

Spectacles of American Liberalism:

Narratives of Racial Im/posture

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This project traces the seemingly improbable intersections between performances of blackness and the development and traces of an American liberalism defined by Gunnar Myrdal's overwhelmingly influential, sociological text, *An American Dilemma*. I argue that when Myrdal determined in his 1944 study on the "Negro problem" that the messy inconsistencies between how the United States articulated its laudable egalitarianism and the violent histories of oppression defining the lives of African Americans was a matter resting in the "hearts and minds of white America" rather than entrenched structural inequalities, he enabled a radicalized version of sentimentality that would structure how liberalism attempted to rectify this racial paradox right into the 21st century – to walk in someone else's skin rather than their shoes. While American liberalism is a notoriously contested and slippery set of ideologies, the texts I study provide a performative logic of American liberalism that deconstructs and historicizes its own ideological impulses around notions of racial difference.

The project situates the discursive legacies of Myrdal's study alongside a series of spectacularized narratives of what I call "racial im/posture" – adventures in racial impersonation authorized by American liberalism and reliant on the logics of both blackface minstrelsy and racial passing. I consider these narratives of racial im/posture in the literary genres of memoir, autobiography, fiction, and speculative fiction, along with the legal brief, the film, and the photograph. Although I read these seemingly disparate texts from my own epistemological disciplining of literary studies, the methodology employed here is an interdisciplinary one indebted to performance and visual studies, race and queer theory, as

well as new Southern studies. The project intervenes in the conventional thinking around racial masquerade by reframing the temporality of what has largely been considered an issue of the 19th and early 20th centuries as well as by considering these texts through the anxieties, ironies, and contentions of the discursive legacies of American liberalism. In five chapters that satellite around the ideological apparatuses of our sociopolitical and cultural landscape including social and literary fictions, the law, and transnational capital, I think through issues of authenticity, belonging, community, appropriation, and performance.

Dedication

For Grammie –

with whom the impossible is somehow always possible

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Chapter One –

Introduction

A decade after winning the 1938 Pulitzer Prize for uncovering the links between Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black and the Ku Klux Klan, Pittsburgh's *Post-Gazette* journalist, Ray Sprigle, pitched a new story to his editor, one he assumed would place him back in contention for that coveted prize. Unlike previous assignments going undercover as a butcher to expose the black market in meat or posing as an attendant to investigate Pennsylvanian mental health institutions, this time Sprigle wanted to become a black man all the while documenting his experiences with racism throughout the Deep South. He writes, "I might as well be honest about this expedition of mine . . . I wasn't bent upon any crusade. All I saw at first was the possibility of a darned good newspaper story."¹ Despite his motivations, for four of what he describes as "endless, fear-filled weeks" (Sprigle 1) in May 1948, Sprigle "crossed the line." In a twenty-one part series of front-page columns entitled, "I Was a Negro in the South for 30 Days," Sprigle detailed his expedition into blackness that, a year later, was expanded into the thirty chapter journalistic memoir, *In the Land of Jim Crow*. Sprigle's text is comprised of short portraits of Southern black life from the sharecropper's cabin to black elementary schools, that, in its very foreword, Margaret Halsey admits "ha[d] not turned up any new material." She continues, "All his facts have been reported before in such research volumes as Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, and

¹ Ray Sprigle, *In the Land of Jim Crow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), 18. All subsequent citations of this text will be indicated by in-text citation.

others. But in the scholarly disquisitions, the facts are necessarily arranged in graphs and statistics and cautious footnotes. In Mr. Sprigle's book they are personal and vivid—the spontaneous, unstudied reactions of a self-respecting white American trying to live from one dawn to the next under disabilities imposed on colored Americans.”² In this brief moment of citation, Halsey foregrounds the motivating concerns of this project, narratives of embodied and appropriated blackness inadvertently enabled by an American liberalism articulated in Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 landmark sociological study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*.

Race and American Liberalism

The initial framework of liberalism in the United States owes much of its theorization to the work of Enlightenment political theorist and philosopher, John Locke. In his *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke articulated a theory of government and personhood premised on the idea that all [men] are equal under the law, and therefore, are subject to a civil governing authority to which the individual must consent.³ In this radical refusal of divine right, Locke helped to instantiate a modern liberalism defined by the individual's guaranteed right to rights as well as personal property coupled with individual responsibility and free market, laissez-faire economics. In *Race, Slavery, and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Arthur Riis writes, “The primary innovation of liberalism is that it transpose a

² Margaret Halsey, Introduction to *In the Land of Jim Crow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), vi-vii.

³ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

system of authority that defines rights vertically (as claims granted by some power above and beyond ‘persons’) with one that holds a horizontal account of rights (the ‘person itself is the source of rights and the claims of ‘persons’ are defined in relation to the claims of other ‘persons’).⁴ As Thomas Jefferson held self-evident truths on the fundamental equality of men in the opening lines of the *Declaration of Independence*, he sutured the rhetorics of liberalism to the country’s most foundational articulation of its own sovereignty and understanding of itself as a nation. This prompts Anne Norton in, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture*, to write, “liberalism has become the common sense of the American people, a set of principles unconsciously adhered to, a set of conventions so deeply held that they appear (when they appear at all) to be no more than common sense.”⁵ When considering the demoralization of the term “liberalism” or “liberal” in the increasing conservatism of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Norton seems wrong in her claim that liberalism names a national commonsense. However, when considered alongside American liberalism’s long and contested history as a theory that names and holds a number of sometimes competing ideologies at various sociohistorical moments, Norton gestures toward the difference between the founding ideologies of liberalism, or liberalism’s good intentions, and its disparate political conclusions and manifestations. For example, one must only consider the promising conclusions of American liberalism as articulated in the

⁴ Arthur Riis, *Race, Slavery, and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11.

⁵ Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

founding documents of the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution* alongside the then seemingly paradoxical history of slavery to recognize vast differences in the instrumentation of liberalism's rhetorics. For anti-slavery activists and proponents, that all men were created equal provided the plainest ideological justification for their desire to end the institution of slavery in the United States. However, those in the pro-slavery camp could hold onto that same fundamentality by seeing "thingness," rather than humanity, in the black body. These and other interpretative maneuvers have cohered into liberalism's historical mercurial instability.

Consequently, the spuriousness of liberalism's commonsense is exposed most often in its intersection with constructed notions of race and racial difference. While other scholars interrogating the relationship between race and liberalism often use "racial liberalism" to qualify that relationship, particularly around the issue of civil rights, I use "American liberalism" in this context to insist, along with Carol Horton, that even in its unstable and historically contingent meanings, American liberalism is always about race. In *Race and the Making of American Liberalism*, Horton writes,

Race has played a primary role in the making of American liberalism. On the one hand, race has been instrumental in creating some of the nation's most radically democratic forms of liberal politics, which emphasize the inclusion of the disenfranchised, the importance of socioeconomic equality, and, more recently, the value of cultural diversity. On the other, it has reinforced the dominance of relatively inequitable forms of liberalism, which use the equation of equal rights and free markets to legitimate grossly unequal distributions of wealth, power, and status. As such, the story of race and liberalism in the United States is not one that simply concerns the radically

disfranchised. On the contrary, it includes the entire national and the dominant vision of civic equity it embodies.⁶

The relationship between race and liberalism is one of symbiotic knowledge production.

Not only is race called upon, ignored, spectacularize, and obscured, as Horton suggests, it is ultimately *produced* to make American liberalism legible, while also, simultaneously obscuring and/or foregrounding class. I hold American liberalism accountable for its dependence on race by unequivocally employing it here.

The Myrdalian Turn

For a country desperate to recover from the ravages of the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal put relief in decidedly, and near exclusively, economic terms. In the years up to World War II, relief policies, legislation, and programs such as Social Security initiatives, welfare assistance, and public-works jobs, spotlighted a national attention to class inequities that helped some African American communities. However, in "Race in America: The Ultimate Test of Liberalism," William H. Chafe reminds that during the 1930s, "The system of Jim Crow remained deeply entrenched. Lynchings continued to occur, gruesomely testifying to the degree that physical terrorism reinforced the customs of segregated jobs, schools, and social spaces. More than 75 percent of black

⁶ Carol A. Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

Americans lived in the South. Fewer than 5 percent had the right to vote.”⁷ However, when the country began the march to war and biological racism, seen as the ideological underpinnings of Nazi anti-Semitism, came under both national and international criticism, and the growing number of newly enfranchised African Americans living outside the South began to agitate for equal civil rights and access to wartime prosperity, cultural understandings of race began to shift. Horton writes, “This horrifying encounter [World War II] with extreme racism cause many political, cultural, and intellectual leaders, as well as ordinary citizens, to reject the formerly acceptable view that racial hierarchy was both national and desirable.”⁸ Since racial discrimination made fighting fascism more than a bit awkward, it became a matter of national importance and international public relations to develop a new theory of race, if not race relations. It is this cultural and political moment that prepared, and made necessary, the highly influential text, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*.

Commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation based on their once long-standing commitment to funding scholarship on a variety of social ills including the “Negro problem,” the research proposal that would eventually be called *An American Dilemma* was an ambitious project to be rigorously supported by the most impeccable and objective social

⁷ William H. Chafe, “Race in America: The Ultimate Test of Liberalism,” in *The Achievement of American Liberalism: The New Deal and Its Legacies* edited by William H. Chafe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 164.

⁸ Horton, 124.

science. Thusly, the Foundation sought an “exceptional man”⁹ to head the research team. According to the foreword to *An American Dilemma* written by Frederick Keppel, head of the Carnegie Foundation’s search committee, “it appeared wise to seek as the responsible head of the undertaking someone who could approach his task with a fresh mind, uninfluenced by traditional attitudes or by earlier conclusions, and it was therefore decided to ‘import’ a general director.” Keppel continues, “the search was limited to countries of high intellectual and scholarly standards but with no background or traditions of imperialism which might lessen the confidence of the Negroes in the United States as to the complete impartiality of the study and the validity of its findings. Under these limitations, the obvious places to look were Sweden and the Scandinavian countries.”¹⁰ After a lengthy search, those remarkably trustworthy and prejudice-free countries eventually produced University of Stockholm professor and member of the Swedish Senate, Nobel Prize-winning economist Gunnar Myrdal. Eager to “think and dream of the Negro 24 hours a day,”¹¹ Myrdal accepted the Foundation’s post and four years later compiled a massive two-volume tome complete with 10 appendices and 250 pages of footnotes addressing the inconsistencies between the

⁹ Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987*(Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 35.

