their story contributes to a narrative that goes beyond “imaging adequate alternatives to the social order that [Child] so brilliantly anatomized” (Karcher, “Child’s Republic” 99); Child’s novels introduce a mixed-race voice that claims legitimacy through an active achievement of identifiable goals. She legitimizes the presence of those born out of the process of a purposeful and systemized eradication. While one might say her novels clearly fall short by present day standards of their agenda of full racial and cultural equality, there should be no disputing the foundation she has laid to challenge the depiction of race and culture as a static, unyielding dichotomy of unreachable opposites.
Chapter 2

Defining Hannah Crafts through the Reversals of Language, Womanhood, and Reason

Until recently, the name Hannah Crafts meant little or nothing to many scholars of American literature. It was not until Henry Louis Gates Jr. purchased the auctioned manuscript *The Bondwoman's Narrative* in 2001 from Swann Galleries and in 2002 introduced it to the reading public that Hannah Crafts’ name began to play a pivotal role in the reading of early American texts.

Authenticated as a text written circa 1855 to 1860, Hannah Crafts’ narrative documents the story of a young mixed-race slave, whose combination of wit, racial vision, and individual integrity eventually earns her the final rewards of community and family. The tale which narrates the journey from slavery to freedom is on the surface simple one. It follows the experiences of the young girl named Hannah and is presented as an autobiography. They story begins in the De Vincent household where Hannah currently serves. Not long after meeting her current mistress, the new Mrs. De Vincent, who has recently been threatened with the exposure of her mixed-racial heritage by the ruthless family lawyer, Mr. Trappe, Hannah convinces her mistress that in order for her to avoid the “horrible foreboding that renders [her] very existence a curse,” she must fly from this house, this place ... fly

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11 In his introduction to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Henry Louis Gates sites Kenneth W. Randall, “a well-known dealer in historical documents to date the ink that Crafts has used to write the text” (xliii).
immediately” (49). The two women plan rapidly and begin their journey with an uncertainly of direction. Unfortunately for them, they are soon captured and jailed with a former slave sympathizer, the eccentric Mrs. Wright, until taken to a large apartment some distance away from their previous holdings where they again meet Mr. Trappe who comes to recollect them for his later trading. As the tale continues, Hannah recounts her loss of Mrs. De Vincent who, following their chaotic flight, dies from “excessive agitation [that] had ruptured a blood vessel” (103). Hannah is then sold to another trader but because of an (un)fortunate accident ends up living as an injured guest at the home of the benevolent Mrs. Henry. Pursued again by Mr. Trapp, Hannah experiences yet another sale to the cruel Mrs. Wheeler; however, this sale proves to be Hannah’s final breaking point where she decides to “abandon this house, and the Mistress who would force [her] into a crime against nature” (213). She then decides to disguise herself by “transform[ing]” herself (216) from woman to man, and “[running] for her life” (216). The tale ends with Hannah finally earning the life she envisions through the help of old friends and a belief in the “wise purpose [for which she] had been preserved” (232).

Although these incidents appear to comprise many of the elements that characterize the slave narrative, Crafts’ narrative cannot be read as a traditional slave narrative, as many have already pointed out. Jean Fagan Yelling notes “Hannah does not follow the stereotypical pattern .... Nor does Bondwoman’s Narrative present her as a pathetic ‘mixed-race’ protagonist whose ‘black blood’ prevents her from the ‘white’ life to which she aspires” (107). Although Crafts’ tale
begins with the conventional disclosure of the lack of parentage and continues with both the expected documentations of escape and descriptions of the cruel masters and overseers, her narrative, unlike the slave narratives of many of her contemporaries, reads more convincingly as a statement about the social contradictions expressed in racial codes and of the challenges these contradictions bring to the definition of the mixed-race slave woman than it does as a condemnation of the unjust treatment and condition of the slave resulting from a capricious slaveocracy. Whereas female slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), by Harriet Jacobs, in part focus on the protagonist’s fear of her master and her gradual effort to gain empowerment and reclaim her voice despite the machinations of her master to sexually exploit her and reduce her to insult, Crafts’ narrative bestows its protagonist with an empowerment from the beginning of Hannah’s tale through a voice of confident knowing that provides the young slave girl with an understanding of herself as a racially and socially complex individual. In this regard she is also quite different from the revolutionary mixed-race slave girls of Lydia Maria Child in that her knowledge of herself and self-assurance is her most defining characteristic. Never hesitant of her potential and always in control of her own story, Hannah challenges the injustices imposed on her from the very beginning of her story. From the onset of her tale, she makes clear the contrast between her potential and the expectations that others have of her. Hannah situates herself as a person with a vision who understands the means by which her body functions as a metaphor for the political and economic appeal of a southern American society. Her public image, however, differs from the private
conception of her as a young girl who sees and understands little difference between herself and the generations of De Vincents that occupy the wall of her master’s house: “I was not a slave with these pictured memorials of the past. They could not enforce drudgery, or condemn me on account of my color to a life of servitude. As their companion I could think and speculate” (Crafts 17). With these words Crafts introduces her reader to a young girl intent on completing a journey toward self empowerment, which she qualifies with Hannah’s belief that “sorrow and affliction and death make us all equal” (45). Instead of the powerlessness commonly ascribed to slave women through sexual and social oppression, as might be seen in characters such as Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s Cassey, Dion Boucicault’s Zoe, or even Lydia Maria Child’s Rosa and Flora, who I have previously argued begin their journey towards self empowerment from a position of exploitation, Hannah seems to experience an immediate sense of authority derived from the knowledge that her legal station in life is “the result of that false system which bestows on position, wealth, or power the consideration only due to a man” (Crafts 205). In a world that seems to say “you are nothing because you are a slave,” Hannah seems to say “I am equal, if not superior,” to those who insist on reducing her to ignorance. Hannah Crafts’ narrative may be therefore read as a different kind of slave narrative. It asks that we expand our understanding of the literary tradition of slave narrative to which Crafts seems expressively bound, and rather than viewing her narrative as a movement that patterns the chronological phases of innocence, realization, resigned resolution, and freedom obtained, designed to describe the process of transformation from slave to human (Foster 65), I argue that we might also see it
as one that denies racial protocols and resists conventions such as those of the “True Womanhood” and the tragic mulatta. By calling on the combined traditions of sentimentality and slave autobiography to depict a mixed-race woman whose body contests the popular conception of the mulatta figure as scandalous and whose mind suggests the possibility of transforming racial traditions through subtle alterations in communication, Crafts’ narrative seems to disrupt the idea of the slave body as a metonym of primitivism. In the context in which Crafts describes herself/her narrator, she seems almost ripe to experience of what Franz Fanon refers to in his book entitled Black Skin White Masks as “the racial epidermal schema” (112) in which one’s visual presence becomes a pre-coded label for one’s body, race, and ancestors (112). Crafts, however, seems indifferent to the knowledge that she is “overdetermined from without” (116) and instead does what Fanon suggests is one of the only ways to undo the scripting that has already been is done: she decides to “make [herself] known” (Fanon 115). She writes her autobiography in which she avoids the myth of the tragic mulatto and instead creates a mixed race woman who consistently fights for control of her representation.

Shelly Fisher Fishkin describes “the author of The Bondwoman’s Narrative [as] an engaged and appreciative reader”(117), concluding as Jean Fagan Yellin, William Andrews, Catherine Keyser and others have done that Crafts’ wide range of reading resonates in the ideas she depicts. Her struggle to work both within and outside the confines of racial paradigms becomes evident in the conspicuous
intellectualism that she insists on to pronounce her subject a complex compound of identities whose legacy cannot be reduced to a singular racial or social experience and whose language insists on freedom gained through the denial a corporal schema. Her autobiography reasons and rationalizes Hannah's humanity as a woman living under the conditions of slavery and as one who speaks from a position of knowing about those who lack the privilege to know: "it must be a strange state," she says, "to feel that in the judgment of those above you you are scarcely human, and to fear that their opinion is more than half right that you really are assimilated to the brutes, that the horses, dogs and cattle have quite as many privileges, and are probably your equals..." (206). In her denial of herself as one who is assimilated to brutes, Hannah also makes clear to the reader her understanding of the outsider's perspective of her as having a socialized inferiority. However, she fights against this belief and resolves the tension between being the subject of others and being the subject of herself by "proving herself analogous to the white man" (Fanon 119), yet more reasoned, thereby denying him the intractable myths he imposes on her. Crafts narrative therefore becomes instructive as a means of widening the scope of study for scholars of the American canon. In his introduction to Crafts’ narrative, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that Crafts’ “unedited, unaffected, unglossed” narrative “would help a new generation of scholars to gain access to the mind of a slave in an unmediated fashion heretofore not possible” (Introduction xlvii). But Hannah is no ordinary slave, for contrary to the condition that creates a state in which most slaves can “know nothing” (206), Hannah transcends this condition and knows all too well that among other things “[t]he Constitution … asserts the right of
freedom and equality to all mankind" (207). Moreover, unlike many mixed-race slaves, Hannah has never allowed herself to become “prey to the rampant sexuality” (Carby 26) of any of her masters, which Hazel Carby describes as a characteristic of the experience of many slaves. As well, she demonstrates the revered qualities of piety and purity much aspired to by white females and defends these qualities through the argument that “duty to myself and God required it” (Crafts 212). Thus, in addition to being a slave narrative that challenges the idea of the slave an ignorant and inhuman, Crafts’ text seems to question the definition of womanhood as it applies to white women only, and further suggests that any thorough reading of Hannah should take into account how the texture of her life differs from, yet reflects a sameness of the lives of both white and black women, whether slave or free.

Although Crafts’ text is a nascent text on the literary scene and has not received much attention regarding the author’s representation of racial mixture, I am reminded of Toni Morrison’s warning that “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (Playing in the Dark 9). Morrison makes the argument that American agendas of criticism has in part favored a Eurocentric tradition of constructing blackness through the lens of the white academic vision, which has tended to place the emphasis of criticism on how racism victimizes while speculating about the impact of the “horrific results” (otherwise known as the investment in racism) on its objects (11). This approach to literature, she argues, impoverishes the literature by silencing the voices that may speak an
ideology separate and distinct from the conclusions found through the single-minded agendas that lay bare the consequences of racism and racist policies upon the Africanist presence in American literature. She goes on to say that criticism, guided by Eurocentric agendas, “can dismiss the difficult arduous work writers do to make an art that becomes and remains part of and significant within a human landscape” (9). My reading of Hannah Crafts’ narrative thus attempts to unpack the varied texture of Crafts’ racially mixed character, demonstrating what I see as the author’s interest in acknowledging a voice that is neither black nor white, but rather is a voice of “American individualism,” which Kathleen Pfeiffer argues “animates notions of autonomy, self-determination, [and] self-determination” (4). This voice meditates on the self and invites a familiarity with the subject through the adoption and repatterning of the formula for white agency as it imparts a distinction from the perception of the mulatto as strange and impure in the culture of antebellum America.

As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Hollis Robbins state in their introduction to the collection of essays titled In Search of Hannah Crafts, the essays examining Crafts’ text set out to explore and answer the following questions: “What kind of text is The Bondwoman’s Narrative? Is it biographical or entirely fictional? Is it internally consistent? Did the author accomplish what she set out to do? Was she seeking to produce a work of a particular literary genre or to challenge that genre? As a writer, is Hannah Crafts as sophisticated as she appears to be? What is the extent of her class or race consciousness?” (xi). In addition to the discussion that these questions
generate, I am interested in furthering the argument of how Hannah Crafts’ narrative expands the horizon of race thinking at a time when particular race knowledge operated as the norm. To this end I ask the question how does the author’s deviation from and juxtaposing of otherwise standard techniques and forms contribute to her understanding and depiction of identity consciousness, concluding that Hannah’s reversal of norms serves to articulate and materialize the woman she imagines who will eventually come to occupy the well-earned space of “undeviating happiness” (246) commonly reserved for those able to claim a purity of whiteness.

Crafts begins her story by telling the reader that “[Hannah]12 was not brought up by anybody in particular” and that “of [her] relatives [she] knew nothing” (5). With these words Crafts introduces the moral and philosophical issues associated with permanent bondage. The lack of information concerning her birth and parentage speaks clearly to the evils of a systematic dehumanization, as many critics have already noted; but more importantly, these evils and the contradictions associated with them that come as a result of Hannah’s thoughtful scrutiny, provide Crafts with the material necessary to actively rewrite herself (and her character). Out of the often incongruent mixture of subjective experience and cultural and historical constructions of identity, she fashions a new Hannah who neither submits

12 I will use the name Hannah to refer to the character and Crafts to refer to the author, for although I read this narrative as an autobiography, I am cognizant of the overlapping identities of author and character.
to confinements of race nor to the simplicity that the concept of race (from a layman’s agenda) seems to convey. In short, The Bondwoman’s Narrative establishes the creation of a racial interbeing that eats away at the seams of slavery, a system that Leonard Cassuto observes “uneasily forced [slaves] into the category of ‘thing’” (76) through slavery’s oppressive and clearly delineated paradigm of whites and slaves. Through a blending of borders between the reality of experiential knowledge and the fictions designed to separate white from slave or human from the thing, Crafts confronts the easy paring of these categories through a subject who rebels against the Pre-Civil War cultural mores and rigid hegemonic practices that, according to Leon Higginbotham Jr. and Barbara Kopytoff, protect the racial caste system (130). Such rebellions expose the scientific theories of race as invalid and offer an alternative theory that privileges the mixed-race subject with both the character of strength and endurance commonly associated with blacks and with the intellectual acumen often attributed to whites. Crafts’ narrative consequently invites readers to participate in naming the inconsistencies associated with the idea of a fixed racial self and warns against those who attempt to reduce her novel to a singular and predictable reading of a racial agenda. Her narrative may therefore be viewed as part of a reformist discourse, much in the same vein as one may classify the antebellum narratives of Lydia Maria Child, which argue for an appreciation of the nuances of race and privilege the identity of human over that of race.
From the beginning of her narrative Hannah fashions her identity through the shedding of assigned tags, and although she presents herself as a parentless slave, she quickly rescripts this culturally confining label without neglecting the influence it incurs and presents herself as a child, albeit a slave child, who is surrounded with “much love and confidence” (12). The clear disharmony that exists between the concepts of slave and confidence places the two characteristics at extreme and incompatible ends. Crafts’ slave child who lives in the midst of love and confidence defies the representation of the slave as inhuman and powerless. Never referring to herself as property despite the understanding by others (principally the inscrutable Mr. Trappe) of her as “marketable” (109), Hannah Crafts represents herself as a girl of intelligence whose ability to “interpret” (7) the looks and attitudes of others humanizes her to the point of superiority over those who see her as less than human.

One morning while sitting alone beneath of some long trees, Hannah meets Aunt Hetty, an aged woman whom she had previously and briefly seen at her master’s house. Without hesitation, Hannah “interpreted” the looks and actions” (emphasis added; 7) of the older woman, concluding that “this woman would become my teacher” (7). This kind of foresight and intuition would later become Hannah’s means of resistance against her racial narrowing, and her ability to read Aunt Hetty at the level of interpretation illustrates more than just her humanness commonly ascribed to those able to participate in the act of reading. Her interpretative reading, which she demonstrates on numerous occasions, contradicts
the claim of others that she is “dull and stupid” (5) and establishes the place that an imaginative sense plays in subverting the expected scripts of slave behavior and opportunity. Her reading of Aunt Hetty as her future teacher calls on her internalized strength, which provides her the means to visualize a future where “a new world with all its mysteries and marvels was opening” (8) and to imagine the none-too-complicated normalcy of the reconstructed slave family in “undeviating happiness” (246).

Hannah’s interpretative readings, which take the form of an intricate mixture of imaginative endeavors and practical analysis, illustrate what Morrison refers to when she speaks of the need for scholars to see beyond the scripted agendas of critical race paradigms. In seeing Hannah as more than a fugitive slave whose conditions force on her feelings of being a “possession,” which allow masters to own slaves through what Christopher Castiglia describes as the mastery of both their bodies and their psyche (236), this leaves little room to also accept her as a symbol of one who transcends paradigms. Midway through the text, when Hannah again meets Mr. Trappe, the infamous slave trader, after having been hunted and caught by him, she reads him with a calculated intelligence: “He looked calmly, though searchingly towards us and I detected an expression in his face at once complacent and self-satisfied .... He was sedately pleased and looked just as one may be supposed to look when some great work is accomplished” (99). Her reading of Mr. Trappe both acknowledges her own social position and comments on the idea of one ignorant of his own ignorance. Unable to tell the difference between some “great
work” and the inhumanity involved in the buying and selling of people, Mr. Trappe is rendered the essence of ignorance. Hannah reads his satisfied look, one that she describes as mimicking those who produce great achievements, with sardonic irony. To her, this fusing of accomplishments with the ownership of others bears more than just a passing resemblance to the absurd. It therefore follows that because Mr. Trappe resides in a state of ignorance, believing unconditionally that “[the trapping of others into slavery] is nothing so bad after all” (101), he thus exhibits the characteristics of one who is truly “dull and stupid,” a term previously used to describe Hannah. This reversal of characteristics between Hannah and Mr. Trappe that Crafts illustrates seems to suggest that what appears as truth on the surface almost always requires a probing to examine and question where reality lies and where fiction begins. That Mr. Trappe’s dullness and stupidity makes him a figurative slave by aligning him with qualities of servitude, so does Hannah’s intuitiveness make her his intellectual superior by aligning her with qualities of reason and wisdom.

Not only is Hannah able to reason logically and to understand the historically dichotomized relationship between property and owner as she meditates on the ignorance mapped onto the body of a slave, she also illustrates the necessity of knowing concretely and of acting on one’s knowledge through a demonstration of one’s wisdom:

Ignorance, forsooth. Can imagination quench the immortal mind or prevent its feeling at times the indications of its heavenly origin. Can it destroy that
deep abiding appreciation of the beautiful that seems inherent to the human soul? Can it seal up the foundations of truth and all intuitive perception of life, death, and eternity? I think not. Those to whom man ... teaches little, nature like a wise and prudent mother teaches much. (18)

The above quote reveals the narrator’s ability to reason profoundly. Hannah’s soliloquy which comes at the beginning of the text, given after she has been sent by one of the housekeepers, Mrs. Bry, to close the windows to the upstairs gallery before her newly married master, Mr. De Vincent, returns home with his new bride, identifies the culture of resistance Crafts pursues throughout her text. Her soliloquy demonstrates a strategy that repositions the hierarchy of slaves and humans. It employs the performance of language to separate the myths of racial fictions from individual subjective beliefs. Hannah’s poetic and reasoned attention to ignorance alerts us to the subtle complexities of language and culture and its ability, however difficult, to function as an agent of change, to signify, to negate, to initiate knowledge, and to dispense subjectivity. Her style of language, which is commonly attributed to the master who defines the parameters of wit and ignorance, alludes to ignorance as a set of biased assertions usually sustained by scientific theories. These theories contribute to the active construction of the “Other” in the political imagination of whites such as that of Mr. Trappe’s. And although Mr. Trappe finds difficulty sustaining his perception of the slave as obedient with “no mind, no desire, no purpose of [one’s] own” (110), he continues to insist on his perception of as a means of reinforcing his power. In other words, he fails to acknowledge the ability
of the “Other” to reason and to transcend the stagnant impressions of the dominant culture and to form alternative perceptions of ignorance in which the oppressor becomes the ideal of ignorance once he fails to understand the “wisdom and prudence of nature” that provides his subject with a pragmatic view of possibilities for liberation.

When the reader is first introduced to Mr. Trappe, he is engaged in the process of reminding Mr. De Vincent’s young bride of his knowledge that she belongs to a slave woman who was sold to a Georgia man and that her fortune in having grown up in luxury and whiteness comes as the result of a shrewd and timely exchange of children following the death of her father’s legitimate child, at which point “the dead was exchanged for the living” (46). In sharing this information, he attempts to strip the young bride of her dignity by stripping her of her humanness. Hannah, however, is fortuitously seated behind the curtain during this exchange and overhears information that she ultimately uses to defuse the primacy of Mr. Trappe’s knowledge. She convinces her mistress to flee the DeVincent household, and in turn her mistress convinces Hannah to accompany her on her flight. The two escape, leaving Mr. Trappe with an empty knowledge that serves him little use. The knowledge, appropriated by Hannah, underscores the difference between her benevolence and Mr. Trappe’s cruelty, for she does not as Rudolph Byrd rightly states, “use her ‘private knowledge’ to entrap and exploit others” (339), an idea that once again highlights the critical inroads that Crafts struggled to forge in which her language and depictions play a significant role in altering the parameters of
subjective possibilities. While Hannah holds her mistresses’ secret safe, as most
slaves would undoubtedly have done, she also uses her knowledge of her
oppressors’ predictable reaction to make herself and her mistress inaccessible to a
culture that would otherwise see them as objects ripe for exploitation. By doing so
the two women become objects of their own destiny rather than submitting to the
role of being “the leading star of [someone else’s ] destiny” (41). In this way Hannah
establishes herself as a woman of reason and authority who now becomes the
bearer of the secret and someone able to upset Mr. Trappe’s ability to dominate
through the threat of exposure. Because the secret no longer has a primary holder,
its potential to disrupt the lives of the woman decreases, and Mr. Trappe’s ability to
manipulate his subject enters a stage of compromise with Hannah as a pivotal
player in the game of unfolding secrecy.