¹⁰ Frederick Keppel, Foreword to *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), lvi.

¹¹ Myrdal quoted in Jackson, 86.

promises of what Myrdal called, the “American Creed,” or our “humanistic liberalism,”¹² and the lived realities of black second-class citizenship. Myrdal writes,

From the point of view of the American Creed the status accorded the Negro in America represents nothing more and nothing less than a century-long lag of public morals . . . The Negro in America has not yet been given the elemental civil and political rights of formal democracy, including a fair opportunity to earn his living, upon which a general accord was already won when the American Creed was first taking form. And this anachronism constitutes the contemporary ‘problem’ both to Negroes and to whites.¹³

“The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the [white] American,”¹⁴ Myrdal establishes in his preface. “It is a moral issue that this problem presents itself in the daily life of ordinary people; it is a moral issue that they brood over it in their thoughtful moments.”¹⁵ Although Myrdal did not wholly excise the structural causes of racial inequality in his text (he was particularly critical of the legal system), his insistence that the Negro problem was mainly a matter of conscience has been his most lasting legacy. Breaking with the government mandated liberalism of the New Deal that he rightly claimed ignored the devastating poverty of many, particularly Southern African Americans as it sought to remedy economic depression, proponents of postwar liberalism enabled by the Myrdalian turn rhetorically claimed racial equality as one of its formative tenets but remained willfully blind

¹² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 8.

¹³ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, lxxix.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, lxxxii.

to many of the structural complexities of race. With Myrdal's authorization, the tensions between the espoused democratic ideals mobilizing both world and cold wartime efforts and the treatment of African Americans are understood and assumed to be matters of the personal rather than systemic oppression.

Both the importance and telling mythologies surrounding Myrdal's text for postwar race relations cannot be overstated. Case in point, Walter Jackson rightly names *An American Dilemma* in *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987* "the study to end all studies."¹⁶ Hailed by critics for the *New York Times* and *Life* magazine, along with black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, George Schuyler, E. Franklin Frazier, and Horace Cayton, Myrdal's text ushered about a significant change in how race relations was conceived, and consequently, changed the discourses around race and liberalism. Even Richard Wright admitted privately that he sought to begin "a project that would do for the inner personality, the subjective landscape of the Negro, what Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* did for the external, social relations."¹⁷ Some critics see Wright's 1945 bestselling autobiography, *Black Boy*, that very reflection on the black psyche.¹⁸

While Myrdal's prominent place in the annals of social science as the author of the most comprehensive study of U.S. race relations, and the Carnegie Foundation's hailing of

¹⁶ Jackson, 231.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Michael Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 586.

¹⁸ Jackson, 247.

the scholar as “exceptional” possibly misattributes a liberal orthodoxy years in the making;¹⁹ understanding the singularity with which Myrdal has been remembered points to his reputation within the discursive space of the text’s reception and legacy. Eventually quoted “in general” in the documents composing the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision as well as providing the concluding line of the introduction to the infamous 1965 Moynihan report, Myrdal insisted that the “Negro problem” was a moral issue. For Myrdal, interrogating the question “who is the Negro?” solves the issue of racial reconciliation, and Ray Sprigle took Myrdal’s question very seriously.

Dixie Terror and the Geographies of Blackness

Originally from the rustbelt, rubber city of Akron, Ohio, Ray Sprigle becomes black alter-ego James Rayel Crawford through the willing and temporary surrender of his privilege by negotiating the legal, cultural, and geographic spaces that, for Sprigle, produce racial difference and its consequences – the Jim Crow South. Although he attempts to embody a physical blackness for almost six months before beginning his racial travels, he is unable to do so recognizing the “problems of ‘passing’” (18). Sprigle writes, “Remember all those romances you’ve read in which the hero disguises himself as a Hindu or Arab or one of the other darker-skinned races? . . . My big trouble at the outset of this expedition was that I couldn’t find one of these old women waiting with her miraculous lotion” (19). After

¹⁹ In actuality a diverse team of researchers and contributors compiled the majority of the evidence Myrdal used to posit his conclusion. Sterling Brown, Alain Locke, psychologist Kenneth Clark, sociologist Robert Park and anthropologist Franz Boas among others comprised the list of researchers and contributors. For more on the input of the team see Walter A. Jackson.