Hannah’s new knowledge of her mistresses’ secret foregrounds the
importance of ownership in the text and attests to the precariousness of a racial
economy based predominantly on the ability to subjugate others physically and
ideologically. Put another way, Crafts’ narrative not only establishes Hannah as a
woman whose very being disrupts the agenda of race ideology, but it also deflates
the power of whiteness by illustrating the contradictions, instabilities and
juxtapositions of apparently stable and consistent racial beliefs, while
simultaneously creating a condition of an evolving self-concept dredged out of
qualities denied, lost, and hidden.
The scene of exposure in which Mrs. De Vincent is reraced by Mr. Trappe’s knowledge therefore becomes particularly significant as an indication of those qualities denied Crafts’ narrative effectively contests what Richard Dyer argues is and has been the position of power that “whites are people whereas other colors are something else” (10). Crafts’ text, in effect, does the work Dyer attests is necessary to achieve in order to reach “where we want to get to” (12), or as Pricilla Wald puts it, “test[s] ‘American literate for its ability to accommodate [...the] testimony’” of those whose “self expression were not conventional” (216). Not only does the baseness of Trappe call attention to the idea that whiteness is not what it appears, but by Trappe’s own admission, he is no different from the slaves whom he traps. In his own words he tells Hannah that “we are all slaves to something or somebody” (101), concluding as he goes on to say, “Freedom and slavery are only names attached surreptitiously and often improperly to certain conditions” (101). Trappe’s statement is interesting in that it reinforces the controlling narrative paradox as it aligns whites with slavery, and Others with the ability to signify themselves differently depending on the space they occupy.

Crafts thus presents the differences between white and black as a difference bearing significance primarily within the political and economic domain. In his 1999 publication of The Wages of Whiteness, David Roediger writes “Republicanism had long emphasized that strength, virtue and resolve of a people guarded them from

13 Wald quotes Frances Foster Smith in recognizing how the literary achievements of those slave authors who came before Crafts both “facilitated their eventual freedom” and subjected their work to “non-literary expectations and assumptions.”
enslavement” (35). He contends that America was founded on the principle of independence and developed through the system of capitalism. This principle begins the scheme of separation in which whites participated in a movement toward freedom and independence and later “invisibility” through work and ownership of that work, while blacks became slaves because they were unable to own their work. Roediger speculates, “Republicanism also suggested that long acceptance of slavery betokened weakness, degradation and unfitness for freedom” (66). Roediger’s account of Republican development becomes particularly relevant to my discussion of Hannah because in arguing that neither Hannah nor Trappe submits to the rules that apparently govern their person (or lack of it), I also argue for the appreciation of a space that allows for conceptual deviations from the traditional route toward claiming an Americanism and an American family. Trappe is a worker who owns nothing stable and is himself, by his own admission, enslaved by his constant labor of deception. Hannah too, who does not capitulate to the Republican ideology of weakness, defies her place as a black slave. Once she learns of her Mistress’s plight, she immediately begins working to own her own freedom and identity. When the two women flee to the woods, representing themselves as “poor women who have become accidentally lost” (58), which they regard as “no more than truth” (58), this “truth” propels them through a journey that brings them to the moral and intellectual reality that freedom and ownership of one’s body is an ideal achievable to those open and willing to destroy, replace, and expand existing borders and limitations. Unfortunately, however, Hannah and her mistress are soon discovered in their escape and their resistance to cultural conformity is quelled. They are taken
to a jail where they meet Mrs. Wright, a woman who has been imprisoned so long that she comes to believe that her prison is her palace. The woman confides in Hannah that her crime was “hat[ing] slavery...[.] and see[ing] no beauty in the system” (86), she assisted a slave girl in her escape.

Through Mrs. Wright, Crafts once again reinforces the paradoxical structure that organizes her narrative, depicting morality and reason in one of the only characters who ostensibly represents a lack of reason, logic, and sanity. Mrs. Wright personifies all that is good and possible in a culture unwilling to broaden its understanding and relinquish its ownership of knowledge. Her goodness is stifled, and she is ostracized from functioning society. However, despite Mrs. Wright’s seeming madness, she never loses her lucid understanding of the dichotomous world in which she can no longer participate because, as she says, she “[has] learned what all who live in a land of slavery must learn sooner or later; that it is to profess approbation where you cannot feel; to be hard when most inclined to melt; and to say that all is right and good; and true when you know that nothing could be more wrong” (87).

That Crafts attributes this kind of discourse to a mad woman is telling because it dramatizes the distinction between the voice of resistance that seemingly speaks from madness and the voice of domination that seemingly speaks from sanity. Here again, through the paradox of reason and madness, Crafts provokes the reader into questioning basic beliefs about ideas commonly seen as true and stable. Her text exposes the various layers and subtexts of a brutal slave system, elaborating on her
critique that truth cannot exist in a slave economy, that fiction becomes the norm of a disciplinary power, and that there is no place to go to live truthfully. As a result of all this, one must rely on creating one's own reality, and only in this reality can truth and integrity exist.

This concept places Hannah in the difficult, and almost impossible position, of attempting to exist outside the fictions of others that define her, and only in her constant movement can she begin to live by her own experiential and conceptual reality. In understanding and identifying herself as “a poor woman” (58), and as a “rational being” (18) within an economy that “enforce[s] drudgery [... and] condemn[s] [her] on account of [her] color to a life of servitude” (18), Hannah pushes the limits of boundaries between fiction and reality and exposes the paradoxes and lies inherent in a slave system. Contrary to the reasoning of John Stauffer, who reads Hannah as a woman restrained in humanitarian bondage (62-63), I see Hannah as a woman whose conceptualizations of herself recognizes no permanent bondage and certainly no mental bondage. With each decision she asserts her humanity and declares her right to reason herself into being. When she decides to leave the De Vincent household after careful consideration of the unjust treatment directed towards her kind white mistress who must now, through the actions of an unscrupulous lawyer and an unjust law, struggle with the pains of an assigned blackness, she does so with the belief that “it was time for thinking and acting rather than giving way to overstrained sensations of any kind” (50). On another occasion, when she decides to reveal her slave status to Mrs. Henry, a
forgiving white woman who takes her in after a bad fall, she does so knowing that “[her] better nature [should] prevail” (120) and that her condition is a “misfortune that [she] could not help” (121). Still yet on another occasion, when she decides to leave the Wheeler household, her last house of bondage, thus demonstrating her need to live as a human being with the dignity of one who claims the ability to assert her personal and intellectual rights, she tells her reader that “duty to myself and God required it” (211). Rather than seeing through the forcible marriage between her and a man for whom she could have little feeling and with whom the sanctity of marriage would mean nothing, Hannah chooses freedom and expresses the belief in herself as one who is morally bound by virtues of sexual restraint, signifying what Hazel Carby has argued in her often-cited text *Reconstructing Womanhood* constitutes the dominant image of white womanhood. This, however, is not to argue that Hannah sees herself as a white woman because her experience as a fugitive slave negates any possible recognition of herself as socially and politically white. What becomes important here is Crafts’ understanding of the literary convention of white womanhood, which is safe to say might be readily obvious to one whose work demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of sentimental, gothic, and slave texts. Carby observes that “measured against the sentimental heroines of domestic novels, the black [and mixed-race] woman repeatedly failed the test of true womanhood because she survived her institutionalized rape, whereas the true heroine would rather die than be sexually abused” (34). Behaving in the vein of a true heroine, Hannah escapes the lustful Bill to whom she had been promised, allowing her to cling to her virtue and her belief that “[m]arriage like many other
blessings [seemed] especially designed for the free” (212). Hannah’s rejection of Bill therefore depicts her as the converse of the conventional black heroine while endowing her with sexual values commonly attributed to whiteness. Relegated to a space of disparity between not back and not white, Hannah becomes the middle ground where the body, the mind, and the Other meet in expression to open up the parameters of possibility. This motif of “neither/nor” thus places Hannah in the curious position of having to balance a double vision and a double consciousness, which she seems to achieve through a binding faith to the concept of integrity.

Integrity for Hannah, an ideal inextricably intertwined with freedom, does not however come without its problems. It comes as a precarious and somewhat dangerous indulgence, although necessary to challenge the deep-rooted fictions and generalizations that limited access to the virtues she values. Her challenge demands she confront what she understands as the difference between her reasoned understanding of herself and the imposed fiction to which she is held. At the point of Hannah’s arranged marriage, the text seems to suggest that each decision and confrontation that Hannah makes and encounters, illustrates a type of reversal of racial myth. It also claims her as an embodiment of the paradox it communicates, for while she is emotionally and spiritually drawn to the virtues of white womanhood, she is also steadfast in her claim that “a good conscience was a sure protector” (71) and that to deny her “condition” would certainly lead to her ruin. In other words, her decisions and confrontations might appropriately be read as a narrative strategy to communicate the freedom to envision and ultimately to
transform the cultural-historical repressions entrenched in the concept of racial and social difference.

When Hannah reveals her slave status to the kind Mrs. Henry, who gives her sanctuary after being left for nearly dead, she makes the conscious choice not to “pass” and to represent herself as nothing other than what she imagines herself to be – a slave by social, economic, and political condition and a woman by her own private understanding of her virtue and humanity. Mrs. Henry, a polished woman of Christian politeness who has taken Hannah into her home after finding her lying almost dead following a disastrous accident, does not immediately question Hannah’s race upon their first meeting and instead assumes whiteness onto the young woman. When Hannah finally regains consciousness and finds herself comfortably cared for in the Henry household, her “scene [had] changed, and [she] almost doubted her identity” (118), leaving her to wonder if she should “perpetuate that delusion” (120) of representing an unfortunate white woman who has suffered a tragic loss. This scene marks a dramatic turning point in Hannah’s acknowledgement of herself as the categorized subject of others as well as herself as the owner of her expressed constitutive agency. In deciding not to continue in Mrs. Henry’s fantasy of assisting an unfortunate white woman, Hannah retains her autonomous self image. She does not linger in deciding against participating in the delusion of herself as a white woman, admitting to the ignorant Mrs. Henry that she is a slave, “one of that miserable class” (120). This admission, of course, is a relative truth and makes clear the distinction between Hannah’s understanding of the self
and the unfitting image imposed on that self. Hannah willingly admits, through qualification, that her identification is not her own, but rather is the judgment of those who insist on her stationary and inferior position. The fiction that controls her life, however, will immediately continue to do so because the power that defines Hannah operates on a reiterative practice and a blind truth reinforced by generalizations that require neither proof nor logic to take hold. Hannah’s vision of herself therefore becomes a vision of her soul, separate from the body that will ultimately fall prey to the systems of disciplinary fiction. Her whiteness for now will not be seen as equal to the whiteness of those able to claim white purity because her whiteness is defined and qualified by a power beyond her reach as a mixed-race woman. For this reason, Hannah’s only choice for self respect is to submit to an internal truth of knowing her own humanness while publically rendering herself the bonded property to which the culture of white privilege and power insists.

When her former nemesis, Mr. Trapp, discovers that Hannah is alive and well and living in the Henry household, he exercises his unquestioned power to reclaim his property. Hannah pleads with her kind mistress not to give her over to the vile Mr. Trappe who will once again sell her to the highest bidder. Mrs. Henry, however, cannot submit to this pleading because, as she tells Hannah, she has made a promise to her father on his deathbed, who was himself a trafficker in flesh, that she would “never on any occasion buy or sell a servant” (131). Accordingly, Mrs. Henry cannot grant Hannah her wish to remain in the Henry household and tries instead to appease her by offering her the opportunity of being “given” to a distant family
relative. This exchange, occurring at the very center of the text, highlights the pervasiveness of moral failure that operates in a system built on power and privilege. In the course of introducing Mrs. Henry, Crafts offers up an immediately benevolent character, full of morality and integrity. Mrs. Henry makes promises and does not waver in their delivery. She assists a slave woman with kindness and hospitality much like the characters of Mrs. Delano in Child’s *Romance of the Republic*, or Mrs. Bird and the Senator from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This image of Mrs. Henry’s benevolence is, however, fleeting and the differences between the character of Mrs. Henry and that of Mrs. Delano or Mrs. Bird are striking. Mrs. Henry never puts herself in jeopardy in her assistance of Hannah nor does she extend herself beyond what is politically convenient. The point that Crafts makes here is clear. There is little morality in Mrs. Henry and even less so in her demonstration of truth and integrity. And although some might argue as Dickson D. Bruce Jr. has argued that Mrs. Henry “[reveals ...] a real moral blind spot so far as her understanding of slavery is concerned” (131), Mrs. Henry’s actions seem to exhibit far more than the unintentionally one might associate with a blind spot. Her refusal to grant Hannah sanctuary in her home implies a deliberate decision to claim silence where voice and action are most needed. Instead of action, Mrs. Henry passively exercises the privilege of her whiteness by saying and doing nothing. In this regard, she identifies with those in power, claiming herself as one of those of power, yet masking her choice through her perceived efforts of kindness.
Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne Davis define white privilege, a right Mrs. Henry certainly asserts, as an unconscious act in that “privilege is not visible to its holder; it is merely there, a part of the world a very way of life, simply the way things are” (94). Mrs. Henry’s lack of action, given this reading, then becomes a natural outcome of a system that conflates race and economics as a means of maintaining privilege. Indeed, Mrs. Henry’s actions reveal a general failure to relinquish privilege in order to make room for the humanity of those created out of the imagination of those in power. While Mrs. Henry provides insight into the thoughts of the fiction makers, so too do the dominated who know that “those who view slavery only as it relates to physical suffering or the wants of nature, can have no conception of its greatest evils” (Crafts 134). Hannah speaks the last word of the chapter and drives home an understanding of culture and race that goes far deeper than any understanding Mrs. Henry could wish to own. With this appreciation she begins to take charge of her own truth, knowing that if she is to shed the limiting proscriptions of slavery, she must do so with an unquestionable defiance.

Crafts’ (fictional) autobiography thus becomes especially valuable not just for its documentation of experience, but also for the way it links the experience of racial instability and a monetary economy invested in the stability of racial markers in defying cultural conventions. In the last third of the narrative, when Hannah is given to Mrs. Wheeler, Crafts points out the alliance between race and economics through a discussion which emphasizes the necessity of one as a means of maintaining the other.
The scene, which begins with a discussion of beauty, tells the reader that "Mrs. Wheeler conceived her beauty to be on the wane" (164). Because of this, she purchases a newly invented Italian powder specifically designed to enhance the beauty of the skin. What Mrs. Wheeler had not realized and what Hannah knows is that when mixed with smelling salts, the powder turns the skin black. As it happens, at the same time that Mrs. Wheeler experiments with her new face powder, Mr. Wheeler, an ousted member of Congress, propositions her with a scheme to use her beauty to assist him in securing an important office, which had recently become available. Mrs. Wheeler concedes, believing that her recently purchased beauty powder will secure her the influence she requires to seal the deal. However, just before leaving on her mission, she takes a bit of smelling salts, which unknown to her turns her skin black before she arrives at the house of Congress. This scene, set apart from other more understated scenes of racial resistance, emphasizes the otherwise subtle paradoxes the author has elsewhere illustrated throughout the text. In turning Mrs. Wheeler’s skin black, Crafts illustrates the privilege of whiteness, its constructedness, the systematic disenfranchisement of all who fall outside the definition of white purity, and the dehumanizing attempt to identify as any race outside that which has already ascribed

Mrs. Wheeler's insistence on acquiring beauty results in the explosive situation of her movement from the privilege of whiteness to that of the non-privilege of blackness. But particularly ironic is the information regarding this purchase, which comes from “an antiquated lady, with a large mouth filled with false
teeth, a head covered with false hair, and a thin scrawny neck, beneath which swelled out a false bust” (162). Once again, Crafts expresses her intent on demonstrating the fixity (in this case of beauty) of an exterior reality. She exposes the fiction of identity by turning its constructions inside out and displays the hypocrisy of the calculated performance and the lengths to which one must go in order to maintain this fiction rather than live by “a good conscience as a sure protector” as Hannah has chosen.

When Mrs. Wheeler reaches the congressman’s office to ask for the position, she is told “it is not customary to bestow offices on colored people” (173). When she pursues the issue, relying on her beauty, which, according to her husband, “no gentleman would think of opposing” (169), she is firmly told that if either she or her husband “had possessed a particle of common sense, [neither one] would have asked for [the position]” (174). This reply points to what Crafts sees as the inseparable nature of race and economics. In the move from whiteness to blackness, Mrs. Wheeler loses her ability to negotiate, to claim her freedom, and to determine her life. In short, the temporary loss of Mrs. Wheeler’s whiteness results in a temporary loss of her ability to participate in American democracy. Doors do not open for her magically, nor does she, at this moment, have access to the doors. Instead, she is left with a blatant denial of opportunity and humanity based on an empty signifier. Crafts reversal of roles here, where the once haughty Mrs. Wheeler becomes a member of the despised race, points to the emptiness of race and/or color as a meaningful signifier and goes one step further to imply an
interchangeability between the races. Mrs. Wheeler’s representation of blackness and its acceptance by others functions to confuse the categories of race and culture, for it is not one’s physical attributes that render one black or white, but rather it is perception and ideology that render identity readable. Mrs. Wheeler, by American racial standards, is no more black in the congressman’s office than she was when she left her home, nor might Mrs. Wheeler have experienced the life of blackness had she not been requesting a position of influence. Through Mrs. Wheeler, Crafts underscores the idea that color has no basis in reality although it functions as the visible marker for social scripting. That Mrs. Wheeler finds herself a member of the Negro is significant, because just in case the reader missed the criticism of the constructed polarity between black and white, Crafts once again makes clear that in an antebellum America it is rhetoric that forms difference, it is ideology that breeds differentiation, and it is white greed that anchors the false idea of inescapable differences between black and white. Crafts’ narrative seems to dramatize that blackness and whiteness cannot exist as positive or negative characteristics in and of themselves, but rather are concepts based on a consistently reproduced fiction that insists on the economic and democratic oppression of the racial “other.” Mrs. Wheeler’s blackness causes the curt and undeniable response she receives, and it is her greed for power that foregrounds the difference between the privileged and non-privileged

One could argue that Crafts’ text was specifically intended to expose the wrongs of bondage, as Lawrence Buell argues, or that it articulates the “diverse
range of social ills” in a racialized society (53) as John Stauffer has similarly argued.

One might also argue, as I have attempted to do, that it exposes the absurdities of logic inherent in a system that is socially and politically motivated to maintain dominance at all costs. However, it is important to note that Crafts’ text functions on a number of levels and in its criticism of racial oppression it also demands a revisioning of the dualisms of racial classification. Crafts documents this idea when Hannah, after escaping from the Wheeler household, reunites with her dear Aunt Hetty who initially taught her to read and who once again secures her with love and a temporary home. This penultimate scene sets the stage for the final ending where Hannah becomes complete through a joyous reunion with her mother whom she has never known except in infancy. Crafts’ depiction of freedom and humanity, however, does not end with the meeting of a mother and a daughter. In a small town in New Jersey, Hannah becomes part of a community where her close friends (former slaves of Mrs. Henry), Charlotte and William reside. In this community she meets her husband, a Methodist preacher, and lives in “undeviating happiness” teaching children and “listening to the words of Gospel truth” (246).

It is an ending that reeks of fantasy, as William Andrews has suggested, arguing that it defies all claims to fugitive autobiography and establishes a world of almost practical impossibility. But this again signals the extent to which Crafts envisioned a self-governing authority created out of a willful knowledge of the self. And much like the community that Lydia Maria Child fashions at the end of her 1867 text Romance of the Republic, in which subjects form their own community based on
a rejection of social norms, Crafts’ imagined community that closes her narrative illustrates a space of cultural possibilities, marked by the culture of a reclaimed womanhood. Knowing that her identity satisfies neither the cultural need to represent similarity nor familiarity, Hannah resolves to establish her own community where its members redefine the concept of family by distancing themselves from its biological and sociohistorical meaning. Their community signals the dream for a new conceptualization of “race” and family, structured from imaginative possibilities that operate beyond the rigid expectations of race.

Crafts ends her narrative with an explosion of the paradox with which she began. Her young slave girl, prohibited from learning, who consistently defines the protocol of blackness, achieves the absolute American ideal. Her end is the ultimate paradox in that Hannah becomes fully humanized because, as Crafts suggests, it is not race that grants humanity, but rather the willingness to see one’s self as human. With this idea Crafts disrupts the concept of race as a stable and definite signifier and demonstrates a fluidity of race that hints at an individual power achieved from a synthesis not commonly recognized. Andrews understanding of Crafts’ ending, in which he states that “Hannah’s story was specifically intended to articulate what ought to happen to a woman of color” (39) can therefore read as only partial truth, for Hannah is no longer a “woman of color.” She has transcended color in that she has achieved what a woman of color was never intended to achieve or considered capable of achieving. She has become a woman endowed with the full rights of humanity to love and to belong to family and friends. Thus to say that the “novel’s
end challenge[s] the notion that an African-American woman had no business expecting or even hoping for such fulfillment” (Andrews 40), is to read the text only in part and to negate the voice of contradiction that strenuously argues throughout the text for a revisioning of racial ideology based on an either/or system. That Crafts’ text ends in fiction seems consistent with its agenda in that it is fiction created by the author rather than fiction created for her. In this respect Crafts’ text articulately takes control of itself through and with a voice whose authenticity can be none other than the author herself.

The Bondwoman Narrative is a text begging for someone to see through the veil of fictional identity and color as a means of looking into the consciousness of racial mixture. Hannah Crafts’ novel is, as Nina Baym defines it, “a find of unprecedented importance” (316). Cutting across ideas of particularities by exposing cultural and racial contradictions that force us to rethink our range of understanding and our part in the creation of fictions and realities with which we live, Crafts’ narrative is an important story of the American experience. It illustrates how cultures and races combine, of the process of rearticulating culturalisms, and the need for addressing the possibilities that racial resistance offers toward creating dignity born out of an honest Americanism.
Chapter 3

Disinheriting Whiteness in Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby”

Kate Chopin’s turn-of-the-century fiction may be characterized as a meditation on the anxieties associated with the liberation from the constraints of gender and race. In her well-known story, The Awakening (1899), once rejected for its scandalous portrayal of its protagonist, Chopin disrupts the traditional expectations of how subjects inhabit social categories by allowing Edna Pontellier to freely submit to her sexual hunger at the risk of destabilizing the white patriarchal system in which she lives. This depiction, for the time, was a brazen defiance of expected morality because in representing Edna as a white woman with sexual needs, one who Bert Bender describes as “a woman who reclaims [her] power to [sexually] select” (119), Chopin represents the entire system of white authority as a precarious system, loosely held together primarily at the discretion of women who either choose to submit or not to submit to patriarchal codes.

Edna’s unwillingness to submit to the conventions of her class and race disrupts the value system that her whiteness assures and positions her as a woman who challenges the often-cited doctrine of “the cult of true womanhood.” Instead of exhibiting qualities of conventional whiteness where purity is prized, Edna’s whiteness behaves quite similar that of the non-whiteness of Zoraïde, the unfortunate mixed-race character of Chopin’s earlier short story “La Belle Zoraïde” (1894) whose sexual desires and love become her downfall. The signifying
difference between these two characters is, of course, their color, and hence, this becomes the difference in the reception of both stories. For the mixed-race Zoraïde, unlike the white Edna, there are no expectations of sexual restraint and/or social conformity. Thus the story of Zoraïde who falls madly in love with the black slave Mézor, whose body “sway[s] and quiver[s] through the figures of dance” (“Zorade” 224) causes no scandal with the reading public. And when Zoraïde pleads for the right to marry the black dancer, against the judgment of her mistress, she is deemed “no better than they” (222). Janet Goodwyn writes that “La Belle Zoraïde ...in becoming cerebrally, hormonally, senilely, and racially compromised turn into that which [she is] supposed to be” (11); that is, she becomes a malleable object of her mistress’ power because she is unable to develop qualities of personal morality and chastity, which thereby justifies her social inferiority. In her selection of an overtly sexual black man, Zoraïde meets the needs of an anxious southern community that recoils at the thought of a defiled purity in white women while they readily speculate the behavior of overt sexuality in the non-white Zoraïde. Emily Toth notes in her 1994 article, “A New Generation Reads Chopin” many recent critics have pointed out that “Because [Chopin’s] local characters were quaint, distant, and sometimes women of color as well, they were less threatening to mainstream audiences if they did unconventional things – such as indulging in sex outside marriage or criticizing patriarchal norms” (14).

Edna Pontellier, however, is not a woman of color, is not quaint, or distant (so to speak), but rather is a rebellious white woman who does not meet the needs
of a southern community hungry in its attempt to order the world by valuing its Victorian ideals above the ideals and practices of other non-Victorians. Edna is a woman with the knowledge and ability to celebrate self-governance who rather than fulfill the expectations of her anxious community insistent on maintaining an identifiable difference between white and non-white, crosses the line of social protocol. In doing so, she exposes the contradictions inherent in the cultural narratives of two Americas separated by race. Her whiteness, an outward sign of purity, is as scholars such as Rebecca Aanerud have noted, a symbol of responsible motherhood, not to be confused with the sexual needs of (non-white) womanhood. It is therefore the whiteness of Edna exposed as such lasciviousness that offends Chopin’s nineteenth-century reading public. Put another way, for Edna’s public defilement of white motherhood, she must be silenced if she is to have any lasting value in literary white America. This theme, however, is not new or particular to Chopin’s *Awakening*. In her 1894 short story “Désirée’s Baby,” Chopin introduces her readers to Désirée Valmondé, who after challenging her husband’s whiteness, which consequently results in his loss of manhood, disappears into the woods “and … did not come back again” (197).

Désirée, however, unlike Enda, does not overtly attempt to challenge the traditions of Victorian womanhood, for she loved her husband “desperately” (195) and measured her happiness by his happiness, for this was a relationship built on the tradition of white Victorian values and protocol. Not until her husband accuses her of bearing him a Negro child does she “awaken” to her potential as an individual
and as a woman independent of the limiting social codes that characterize her Victorian community. In Désirée’s refusal to admit blame for the color of her child or to subject her child to her husband’s racial anxieties, she prevents a return to the ideology of pre-given identities that has long functioned to regulate behavior and restore certainty to situations of such anxieties. Désirée’s disappearance into the woods may therefore be read as an act of defiance against the male traditions that manage motherhood and womanhood. In Chopin’s decision to avoid submitting Désirée to the “passing” theme so popular during the turn of the century, Chopin in turn, focuses her text on the strength of conviction that seems to override the vicissitudes that predictably accompany any act of passing.

I should, however, at this point, make clear that I am not auguring nor intend to argue that Chopin, in much the same vein of previous authors such as the recently uncovered Hannah Crafts, for example, resolutely participated in the discussion of how white privilege usurps and restrains the liberty of the non-white sector of American people; for while I see Chopin as a social commentator, I also recognize the overriding “powerful feminist message” in her work (“New Generation” Toth 14) for which she is commonly credited. My approach to Chopin’s work therefore does not privilege a feminist perspective, but rather incorporates it into what I see as the author’s racial agenda to examine the dominant paradigms that organize our understanding of Americanness. In response to a rapidly changing America, “Désirée’s Baby” addresses the concept of resistance and domination from an evolutionary perspective. Through this text, Chopin writes from the perspective of
as a social writer doing a particularly unique job of exposing the racial truths with which Americans live and of recognizing the racial evolution that becomes inevitable when people of different races live and work in a common community.

“Désirée’s Baby,” at its most basic level, is a story about a woman who has failed in her role as wife and mother and because of this becomes exiled from her community but not before challenging her husband of his accusations that she is not who she presents herself to be. By writing Désirée as a woman who willingly confronts knowledge, Chopin positions her as an agent of change, similar, although much more surreptitiously to the way she positions Edna as a complex personality whose race and gender operate strategically to disrupt conventional reading of traditional tropes. I argue that in placing her female characters at the center of power and knowledge in opposition to the willful productive ignorance that white male nationalism enables, she confronts the exploitive power of male nationalism. In representing knowledge as the pivotal force in determining how family relationships are considered, Chopin draws our attention to the deliberate effort of the planter elite to manipulate maternal instinct and wisdom to the ends of securing white manhood.

This chapter examines how Chopin’s stories of race capture and reveal the paradoxes associated with a male power seemingly unlimited in its ability to manipulate categories of gender and race. Moreover, I contend that Chopin’s story of Désirée, Armand, and their baby, written in 1894, is a political contribution from a woman intent on participating in the intellectual discourse of her time, when, to
use the words of Warner Sollors, miscegenation “function[ed] as the ultimate sanction of the American system of white supremacy” (183). Chopin wrote during a time when writers such as W.E. B. DuBois publicly challenged the argument of “scientific” differences between races; when Charles Darwin’s Descent of Man circulated ideas of female inferiority and male dominance in the process of sexual selection; when women such as Ida B. Wells fought tirelessly in antilynching crusades; when writers such as Mark Twain mocked American disharmony brought about through unrelenting racial intolerance; and when the 1883 Supreme Court decision overturned the 1875 Civil Rights ruling. Thus, when Emily Toth notes in her important work Kate Chopin that “[a]s a writer, Kate Chopin was not interested in men’s political battles over race, but she portrayed black women, especially black mothers with sympathy and deep feeling” (136), it is not that she got it wrong, for surely Toth recognizes the critique of Southern mores in Chopin’s work. It is rather that her focused emphasis on gender leaves little room for an extensive discussion of its natural corollary—race. “Désirée’s Baby,” with its obvious emphasis on color, name, and secrets, presents itself as a serious commentary regarding the domestic challenge in which excess and deficiency of knowledge control the dynamics of family inclusion and consequently that of national identity.

Anna Elfebein observes that “[w]hile Chopin’s unorthodox pictures of black characters suggest the range of her sympathies, her concerns are only incidentally race and Southern mores in those stories that deal with the situation of racially mixed women” (118). Although Elfebein reads “Désirée’s Baby” as a story whose
plot lines comprise the penalties of being black, her emphasis resides in “Désirée’s “total powerlessness,” which she sees as – “the result of the life-and-death power of the husband in her society” (131). Recent criticisms, however, have recognized the significance of the racial agenda in much of Chopin's work, and where earlier critics viewed Chopin as a writer of "sympathies," contemporary views reach toward a more nuanced understanding of Chopin’s racial position.

Michelle Birnbaum in “Alien Hands” interrogates the colonialist agenda in The Awakening and argues that Edna’s cultural and racial boundaries become easily eroded through her conflict between maintaining her sovereignty and recognizing her similarities with “others.” In a special edition of Louisiana Literature devoted to Kate Chopin, Bonnie Shaker examines “A Rude Awakening” and explores the ways in which the text “capitalizes on the inadequacy of external signs to determine one’s race” (116). She concludes that “Such politics [of race] in even one of Chopin’s texts requires us to question whether we should continue to value Chopin's writing for its feminism alone or whether we should revalue it as a rich site from which to unearth turn-of-the-century constructions of identity” (122).

“Désirée’s Baby” thus becomes significant in this discussion of Chopin’s work because it represents a segment of American mixed-race voices that delivers knowledge about Americans who would otherwise remain on the periphery of American culture. Chopin’s work, while sympathetic to the mores of southern culture, seems to demand a speaking of our history in which American self-interestedness results in an unbearable tension and anxiety to resist the idea that, to
use the words of Barbara Johnson, “difference is a misreading of [our] sameness” (323). Thus, to read Chopin as a woman of her time is to understand her as a writer who creates a unique discursive space in a climate where fears about racial instability were at its height and were easily transferred “onto the bodies of women” (*National Manhood* 53), as Dana Nelson documents in her book entitled *National Manhood*.

“Désirée’s Baby” begins as a simple love story between Armand and Désirée. Although Armand has known Désirée from the days of childhood, after seeing her standing against the same stone pillar “in whose shadow she has lain asleep, eighteen years earlier” (189), he fell immediately in love with the young Désirée “as if struck by a pistol shot” (189). The two marry despite Mr. Valmondé’s reminder that Désirée comes from obscure origins. Armand, however, dismisses this insinuation, telling Mr. Valmondé, “What does it matter about a name when [I] could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana” (190). Following the birth of their baby, the two live happily as a couple for a while, but soon thereafter Armand becomes distant and Désirée becomes cognizant of her baby’s dark skin. She confronts Armand, but he responds simply by telling her that “the child is not white” (192) and “that you are not white” (192). He dismisses her from the home and she leaves with her baby “disappear[ing] among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again”(194).

The story’s central focus is the unnamed dark-skinned baby of Armand and Désirée. He becomes a point of contention in that his presence raises questions
about the racial uncertainty of his mother. Having been adopted by the Valmondés after being found at the gateway to their plantation, Désirée’s uncertain past becomes the point that pivots the text toward a critique of the social and political understanding of mother and family. On the surface, the story seems to suggest that because of the absence of knowledge concerning Désirée’s heritage, she is neither fit for motherhood nor for wifehood, and much like Edna Pontellier who threatens to expose the precarious paradigms of gender and race, she becomes a silenced subject. It is, however, Désirée’s balance between knowledge and lack of it, concerning both her own origins and that of her husband’s, that lends important authority to the story. It is her side of the story, spoken from the position of the silenced subject, that challenges the authorized history of good motherhood and questions the ability of a nation to move forward while grounded in practices of denial and deceit. Armand’s decision to expel the innocent Désirée from the household may be read as a point of national stagnation in which the insistent belief in the maintenance of white purity comes at the expense of families and truth, which, according to Higginbotham and Kopytoff, became more important following emancipation (131).

Chopin’s plot, while illustrating skepticism in the belief of American racial purity, seems to establish an even firmer critique of the social understanding of the maternal body in its relationship to the nineteenth-century political agenda of white dominance. The means by which Désirée is classified as an unfit mother and wife derive primarily from an absence of knowledge of her heritage rather than any
empirical fact, for neither Désirée nor any member of her family can claim any certainty about her racial heritage. But because Désirée’s appearance and behavior do not contradict expectations of whiteness, she is granted the status of a white woman by the two men in her life who have the ability to color her or allow her to function as a wife and mother in an already established white aristocratic family. It is not until the birth of her baby, with his obvious taint of blackness, that Désirée disrupts the illusion of perfection and truth of “white purity.” This idea is further complicated as the reader learns it is not Désirée who is black (although this question never reaches full resolution), but instead, it is Armand who “belongs to that race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (Chopin 198). His private racial knowledge at the end of the story does not, however, affect his public position as an elite white man of the community, for Armand has been white all along (unlike Désirée who has always carried a taint of suspicion), and has constantly built his identity based on the principles of American whiteness. He is the product of a wealthy land owning father. He is the plantation owner of slaves. To disrupt this image with the accusation of impurity would be to suggest a large-scale failure in the ideology of “national manhood.” It would suggest the unattainably of racial purity and expose the white man’s culpability in achieving the dream of two separate Americas. As Dana Nelson emphasizes in *National Manhood,* “the value of scientific discourse on whiteness is that it provides a socially authoritative position for white men to manage [their] anxieties ... by managing raced bodies and white female bodies, to certify on the one hand white male coherence and on the other their virtue (through woman’s reproductive purity)” (60).
Thus, we come to understand Armand’s racial truth as his own, kept safe by his inherited position as keeper of national whiteness. He displaces the “impurity” of whiteness onto Désirée, an act that requires little effort when operating within a system that locates racial instability in the bodies of white women. He thus maintains cultural authority and responsibility through the occupation of his white manhood; his ownership of slaves is yet another assurance of his whiteness. But more specifically, his ownership of LaBlanche and her quadroon son, who differ little in color from his own acknowledged child, positions Armand as a white man capable of determining destinies, although incapable of propagating the white race. This detail becomes significant because despite Armand’s dominant role in what Bender describes as the mating process in which Armand has the power to chose and reject, Bender argues that he will forever remain lesser of a man because of his inability to produce white heirs. Hence, the little boy who lay half naked asleep on the “great mahogany bed that was like a sumptuous throne” (Chopin 192), falls prey to the anxieties of his father and becomes his father’s downfall. Désirée, however, pays the price for this so that Armand may continue his pretense, which thoroughly conceals his wickedness and his blackness.14

Margaret Bauer argues “Armand Aubigny has been aware all along of his own racial heritage” (161), offering significant insight into the role of knowledge and

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14 I should note here that I am not acquainting wickedness with blackness, nor am I making the case that Chopin does this. Unlike Thomas Dixon who illustrated black men as savage rapists and mixed race people as hateful schemers, Chopin’s Armand is white by most American standards, and although convention might claim that his taint of black blood causes his wickedness as has been claimed of Mark Twain’s Tom Driscoll, to do so would be to make a dangerous generalization about white men – an idea Chopin’s remaining texts do not support.
ignorance and its use in this text as an organizing principle employed to expose the machinations of dominance and manipulation in white patriarchal America. In other words to use the terms of Samira Kawash, because “knowability” and “invisibility” converge in the body of Armand, he becomes the “passer” (132). This idea, however, is complicated by Bauer’s argument that Armand’s need to conceal his racial heritage is what prompts him to marry Désirée. Bauer further explains that despite his security as an already established white male, Armand uses his wife’s whiteness as a shield against the possible telling of his racial heritage, for Désirée’s whiteness greatly reduces the likelihood of his black heritage resurfacing. In the event that his child exposes him, the ease with which he will be able to fault Désirée for the violation of the family unit becomes valuable insurance in the maintenance of his continued whiteness. In this way Armand preserves the illusion of himself as white while he calculatingly manipulates Désirée into suspecting that the “strain” resides in her. Although Désirée has no reason to believe she is black, she also has no certainty of her whiteness, and this doubt places her in the precarious position of unknowing.

Eve Sedgwick’s discussion of the “Privilege of Unknowing” elucidates the very process of how Désirée’s silence functions as a product of both her knowing and unknowing, which in part functions as an active resistance to the authority that defines her. At the same time, Sedgwick’s discussion also speaks to Armand’s knowing in that it makes clear how his manipulation of Désirée insulates him from a knowledge that will disrupt his own illusions. Sedgwick implies that if there is
something of which we are ignorant (such as Désirée’s knowledge of her racial past or of Armand’s past), we are not ignorant of it at all, for it is in the musings of our ignorance that knowledge, no matter how repressed, reveals itself. In the end Désirée’s ignorance then proves itself to be the final productive power that dominates over the power of manipulation. Her state of ignorance, which once protected her from an unjust system, now opens up possibilities for seeing what is true or right. In her state of ignorance verging on knowledge, “Désirée’s eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her” (195). For three months she had lived without knowing, without questioning, until the day arrived that “the blood turned like ice in her veins” (196) and she could no longer avoid her knowledge that not only was the son of La Blanche also the son of her husband, but also that in her son resided the taint of blackness. Her knowing becomes her burden that forces her to make the decision to either submit to a permanent state of bondage by relinquishing her power of knowledge to her husband or to accept her gained knowledge, thereby giving her authority to set the terms of her own freedom.

Chopin’s use of the tragic mulatto narrative convention positions “Désirée’s Baby” as a text that challenges the assumptions behind the conventions. Through this emphasis of racial uncertainty among the characters, Chopin seems to be contributing to the popular rhetoric that the color line is an artificial construct. But more importantly, she also seems to be addressing the more serious preoccupation that “whiteness [has become] increasingly precarious” (Kawash 132). Her text
presents race as a slippery slope and illustrates how through personal reinterpretation of racial codes, one may manipulate the racial culture so as to include racial subjectivity. Chopin seems to suggest that the identity of a person resides beyond the identity of a body and further insinuates that the grounds by which one self-identifies must come from a position of owned knowledge, a position Désirée is unfortunately unable to claim with absolute certainty. This becomes her tragedy, much like Armand’s certainty becomes his tragedy. Her lack of knowledge regarding her racial heritage, for a time, it seems, protects her from owning any responsibility for her baby’s blackness. However, as time darkens the baby’s skin, both Désirée and Armand can no longer hide behind the silence of unkowning. The illusion of whiteness then becomes compromised because despite Armand’s unseen blackness that seems to reverse the polarity between black and white, the visibility of his son’s blackness, irrespective of what Armand has demonstrated as the interchangability of the two cultures, demands a confrontation that had not blackness shown itself, might otherwise go ignored. Whether it is Armand or Désirée who carries the taint, the fact that one or both parents has been “falsely” living as a white person presents serious flaws with the concept of whiteness. That white bodies can be black and black bodies can be white suggests that the shifting ground of knowledge undercuts any absoluteness where race is concerned. But more importantly, Chopin seems to make an even firmer critique of the way in which the narrative convention functions to sanction the American system of white (male) supremacy in that blackness is almost always paired with death and
whiteness almost always pared with life. The uncertainty of her characters’ racial past, however, problematizes this sanctioning.

At the physical center of this short text, we find a frightened Armand, who after noticing the darkness of his baby begins seeking certainty of his own whiteness, which he easily claims through the blackening of his wife, Désirée. As I have previously stated, this is easily accomplished as Désirée has no past and no biological parentage of which to speak. Because of this, she now finds herself in a position of defense, in which she must fight for her whiteness. This she does by documenting it with physical proof, demanding that Armand “look at [her] hair...and [her] eyes.... Look at my hand; whiter than yours” (193), she says. But Armand does not accept Désirée’s evidence and further likens her by color to his mixed-race slave, LaBlanche. Again Armand demonstrates his authority to strip Désirée of her whiteness and replace it with obedience and servitude. This behavior seemingly leaves her little other choice but to concede, not to his racialization of her, but to her inability to self-define. Her initial reaction is to accept the burden of unknowing because, to borrow the words of Eve Sedgwick, “she has allowed herself to accumulate no mental deposit of connotation or denotation to which the name could attach” (45) in regards to herself. Her only hope for truth lies in the possible knowledge of her mother, whom she asks: “For God’s sake, tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true” (196). Her mother, however, can provide no certainty for Désirée. This increased unknowing further deepens her position of vulnerability and allows Armand to take advantage of her and to create “the illusion of existence
of the thing revealed” (Sedgwick 46) -- for in the space of unknowing always lies the possibility of something to be known.

When Désirée defends her whiteness against Armand’s assumption that she is anything but white, she identifies her husband as the liar, surrendering her responsibility of wife and protector of his manhood, thereby giving credence to the argument that not only was Armand cognizant of his racial heritage and performing whiteness all along, but also, that Désirée was his protector, a role she performed out of love and unkowning. As Bauer asserts, “the fact that his background is somewhat mysterious in that no one knows his mother” (165), suggests the logical possibility that the racial taint resides in Armand and not in Désirée. Désirée’s ignorance then would almost certainly extend itself to a musing of Armand’s own obscurity. Thus, to read Désirée as a victim is, in one respect, to relinquish her of power to revise the seemly self-evident categories of black and white and of family and strangers.