consulting chemists at the Mellon Institute who recommended phenol compounds that would change his skin with the caveat that using them would probably kill him, Sprigle attempts to darken his skin with the juice of walnut hulls along with “iodine, argyrols, pyrogallic acid, [and] potassium permanganate,” but unfortunately, “come a little perspiration and I’d find myself striped like a tiger or spotted like a leopard” (20). Finally after three weeks in the Florida sun, Sprigle “shaved his head, practically down to the skull . . . had my glasses reset in enormous black rims, and acquired a cap drooped like a tam-o’-shanter. I was all set for “passing in reverse” (21). When Sprigle realizes that “everywhere I went in the South I encountered scores of Negroes as white as I ever was back home in Pittsburgh,” (22) he decides not to significantly alter his body, and instead, simply moves in both the real and mythic Southern landscapes structuring a racial public that establishes the conditions for his imagined racial belonging. He writes, “I quit being white, and free, and an American citizen when I climbed aboard that Jim Crow coach in Washington’s Union Station. From then on, until I came up out of the South four weeks later, I was black, and in bondage—not quite slavery but not quite freedom either” (10). Allowing him to become a “reasonable facsimile of a light-skinned Negro from the North,” (21) Jim Crow segregation produces a black identity for Sprigle. He writes, “Southern whites have long taken the position that when a man say’s he’s black, so far as they are concerned he is. So the white folks never lifted an eyebrow when I sat in the Jim Crow sections of trains, busses and streetcars, drank from the ‘For Colored’ fountains in courthouse and railroad station, ate in Negro restaurants, sat in the ‘For Colored’ sections of rail and bus stations” (3-4).

During his travels, Sprigle enlists the help of Walter White, the then executive secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who often used his “light-skinnedness” to pass for white while investigating lynching, and, not at all coincidentally, was also a member of Myrdal’s research team for *An American Dilemma*. Sprigle writes, “Scores of times Walter White has traversed the South from end to end, posing as a white man, risking his life every mile and every minute of his journeyings. And here was a white newspaperman from Pittsburgh who wanted to reverse the process and turn Negro. The idea caught his fancy” (6-7). With the authorization of White and the protective guidance of political and civil leader, John Wesley Dobbs (originally unnamed for safety reasons), Sprigle as Crawford crisscrosses the South giving up access to restrooms, water fountains, waiting rooms, convenience, and privilege, thereby experiencing how Jim Crow produces and structures black public life. For example, after arriving in Huntsville, Alabama, and in search of room and board Sprigle’s finds relief in the de jure segregated community of black Huntsville that produces his feeling of racial belonging. “A little after midnight,” Sprigle writes, “we pulled into the Negro section of that northern Alabama town. Only once before in my life had I experienced the relief and comfort and sense of safety that I did when we kinked ourselves from the car and joined those friendly black faces on the sidewalk . . . And by this time, they *were* my people, I was somewhat surprised to find. I think that was the first time I realized that I was *feeling* black” (113, emphasis in original). Sprigle “finds” himself purposefully dislocated, and thereby, “kinked” as Crawford. This

racial (re)positioning, however, must be continually constructed and reconstructed through the idea(l) of an imagined South.

For Sprigle to prepare a place for Crawford the Jim Crow South is articulated through the logics of what Houston Baker and Dana Nelson theorize as its “symbolic geography” as a “national but alien” imagined internal other.”²⁰ Often called the “Southland” throughout the narrative, Sprigle’s “land of Jim Crow” is displaced as another country and structured as not only strategically foreign, but also inaccessible and outside history. He writes, “The towers and turrets of the great cities of the Southland, painted against the falling night as we rolled along, represented a civilization and an economy almost completely alien to me” (2). This alienating disorientation of strangely medieval architectural relics erects a gothic castle wall between North and South by delimiting the boundaries of the South via its relationship to a history of racial terror. It was not the Mason-Dixon line, but the “Smith and Wesson line to us black folk,” Sprigle maintains (1). The violence implicit in this renaming spectacularizes the South as the bounded repository for the sins of the past and a ready excuse for those of the present and future even while it is paradoxically pushed out of history.

A “pastoral in blood,” (198) the South’s Sprigle-described “feudalism” sluggishly trails the North’s modernity, as well as its liberalism. “Up north,” he writes, “young folks follow the new pattern of being liberal in all things” (176). This “new pattern,” or the

²⁰ Houston Baker and Dana Nelson, eds, “Violence, The Body, and ‘The South,’” *American Literature* 73 (2001): 233.

discursive shift brought on by the Myrdalian turn, constructs the South as a physical and psychic home of racial terror that enables an innocent and progressive North. Baker and Nelson continue, “To have a nation of ‘good, liberal, and innocent white Americans, there must be an outland where ‘we’ know they live: all the guilty, white yahoos who just don’t like people of color . . . ‘The South’ comes to the rescue of U.S. wholeness.”²¹ Although Sprigle begrudgingly recognizes that “[n]o Northern white can deny there is discrimination against the Negro in the North,” (8) he refuses to construct the North as equally culpable in those histories. He writes, “Don’t anybody try to tell me that the North discriminates against the Negro, too, and seek to use that as a defense against the savage oppression and the brutal intolerance the black man encounters in the South. Discrimination against the Negro in the North is an annoyance and an injustice. In the South it is a bloodstained tragedy” (7). Sprigle continues, “In short, discrimination against the Negro in the North is usually in defiance of the law. In the South it is enforced and maintained by the law” (9).