In Armand’s insistence on creating the known out of the space of the unknown, he moves Désirée from white to black, which immediately rescripts her position of wife to that of baby maker. The social politicization of race and gender forces Armand to take action to ensure his identity by maintaining the social reproduction of gender and race. With her change in status, coupled with the social and political obligation to own one authentic identity, Désirée seems to have little option but give in to Armand’s desire for her to go and leave his household with her baby. She disappears among the willows and the reeds, never to come back again.
Although I have attempted to argue Désirée’s awareness of Armand’s racial heritage, the fact remains that it is certainly one of the enigmas of the text. However, if we take into account that Désirée notices the similarities of the boys, without ever being told of the possibility that lurked in the imagination of others; that she notices Armand’s dark color; that she notices “an air of mystery among the blacks […]” Then a strange, and awful change in her husband’s manner, which she dare not ask him to explain” (191), one might conclude that Désirée’s unknowing is limited only to knowledge of herself and that her knowing reflects on Armand and sheds new light on how the story works to produce a disruption of what might be commonly considered a stable domain of male whiteness.

The context in which we see Désirée is, in the words of Robert Arner, as “a Pure Maiden [... who] suffers at the hands of a villain” (145). She is the loser, whose racial uncertainly is exposed, stripping her of any right or claim to American womanhood and motherhood. Armand in this same context becomes the winner whose full racial heritage is subsumed by the cultural authority of his professionalism as a planter-elite, which gives him absolute and total control over the making and maintaining of his image. The text, however, extends beyond the information given and invites the reader into an experience that focuses on the complex emotional subtleties created by its gaps and enigmas. In this regard Désirée becomes a vehicle by which the author subtly and quietly subverts tradition. True, Désirée can be read as a fallen maiden who is finally exposed and relegated to her rightful place, but the uncertainties surrounding Désirée more fittingly asks the reader to consider the
fragility of any meaning or conclusion formed in absolutes. Within these gaps, Chopin positions Désirée as a woman privileged with the knowledge or potential knowledge of her husband’s blackness, yet she selects and marries him nevertheless. She is a symbol of national potential where white women may love “black” men and where families may thrive given the ability to let go past practices of pre-given identities. Désirée is Chopin’s instrument used to illustrate the weaknesses of those in the text who insist on conflating blackness with death and whiteness with life. She is unbound by prevailing ideology unlike Mr. Valmondé who feels it necessary to remind Armand of his daughter’s “obscure origin” (190), or unlike Armand who banishes his wife from the home at the immediate suggestion of her racial impurity.

By the end of the story the reader comes to find him/herself in an interesting position of being privileged to knowledge that at once demands a rereading and questioning of the insinuated knowables present in the story. That Armand is certainly black and that Désirée is certainly questionable begs the following questions: Is Desiree also black? Is it the coupling of two mixed-race individuals that produces a visibly black child? Is there an absolute and identifiable difference between black and white? Is it color, heritage, behavior, family, or history that designates blackness or whiteness? What defines racial truths? What is lost or gained had not this revelation made itself clear? How do the characters change as a result of the knowledge revealed and of that which is still unknown? What does Armand’s revelation say about the already accepted presumptions of race? These
questions lie at the heart of Chopin’s text and offer insight into the anxiety about race and gender. They flaunt the doubts, uncertainties, and confusions that lurk beneath the seeming stability of white manhood and force the reader to question what subtleties lay in Désirée’s disappearance into the woods.

The ending, on one level, seems to surrender to the narrative code that voices the necessary death of a heroine who attempts to upset the boundaries of societal convention. It also seems, in part, to silence Désirée so that she does not expose the inconsistencies in the tortured argument of racial politics. Chopin’s text, however, despite its appearance of rendering a powerless Désirée, is not a story of Désirée’s defeat, for if we consider the ambiguity of the ending that seems to render Désirée voiceless and erase her from immediate sight, in it we are also reminded that Désirée’s erasure comes only as an insinuation – not as fact. As Ellen Peel points out, “[t]he enigmas [of this text] are silent, formless absences that cannot be found in any specific location” (233). In these silences and absences Chopin challenges all certainty and replaces them with insinuations and resistance. One might even argue that Désirée’s disappearance is symbolic of a transcendence in which Désirée moves beyond the limitations of her physical self towards what Jean Toomer later claims as a “space of higher consciousness.”

Thus, while Désirée’s words seem to have no authority within the space she inhabits and her protests go unheard, seemingly carrying no threat to her husband’s stability, her accusatory questions reveal a knowledge of Armand’s deceit, which Armand denies with an inverted accusation. Désirée must make a decision to act on
what she knows is her ethical responsibility to herself and her child or to remain complicit in granting Armand the full patriarchal power which his claimed whiteness grants him. Although some readers of this text may read Désirée’s leaving as a submission to the authority of social convention, it must, however, not be forgotten that it is Désirée who initiates the public acknowledgement of their mixed-race family and it is Désirée who leaves not alone, but with her child, signifying the acceptance of this mixed-race child as her own, into her life, whatever form this life may take.

Her exilic state, which comes as a willing and conscious choice following a series of prompts to her husband: “Shall I go?” she asks him (193). He answers, “Yes, go” (193). However, before conceding, Désirée’s words alerts the reader to the inevitable difference between “shall I go” because there is no room in this culture for the white mother of a black baby, or “shall I go” because I can no longer shield you from your blackness or “Do you want me to go” (193), which unlike the previous questions asks for the confirmation of love. Armand answers “yes, I want you to go” (193), a statement that seems to confirm Bauer’s argument that Armand never loved Désirée, that he had been using her all along to compensate for his tainted racial past. However, I submit that Désirée knew, or at least suspected that it was Armand who carried the “strain,” because her initiation of this conversation with an obscure “it” intimates that the facts are obvious. Désirée’s asking “What does it mean?” implies that the answer lies in Armand. The question suggests an opportunity for Armand to reveal himself, to place the truth at the center of his
family so that the family may continue despite its inability to contribute to the national illusion of the superiority of whiteness. But instead, Armand resorts to the authority of his privileged position to deflect blame and to expose Désirée as an example of an untamed woman who, without the policing of her husband would certainly destroy the nation through her uncontained impurity. By the end of the text, however, the destruction spreads itself beyond Désirée, leaving only a “remorseless murderer” (Chopin 197) who once was Armand and who once headed a family that boasted “one of the oldest and proudest names of Louisiana” (193).

Thus, despite an ending that seemingly restores the social order with Armand demonstrating his authority and cleansing his house of corruption, we will do well to remember that he remains alone at the end of the text, without family or any potential for a new family. His name will die in obscurity, for Armand can never achieve the status he once claimed as “the proudest father in the parish” (195).

Following Désirée’s insistence that it is not she who is black, and following his certain knowledge that he will never produce a white child, Armand is reduced to a state of perpetual loneliness. In other words, he no longer possesses the power of selection that according to Bender’s Darwinist reading, characterizes the masculine order. One might even argue that Armand never possessed the male power of selection because his selection, much like that of a woman’s, was predicated on social position and wealth. By the end of this tale, it seems reasonable to view Armand as a character equally as destroyed as is Désirée. The difference between their destruction, however, comes in their ability to hide the root of their demise.
With neither a stained family nor written proof of his stain, Armand continues the ability to perform whiteness as he has previous done, with the small exception of knowing that he will never produce a white heir, and thus will never fully fulfill his role of white manhood.

Having firmly established the exploitive ability of white males who move in and out between covert and overt practices of ideology, who know one thing and claim another, Chopin presents the unscrupulous ability of aristocratic white males to create knowledge where knowledge does not exist. Although Armand’s dark skin is obvious to all, a fact which the narrator makes clear through an emphasis on color in almost every character, Armand remains a white man, and despite his darkness, the narrator tells us ‘[Désirée,] loved him desperately’ (191). “When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God” (191). Désirée seems to accept Armand with all his faults and tempers, and despite her fear (which we might read as a fear of Armand’s exposure) that her trembling and pleas to God suggests, she exhibits a strength that might only come from knowing. Against all social convention, she accepts her husband without question and condition, much like Mrs. Valmondé accepts her own daughter. In this acceptance both women take charge of the destinies of their families. When Désirée writes her mother seeking certainty of her whiteness, Mrs. Valmondé, although unable to give her the certainly she seeks, assures Désirée that she and her child can come back to a mother who loves her. Désirée’s decision to go and her mother’s decision to accept her back is crucial to the implications of the story. Chopin offers
her reader two women who see beyond what more conservative thinkers might consider transgressions. As such, these women become destabilizers to the authority of white men and ease the degree to which these men claim authority over the domestic space. Désirée and her mother, in their disregard for what the elite southern community might consider unwelcome racial histories, violate the code of American morality that pervaded the 19th and early 20th centuries. One might even say they become heroines of the domestic struggle in that they redefine womanhood based on a system of humanity rather than a calculated system of racial difference.

Unlike Mr. Valmondé who remains constantly aware of the possibility of a racial taint in his daughter, reminding Armand that Désirée is not truly a Valmondé, “that she is nameless” (190), Mrs. Valmondé claims her as “My own Désirée” (193), and in so doing embodies a different value of “true womanhood” from the commonly accepted values of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Carby 23) espoused by the men of “Désirée’s Baby.” Mrs. Valmondé represents unconditional love. She is a threshold figure mediating between the conventions of white female behavior and the reality of racial mixture that unites family in a common bond. Armand, on the other hand, representative of the traditional South, stands firm in his belief of “true womanhood,” and seems to rely on the domestic truth that Catherine Beecher so neatly lays out in her Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841), that his success is intimately tied up with the success of democratic institutions, which depends on women to ensure the continued life of American democracy, one which he later recognizes as a truth no longer available to him.
Catherine Beecher, who expresses the prevailing sentiment of the antebellum South, states “[t]he mother writes the character of the future man...the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation” (13). Given this sentiment, the onus of Armand’s success thus falls squarely on the shoulders of his wife Désirée. She becomes the keeper and guardian of his social and cultural security. In her whiteness rests an unstated commitment to white democracy that implicitly demands recognition of the differences between white and black. Désirée, however, in the context of the story, fails in her commitment to be, as Beecher puts it, “virtuous and intelligent, [so that] men will certainly be the same” (13). She disappoints Armand in that she pollutes the purity of family and strips him of his ability to achieve manhood. She produces a visibly black child who, if allowed to remain as a member of the family, disrupts the lines between slave and mistress and intrudes on the family unit as well as the national ideology. Désirée’s child problematizes her whiteness through his blameless ability to suggestively imprint his blackness on her white body thus reducing the family to chaos, ruin, and corruption. Armand’s blackness, on the other hand, at this point reads somewhat as a non-existent issue because by law, the 1705 statue prescribed a penalty of six months in prison and a fine for a white woman who sired a mixed-race child (Higginbotham and Kopytoff 118). This history foregrounds the degraded conditions under which Désirée must now function as a white woman with a mixed-race child regardless of which lineage the child inherited his blackness.
From an intratextual level, the text seems to point out how whiteness becomes legitimated through association with and accepted performance of privileged white manhood and how it maintains it ascendancy by systematically imposing the rule of culture and/or racial inferiority on others. Hazel Carby, in her discussion of “Ideologies of Womanhood under Slavery,” posits that “Popular white novelists” [many of whom she describes as antislavery and abolitionist writers] often used their texts to explore the boundaries of the cult of true womanhood and to challenge some of the most confining strictures in definitions of female sexuality” (33). She goes on to say that “this process of questioning the ideology applied only to the white female characters; black women in these texts exist only to confirm their own lack of womanly attributes in contrast to the abundance of virtues in their mistress” (33). Chopin, I believe, confronts this ideology much like her predecessors but moves beyond the disruption as it pertains to white women. She blurs the lines between black and white, exploring and defending against the regimes of racial difference whose goal it is to obscure the thread of racial mixture that characterizes American culture.

To consider that Désirée knows of her husband’s racial heritage is to consider her ability to create a family outside the divided consciousness of racial difference in America. Chopin implies that this family is a creation built by women who understand the home as a separate haven from the public world. It is not a world that builds democracy, but rather is a private world of individuals where interracial relations are not incompatible with family relations. Thus when Désirée
takes her baby and heads off to the bayou never to be heard from again, this stands as a testimony to her motherhood. Whether she is a black mother or a mother whose husband chooses to erase her, Désirée’s ensures her motherhood through a last minute decision to consider her child’s welfare. Given the story’s own terms that place anything definitive in question, Désirée’s demise certainly becomes another question. Central to the reader’s understanding of this story is the reception of Désirée, and specifically her absence. If read as a fallen maiden, Désirée then surely represents the price of racial pollution, and thus reflects the belief in white superiority. If read as a figure of mystical transformation, who after leaving her husband’s household dies only in the eyes of the characters, and not the reader, Désirée then invites an understanding that she is not constructed by notions of tradition, but rather represents a strength of character who is more aware of humanity than those traditionalists who bind themselves to limitations of one-drop markers. Désirée’s silence at the end of the story, following the last words of Armand: “Yes, I want you to go,” should be a silence already anticipated by the reader. Chopin, without equivocation, has established the power system under which Désirée functions. She has positioned uncertainty as the primary agent of the text. Désirée’s silence at the end of the text, in Chopin’s subtle way, remains subject to the interpretation of the reader who in his/her privileged position of knowing, seeing through the gaps and uncertainties might justifiably come to see Désirée’s disappearance, not as an end, but rather as a beginning. Although she dies in the eyes of the characters, who themselves are limited in their vision and knowledge, one might appropriately conclude she dies only in a limited earthly sense. In another
more visionary sense, she simply “disappears” and “did not come back again” (194). Where Désirée goes next is, of course, the grandest enigma of the text, written with the quiet subtly of southern charm and etiquette, suggestive of possibilities of another life fitting for a mother and a baby of any color.

The end of the story that pictures Désirée as the tragic victim of a brutal authority, might therefore be appropriately interpreted as another disruption in the political agenda of male domination. Armand’s insistence that his wife leave the house is testimony that he cannot continue what Bauer calls “his masquerade as [a] Southern (white) gentleman” (162). He cannot legally remain married to Désirée as a white man, for despite Louisiana’s recognition of three different racial sectors of society, its 1808 Civil Code, along with its 1825 Civil Code barred “marriages contracted by free white persons with free people of color” (Dominguez 25). The continued marriage of Désirée and Armand would therefore insist that both parties recognize themselves as free persons of color, and although this sector of society held privileges not granted to blacks, they did not hold the same privileges as whites. Children of “illegal unions,” for example, could inherit property only if the white father acknowledged his children through a notarial act (Dominguez 65), thus Armand, the product of an illegal union, has actually wrongfully and illegally inherited his whiteness. Armand is, however, above the law. The irony in this fact comes, of course, in the recognition of the social and legal incompatibility of racial identification and difference.
The unstable certainty of unknowing, functions not only as the plight of Désirée, but is also shared with the reader who becomes complicit in Chopin's subversive plot to expose the tragedy of a systematic structure of inequalities. In this manner, the reader is invited to view Chopin's female characters as self-governed individuals who take necessary steps to readjust the perversity of humankind, creating a gentler, less masculine dominance.
Chapter 4

“The Thrill of Discovery” Told Through the Borderland Voice of James Weldon Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man

James Weldon Johnson's 1912 work, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, speaks from a strikingly modern voice that negotiates a space wherein parallel essentialist views meet in a non-performance of race. Originally published anonymously in order to separate the main character from its author, the narrative of a self-identified “ex-colored man” depicts the life as an unnamed mixed-race man whose peregrination takes him from the American South, to New York, to Europe, and back to the American South before he finally settles in New York. There the narrator, otherwise known to the reader as the ex-colored man, takes on the task of confronting what he comes to see as the problem of America’s lack of acknowledgement of its own “common humanity” (122). He portrays this idea through a story in which he challenges the idea of race as a unitary concept by writing himself into being as a representation of those who inhabit the often-ignored-in-between space of a non-racial community.

His narrative is a declaration of his personal and imaginative consciousness made public, and provides a voice intent on claiming its distinction and consequently its place in American literature. Through the written conceptualization of a rehistoricized self that analyzes American racial and cultural obsessions, highlighting the exaggerations and realities that inform perceptions on
both sides of the color line, the narrator offers his story as a textual mirror of the emotional and psychological spaces occupied by the racially undefined. The following pages explore the growth of the narrator from his childhood days where his imagination and experiences lay the groundwork for his adult ambitions to create a public voice for those who occupy the borderland space of America’s racial culture. In seeking to make clear the conditions of this space, I pay specific attention to the way in which voice and experience overlap to provide a new reading of common circumstances from the perspective of a rehistoricized self. To this end, I contest the argument of those who see the narrator as an opportunist who passes into whiteness at the expense of maintaining an allegiance to the black race, arguing that the premise of this reasoning falls short in its failure to acknowledge the narrator’s insistent lack of belonging despite his realization that one’s whiteness often affords one a bit more humanity than one’s blackness might provide.

In a vein quite similar to the narrative of Hannah Crafts (circa 1853), Johnson utilizes an unconventional form of the autobiography to explore his agenda. Although the agendas of these two texts overlap in that they both seem to argue for the acknowledgement of a voice uninvested in any particular racial allegiance, the two narratives occupy distinctively separate time periods that influence the means by which their agenda is carried out. Whereas Crafts’ narrative takes place in a pre-Civil War period, which forces her narrator to focus on the role of escape as her means of exploration of the unfettered voice, Johnson’s narrative takes place in the Jim Crow era of 1912 where, according to Hazel Carby, “social convention dictated
an increasingly and more absolute distance between black and white as institutionalized by the Jim Crow laws, (89). Johnson text challenges the distance between black and white and further fills this distance with the experiences of a man who defies the logic of segregationist reason.

Johnson's narrator, who remains nameless throughout the text, presumably due partly to the Jim Crow laws that threaten to immediately silence him, or more certainly due to the character's commitment to put theory into practice, becomes secondary to the events of the text. His story focuses on the growth of a young man who emphasizes the difficulty of maneuvering one's way through American society without racial or personal belonging. His experiences range from a school boy in Georgia who “became something of a solitary” (15) after learning that his legal status did not match his psychological understanding of himself, to a young adult in Jacksonville who befriends an exile from Cuba whose alienation seems to mimic his own alienation in America. As a mature adult he experiences a friendship in New York with a wealthy white American who becomes his patron, takes him to Europe, and attempts to convince him that his return to America is impractical because “[he is] by blood, by appearances, by education, and by tastes a white man”(105). These experiences, although by no means exhaustive, form a significant core of the narrator's tale in that they place the speaker in the position of a racial outsider in which he stands both between and on the periphery of two separate cultures: one designated for blacks and the other designated for whites. His determination, however, to enter these spaces leads him at various points in his narrative to
indulge in the pleasures of “gather[ing] up all the little tragedies of [his] life, and turn[ing] them into a practical joke on society” (1). His fluid movement between and inside America’s restrictive racial spaces seems to achieve his goal of making those who fail to acknowledge a middle-ground of racial interchangeability appear foolish and limited in their inability to see the joke. But unfortunately the narrator’s tale ends with his practical joke turned upside down when he falls in love with a cultured white woman and must decide if he is equipped with enough “moral courage” (146) to publicly identify himself with what he calls “a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals”(139). To his surprise, his lover accepts him in all his racial ambivalence despite his disclosure of his black heritage; they marry and she bares them two children. However, not long after this, his wife dies, and in order to “keep the brand [of inferiority] from being placed upon [his children]” (153), the narrator reclaims his former interest in his practical joke, albeit this time, with a seriousness of purpose, identifying himself as “an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money” (154).

Prior to his decision to publicly claim inclusion with the white race, the narrator had lived a life relatively uncommitted to any racial belonging. In fact, his early approach to both music and reading forms the basis of his general attitude regarding any fixed racial commitment. With music he preferred the freedom of his creativity to that of the confinement of the keys, and “whenever [he] came to words that were difficult or unfamiliar, [he] was prone to bring imagination to the rescue and read from the picture” (6). Consoled by his ability to imagine beyond the fixity
of boundaries and unhampered by the restraints of black and white that the piano keys or printed words might contain, the narrator engages in a performance of perfect possibilities delivered through a freedom of expression. In his willingness to create outside the lines of black and white, he connects with the extensions of himself, not in denial of a given and accepted authenticity or in rejection of any pre-given meaning, but rather as an exploration that freedom offers. Many current critics, however, fail to read the narrator as an independent character who chooses racial freedom over racial insistence, and because of this, the text becomes subject to the confined discourse of racial passing. William L. Andrews, for example, in his introduction to Johnson’s narrative, identifies the text as a novel about “an African-American who passes for white” (xv). Henry Louis Gates reads “Johnson’s phrase ‘ex-colored’ [as] simply another form of “colored,” with an X passed though the word colored (Figures in Black 202). These scholars read the narrator as “passing” because in their view he is seen as “playing on the transgressions of racial boundaries but ultimately reinforce[ing] the premise of a racial essence underlying identity”15 (qtd. in Kawash136). Samira Kawash, however, views passing in a more nuanced perspective in which she states that “[t]he relationship between knowability and visibility is one way of comparing the mulatto figure and the passing figure” (132). She goes on to explain that “[i]n representations of the passing figure, visibility interrupts knowability” whereas “in representation of the  

15 Samara Kawash quotes what she describes as Michael Awkward’s “‘traditional and commonsensical interpretation of passing,’ a concept she calls into question for its emphasis on privileging the idea of “being over appearing” (136).
mulatto, knowability and visibility are made to converge” (132). With this explanation, she notes that “[p]assing for white is unsatisfying for the narrator of Johnson’s Autobiography” (136) because, as she states, the use of the X to define himself “effectively negates both terms of the racial binary” (138). Kawash intimates that the narrator’s border crossing thus fails to meet the standards of a calculated subversive strategy for long-term gain because such an act would require an investment in one race or the other, a position I argue Johnson seems to support through his narrator’s purposeful insistence in maintaining what Kathleen Pfeiffer calls his “individuation” – a goal to which he aspires through his practice of racial objectivity and unbiased group participation.

The narrator’s belief in his ability to uncommittedly observe the races at times affords him the opportunity to play the valiant defender of justice; at other times it permits him to peep into uncensored states of mind. In one specific incident on his voyage to Boston, he delights in taking advantage of his perceived whiteness to expose the senseless bigotry of a white man who asks to have himself removed from the dining car in which a black doctor was dining. Following the man’s removal, the narrator shares the details of the incident with the “offending” black doctor. This sharing leads to a lengthy conversation about the “Negro question” with the doctor, giving the narrator the opportunity to once again cross borders to experience, through observation, what the doctor describes as a facet of blackness not commonly represented as belonging to the race. In a separate incident, in a Pullman car on his way South from Nashville to Atlanta, the narrator privileges
himself to yet another conversation revealing partisan racial attitudes in America. The conversation which took place between a Texan and an old Union soldier became spirited when the Texan “maintained hotly that the Civil War was a criminal mistake on the part of the North and that the humiliation which the South suffered during Reconstruction could never be forgotten. The union man retorted just as hotly that the South was responsible for the war and that the spirit of the unforgettable on its part was the greatest cause of the present friction” (117).

During this conversation, the narrator says nothing. In a sense, he becomes almost invisible, or rather, he becomes what Stephanie Wildman and Adrianne Davis describe as one invested with “the invisibility of privilege” (89). His participation in whiteness at this point, however, seems not to grant him any pleasure or create any sustained affiliation with the group. Although his silence during the conversation between the Texan and the old soldier demonstrates an ostensible connection with the dominant power system, he chooses to opt out of the discussion, thus maintaining the public illusion of whiteness while simultaneously guarding the privacy of his own objective position.

This particular conversation between these two men has generated much literary discussion about the narrator’s position on his own race as well as race in general. Heather R. Andrade makes the claim that the narrator’s blackness prevents him from speaking out and contributing to the conversation out of the fear of exposing his blackness; she goes on to state that because the text itself speaks to the injustices of inequality “Johnson invents a persona ... to refute the prevailing
discourse framing black subjectivity and its ascribed racial inferiority” (264). In a more directed characterization of the narrator as self-serving and devoid of purpose, Gayle Wald characterizes him as a man who refuses to “embody the valorous tradition” of racial uplift (40) by engaging in any racial confrontation. Kathleen Pfeiffer, on the other hand, sees the narrator as a man who respects the “individuation” of the Texan, not for his prejudiced ranting but for his “ability to staunchly maintain his position while recognizing it to be indefensible” (66). I contend simply that the narrator’s silence might be read as acknowledgement of the dominant belief in the inferiority of the black man, which if broken, would strip him of the privilege or riding in the Pullman car that he currently enjoys. By remaining silent, he surreptitiously engages in the rupturing of racial positioning without cost to himself while indulging in the ease and comfort that his ability affords him. This subversive behavior contributes to his enjoyment that comes in knowing that his practical joke “turns the ruling class’s own assumptions about racial purity against them, infecting them with his subversive blood” (Pfeiffer 60) and is heightened by what he secretly views as his status of omniscient superiority that his mixed-race brings. Because he views himself as one of the privileged few who can see beyond the limitations of race, as one whose experiences have broadened his intellectual capacity to observe objectively, he narrates his judgments with an authority of knowledge and seems almost to dare the reader to define him through the application of any racial norm.
Despite what seems to be the narrator’s intention, he is persistently characterized as one who, in one way or the other, betrays the black race. Pfeiffer makes the point that “[m]any critics and readers … give tremendous weight to the moments when the narrator resists full participation in the black culture but fail to credit the degree to which [these incidents] are juxtaposed with resistance to the white culture” (67). One might see this balance in his contemplation on the “race question,” as the narrator observes a sameness in both the colored and white man. He makes the claim that “the colored man look[s] at everything through the prism of his relationship to a society as a colored man … [and] most of his mental efforts run through the narrow channel bounded by his rights and wrongs … The same things,” he posits, “may be said of the white man of the South; most of his mental efforts run through one narrow channel; his life as a man and a citizen…” (55). The objective balance with which the narrator contemplates the position of each man, calling special attention to the sameness of the words used to describe both men, albeit from different visions, may be indicative of the narrator’s talent to bring new meaning to old ideas – a skill which he has previously perfected in his young piano playing days when he played by ear, choosing “not to be hampered by notes” (5) he learned

The narrator who depicts himself as a loner also positions himself as one who possesses the ability to acknowledge the reality of racial conditions from a non-partisan view and seems almost to pride himself on his unique ability to read the condition(s) under which the narrow channels of black/white relations might
merge in mutual and respectful recognition. This self-indulged idealism is the
dream of a child later transformed into the dream of an adult idealist who believes
that through the blending of ragtime and classical music he could create a “universal
appeal” (73) that would form the basis of America’s healing. But the text ends
without the narrator’s dream of creating the foundation for America’s racial
reconciliation ever coming to fruition because America forces whiteness on the
narrator by demanding he make the decision between returning to the South
“amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggles, of the black people of
the United States” (105) or remaining abroad and “avail[ing] [himself] of every
possible opportunity” (141). In other words, his return to the American south
necessitates he become a raced American and thus subjects himself to mental
attitudes that will henceforth predicate the conditions under which he will live.

Despite these seeming restraints in the era of Jim Crow, the narrator returns
to the American south to pursue his patriotic and artistic endeavors, but it is not
long following his return that he becomes witness to the hanging of a black man. The
experience fills him with a humiliation and shame, both for himself and his country
(137). This incident precipitates the narrator’s decision to become a “successful
white man”; and although he recognizes his resolve as a selfish one because he
never fulfills his dream of publicly “bring[ing] glory and honor to the Negro race”
(32) through music as he had set out to do, William Andrews reminds us that
“Johnson allows him to succeed as a writer” (Introduction xxvii). Through this
achievement the narrator claims a voice for that often ignored in-between space of
racial nothingness, which he documents through a first person account, exposing the internal discourses that inform how we read bodies while demonstrating how the act of writing brings about concepts that imagine and materialize a meeting ground between the internal self and the external words.

The narrator’s semi-touristic journey through both America and Europe provides him with the fodder for the documentation of an experience that gives him a type of authority to “other” those he represents as outsiders to himself. He persistently offers an assessment of culture as he describes the cultures he views and experiences: “Paris is the concrete expression of the gaiety, regard for symmetry, love for art, and, I might add, of the morality of the French people. London stands for the conservatism, the solidarity, the utilitarianism, and I might add, the hypocrisy of the Anglo-Saxon” (100), he tells his reader. The seemingly objective gaze with which he depicts the cultures he lives with and through provides him with what he sees as his authority to reread the practices and attitudes of American culture from the perspective of an objective outsider and offers the reader a mediated look at a shameful America whose “general ideas” he claims, “hark back to a former century, some of them to the Dark Ages” (138).

In his retrospective narrative, the now ex-colored man provides the reader with a reasoned contemplation of how his own particularity as a racially fluid man offers valuable insight into the “race problem” and how this insight becomes his departure towards liberation from racial fetters. However, because Johnson’s narrator also participates in what Kawash characterizes as “the fully racialized
society of the United States” (138), to position himself as a racial outsider, who speaks a language of the racially alternative is, according to Howard Winant, to be in the dangerous position “of having no identity” (qtd. in Kawash 138) at all. In seeming recognition of this fact, Johnson presents a narrator whose refusal to submit to the experience of a specific historically situated self leaves him alone and invisible, although confident of his own authoritative right to view and tell. In this regard, we might view the narrator’s tale as an untraditional autobiography whose aim is not so much to “show how past history has led to his current being” (Onley 47) but rather to offer a counter American voice that questions those lines of subjectification and objectification, which the narrator himself questions in the end of his tale as he finds himself “gazing at the towers of New York and wondering what future that city held in store for [him]” (139).

In his discussion of Johnson’s Autobiography as an “improvised” slave narrative, Robert Stepto maintains that “the overwhelming effect of the Ex-Coloured man’s lack of history, place, name, and referential pronoun in the “Preface” to [the narrator’s] life story ... portray[s] him less as a human being than as a fact ... (98). Although Stepto’s argument situates the narrator as a representation of the black experience of inequity and oppression and does so by focusing on the features of the text that stresses its likeness to that of the slave narrative in which Stepto sees Johnson’s narrator as the converse trope of the slave hero, one might also read Stepto’s observations in which he compares the narrator’s rhetorical omissions with that of Douglass’s as a means of viewing a modern-day voice that is much more
complicated and nuanced than the antebellum voices that fought for racial liberation and equality. Johnson’s strategy of omissions, objectivities, and subjectivities depicts the reflections of an ex-colored man whose experiences are so far removed from the experience of raced Americans that his Americaness becomes almost incomprehensible to those rooted in the idea of a historical self and thus can only be represented as personal fact. Specifically speaking, the narrator’s discourse may be described as the product of his illusive borderland experience, and his cultural spaces, varied as they are, serve as an illustration of the fluidity of the narrator’s true-life position, which highlight the living histories that inform his social self. I therefore argue against Stepto’s reading and the reading of others who see Johnson’s text as a discourse of tragedy in which a “failed race man” (Wald 36) exposes his perils and travails that present him from being “less than heroic” (Stepto 104); for in a sense, I see Johnson’s narrator as an Everyman who stands up against and traverses the fastened lines of acceptability. My reading of Johnson’s Autobiography assumes the position that it is neither the physical nor material quality of fight that defines the narrator’s success or failure, but rather it is the dream itself that defines the narrator as a courageous man who chooses resistance over complicity until he is unfortunately forced to make the more practical choice between poverty and success.

In Gayle Wald’s discussion of Johnson’s text, she notes “The Autobiography is frequently cited as ... a work that centers on the failure of the nameless protagonist to live up to the standards of racial self-assertion associated with the heroic
tradition” (36). I propose instead that if we view the narrator as a man who resists the positioning of himself as a historical subject and one who gives voice to the understanding of the reality of choices available to those who live in the in-between spaces of identity politics, we allows ourselves a depth of reading not commonly associated with prescriptive race-reading. And while I agree that the narrator’s autobiography might not succeed in “uplifting” the black race, I read it as a work that succeeds in defining the space of plurality that serves and promotes individual empowerment for the racially undefined.

In an effort to make clear the significance of his memories and his current situation as a racial outsider, Johnson’s narrator relies on his ability to create and recreate the language of both the racial insider and the outsider. His first task in this effort becomes the necessity of freeing language from its restrictive racial claim so that it operates freely with the borderland culture, functioning much as he does by overlapping and juxtaposing what M. M. Bakhtin refers to as “intentional ideology”16 with situational experiences. The narrator’s ability to write his experiences with the realization of how both his space and his differently cultured awareness contribute to the negotiation of his positionality becomes an empowering construction of his voice and his agenda of political viability. But equally as important to this idea of revised visibility, I see my study of Johnson’s text as an opportunity to address so

16 M.M. Bakhtin states in his essay “Discourse in the Novel” that embedded within each language lies specific intension that is expressed using concrete words. He intimates that meaning is derived more fully from the intention of the expression through words than from the words themselves. This intention is the result of group understanding which creates “possibilities [that] are realized … and are made concrete, particular and are permeated with concrete value judgments” (289).
many of those traditional readings that view Johnson’s narrative as the confession of a black character who passes for white because although many of these readings acknowledge the slippery slope of racial discourse and the differently political voice of the mixed-race character, in the final analysis, too many of them ultimately return to a reliance on the comfortable American premise of racial essence.

The narrator, much like Johnson himself, has traveled the world and in his retrospective analysis of the “race problem” has come to understand that the idea of defining one’s self by race is a specifically American concept that almost always demands that in order to read one’s self as raced, one must do so to the exclusion of the knowledge that one’s living history is as much as part of one’s self, if not more so, than one’s biological history. Thus when Johnson tells his reader in his real-life autobiography that from the moment he set foot in France, he had “a sense of being just a human being” (*Along This Way* 211), he seems almost to reiterate the sentiments of his narrator, spoken twenty years earlier, which references America’s “race problem” as the core of America’s ills. The narrator tells his reader that “the United States puts a greater premium on color, or better, lack of color, than upon anything else in the world” (*Autobiography* 113), and it is this awareness that motivates him to “divulge the great secret of [his] life” (1), to make visible his experiences, to engage in a vision of the present, and to expose the varied textual layers of his being that contradict the historically dichotomized position between the esentialized historical self into which he has been forced and the composite *interbeing* he has come to be.
The narrator’s autobiography begins in the childhood years where the narrator establishes, for the reader, his middle-ground experience that follows him through the remainder of his life. He describes himself as “a perfect little aristocrat” (4) and details his Georgia house, giving special attention to the vegetable garden that ran behind the house: “I can still recall the thrill of joy, excitement, and wonder it gave me to go on an exploring expedition through it, to find the blackberries, both ripe and green, that grew along the edge of the fence” (2), he tells his reader. This thrill he mentions echoes his previously stated thrill regarding the exposure of his secret because only through its exposure can the narrator address what he sees as one of the chief issues of the race problem, which he states resides “in the mental attitude of whites” (121), and which Johnson describes in his 1933 autobiography as the necessity of “sav[ing] the white man’s soul” (Along This Way 318). This thrill of which he speaks becomes the nearing of a goal that seeks to offer a new racial perspective, albeit at the risk of losing the self he has come to be.

From the very beginning of the text, the narrator establishes his innate curiosity about the confluence of time, space, and bodies and details his efforts to claim his position as a racial interbeing\textsuperscript{17} through the voice of seeming objectivity. He documents his childhood memories with adult intention: “The blackberries both ripe and green that grow along the edge of the fence” (12) of his childhood home speak to the common ground in which differences meet and suggests the means by

\textsuperscript{17} I use this term to refer to the concept in which all races and cultures integrate and coexist in an unconventional, yet open spirit of interconnectedness.
which his text will mimic his vision of America’s racial freedom, and more specifically, his unbounded racial wanderings. Together in their differences the blackberries flourish. The fence seems not to separate but instead creates a space for growth. This is the narrator’s thrill, materialized in the discovery that given time, fruitful coexistence becomes a reality. The narrator combines both the ripe and green (emphasis added) together in the pleasures of his discoveries. He neither separates nor evaluates the qualities of his blackberries with bias for one or the other, and in doing so he begins his narrative of journey in which he suggests an alternative view to America’s dichotomous conception of race.

Johnson’s narrator thus carries the burden of attempting to achieve what others might consider a social and political impossibility, and because of this ambition some read him as untrustworthy narrator. Numerous critics, among them Salim Washington, have argued that Johnson’s novel “is careful to draw [its] protagonist in an ironic stance that allows the reader to see the narrator as sometimes unreliable, and even more damming, unwilling to fully participate in life” (234). One must be careful, however, to remember that the narrator’s choice to “divulge the great secret of [his] life” (1) is a deliberate choice to remove the veil that has hidden and silenced those who live on the “fence” of cultures. His choice to divulge his secret also allows him the ability to reclaim his birthright, not as a black man, but as a man who is both black and white, both “ripe and green.” He does this with a public confession of his transgressions while simultaneously maintaining his personal privacy. Kawash addresses these moments of seeming obscurity in his
narrative, pointing out that the narrator’s “characters are like pieces on a playing board, playing out particular and discrete narrative functions in relation to the narrator” (137). His characters remain nameless because, as Kawash points out, “The stability and identity of the subject are not inherent in the subject; rather they are secured by the functioning of a proper name” (137). Everyone thus remains nameless because neither he nor his characters form the core of the narrator’s story. His need to negotiate a shared space within America’s rigid racial consciousness for the quiet borderland voices therefore takes precedence over the development of characters whose stability is not predicated on their individualities but rather on the situation in which they are currently seen or engaged. The narrator thus proceeds with the “telling” of his story, knowing that it is “likely, even certain to lead to his undoing” (1). This, however, is a price the narrator is willing to pay to divulge “the motives which prompts [him to reveal his boundary crossings]” (1), which might be described as his last and mature attempt to “make history” (154). What therefore appears as the narrator’s unreliability might otherwise be seen as a rhetorical strategy to mirror the borderland space of instability which the narrator consistently occupies. His eloquence, control of his disclosure, and rationalization of his time chosen to disclose his “secret,” permits him to voice his agenda without losing his authority in the process. He delivers himself to his readers as the product of a historically defined subject – a black man by American definition whose cultural identity denotes but does not limit the scope of his identity.
In establishing the grounds for the narrator’s unreliability, Donald Goellnicht argues that the narrator “appears to be a subject of considerable self-knowledge; but at other times he is blind to the narrowness and bigotry of his own perspective and thus becomes the object of Johnson’s and our, ironic gaze”(2). Although it is fair to say that no perspective is totally unbiased and that the narrator is, without doubt, a man of somewhat biased judgment in favor of the educated, his commentary on the current black/white psychology reads as a reasoned critique of America’s racial reality. On his first night in Atlanta, he comes in contact with a large group of poor blacks. The narrator tells his reader “[t]heir unkempt appearance, the shambling slouching gait and loud laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion”(40). In commenting on what he sees, and as a means of capturing the intent of his discourse, which is to provide an objective presentation and analysis of both black and white races, the narrator first acknowledges his own subject position as a racially undefined man in relation to the subjects he describes. He does not know their language and is not privy to the dynamics of group belonging, which causes him alarm and offends “the perfect little aristocrat” in him. However, over time the narrator comes to understand the root of both his own disgust, derived from his lack of understanding of racial matters and the part that whites play in creating his disgust.

Against the backdrop of his subjects who, in their unknowing reveal themselves in their most unflattering ideas, the narrator speaks from a position of the informed outsider who discloses the secrets of the inside as one privileged to the
boundaries of culture. His reporting infiltrates the sanctuary of culture and defies the rules that regulate the circulation of speech regarding who is privileged to say what about whom. His method of observation and reflection, assists in producing a text that provides a space to acknowledge the cultural life of the in-between subject in that it does not feature identity as confined and prescribed and instead presents it as something that is ongoing and independent. This space resists the repression of language that might otherwise be construed as morally unacceptable, or racially inappropriate. It refuses to lend itself to what Paul Gilroy refers to as a "prepolitical, sociobiological, or biocultural feature ... of deterministic thinking" (103). Instead the narrator subverts the scripts of everyday performance with his objective gaze. He “[catches his] first sight of colored people in large numbers” (39). He then categorizes them, “in respect to their relations with the whites” (56) by placing them into three distinct groups: the desperate class, the domestic servants, and the independent and educated workmen and tradesmen. In speaking of the desperate class, he likens them to “a trained lion with low muttered growls” (56), and views their attitude toward life as “cheap” (56). However, his position does not intentionally seek to dehumanize this class of blacks as some critics might suggest.

The fact is the narrator reports on a class of people with an honestly uncharacteristic of those regulated by group belonging. In other words, he states what the black man must not state and what the white man cannot publically state, which to some, who refuse to acknowledge the borderland existence of the narrator, might read as a betrayal of his blackness.
The agenda of the text, prefaced by his fictional publishers, introduces the narrative as a work that creates a “vivid and startling new picture of conditions brought about by the race question in the United States [and] makes no special plea for the Negro, but shows a dispassionate, though sympathetic, view of conditions as they actually exist between the whites and blacks to-day” (xxxiii). Kathleen Pfeiffer, who discusses the protagonist as a man who defines himself by qualities of individualism, reflects on the means by which the narrator achieves his individuation, concluding that “both [racial] identities are legitimately [the narrator’s] to claim” (65), noting that “we have for years ignored the novel’s rich implications” (71). She goes on to detail how the novel seeks to dismantle the legitimacy of racial essences. In pursuing this line of reasoning even further, I submit that Johnson’s narrative also creates a unique analytical vantage point by which to reflect on America’s racial obsession. The narrator’s racial duality provides us with a perspective of mind that a civilized society dare not speak.

In the early stages of his autobiography, the narrator introduces us to an incident in which he begins his education in American racial practice and identification. The incident takes place in school and is conducted by the authority of a school principal who enters the classroom and asks the “white scholars” (11) to stand. The narrator stands with those who look most like him, but after being asked to sit and rise with the “others,” he becomes confused. The narrator sits, although it is uncertain if he rises again with the others, leaving the reader to assume that at this point in his life, although aware of basic physical differences, the narrator is
unaware of the role that history, loyalty, and racial consciousness plays in racial identification. Having taken himself for “white” because he neither sees nor experiences any differences between him and his white classmates, the narrator faces what Judith Berzon characterizes in her seminal work on mixed-race literature as “the signifying moment of identity.”