Characterized only by the “annoying” consequences of U.S. racialization including lynchings and riots, the North remains the necessary bastion of postwar liberalism due to the much more distracting spectacles of racial terror defining the South. For example, when Sprigle excuses the North he renders the rash of race riots during the red summer of 1919 in cities such as Chicago and Omaha, the 1930 lynchings of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, and the 1943 race riot in Detroit merely unremarkable although he seedily anticipates similar spectacles of somehow distinctly Southern terror. He admits,

²¹ Baker and Nelson, 235.

Let me make clear at the start, too, that this is no complete and impartial survey of the race problem in the South. This is the story of a newspaperman who lived as a Negro in the South and didn't like it. I deliberately sought out the worst that the South could show me in the way of discrimination and oppression of the Negro. I spent most of my time in Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama. I ignored Virginia and North Carolina, where the greatest progress in the development of civilized race relations has been recorded. How can you correct evil until you find it? I deliberately sought the evil and the barbarous aspects of the white South's treatment of the Negro. It is of that only that I write. (9)

Sprigle's blackness relies on what I call, "Dixie terror," an imagined construction of the South dependent on the anticipated presence of racially-motivated violence necessary to both spectacularize and authenticate his "reverse passing." And as Tara MacPherson reminds us in *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, "Dixie, after all, is a woman's name,"²² the term reveals this understanding of the physical and psychic geographies of the South as one deeply gendered. MacPherson continues, "The South [post Civil War], responding to its own feminized position vis-à-vis the North – a feminization that was both literal, owing to the loss of a large portion of the male population, and figurative, given the South's status as defeated – turned to a hyperfeminized figure of the Southern woman as discursive symbol for the region, with the land itself being figured as feminine as well" (19). Against this already feminized landscape, the white body in masquerade exposes the rest of the nation's psychic need for the South as exclusive repository of racial terror as well as the delicious anticipation of both real and perceived vulnerabilities to violence.

²² Tara MacPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

Reading at times like a piece of ethnographic travel writing, both the series of newspaper articles and the book-length *In the Land of Jim Crow* pornographically splay an already gendered and fantasized South across the minds of titillated Northern readers, and consequently, although fifteen Northern newspapers syndicated Sprigle's column, not one Southern white newspaper ran even the briefest mention of his adventure. As Sprigle excuses the North to enable his search for Dixie terror, he admits that while he "ate, slept, traveled, lived," and eventually "felt" black, "[o]n that long bus trip North, as in all my sojourn in the South, in 4,000 miles of travel by Jim Crow train and Bus and street car and by motor, I encountered not one unpleasant incident. Nobody called me 'nigger.' Nobody insulted me. Nobody pushed me off the sidewalk" (212). While those made most vulnerable by Jim Crow might consider such a negotiation of the South a "success," Sprigle as journalist recognizes that "this would be a far better story if I could show some scars left by the blackjack of some Negro-hating small-town deputy whom I'd failed to 'sir.' Or a few bullet holes, mementos of an argument with some trigger-happy Atlanta motorman. I could have gathered them, all right. Just by getting 'fresh' at the right time and place. But for me, no role as hero. I took my tales of brutality and oppression and murder at second hand" (212-213). While his failed heroic opportunity might have been the consequence of the protection of Dobbs, and the accommodationist performance he may have encouraged ("I was more than careful to be a 'good nigger'" [212]), Sprigle still craved the racialized violence necessary to guarantee the salaciousness of his series and eventual memoir. Perhaps Sprigle was right to insist on some authenticating Dixie terror. Sales of the book were disappointing

and his series in the *Post-Gazette* failed to garner that second Pulitzer Prize nomination for which the newspaper's staff heavily campaigned on his behalf. This "failure" is not only a matter of book sales, however, Sprigle's passing is oft-forgotten, lost among and overshadowed by the much more popularly remembered John Howard Griffin who passed as a black man in the South a decade later. That Sprigle never experiences racial violence and is consequently forgotten reveals how the spectacle of that violence is necessary to perform the scripts of Myrdalian-liberalism.

The Sentimentality of Myrdalian-Liberalism

When the adventures of violence Sprigle imagines and anticipates never materialize, he turns to the literary and cultural work of sentimentality to stand in for his absent experience. In the last chapter of *In the Land of Jim Crow* entitled, "Crossing Back," Sprigle writes, "All my life I've regarded Eliza's stunt of crossing the Ohio on floating ice floes, with bloodhounds baying at her heels, as a pretty heroic adventure. Not any more. The night I came up out of the Deep South in a Jim Crow bus, I'd have been glad to take a chance crossing on the ice if anything had happened to stall our jolting chariot on the Kentucky shore. And there'd have been no need of any bloodhounds to put me into high gear" (210). As the only other text explicitly referenced in Sprigle's narrative, the iconic and often theatricalized scene of Eliza's perilous crossing of the Ohio River in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stands in for the entire archive of the novel and its legacies. In "Poor Eliza," an essay considering the work of sentiment through the dramatic adaptation of Eliza's harrowing ice walk in Rodgers and Hammerstein's on-screen musical *The King and I*, Lauren Berlant acknowledges,