Previously unmindful of his mother’s “brown skin” (12) and the lack of softness in her hair that would otherwise signal his inclusion in the black race, and following the school incident, the narrator begins to take note of his mother’s non-white features as he reevaluates his own “whiteness.” His racial awakening leads him to ask his mother “am I a nigger?” (12). Despite what seems the use of an offensive epithet, the word nigger here does not function as a political affinity to whiteness nor is it a signification of bigotry. In the narrator’s childlike mind the word holds no historical existence, and for this reason the narrator employs it as an appropriate means of communicating his curiosity about himself. His aversion to be classified as a “nigger” comes from his knowledge that “in some way [blacks ] were looked down upon” (9) and he did not wish to share the brand of inferiority with anyone – black or white. For this reason he helps his school friend “Red Head” spell words in a spelling competition because “[he] felt that if [his friend] failed it would in some way be [his] failure” (8) as well despite Red’s whiteness. His mother, however, quells his anxiety by telling him that he is “not a nigger” (12), and that she is “not white” (12) but within him, he carries the “best blood of the South” (12). Having never known his father or the life of his father, the narrator has no means of
reconciling the difference between being a “nigger” and being one who carries the best blood: “The thought did not cross my mind that he was different from me ...,” discloses the narrator, “for not withstanding my changed relations with most of my school-mates, I had only a faint knowledge of prejudice and no idea at all how it ramified and affected our entire social organism”(25). The narrator’s upbringing had been one of racial neutrality and he had neither claimed an affinity to the black race nor one to the white race. His best friends comprised one boy from each race and he divided his pastime between music and school books. Nothing about the narrator’s childhood speaks of a fixed racial identity, and for this reason, the school incident, which identifies him as black and strips him of his neutrality becomes a signifying moment of his life. This is the point at which the narrator recognizes that his identity is marked by social disapproval and at which point the text takes on urgency for a new discourse – a “coming out,” so to speak, that infuses conventional representations of race with new meaning.18

The arbitrariness of racial classification leads the narrator to become fixated on the concept of race and overly conscious of his ancestry and himself as a product of a multitude of differences and experiences. James Davis cites the “one-drop rule” as the general operating definition of what constitutes blackness in America. He asserts that “in the absence of proof of a specific black ancestor, merely being known as black in the community has usually been accepted by the courts as

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18 This definition is based partially on Martha Gever’s discussion of how the gay/lesbian culture strategizes to create a public place of dignity where identities that do not conform to the norm become normed. The narrator’s process of self creation mimics what Giver refers to as the gay/lesbian effort of “project social visibility” (196).
evidence of black ancestry” (9). In the case of Johnson’s narrator, there seems no legal confusion regarding his blackness because the 1896 Supreme Court decision of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case “[w]ithout ruling directly on the definition of a Negro” ... classifies “a Negro or Black as any person with any black ancestry” (Davis 8). The narrator’s problem, however, arises with the discrepancy he experiences between the legal and social definition of his assigned race. According to W.E.B. DuBois, who argues for a sociohistorical definition of race in his 1897 paper titled “The Conservation of Races,” race may be defined as “a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (qtd. in Appiah 23). Despite what some scholars such as Anthony Appiah see as problematic in DuBois’s definition, (citing it for its reliance on the scientific definition of family while simultaneously trying to transcend it) the fact remains, the narrator’s classification as black carries with it an implicit understanding of belonging and a possession of a specific slave history that almost requires a responsibility to uplift the race. And herein lies the difficulty in reading the narrator and in coming to terms with the multilayered facets of the text. Because the text highlights questions about the validity of the continued circulation of racial representations and questions those interpretations through the use of its distant voyeuristic, unmanned mixed-race character who “would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race (139), it stands as a challenge to conventional views that imagine identities as definitive. Without doubt, the narrator’s school experience changes
him. He tells us that since that day “[he has been] forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man” (14). Because his school incident has raced him, the narrator can never return to his idealist state of neutrality, and as a result he thus “[becomes] something of a solitary”(15), obsessed with his own fate and his attempts to make his mixed-race identity a workable and recognizable product to an uncomprehending society invested in the legacy of slavery and segregation.

At several points in the text, Johnson reminds the reader of the crisis that race orientation brings on an individual who operates outside the margins of clear racial paradigms. Following his mother’s death, and now old enough to manage the compromised position that his racial heritage offers him, a naïve and sheltered narrator heads South on his first adult journey. He travels partly in search of what his mother referred to as “the best blood in the South” (12), and partly in search of the black heritage she offered through song. While on his journey he continues to narrate his impressions with the curious detachment of a scientist: “And here in [Atlanta] I caught my first sight of colored people in large numbers” (39), he reports. But unfortunately, these Georgians disappoint the narrator’s expectations possibly because they did not reflect the eloquence and sophistication of one of his only intimate references to the black race, his schoolboy friend Shiny, or because he had so romanticized the South through the songs of his mother that the reality of black poverty shocks him to the point of disappointment. Their “unkempt appearance, the shambling slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in
[him] a feeling of almost repulsion. Only one thing about them awoke a feeling of interest; that was their dialect” (40), which represented a world the narrator found both fascinating and repulsive. Only in retrospect does the narrator come to understand his own reaction to these “strange” people. He realizes that he too, along with every other American, both black and white and in-between, has become subject to the influences of racial propaganda: “log cabins and plantations and dialect-speaking ‘darkies’ are perhaps better known in American literature than any other single picture of our national life,” he says. “Indeed, they form an ideal and exclusive literary concept of the American Negro to such an extent that it is almost impossible to get the reading public to recognize him in any other setting”(122). The narrator is no exception to this influence except in the fact that his racially legal standing places him in an awkward position of having to confront the juncture point of two very different cultural sites inscribed by rigid social practices to which he cannot conform. Because the narrator’s legal blackness contrasts with the everydayness of his experience, his problem becomes how to reconcile the immense gap between the familiarity that he lives and the similarity that he is expected to perform. In order to enter the space of blackness where similarity purportedly exists, he must acknowledge that while he does not fit comfortably in the discursive space of the black community, he also does not fit comfortably in the ideological space of the white community. It is largely the narrator’s knowledge of the community’s language that grants him access.
As he wanders further South and meets a community of Cuban cigar makers, he immediately notices that “cigar making is one trade in which the color line is not drawn” (49). Again the narrator becomes enchanted by the “uproarious conversation [where] everyone talked at once [with] loud exclamations, rolling ‘carambas,’ [and] menacing gesticulations” (49). “The conversation was carried on entirely in Spanish and my ignorance of the language subjected me more to alarm than embarrassment” (49), her tells his reader. This is the alarm of exclusion. His whiteness neither privileges him, nor does his blackness ingratiate him to his fellow cigar workers. The knowledge of language which he lacked in the South becomes his only means to control his environment and his place in it. He soon learns “not only to make cigars, but also to smoke, to swear, and to speak Spanish (53), for which he was repaid in the honor of “being selected as a reader” (53).

The narrator’s engagement in the language reveals an active interest in the culture, but more importantly, it reveals a fluidity of identity in which he practices a freedom that opens identity to layers of experiences that ultimately and finally meets with the similarity of others in a revolving familiarity of give and take. In contemplating Stuart Hall’s theory of racial evolution, we are reminded that we become what we experience for “we cannot speak for very long with any exactness, about one experience, one identity, without acknowledging its other side—the differences and discontinuities” which Hall refers to as “the Caribbean’s uniqueness,” (70), and what Johnson documents as an American reality. Through the participation in language, including its unspoken zones, the narrator achieves
recognition, community, and identity. He no longer stands on the margins of a culture looking in, but rather he speaks as an insider looking out while recognizing the irony in his increasing alienation as an American citizen even as he searches for American inclusion. His regular attendance at a Jacksonville church brings him a familiarity with the black race and a closer perspective to the inside of black culture. Although he had previously “formulated a theory of what it was to be colored” (54), he was now “getting the practice” (54). In other words, he was now engaged in the practice of language and behavior that defines the culture.

Although community does not come naturally for the narrator, his ability to grasp the language of others, to mimic their rhetoric, and to perform their behavior endows him with his own personal authority to speak for the whole. He learns that despite the lack of support from the mainstream culture in his effort to reject an already constructed racial definition, to be an American of mixed-race means developing a consciousness where nothing is rejected or abandoned and where one accepts the possibility that contradictions can meet in creative motions to form new paradigms. Such is the mission of the narrator’s creative indulgence in language. His first-person narration functions partly as a pastiche of the various communities with which he engages and observes and partly as a documentation of his realization of himself as a borderland reality. In fact, one might read the narrator’s entire autobiography as a collection of individuals at their various stages, channeled through the unifying voice of one man. M.M. Bakhtin’s discussion of the novel as a “social phenomenon” where form and content meet in discourse may be helpful in
clarifying how the narrator’s rhetorical style perceives and exhibits the borderland space which the mixed-race subject inhabits. Bakhtin sees the novel as “a diversity of social speech types” that constitutes the internal stratification of any single national language. He develops this idea by illustrating how “the novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the diversity of speech types” (262-63). With this idea in mind, I see Johnson’s text as a representation of an ideology, in which the part represents the whole, in which the narrator actively and convincingly performs the speech of the various social types he observes. He thus becomes that which he illustrates – a totality of races and cultures.

One of the best illustrations of the narrator’s ability to create a “social heteroglossia” (to use the words of Bakhtin) comes in the narrator’s description of the conversation between the old Civil War soldier and the Texan he meets in the Pullman car on his way South. In providing a description of the two men, the narrator plays the part of each. He begins with the voice of an older Union soldier who gives his impressions about America’s current state of affairs. With the language of the northerner, the narrator begins recounting the sentiment of the old soldier who comments on America’s current political position: “Can you imagine ... what would have been the condition of things eventually if there had been no war, and the South had been allowed to follow its course? Instead of one great, prosperous country with nothing before it but the conquests of peace, a score of petty republics, as in Central and South America, wasting their energies in war with
each other or in revolutions”(117), asserts the old soldier. Implicit in the reporting of the question and its reasoning is the narrator understanding of the layers of whiteness. The narrator engages in this conversation as a passive bystander, knowing that the old soldier’s direct speech differs from that of his intent. In direct opposition to him, the Texan, who argues against him responds by stating “anything—no country at all—is better than having niggers over you” (117). This is the point at which the two arguments overlap in intent despite their seeming difference in words and content. The old soldier’s primary concern is not the equality of the Negro, nor is he particularly concerned with the Negro’s reputation as an inferior being, but rather it is his own economic interest that drives his passion to oppose the Texan’s adamant bigotry. The soldier’s comparison of the nation to Central and South America highlights what Bakhtin refers to as the “intentional dimension” of speech. The Texan’s mention of Central America and South America carries with it an implication of American superiority to other dark-raced nations that are characterized as unreasoned and primitive in their “score of petty nations fighting against each other” (Autobiography 117).

Quite similar to the manner in which he outlines, performs, and analyzes the various classes of blacks, the narrator performs and analyzes the various types of whites demonstrated through the speech that he mimics. The old Civil War solider represents the class of those who exhibit what according to George Lipsitz is “a possessive investment in whiteness” (62). In viewing the races of others he “stigmatizes and exploits them while at the same time preserving the value of
whiteness” (Lipsitz 63). To the reasoned intellectual argument of the old soldier, the Texan, who the “argument has passed a little beyond his limits” (119), responds by using the rhetoric of pathos: “Do you want to treat niggers as equals. Do you want to see ‘em sitting around in our parlors? Do you want to see a mulatto South? To bring it right home to you, would you let your daughter marry a nigger?” (119). These questions, which come at the last third of the narrative, draw the reader’s attention to the fact that the Texan is helpless in his ability to create a reasoned discussion and the thus succumbs to the power of emotion. The language used here by the Texan, although similar to the language used by the old soldier, differs in its “intentional dimension.” The Texan’s emotional argument positions his case as an oppositional contest of them against us. He resorts to an argument developed through the rhetoric of fear, which finds roots in the everyday speech of his Southern contemporaries. He sees no humanity in the Negro and his passion is inspired by the fear of losing the privilege that his whiteness brings. The old soldier acknowledges the achievement of the Negro and understands that by ignoring his successes he will not “keep [the Negro] in the same place into which inferior men naturally fall” (Autobiography 118).

This exchange that the narrator provides demonstrates the interrelationship of black and white. It also offers a glimpse to the internal stratification of whiteness wherein whites become defined by their relationship to the “race question.” The conversation between the old soldier and the Texan ends with the old soldier conceding the he “wouldn’t consent to [his] daughter marrying a nigger, [although]
that doesn’t prevent [him] treating a black man fairly” (119). The two agree they can never convince each other of the validity of their viewpoints and the conversation concludes with almost all the riders in the Pullman car partaking in a drink from the Texan’s flask. The narrator ends this scene with a loose unity of the two men. It is, however, important to note that the old soldier represents a difference from the Texan in that he does not promote racism as much as he promotes an understanding of race and the social conditions that regulate race relations – a fact in which we are all implicated. The narrator’s recounting of this exchange – an exchange not commonly accessible to blacks – illustrates both the diversity that exists within the white community and the narrator’s ability to penetrate the depths of individual culture. In a sense the narrator breaks down the stereotypically pathologized position of the evil white man, and similar to the manner in which he demonstrates the diversity that exists in the black community, he demonstrates an equal variation of type in the white community. In other words, he positions communities as an ever-changing concept brought about only through the educated who fight valiantly, but often tacitly, against a static and reductive construction of the “inferior” class. This awareness is important for the narrator because while he acknowledges the continued sedimented line of racial demarcation in America, he does, in fact, also acknowledge his unique position to access the “other,” be the “other,” and speak about and from the “other,” and doing so to look back at himself as a modern product born out of his bidirectional voice. Thus, when Siobhan Somerville argues that ”Johnson implicitly criticizes the protagonist’s inability to see class and racial hierarchies that structure his relationship to his patron, a blindness that implicates
the narrator in his own exploitation” (119), to this I argue that both the narrator and his patron are socially bridged together by their understanding of American cultural expectations and racial performance that does not immediately exist for either one of them.

Much of the relationship between the narrator and his white patron occurs outside the United States, specifically in Paris, where the narrator can finally be “an American” (99). The relationship between the narrator and his patron therefore becomes more complicated and nuanced than a relationship that occurs in the United States between a “white” patron and what can be none other than a “black” beneficiary. The rigid boundaries of race and racial expectations become softened as one adapts to a culture that is “more logical and freer from prejudices” (Johnson, Autobiography 99) than one whose history has been built on instilling the inferiority of the black race. Thus, it is not so much that the narrator “mistakes the superficial appearance of similarity between [him and his patron] as evidence of their equal status” (Somerville 120), but it is rather that Europe frees him from the burden of confining himself to a historically situated self and to reading his patron as an American invested in his whiteness. The narrator becomes the educated, the agent of change, who although cognizant of the limitations that exist between him and his patron (for he can never fully rid himself of his American sensibilities), chooses to enact what Johnson later describes regarding racial superiority as the necessity of “see[ing] that what is imaginary, artificial, and false cannot eternally withstand actually and truth” (ATW 119).
Convinced of the necessity of change, Johnson’s narrator leaves his patron in Europe to begin what he sees as his calling to “carry out the ambition that [he] formed when a boy” (101). He decides to make tangible his agenda of communicating America’s interconnectedness and common humanity by making visible the interconnection of two very separate styles of music: ragtime and classical. Through the blending of these two forms of music, the narrator visualizes a space of displacement and reconnection in which elements of both the African and European traditions combine and become reinterpreted as the music and voice of American interconnectedness. In this regard the narrator’s autobiography thus becomes equally as politically driven as it is personally driven. It becomes a means of balancing the difference between the narrator’s “being as outsider” and his “being at home.” Cathy Boeckmann’s reading of the narrator’s music as a “way to free character from that body it is assumed to inhabit” (198) locates music as a means to present an alternative vision to the scientific approach of race that dominates Post-Reconstruction thought. Although Boeckmann does not view the narrator as a non-raced subject, and in fact, views him as a “passer,” her argument is a valid one in that it implicitly argues for the separation of “character” and body. It sees the role of music in the text as a way to provide “an alternative sociology” (198) to the scientific understanding of race. The narrator’s project to elevate black music to a status of popular acceptance and respect takes on the challenge of rewriting the popular negative image of blacks, intertwining it with the already accepted positive image of whites through a blending of language and rhythms. This project symbolizes the narrator’s “coming out,” which represents more than an individual
declaration of his differently raced self. It is an action that Martha Gever, in her reference to the gay and lesbian experience, describes as “a fundamentally social process that defies social disapprobation and infuses conventional representation of [...] racial] deviance and moral degeneracy ... with new meaning” (194). His project promotes a separate distinction of body, voice, and character that in a racialized society, according to Beckmann, is always conflated, leaving little room for individualism and direction. The narrator’s project plays against this conflation, building an outward movement towards the process of personal and social racial revision.

Unfortunately the narrator’s dream or the affirmation of subjective autonomy and racial unity, born out of a vision of idealism, does not materialize for him. The persistent horrors of a culture bent on dehumanizing the black man through a systemic approach of violence and fear makes clear for the narrator the futility of his goal in any public measure. Witnessing a black man’s hanging profoundly affects him. Never before has America’s racism been expressed to him in such concrete terms. His life as a “perfect little aristocrat” had sheltered him from these horrors, and his refusal in adulthood to accept the rules of color division has blinded him from the injustices that mark the division between the experiences of a black man and those of a white man. But here, under the burnt body of a black man, the narrator experiences blackness, in a fullness he cannot deny, as a man of any color who owns a conscience. As is typical of many scholars, Boeckmann views the narrator’s witnessing as part of his final decision to pass, to “fall back on his
invisible whiteness” (200). Arguably so, this scene stands out as another critical turning point in the narrator’s ambition. It forces him to face his marginality and in making the decision to quietly leave the scene by “following the drift” (135), he comes to recognize himself as one alienated in and estranged from his country that he believed carried the potential to move beyond old hatreds. His movement away from the scene takes him towards a silent space where he retreats into the safety of voicelessness although always remaining reminiscent of the promise that words and music carry. But for now, in the year 1912, the hanging signifies the rootedness of American hate and the steadfast hold traditional knowledge assumes in the American mind. It ignores the fact that, “We are a great race, ... standing on a pile of past races,” which, when ready to acknowledge, will allow us to “enjoy our position with a little less arrogance”(Johnson, Autobiography 119).

While the narrator acknowledges the greatness of the contributions that black Americas gave to American society, he also recognizes his own paralysis in advancing the achievements made. Gayle Wald makes a compelling argument that the lynching serves to finally and concretely emasculate the narrator by disjoining him from the “valorous tradition initiated by ex-slaves such as Douglass” (39) and positioning him among the ranks of the disloyal passers. I believe, however, that Wald fails to give just due to the narrator’s complete and startling dissolution of his dream. Reality tarnishes the narrator and leaves him powerless to challenge what he knows is a democracy in need of revisualization. He gives into the power that echoes the rhetoric of white nationalism, and despite the narrator’s claim that “all
the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew it was shame” (139), what he does not admit outright is that his shame is not having the “earnestness and faith” (154) of a Booker T. Washington.

Johnson closes his narrative without ever concretely resolving the question of how the narrator finally participates in America’s racial contract. Johnson’s autobiography, however, provides some insight in understanding the motivations behind the narrator’s silence regarding what part he should play in the uplifting of the race. At one point in his autobiography, Johnson reflects on a speech he attended given by Frederick Douglass. He recalls how the speaker filled him with “a feeling of awe” (Along This Way 61). But the one statement that stood out to Johnson as a statement of courageous autonomy was the one regarding Douglass’s marriage: “In my first marriage I paid compliments to my mother’s race; in my second marriage I paid compliments to the race of my father” (61). Douglass’ delivery of racial honesty that comes without reservation thoroughly impresses Johnson. He realizes that not every man possesses courage enough to speak a truth few American are willing to hear. Douglass publicly acknowledges his birthright, claiming both his racial heritages, neither forsaking nor betraying the influence of either part of his duel inheritance.

Looking back now on his potential as a lone man of revision and uplift, long after the days of Douglass, the narrator feels “small and selfish” (154). Although he does not speak of Douglass, he speaks of Booker T. Washington who does not bend
to fear, nor to the vituperation of those who opposed his assimilationist practices.

He was a man, much like Douglass, who followed his ambition through, and, who for the narrator, stands as a man much larger than he. Rather than offering himself and his children up to the injustices of blackness, the narrator instead decides to participate in America as the only means afforded to Americans. While claiming himself “an ordinarily successful white man” (154), he writes his autobiography, breaking the silence that perpetuates the proliferation of stereotypes commonly used to inform the regimes of domination and repression while finally speaking for himself and others like him. His autobiography, however, reads only partially as an autobiography because it is not the personal life of the narrator that grounds the text. Instead it is his voice that cries out for revision of American’s racial consciousness that takes center stage. As a means of achieving his goal, the narrator attempts to provide an honest declaration of America’s racial reality while maintaining a life of a safe and quiet banality. But while America forces whiteness on the narrator as the only route to success, safely, and publication, he closes his narrative by reminding his readers that he does not forget his dreams kept safe in a little box which he sometimes opens.

The narrator ends his tale with a discussion of the regret and the remorse he promises in his first pages, confessing that he has failed himself and America because of his inability to make public his vision of America as a place where the metaphor of “blackberries, both ripe and green, that grow along the edge of the fence” (2) may become a racial reality. In his last words, however, he reminds the
reader of his dreams, which he now stores privatively, locked away from public scrutiny. The pages of the yellowing manuscript, which the narrator tells us he occasionally views signifies a possibility yet to come. While some might say he has taken the easy way out by “passing” as a white man, in his whiteness, I see a remorseful non-performance of any race, which stands as a constant reminder of the private, flickering dreams that lay beneath the public face. Speaking of the sentiment of sadness and remorse because he has “chosen the lesser part” having “sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage” (154), the narrator leaves the reader. He recognizes that he will never become a Booker T. Washington or a Frederick Douglass and that his mixed-race birthright might never receive that status that music could bring to it. He has chosen instead to write an autobiography, suggesting that perhaps he is now ready and willing to accept the challenge of his whiteness and the opportunity to espouse the claim of his identity of an American ex-colored man who “neither disclaim[s] the black race nor claim[s] the white race” (136).
Chapter 5

Consciousness of “Being” in Jean Toomer’s Poetry

On August 22nd, 1999, a few days after a massive earthquake destroyed much of the northwestern area of Turkey, I met Hale in the small Turkish town of Gölcük. The disaster of the earthquake was very fresh to her and she recounted her experience with me of how she watched the red blaze come out of the sea like a drowsy and waking snake that night; how she thought that something dark beneath the earth had exploded, and how buildings swayed and toppled without warning. She told me about how she ran, without family or friends, with the speed of terror and how the earth came alive in heaving rhythms as she ran without direction.

Looking back on it now, it seems so clear to me that Hale and I were, as Jean Toomer might put it, “nonidentifying from surfaces and from the preferences and prejudices associated with them…. [We were in the process of] realizing our basic human stock, our humanness, our fundamental and universal humanity” (“Americans” 110). We were women entangled in the concept of oneness, experiencing the mind’s liberation from the trappings of racial and cultural divisions. We were “beings”\(^{19}\) intricately involved in the other’s world of “being.”

\(^{19}\) Toomer differentiates the body from the being, concluding that the “being” is one’s true self and in order to arrive at the position where one is capable of acknowledging the “being,” one must surrender the surface elements that in a worldly environment define who we are. In doing so, we make room for an existence unmarked by limitations.
I open with this incident as an illustration of the practicality of what Toomer refers to both abstractly in his poetry and concretely in his prose as a world of “higher consciousness” (“Experience” 37). In this space human beings transcend the materiality of the body and come to understand the world as a place of human growth that occurs as a consequence of a human oneness.

Toomer’s poetry is described in the collection of Robert B. Jones, and Margery Toomer Latimer as having four distinct periods: the Aesthetic period (1919-1921); the Ancestral Consciousness period (1921-1923); the Objective Consciousness period (1924-1939); and the Christian Existential period (1940-1955). These periods follow a path of self-development that culminates in the view of Toomer as “a full-fledged literary modernist who produced experimental fiction and drama and was influenced by [a number of movements including] Futurism, Imagism, ... Expressionism, and the lyrical- impressionism” (Woodson 30). Of his most lasting influences, however, has been the philosophies of spiritual mysticism promoted by G.I. Gurdjieff and A.R. Orange. These influences can be seen in Toomer’s work, beginning with the Ancestral period, in which the body functions as an object of secondary importance to experiences and workings of the mind. In other words, what we see in much of Toomer’s work is a purposeful abandonment of the traditional discourse of race where the body has traditionally been viewed as a window into the interior. Much like his contemporaries, such as James Weldon Johnson, Toomer resists the concept of race as a defining marker. The difference, however, between him and his contemporaries is the manner in which he voiced
this resistance. Werner Sollors makes the point that Toomer’s “strongly visual image[s] ... make the reader see things fresh” (27) and that it is Toomer’s “stylistic choices [that create the] expression of his refusal to endorse the racial divide” (27).

Much of Toomer’s work, outside of Cane, deemphasizes race while stressing the importance of “the experiences, forms, and spirit we have in common” (“Letter to Johnson” 1930). This chapter looks at the way Toomer “spiritualizes experiences,” to use the words of Mark Whalan. It examines the ways Toomer both confronts and transcends race, arguing that in his spiritualized state, Toomer’s speaker becomes a unifying agent, carrying the ability to merge three distinct elements (past, present, and future) into an evolutionary ideal of perfection. As a method to achieving my goal, I examine the criticism of Toomer’s “Blue Meridian,” suggesting that a disconnect exists between Toomer’s voice of the racially undefined and the criticism that addresses this voice. Toomer’s work, unlike the previous works addressed in this project, is distinct in the manner that it outrightly proposes, as Kathleen Pfeiffer states it does, “that all America rise above racialist ways of thinking in order to bypass race itself” (89). Much like the narrative of James Weldon Johnson’s An Ex-Colored Man, Toomer approaches the idea of race as a personal understanding of one’s state of mind and views the concept of racial passing (in his case) as being incompatible with the life of a multi-racial individual. In his essay titled “Crock of Problems,” written in 1928, Toomer states that “I have never tried to pass simply because I never had to try. I have simply gone and lived here and there. I have been what I am” (qtd. in Pfeiffer 89). This sentiment pervades
his poems and highlights the difficulties of reading Toomer from a traditional perspective of race where distinct differences and concrete divisions separate black from white.

In a letter to James Weldon Johnson, Toomer articulates his feelings of racial transcendence, stating that this emphasis of division in America is “indeed an overemphasis” (11 July 1930). Toomer goes on to say, in a similar sentiment later echoed by Johnson in his 1933 autobiography, “I see myself as an American, simply an American.” Such comments indicate, as Whalan and Barbara Foley have stated, that he saw himself as a “vanguard of the U.S. future without racial essentialism” (xxi). His long meditative poem, “Blue Meridian,” first published in 1936, works to illustrate this point through the harnessing of both material immediacy and spiritual consciousness. In this poem Toomer presents the idea that one may look backwards to the realization that “out of our past comes hell” (“BM” line 56), out of our presence comes “wreckage” (62), and out of our “waking” consciousness comes “the man of blue or purple” (72) who symbolizes the totalizing ideal of human perfection. The speaker of the poem speaks from a voice that beckons the reader to look beyond the immediate toward the possibilities of a “Dynamic atom-aggregate” (56), which he reasons holds the potential to explode in “light,” or vision, and to arose the “waking forces” (50). The poem, true to Toomer’s intention to practice ‘observation without identification’ (Woodson 41), indulges in the view of an omniscient I, who simultaneously acknowledges the togetherness of “we—priest, clown, scientist, technician/Artist, rascal, worker, lazybones,/ This is the whole--/
Individuals and people” (51). Such an image of wholeness that is at once the
togetherness of people and the distinctiveness of individuals, which never quite
seems to fit comfortably into the worldly American context of black and white,
opens Toomer to criticism that Jon Woodson states has labels him “a tragically
misguided figure who was unable to come to terms with his racial identity” (29).

My study of Toomer’s work remains invested in the notion that as both poet
and prose writer, Toomer acknowledges the historical reality of racial oppression
and confronts it by invoking the authority of an evolutionary spirituality that is all-
knowing. His creation of “I,” I argue, it is not an exclusionary or indulgent private
and particular essentialism, as some of the older critics such as Scruggs have
contended, but rather may be seen as a personal and reflective engagement with the
stages of consciousness as a means of opening up repressed or misunderstood
corners of the mind: “When the spirit of mankind conceive[s]/ A New World in
America, and dream[s]/ The human structure rising from its base” (“BM” 54),
Toomer suggests we can, contribute to the building of a vital and necessary social
harmony of which real American democracy and honest Americanism depends,
which is a sentiment articulated by writers as early as Lydia Maria Child and as
contemporary as James Weldon Johnson.

In his introduction to Jean Toomer Selected Essays and Literary Criticism,
Robert Jones makes note of the school of thought that views Toomer as racial traitor
and goes on to state that “This school believes that writers of African heritage
should focus exclusively on racial themes and subjects.” He speaks specifically of
writers who thought that "Toomer’s racial idealism was a clever ruse to deny his heritage; and that his ‘raceless’ writings ... should be banished into obscurity" (xiii). Jones goes on to state that "Toomer’s significance must ultimately be evaluated in light of his contribution to both African and American literature" (xiii). As a man whose aim it was to "stress the fact that we are all Americans .... [and who does] not see things in terms of Negro, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, and so on" (11 July 1930), Toomer provides a means for readers and critics to push the conversation about race forward, making room for those previously unheard voices and experiences willing to share their various ways of knowing, being, and spiritualizing. To therefore contain Toomer’s work to the canon of American literature, or to seek the African-American voice in his work is not only counterproductive to Toomer’s intention, but also asks of his work to do what it cannot do or to sustain what it cannot sustain on any level.

In his 1975 essay titled "Jean Toomer: Fugitive," written eight years following Toomer's death, Charles Scruggs states “Toomer insisted that he stood for a new breed of American, but he occasionally caught a glimpse of the reality that this idea existed mainly in his imagination” (92). Statements such as this suggest Toomer’s claim for American plurality has gone too far or that Toomer was not a systematic enough thinker to carry out this line of thinking. Scruggs’ statement makes an appeal for the return to the solid foundation that race thinking seems to provide. Similarly, Rudolph Byrd’s 1985 essay on “Jean Toomer and the Afro-American Literary Tradition” argues that in labeling our writers in one tradition or the other,
we must take into consideration not only their work, but also their own declaration of who they are and what they intend. In this regard, Byrd suggests that it might be wise to liberate Toomer from his place as a black American writer; Byrd, however, concludes his criticism by stating that “[Toomer] transcended what he believed were the artificial divisions of art, and in the process he created a new category which, on racial grounds, he alone appears qualified to occupy” (318). My contention with Byrd’s conclusion is again the contention I claim with many of the critics of Toomer’s work, and for that matter, with much of the criticism that applies to works that attempt to liberate Americans from the racial straightjackets that confine them. These criticisms are short-sighted. They fail to see to the possibilities of an open dialogue where commonalties might take the place of differences. They fail to allow the vision of a “new America” to take form, which is a vision that I have argued in previous chapters is shared by notable writers such as Lydia Maria Child, Hannah Crafts, and James Weldon Johnson.

The point that Byrd, Scruggs, and others leave out of their thinking is that cultures, nations, and races do not exist in isolation. Toomer’s complicated racial intermingling proposes the joining together of all races. His work as a member and leader of the Harlem group “recognized that all humans, not just African-American, are bifurcated” (Woodson 13), and that racial unity could work as one solution towards the transformation of American culture. Toomer hoped this unity would rid America of racism and the world of “its cataclysmic and intractable tendency toward self-destruction” (Woodson 4). Stephanie Hawkins argues that Toomer’s
membership in the “blue” race is “a position from which he affirmed biological equality of transracial subjects while he exposed as myth the scientific terminology that naturalized racial categories and privileged Anglo-Saxon purity” (154). The “blue” race, which culminates Toomer’s “Blue Meridian,” and which encapsulates his idea of racial unity, works in direct juxtaposition to the “Black Meridian” which begins the poem. The “Black Meridian,” characterized by a “black light,” that yields no vision, “lay sleeping on an inland lake” (50). The “Blue Meridian” (74), characterized by its “banded light” offers an array of vision and “wakes upon the earth” (74). This movement from black to light depicts the natural progression of growth, illustrated in the movement from sleeping to waking and occurs only in those who answer the call to “lift, thou waking forces!” (50). Toomer’s “Blue Meridian” might therefore rightly be distinguished as a work that dramatizes the inseparability of spirit and form beyond the limits of science and rhetoric.

In a 1923 letter to Waldo Frank, shortly after the publication of his best known work, Cane, Toomer explains his frustration with those who, despite rational argument, refuse to accept him and his work as he intended: “I expect artists to recognize the circle to expression,” he says. “When they dont [sic], I’m not disappointed; I simply know that in this regard they are second-rate” (1923). As Barbara Foley points out, many of Toomer’s comments in his letters show him as a man who “is hardly without faults [...] and one who reveals] “a somewhat inflated sense of his own importance” (Whalan x). However, the fact remains that Toomer’s engagement in “spirit-centered” poetry (and fiction) confounds the attempts of
Stephanie Hawkins sees the lack of attention given to “Blue Meridian” as the result of its “transracial terms [that] are not easily assimilated into critical discourse that requires an author’s public identification with either ‘black’ or ‘white’ politics” (150). Unlike the racial protest texts and the texts of moral sentimentality that argue for racial equality and transracial acknowledgement from identifiable traditions, Toomer’s texts reflect, as Sollors argues, a search “for a more cosmic understanding of the wholeness of a polyvocal America” (“Modernism” 21). In other words, he searches for a oneness through a blending of social, economic, and political energies. These energies, however, are slippery. They come in the form of the “east coast” and the “west coast,” the “masculine,” and the “feminine,” and insinuate that political restraints against natural unions such as masculine and feminine, despite the differences in origins, are the bulwarks to “reconciling force[s]” (55). His use of the interracial union is not, however, his only means of calling for a spiritual transformation.

In working towards this transformation, Toomer begins with a philosophy that regards the mind as a state of consciousness that drives the desire to promote the necessary spiritual experience that results in the integration between the physical and the intellectually emotional. His philosophy does not rely on a reading of the physical body, and it does not give in to the reading of others. Instead, it requires an awareness of one’s self, one’s motivation, one’s need, one’s history, one’s relationship to the world in which one lives. And thus he asks the following
questions: “Of what avail that with neon lights / We make gas-tanks look like Christmas trees? / Of what avail the battle / Of the school books, and the guns? / What use bombs and anti-bombs, / Sovereign powers, brutal lives, ugly deaths?” (58). Concerned with both the perception and the manifestation of what his culture has come to call achievements, Toomer raises questions about the pretenses we take as truth. For Toomer, the efforts put into the practices of public mind control, across time and generation, is the battle that he fights against as a first step in enriching the zone of consciousness.

According to Georges I Gurdjieff, it is in the state of awareness that “[o]ne is fully attuned to, and aware of cosmic laws. Cognition has limpid clearness and consummate perspicacity.... One understands. One knows. Along with the knowing comes an ecstatic or blissful quality of joyful acceptance” (Speeth 58). Quite similar to the state of Nirvana, this acceptance, otherwise known as the pinnacle state of “objective consciousness,” which the Gurdjieff philosophy defines as an enlightened state that comes as result of inner growth, solicits a connectedness to both earthly and celestial creations. Toomer, a self-claimed “earth-being” (“Experience” 37), denoting one who has transcended his physical body but has not yet left the earth, views himself as an integral part of the natural world. His poetry reflects a philosophy of transcendence achieved through an acceptance of a meditative power, which carries the ability to strip away prejudices and replace them with the spirit of a higher consciousness. It emotes and communicates a spirit of moral oneness. But
more importantly, it inspires the gift of transformation from body-minded to 
“being”-minded

His poetry, unlike his much written about Cane, which in part attempts to 
expose the world as a place of pleasure, pain, hope, fear, violence, and possibilities 
where people struggle to hold on to an identity even in the face unreasonable logic,
attempts to deal with the American obsession with race from the perspective of a 
spiritual healing. He addresses the sociocultural and sociopolitical conditions that 
beset the issues of race and offers in the place of separatism, a place of deep 
consciousness where spirituality extends itself beyond the limitations of race and 
culture, and speaks specifically, but not exclusively, to those who have spirit enough 
and conscience enough to believe and will what he terms as the “new American[s]” 
(“Experience” 55).

Toomer begins “Blue Meridian” with a declaration that “It is a new America” 
(50), but qualifies his statement with the idea that newness is the result of the 
process of spiritualization that ultimately results in a oneness in which “I am, we 
are, the human race” (64). Critics, however, scoff at Toomer’s spirit-centeredness 
and see him as a facilitator of a “social experiment” who “subordinates...his former 
concerns in Cane, to a transcendental belief or hope in a new beginning...” (Scruggs 
and VanDemarr 216). Scruggs and VanDemarr speak primarily about Toomer’s 
earlier work Cane as a political work written by an “African-American writer” (1). 
We should, however, note that “Blue Meridian” does not meet the conventional 
social expectations of its time, and for this reason it is seen as a poem whose
political message is vague and obscure. Its challenge to critics comes in the way it captures and refines an area of human and spiritual experience for which there is no equivalent literary vocabulary. Toomer’s poem is about race—about the human race. Stephanie Hawkins suggests that “Toomer deliberately invokes the social taboo and the Anglo-Saxon horror of mixed-race offspring in the first stanza” (164). Without ever mentioning the concept of race in a sexual context, Toomer repeatedly returns to the idea of an interracial sexuality through suggestion. He refers to “The illusion of split dominance” (67), which occurs in a meeting between his speaker and the only woman in the poem. The attraction between the two is based on the “essential thing” they had lost. “And ... could have helped each other lose more” (67). Yet they return to their separate worlds but not before Toomer heightens the reader’s consciousness of the characters’ interrelatedness and their awaking awareness of the perceptions of the different worlds they inhabit. Toomer thus intimates that however one looks at race, however one talks about it, however one presents the issue, race is never a nonpolitical issue in America. It is always suggestive of a hovering “dominance” that maintains the balance between “essential” cultures. When Scruggs and VanDemarr’s criticize Toomer for his inability to gain hold of his authentic self, they dismiss the power of the spiritual oneness “Blue Meridian” voices, denying the full spectrum of the artist’s voice. They quote Toomer, negating his own interpretation of his work. Specifically put, Scruggs and Van Demarr state that “In Toomer’s interpretation of ‘Bona and Paul’ ... [Toomer] not only denied that ‘black’ and ‘white’ referred to black and white persons but also insisted that Paul, in his speech to the doorman, ‘resolves these
conflicts in unity’” (213). This is the utopian oneness that Toomer returns to in “Blue Meridian” in which Paul “sees the Gardens purple” (Cane 79), knowing and imaging that “something beautiful is going to happen” (80). Unfortunately Paul’s date, Bona, disappears following his explanation to the doorman about how the garden, taken as a whole, comprises the different petals of various types of roses. It is, however, Paul’s vision of the purple garden that speaks most poignantly to Toomer’s vision expressed in “Blue Meridian” of a place beyond the seeming simplicity of black and white.

Rudolph Byrd’s article “Years with Gurdjieff” asks “Do we label a writer by his work, by the poems, plays, or novels he is so proud of and which means so much to us; or do we label him by what he says and write about himself? ” (310). Toomer’s characters, both of mixed and unmixed-race ancestry illustrate a struggle to claim their voice within a system that unfairly attempts to silence them. To negate the space that his characters occupy is to reduce Toomer’s work to personal agenda and to disregard the layers of meaning that inform so many of Toomer’s texts. “Blue Meridian,” I contend, does not “subordinate” the concerns of Cane, as Scruggs and Van Demarr suggests, but rather elaborates on the themes embedded it. Being well schooled in spiritual matters, including the works of Buddhist writers, biblical literature and Eastern philosophies, and as one who had been intimately motivated by the teachings and practices of Gurdjieff, Toomer knew well the difficulties in achieving the level of spirituality needed to gain objective consciousness required towards the attainment of his “new America.” His practice cultured him to the belief
that the state of awareness is the “rarest most valuable of human experiences” (Speeth 58), and can only be achieved by those willing to take that inward journey. Arriving at the state of objective consciousness necessitates a relinquishing of attachments to the surface while permitting the soul to travel through states of nakedness, profundities, growth and enlightenment (Speeth 47-49). Certainly, this is not a potential for all human beings and is reserved for those who can proclaim their movement from one stage of consciousness to another, such as the speaker who proclaims his fluid journey from the space of immediacy, of “popular contemporary,” where language facilitates categorization much more than it does synthesis, to the space of fluid timelessness where the speaker presents the reader to an imaginative possibility that holds the potential for spiritual enrichment: “I hear myself, the unrecorded/Sing the flow of I/The notes and language not of this experience/Sing I am/As the flow of I pauses/Then passes through my water-wheel --“ (68). This experience he proclaims following a separation from the woman with whom he had experienced the “essential thing,” (67) whom critics such as Bernard Bell believe represents an intimate friend, Margaret Naumberg, Toomer’s lover and fellow believer in the Gurdjieff philosophy (348): “For she was going where I was going,/ We together, / And a buried being was called to life” (67), the speaker states. Recognizing both the intangibility of physical permanence and the concreteness of antimiscegenation, Toomer presents the often unacknowledged interaction between the human work and that of the “higher consciousness.” Despite the fact that they had been going together “We together” (67), “I and she pushed we apart” (67). Whether they gave into the forces of a segregated America or whether their
knowledge of impermanence divided them, or both, in the end Toomer's speaker returns to the imaginative power to “Sharply remember our way together,/ And feel, deep beneath the layers,/ Gratitude—and the task of man” (67). The experience constitutes the full fulcrum of the speaker's becoming in which he moves into a waking state where he is able to appreciate the spiritual agenda of learning through experience that the state of objective consciousness requires from a committed oneness. In this state he combines the past, present, and future in one fluid reality of “gratitude.”

Important to the intellectual understanding of the poem is the understanding of the voice of consciousness because this is the “color” of the speaker’s experience and what informs his being. Having summoned the strength and discipline to satisfy himself with the woman “from a distance” (67), he returns to his “essence” and to his consciousness and “sings the flow of I” (68). He does not do this in an egocentric exultation, but rather does so from an indulgence in consciousness in which he divorces the mind from the body and its physical needs as an effort towards achieving an impartiality and tranquility of mind.

Toomer’s “Blue Meridian” chronicled in three stages of awareness—the passive, the active, and the pivotal element that neutralizes the two in productive activity—is a deeply personal poem that addresses the author’s life-long concerns. It queries American consciousness, American beliefs, American practices and American identities. It seeks to know the meaning of Americanness and to provide a means for consolidating the mixtures of America so that differences become part of
American identity and the future becomes characterized by a commonality among people without reference to one group at the exclusion of the other. Toomer writes: “My Americanism is not only untypical of the American today, it is untypical of the human world of today, this world being split and torn asunder by ancient separatisms and rivalries…. Yet that which is untypical of the human world today will be characteristic of the human world tomorrow” (“Not Typically American” 101).