“Almost every adaptation of the novel involves an elaborate dramatic staging of the scene where [Eliza] crosses the Ohio river riding rafts of ice. This event takes less than two pages in the text. Yet it is a powerful scene, electrified by the awesome power of the mother to harness her own sublimity to the sublimity of nature, thus transforming herself into a species of superperson.”²³ Removed from any narrative contextualization (Sprigle never mentions Harriet Beecher Stowe or the novel’s title), Eliza stands alone in the memoir as a representative citation of not only what Lauren Berlant calls the “supertext” of 19th century American sentimental fiction, but also, the cultural work of sentimentality more broadly. In so situating Stowe, Sprigle necessarily restages the scene of Eliza’s crossing for a presumably familiar audience. While the debatable comfort of a late, southern Ohio spring replaces the frosty winds of a February night, and suspended bridges rather than ice floes carry him to “freedom,” Sprigle further disrupts the iconicity of the scene by replacing Eliza’s tender feet with a Jim Crow bus and her black woman body with his own. Placing himself at the center of this reimagined sentimental epic, Sprigle does not just identify with Eliza’s precarious vulnerability, he overtakes it through a fantastical revision of its conditionality. Revising the script of this oft-performed racial melodrama, Sprigle substitutes Stowe’s dangerous bloodhounds and slave traders for a paranoid longing for the surveillance written into transregional law with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.

²³ Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” in *No More Separate Spheres!*, editors Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 299-300.

Sprigle attempts to answer Myrdal's query, "who is the Negro?" through the imagined logics of "how . . . the Negro suffer[s]," radicalizing the empathy Myrdal demands with a turn to a politics of the skin. As Sprigle "feels" blackness through a spatial logics of experience and racialization that evidences the empathy Myrdal encouraged from white America, he locates his ability to bear witness as participant-observer to African American second class citizenship in his body's vulnerability to a renegotiated site of spectacularized trauma. In "Poor Eliza," Lauren Berlant again says it best: "Suffering, in this personal-public context, becomes answered by survival, which is then recoded as freedom. Meanwhile, we lose the original impulse behind sentimental politics, which is to see the individual effects of mass social violence as *different from* the causes, which are impersonal and depersonalizing."²⁴ Sprigle's citational invocation of Stowe reinscribes and possibly anticipates the political utility of sentimentality to facilitate the project of liberalism. As both form and content, sentimentality guarantees liberalism's success by placing a structure of feeling, seductively teary-eyed, around the sociopolitical ideologies of American liberalism. Berlant continues, "When sentimentality meets politics, it uses personal stories to tell of structural effects."²⁵ Sentimentality then *primes* us for that heaping, but oftentimes bitter, dose of liberalism's "good" medicine. "Feeling" for Eliza makes Lincoln's misrecognition of the start of the Civil War as the sole consequence of the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seems logical. Similarly, feeling for Sprigle as Crawford as Eliza might make the Myrdal-inspired, postwar

²⁴ Berlant, 297. Emphasis in original.

²⁵ Ibid, 297.

liberal solutions to the “American dilemma” all the more urgently palatable. In other words, sentimentality establishes the necessary emotional conditioning for the suturing of subject to nation.

Sprigle stretches the boundaries of sentiment, pushing beyond simple imagination to actually become the other that sentiment only mandates we sympathetically pity. However, this intentionality refuses to affect any real political changes, “Because,” as Berlant writes, “the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its cases become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy.”²⁶ Sprigle’s actively passive empathy inspired by a postwar orthodoxy of liberal thought trafficking in the logics of sentiment does not inspire or even suggest any real changes to de jure segregation for African Americans, particularly since liberalism never requires anything to be surrendered in its name. Echoing this, the end of Sprigle’s memoir puts potentially anxious, yet satisfied readers at ease with its reassuring recommendations. He writes,

Finally—one last word to the white man in the South from a Negro, even though a temporary one. Don’t be concerned about the Negro’s seeking to rise to the stature of manhood and American citizenship. Don’t worry about him defiling your hotels or restaurants, or above all, your race. Not one Negro did I meet who wanted to associate with white folks. True, all of them condemned segregation bitterly. But as they talked on, it developed that it was discrimination rather than mere segregation that they hated. Every man and woman I talked to, field hand or educator, betrayed the fact that he wanted as little contact with the white world as possible.

But here are a few things with which, it seems to me, no decent Southerner could quarrel. Surely none of them is going to destroy the way of

²⁶ Ibid, 297.

life of the white South. They probably won't even appreciably dent white supremacy. They are the few things that I, as a Negro for four weeks, learned to want:

Quit killing us wantonly just to try out a new gun, or to teach us that it's not good for us to try to vote, or just because you 'don't like a damn nigger nohow.'

Next, let us exercise the franchise guaranteed us by the Constitution and the Supreme Court. You'll never see a Negro party in the South. You'll find that the Negro vote, when there is one, is going to split along the same lines as the white vote.

Give our children a decent change at a decent education—the same kind of education that you want for your children. And give our young men and women a chance for a university education—in law, medicine, engineering. We might even be of service to you. (214)

As he articulates a call for the limited rights of the Southern black community, he does so by insisting on the separation of those civil rights from interracial, social interaction, and in so doing, Sprigle parrots Booker T. Washington's address delivered at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exhibition. In what became known as the "Atlanta Compromise Address," Washington states,

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories. While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in

nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.²⁷

In 1895, Washington's suggestions to Southern whites were incredibly controversial. For some he articulated an unfortunate, but necessary, compromise, while others viewed his words as an egregious, personally beneficial "selling-out" of the black community. In 1949, however, Sprigle's mimicked accommodationist rhetoric only attempts to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of Jim Crow since disrupting segregation would undermine the very spatialities that would otherwise categorize his body "white." Here, Sprigle authorizes what James Baldwin vehemently denounces as the sentimental "fantasies, connecting nowhere to reality" in his 1955 essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel." Baldwin writes, "Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty."²⁸ In the logics of Myrdalian-liberalism, racism is a redeemable matter of the heart and soul and not about complicity in a system that produces, maintains, and defends racial difference. Liberalism allows the most privileged, and

²⁷ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 129.

²⁸ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 14.

presumably most aware, to exempt themselves from the wages of race on the basis of the I'm-a-good-person defense. Undermining the structural disadvantages of racial difference that along with the privileges of racial hierarchism maintain the political, social, and economic wages (costs and benefits) of race, Myrdalian-liberalism works on the assumption that intimacy provides the condition for racial reconciliation, or for Sprigle, that being in someone else's skin, and not their shoes, fully enables understanding. Consequently, Myrdal's dilemma is reconciled by what Sprigle calls "passing in reverse" or what I call "racial im/posture."

Throughout this project, racial im/posture names a spectacularized performance of racial or ethnic identity reliant on the logics of both passing and blackface minstrelsy. While these modes of racial masquerade can differ regarding ideology, technologies, motive, reception, and access, thinking through their places of divergence and intersection exposes how performances of race are both structured, maintained, embodied, and (re)presented. Racial im/posture brings together the theatrical insistence on artificiality grounding performances of blackface alongside the necessary nondisclosure of the racial passer as such. Racial im/posture also maintains the cultural, social, and political ambivalence around blackface performance and iconography as well as the very ethics of racial passing. Enabled by Myrdalian-liberalism and framed with the ideological language of sentimentality, racial im/posture spectacularizes the absurdities and ironies of racialization while simultaneously gesturing toward its very real consequences. While I have been asked more than once, "Don't you mean *impostor*?" im/posture here articulates the performativity and performance

in these acts of racial transgression. Im/posture does the work of destabilizing the assumptions around blood, suspicion, belonging, authenticity, racism, and community that the subject position of “impostor” immediately forecloses. This is also the work of the slash. In *Aporias* Jacques Derrida writes, “The mobile slash between and/or, and/and, or/and, or/or, is a singular border, simultaneously conjunctive, disjunctive, and undecidable.”²⁹ This virgule cuts, destabilizing the boundaries structuring notions of racial propriety.

Sprigle’s im/posure, paradoxically well-intentioned, maddening, misguided, exploitative, and sincerely pursued, exposes the political efficacy of sentiment, and his text’s citational kinship with Gunnar Myrdal’s study allows us to reconsider *An American Dilemma* with attention to the work of sentimentality. As an oft-disparaged literary mode characterized by a grotesque excess, sentimentality would be the least expected part of Myrdal’s 1000-plus pages. Recognizing, however, that where sentiment goes so follows liberalism allows us to return to the discursive space of Myrdal’s text. Although Myrdal’s presumed national objectivity coupled with the disciplinary demands of the social sciences might render sentiment strangely inappropriate among obsessively documented facts and figures, sentimentality both structures the analysis and prepares its readers for *Dilemma’s* conclusions.

The 1944, and consequently, only edition of Myrdal’s research stands as a near immortal text that, while full of the charts, graphs, and appendices that make scientific and

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 23.

social scientific evidence visually legible to the non-scientist, still attempts to structure the feeling that can and will provoke action. Myrdal concludes his analysis with a laudatory nod to his formal disciplining. He writes, “We have today in social science a greater trust in the improbability of man and society than we have ever had since the Enlightenment.”³⁰

However, this glowing disciplinary allegiance is disrupted only pages before as he attempts to articulate American potential for international exceptionalism.

Mankind is sick of fear and disbelief, of pessimism and cynicism. It needs the youthful moralistic optimism of America. But empty declarations only deepen cynicism. Deeds are called for. If America in actual practice could show the world a progressive trend by which the Negro became finally integrated into modern democracy, all mankind would be given faith again—it would have reason to believe that peace, progress and order are feasible. And America would have a spiritual power many times stronger than all her financial and military resources—the power of the trust and support of all good people on earth. *America is free to choose whether the Negro shall remain her liability or become her opportunity.*³¹

In the shadow of the war, Myrdal’s conclusion makes a sentimental appeal to white America to put into “practice” those liberal promises with the potential to change the relations between the races along the black/white binary.³² Hailing the falsely universal categories of “mankind” and “American,” a characteristic of the sentimental literary genre, Myrdal issues a call for America (read the United States) to realize the potential of its exceptionality amidst both the real and imagined threats to its status as an emerging postwar superpower. For

³⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Vol II*. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), 1024.