With the authorial voice of a preacher calling on his congregation to “Lift thou waking forces” (50), the narrator addresses his message first to the “black meridian,” who are black because of the absence of their vision. The “Black meridian[s] …lay sleeping on an inland lake” (50) in an unproductive state of inattention in which they watch the history of America in a silent passivity, in a complete disengagement, in an unprofitable unconnectedness to both their own center and to the center of the universe. In this state of passivity, “the great European races…/…Sang of their swift achievements,/ And perished, displaced by machines,/ Smothered by a world too huge for little men, too empty for life to breath in” (52). And in this same state, ”the great African races…Sing because [they] ache. Go because [they] must” (53). Toomer tells us “[they] leave the shinning ground” (53) in much the same way “The great red race…/ [s]inks into the sacred earth” (53-54). Through Toomer’s presentation of a non-linear occurrences, he offers a vision a world of “great race[s]” perishing from self indulgence and separatisms, unmindful of “ …the spirit of making [that] conceived/ A new world of America, and dreams/ The human structure rising from its base” (54). Toomer
takes us back to a time when “the old peoples” (52) cultivated the natural at the expense of the social. He warns of the detriments of “swift achievement[s]” and of the sacrifices man makes to the Natural that these achievements import. He warns us also of the desperate state of inertia brought on by sorrow and victimization, and of the false worships that carry no value. The European races, the African races, and the “Red” race, each in their own way, participate in an environmental nihilism that puts humanity in a precarious position of marginality in regard to the source of growth. And whether Toomer’s railings against the past results from empirical fact or is the consequence of imaginative device, he, nevertheless, alarms his reader with visions of waking death. “Not iron, not chemicals or money,” he writes:

Are animate to suffer and rejoice

Not what we have become, this angel dough

But slowly dies, never attaining birth

Above the body, above its pain and hungers

To beat pavements, stand in lines

Fill space and drive motorcars. (52)

Toomer documents these claims of slow annihilation through the waking voice of “someone” (52), and then reiterates the sentiments through the waking voice of “another” (53) and “another” (53), making the case that moral and emotional accessibility is a gradual achievement that takes place one person at a time. These
voices, although not in the majority, who speak from seemingly lonely and solitary positions, speak in recognition of America’s sleeping state. While Toomer capitalizes on the historical events of European commercialism, and interprets the action of the Black and Indian masses as a sleeping participation in their own domination, he preaches about how these groups engage in a sightless passivity towards the politics of racial and economic power that insists on keeping the system of separation alive. Toomer intimates, through three lonely voices that the cure to preventing what currently stands as our imminent fatality lies in our vision of our human affairs as part of something larger: “Born of elevated rock and lifted branches (72), we are the power of God and of the natural creation, he later tells us. One speaker directs our attention to the “restless earth” (53) seemingly thrown out of balance by “…a city of Goddamn and Jehovah/ Baptized in finance” (52). These city people pay little respect to the land on which they build. But make no mistake about this, Toomer’s claim to the ecological abuse rests not simply with the European races alone who “…washed the forests [and] the earth’s rich loams/ [with] …giant cities” (52), he blames also the African races who failed to challenge the human ecological indecencies, and who instead, in a deep sleep “[sing] ripples to sorrow in red fields” (53). In this same respect, the Indians too, who surrendered themselves to the “white robed priests” (54) who epitomized and perpetuated the sickness of a greedy culture, danced in sorrow while “[sinking] into the sacred earth” (54). These are the histories that Toomer attempts to reincarnate in order so that we may properly bury them in a safe but accessible past. In doing so, he contends that we make the effort of liberating ourselves from the snares of the past with a
mind toward positively incorporating them in the “receptacle” of our present, created towards attaining higher ideals. “And we are one with the old people, witnesses,” he says:

That behind us there extends

An unbroken chain of ancestors,

Ourselves linked with all who ever lived,

Joined with all future generation;

Of millions of fathers through as many years

We are the breathing receptacles. (72)

Toomer’s indulgence in America’s historical environment functions to motivate his reader towards the acceptance and understanding of the concept and necessity of a “higher type of man” (56) who is “love centered towards God (56). He appears to hint at the fact that although all men will probably not attain “objective consciousness” the “new American” is intrinsically wholesome, being of noble-minded nature and needs only the effort of concentration to develop his wisdom so that past defilements do not suffocate the potential for morality or obscure the potential to extinguish commitments to selfish satisfactions such as desire, hatred and delusion. Toomer reveals how Americans, driven by the desire to transform the natural into industrial visions of prosperity, attempted to turn biblical promises of spiritual prosperity and peace into a literal truth that not only tarnished the
innocence of creation, but also subjugated “great” (70-71) races of people in a horrific diffusion of laws that govern the life of the universe. Gurdjieff teaches that “man is in the full sense of the term a miniature universe; ... in him are all the matters of which the universe consists” (Speeth 21). Therefore, to impoverish a race is to impoverish a man, which is to impoverish a universe. It is in this vein that Toomer announces: “We are waiting for a new God/For revelation in our day/For growth towards a faceless Deity” (52). This faceless deity for whom Toomer awaits does not confine its concerns strictly to the spiritualization of America despite his reference to “a new America” (52). Toomer acknowledges that in order for his idea of spiritualization to work, it must take the shape to a world effort. He talks about his feelings of “disharmony” experienced by himself and his colleagues, and of his decision to: “...go on and accept the task of creating a human world that was at least as conductive to man’s well-being and growth... We had to project real values,” he says, “and then to realize them in full-bodied life. And this included everyone in America, and everyone in western civilization who had arisen—or who had been pushed—above the grass line” (Toomer, “Gurdjieff Experience” 129). For this reason he implores “Thou Radiant Incorporeal” ( “BM” 55) to “hurl/ hurl/ Down these seabords, across this continent/ And blend our bodies to one flesh” (55). These barriers portray the conceptual reality of our physical and emotional separation, or as illustrated by the “Law of Seven,” portray the orderly discontinuity of things which must exist so that our universe may perpetuate its diversity (Speeth 22). I should make clear, however, that Toomer does not suggest that diversity stagnates our spirituality, nor does he suggest that in itself it demands new vision.
Our aversion to diversity, nevertheless, necessitates new wisdom if we are ever to “dance the dance of the Blue Meridian” (74) in the realization that “we are joined as a cross irrevocably” (74). When Toomer then speaks of death that “[fertilizes] the seven regions of America” (53), he refers to the process of regeneration in which birth and death and rebirth functions to integrate the effects of our previous actions and individuations. This process not only addresses the historical suffering and the pain of the great races, it also addresses the land as a place of unity in which death reduces our differences to a oneness. It welcomes those of all cultures and races who have participated in the building of America and those who have found their nature in the land:

Thou, great fields, waving thy growth

Across the world

Couldst thou find the seed which started thee?

Can you remember the first great hand to sow?

Have you memory of His intention? (55)

And it is here we see the faithful optimism for which so many have ridiculed Toomer. In the land he offers hope through the acknowledgement that the world of souls are manifestation of God, albeit, distinct from Him. Therefore when William Bell writes regarding “Blue Meridian” that “the creation of the new man is a long evolutionary process engineered by Nature (347), he is correct in that Toomer
alludes to the omnipresence of God which he illustrates as a natural experience of regeneration that consequently imprints our spirit with new understanding.

This idea that Toomer affirms regarding the unity between man and nature has long consumed his occupation. Beginning with the early Aesthetic period in 1919, Toomer concerned himself with what he describes as the “suffered mistreatment resulting from the fact that people were body-aware, being-blind” (“Experience” 49). His series of four poems titled “Air,” “Earth,” “Fire,” and “Water” seems to function as a statement regarding the blending of the elements of our human nature. Within these poems Toomer extracts the “being” beneath the body. He brings his consciousness to the surface and thus attempts to balance our worldliness with our godliness. In short, he depicts our nature as a purposeful exchange of creative energy between mankind and the cosmos.

If we take air as a representation of breath, earth as a representation of the body, water as the representation of blood, and lastly fire as a representation of the “being”/spirit, we may come to understand the elements of nature as a mode of knowledge into the sublimity of ourselves. To understand the “darts” of our breaths, the “flickers” of our being, the “riplets and currents of our blood” allows us to apply a constant awareness to the present reality of our existence as opposed to our walking blindly in the participation of unproductivity and disengagement. By this statement I do not strictly imply that he imagines an awareness of human physical existence, for as Toomer tells us, “The body is bound to the space..., just as certainly the being is not so bound. The being has its own great space and long
“Air, “Breath,” “Water,” “Fire,” I believe, is an attempt to address the states of physicality and their relationship to consciousness through purposeful identification with one’s own “being” and experience. Toomer describes the movements of air/breath with a perception of sprightly independence. Air seems to hover in the balance of assimilation to both body and “being.” But beyond the body and the limitations it imposes, “Air” suggests a disconnectedness to the mundane reality through an indulgence in experience: It “Darts touches much—flies, soars, hovers, puffs, breezes, blasts” (10). Through the fluidity of movement, air breathes life without the biases of physical restrictions. Closer, however, to the spirit of “being” than to the physicality of body, air, “plain and colorless” (10), is vital to the body-being in that it is the house of our “being,” the conductor of our energy, one might say. It absorbs the external, bringing it inward—“tasters of experiments” (10), Toomer claims. It moves between the indulgence of self-interest and the perspicacity of cosmic law. It functions thus as a necessary consciousness towards the possibility of “being-minded”

Similarly, his depiction of water/blood, characterized in a motion that “flows—on and on—soaks, bathes, slops, gushes [and] seems not to be affected by impression and experiences” (13), reinforces the premise of physical monotony and
rootedness as an obstruction to knowledge of being and the potential of growth. That water retains its fluidity, moving in and out of “impressions and experiences” with respect to the influence of conditions, testifies to the harmony of natural law. It alludes to the internal rhythm of nature to accommodate the process of harmonious causality and to our inner experiences as wisdom that informs our “being.” These “impressions” and “experiences” allow the blood, one can say, a mindful awareness of the origination and dissolution of feelings. It is, however, the dedication to the spiritual practice that permits one to understand and control one’s thoughts and feelings so that they do not overtake the body, and so that the body maintains its capability “to understand if men are like/ The full equipped members of the cosmos/ Or exceptions” (“Living Earth” 77).

“Earth”—an ostensibly permanent object—solid in nature and existing in dependence to the determinants of space and mind, “moves[s] about through the world of things/ Dependable from a physical view’ (11). Through this image Toomer hints at the idea of body impermanence. “Solid—stolid” (130), he describes it, leading us toward the belief in the non-substantiality of our physical selves, which, of course, is not to reduce the function of our physicality to nothingness despite its outward limitations.

In “fire,” however, we regain this substantiality. Here Toomer gives us “depth” and “profundity” (12). Here we see passion moving towards a center. “Hot after something” (12), he says. The difference in the description of this element as opposed to the others is the use of “always.” Whereas the other elements seem to
function somewhat undirected in their movements, ebbing and flowing, coming and
going, a common characteristic of any physio-spiritual experience, fire conversely
seems to maintain a sense of assurance: “Always stewing smoking panting/ Flashy”
(12). It is fair then to say that it differs in its properties from air, water and earth
despite my inclination to see them as four connected elements working together in
harmonious dependence. What “fire” or “being,” as I have previously suggested
maintains that the other elements do not, is a sense of permanence implied through
the function of “always.” Realizing that nothing heavenly, earthly, or spiritually
maintains eternal constantness, I believe that fire/spirit/being, involves a sense of
substantiality in which the physical activity of burning evolves, “Burns into a thing”
(12) with the “depth” and profundity” (12) characteristic of the spirit of “being.
Through an attention to the connection between the nature that influences our
bodies and the nature of our “being,” Toomer attempts to introduce the premise to
his antiracist discourse that addresses the tenuous identity of what he refers to as
“the particularized life of men” (“Experience” 44). He elaborates on this theme in
his poem “Men” in which he describes the individuation, the isolation and the
concept that “each individual is unique and yet identical with all” (Jones, Collected
Poems 23). “Separate in bodies/ many in desires/ [but] one in the ultimate reality”
(“Fire” 79), he says, no doubt making reference to the centrality of our “being” and
to the universality of our cosmic consciousness.

This theory of oneness emanates from his personal and life-long battle with
racial identification. Toomer rejected the classification of “Negro” forced on him by
an intolerant society unwilling to accept the mixture of the six bloodlines that ran in his family, which positions him (even to this day in some circles), as an antagonistic member of the black community. The pervasiveness of race mixing in America that many critics fail to come to terms with, which consequently lures them to constrain Toomer’s work within the traditions of literary criticism, racializes literature by “blacks” as a discourse that privileges race above all else. When Toomer, therefore, says in “Blue Meridian”:

I would give my life to see inscribed

Upon the arch of our consciousness

These aims: Growth, Transformation, Love

That we might become heart-centered toward

one another,

Love-centered toward God, dedicated to the creation

of a higher type of man, growing up to Him (“BM” 56),

he introduces his theory and the practicality of living a non-racial identity. He suggests that through a dedication to our inner being and to God (a reality he understands as an existence needing no labels), we can shed the limitations of our bodies and “become heart-centered towards one another” (“Experience”). This, however, is a scary proposition for a country long built on the institution of racialist ideology. For to use the words of Barbara Johnson: “If the average man could
recognize that the Negro was just like him, he would have to recognize that he was just like the Negro” (323), thus confounding the rationalization of the very system of separation.

Toomer’s “Portrait in Georgia,” written somewhere between the years of 1921-1923, explores the hostility directed by a nation towards blacks in general and race mixing in particular, and offers for contemplation a spirit of a non-racial “being” that exists beyond the impermanence of the body.

In the absence of any physical unity Toomer’s portrait reflects definite oppositions between what Samira Kawash refers to as the difference between what is visible and what is knowable. His first image of “braided chestnut” (30) hair is, in a somewhat vague perceptual sense, a teasing image that tantalizes us with multiple visions of race. By omitting qualities of texture from the description, Toomer cleverly thwarts any conclusions we might make about the woman’s race. The image of hair does, however, suggest an element of strength, which further reinforces the racial discomfort fostered by the intangibility of this Georgia woman. And just in case the reader, pulled by some pathology of the ordinary, feels an uncontrollable inclination to racialize this woman, Toomer ruptures this attempt, in similar fashion, by once again avoiding any direct impression of race. “Her slim body, white as ash/ of black flesh after flame” (30) literalizes the slipperiness of racial authority through an indirect comparison of her body to both white ash and black flesh. Positioning this woman as neither black nor white, and, as Hutchinson notes, “by superimposing the images of white woman, the apparatus of lynching,
and the burning flesh of the black man” (378) within a world so polarized by color, makes her a destabilizing force within the power dynamics of the culture. She obstructs the system of knowledge that clearly identifies subject positions by race (and according to Hutchinson – gender). In this way, Toomer constructs a self-articulated woman who disputes and disables the stability of racial essentialisms, albeit, at the consequence of violent objections. These violations, however, do not silence this woman who straddles the life between white and black, for the simple fact that Toomer resurrects her—body and voice—through a portrait that speaks to a consciousness about the inefficacy of racial segregation, and for that matter, the racial violence directed towards black women who, either out of love or submission, give themselves up to white men.

Since this poem is organized around racial principles of inclusion and exclusion, of acceptance and rejection, of realities and falsehoods, it is helpful in part to see Toomer’s portrait as an articulation of the emotional and intellectual response to the increasing prevalence of racial dissolution. Apprehension about miscegenation and increasing fear of the invisibility of blackness at the turn of the century, created a destructive and dehumanizing environment for those unwilling or unable to conform to racial singularity. Toomer’s Georgia woman, thus, symbolic of the idea that the lives of black and whites are indelibly “braided” (30) in a common southern experience, faces her punishment for exposing the myth of a white purity, supposedly uncontaminated by blackness. And for this disclosure she becomes her own executioner. Her braided chestnut hair “coiled like a lynchers
“rope” (30) is used to disintegrate the very union it represents, while simultaneously erasing her example as the literal truth of America’s identity.

Disturbing as the individual portrait is, the poem also intends an equally pointed reflection on American history as a whole. The scarred, blistered lips heal just enough to speak of a woman’s story of human suffering. She does this with the breath of “cane” and with a self-consciousness that links her to the exploitation and abuse that so many marginal, southern women faced within an oppressive economy. Such images position Toomer’s Georgia woman not only as a woman destroyed by irrational fear, but also as a woman destroyed by economic dominance. With this understanding of the poem’s broader, historical context, we can then credit Toomer with creating a voice that grants agency to this mixed-race woman—ironically, through a gradual death that in the end fuses a spiritual and physical return to the land. One might argue, Hutchinson has done for sections of Cane, that this Georgia woman, through her death, simultaneously reclaims both her black and white ancestral investment in this southern land. In other words, she claims her dual heritage that was previously denied to her by America’s own internal conflict over race.

Intimating that in the end we are all reduced to ashes—that we “Sink into the earth/ To resurrect--/ To project into this conscious world/ An example of the organic; To enact a mystery among facts” (“BM” 71)—Toomer’s final image of “her slim body, white as ash/ of black flesh after the flame” (“Portrait” 30) renders a subtle, if uneasy, idealization of a world where our similarities link us in common...
oneness. As a recorder of history, Toomer offers his portrait as an invitation to rethink matters of race representation, and more importantly, race division.

In the final analysis, however, it is the “Blue Meridian” (74), not the colors of black and white in their separateness, but the fusion of all colors, the “banded-light” (74) as he calls it, that will “[dervish] with the seven regions/ of America, and all the world” (74). This is the soul, not only of our America, but also of the universe (74), he says. Given the evolutionary process from birth to rebirth that Toomer documents, beginning with those who “lay sleeping” (50) in a “black meridian” (50), to those who “lay waking” (62) in a “white meridian” (62), until finally, for some, reaching that state of “[awakeness] upon the earth” (74), it is indeed possible to see how he arrives at the dervished trance-like state of spirituality.

The white meridian section of the poem urges a new level of consciousness. Recognizing that our dedication to work comprises the essential content needed to pursue the ambitions of kindness and compassion towards our fellow beings in society, Toomer calls for us to work, to “uncase, unpod whatever blocks, until,/ Having realized pure consciousness of being” (65). The consciously awake, Toomer believes cannot content himself with the satisfaction of merely knowing that “I am” (68). This person dedicates himself to the world, through the teachings of “I am, we are, simply of the human race” (64). “We are beings” (65). And as for those who wish to remain “incontinent” (64), “Or small from shrinkage” (64), Toomer acknowledges the fear imbedded within the desire for isolation. He acknowledges the fear of newness, the fear of being awake, and recognizes that there will always
be those who will not or cannot participate in the collectivity of spiritual growth. To those sleeping individuals, Toomer asks that they “Feed not on these children/But rather break your arms/ Than impede their growth/...Cut the binds of apron strings/ That young gods may dance” (66).

Into the depth of the conscious “being” the newcomer plunges like a “Lost Dancer” (39) intent on finding his “being” through the traces of the “beings” who have already survived. He dances his dance, but the dance is not his. He follows the vibrations of the dance [yet survived]” (39), but he can find no “source/ To bind the sand upon his feet” (39). Entrenched in the earth we find the souls of those who never die, who exist in a state of uninterrupted energy and who seek “spatial depth of being” (39). In time the newcomer will reach the understanding that “being” requires a building of past upon present like “sand upon ...feet,” like “feet upon...dance,” like “dance upon...body,” like “body of being” (39). For the newcomer then to claim a space of his own, he must as Robert Jones insightfully affirms, “synthesize ‘the birth to death recurrences/ Of feet dancing on earth of sand’ with ‘the diamond body of his being’ the prismatic brilliance of inner essence, to form a unified complex, the transcendental self” (20).

“Blue Meridian” thus becomes as a replication of the life it dramatizes. It is born, it lulls, and finally resurrects itself in the mind of the reader thorough a calling to enrich the human spirit. This process of regeneration assures that nothing ever fully dies except, of course, the hatred that “brand[s] as slave or peon” (71). “The great European races.../ died and came alive again/ To demonstrate the worth of
individuals” (70). And contrary to the opinion of Scuggs and VanDemarr who read in the poem the disappearance of the African race, which they understand as a death that is “both a racial death and a death of racial identity, Toomer’s own,” and which they claim “frees him to be just an American” (215), the “Blue Meridian” implies a resurrection for all. In its conclusion the African race on longer “[leaves] the shining ground” (53) as the poem’s beginning asserts. Instead, they are renewed with a liberation that consciousness assumes. In this sense they resurrect as does the red race into “Each new American-/- To be taken as a golden grain/ And lifted as the wheat of our bodies/ To matter superbly human” (70).

Within this resurrection nothing is lost. “Black is [still] black, white is [still] white” (72), and East and West retain their physical properties. What is new, however, is “the man of blue or purple” (72) who in old America died before birth never to be resurrected. But in this new America “beyond the little tags and marks” (72), the blue man or the purple man who “struggling for birth through the ages” (72) finally achieves his birth and we, as Americans, finally liberate ourselves from the falsities that bind us in negative separatisms. And although we might choose to identify ourselves with “tags” or “marks,” “Mankind is a cross” (73), Toomer reminds us. For him, we are the symbol of something greater than our physical selves; we are the suffering and the unity of the past, the present, and the future.
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Biography

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