³¹ Myrdal, 1021-1022. Emphasis in original.

³² Jackson, 230.

Myrdal, this exceptionality, couched in the language of sentiment, inspires a hopeless yet redeemable global citizenry of “good” individuals. As Berlant emphasizes, “The turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world, one where structural inequities, not emotions and intimacies are epiphenomenal. In this imaginary world the sentimental subject is connected to others who share the same feeling.”³³ Reconciling the “Negro problem” becomes simultaneously a moral, domestic imperative as well as a way to cohere an international community through the gently restrained embrace of blackness into the logics of the liberal project.

Recognizing the lasting impact of the Myrdalian turn on contemporary understandings of race and race relations, sentiment is also employed in how the text is remembered and (re)historicized as evidenced by the introduction to the Transaction Publishers fiftieth anniversary edition lovingly written by Myrdal’s own daughter, Sissela Bok. She writes,

An American Dilemma Revisited was the title my father, Gunnar Myrdal, had given to his final, unfinished book. His aim was to reexamine all that had gone into writing *An American Dilemma*, to reevaluate its conclusions in the light of how race relations in America had evolved in the ensuing decades, and to “express my worried thoughts about the future development.” But the task proved too great. In 1985, at the age of eighty-seven, increasingly immobile and blind, and unable to carry out or even oversee the research and the revisions that he knew were needed, he decided not to submit his manuscript for publication.³⁴

³³ Berlant, 301.

³⁴ Sissela Bok, Introduction to *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), xxi.

The once internationally renowned, highly influential scholar of economics, race, and politics is presented to recent readers as an enfeebled old man too frail to bring the clarifying liberalism of *An American Dilemma* to bear upon a post-civil rights, frighteningly neoconservative, sociopolitical moment. In her father's place, Bok entreats on Myrdal's behalf by framing the significance and relevance of his text for a new audience. Bok continues, "When asked by my sister, Kaj Fölster, what had been the greatest moment of his life, my father answered that it had been when he finally stood at the Princeton train station, 'with the manuscript for the *Dilemma* in my hands—ready! All that I had lived for.'"³⁵ Bok recounts her father's dedication to his scholarship with the adoration of both a prideful and jealous daughter. She splays her father's tireless dedication on the pages of her introduction in much the same way Stowe's melodramatic tableaux incite the sympathy of her readers: "My father gave his life and family to this work. So what, [dear reader,] will you do with his legacy?"³⁶

With Sprigle's answers in mind, the rest of this project theorizes Myrdalian-brand American liberalism and race in four subsequent chapters that satellite around the apparatuses of the ideologies of our sociopolitical cultural landscape: social and literary fictions, the law, and transnational capital. Chapter Two, "A Secondhand Kind of Terror": Grace Halsell and the Ironies of American Liberalism," considers the controversial and elided oeuvre of Grace Halsell, a journalist and White House staff writer who, following the

³⁵ Kaj Fölster quoted in Bok, xxi-xxii.

³⁶ Bok, xxi.

precedent and example set by John Howard Griffin in 1959, passed as black in both Harlem and Mississippi in 1969. I contend that Halsell's oft-forgotten, subsequent memoir, *Soul Sister*, refigures the usually masculine, racial im/postor's body as a woman, but in doing so she ironically invests in Myrdalian-liberalism during its own ideological crisis, while also, problematically evacuating the place of the African American woman for whom she presumes to speak. Chapter Three, "The Laws of the White Negro: *Malone v. Haley* and *Soul Man*," takes a legal turn by considering the case of the Malone brothers, Irish American identical twins who gained employment in 1975 with the Boston Fire Department under the auspices of the department's affirmative action policy by passing as black after initially being rejected as white candidates. Only after the Malone brothers served the fire department for over twelve years did routine clerical tasks uncover the discrepancies in the applications leading to their termination and, consequently, a fraught suit contesting that termination through an attempt to establish either the fact or the sincerity of their claims to black ancestry. While a few legal scholars have briefly cited this case as demonstrative of the absurd relationship between socially constructed race and the law, this chapter critically reads the "evidence" composing *Malone v. Haley* as a legal, social, visual, and literary text anxiously negotiating the supposedly precarious power of white masculine identity in the face of reparative legislative policy. The case is then read alongside *Soul Man*, the highly controversial and routinely panned 1986 film chronicling the racial consciousness of an upper-middle class, white, male Harvard Law student who passes for black to gain access to a scholarship originally designated for an African American student. *Soul Man*, I argue, eerily

redresses on screen the privileges lost and gained by the Malone brothers in court, spectacularizing the redemptive laws of the White Negro in the cultural imaginary.

Taking cues from Chapter Three that race is often a matter of consistent documentation, Chapter Four, “The (Il)literatecies of Race: Anatole Broyard and *The Human Stain*” argues that race is not only to be seen, but also, to be read by examining the life and writings of *New York Times* book reviewer and literary critic, Anatole Broyard. Posthumously outed for passing for white by literary mogul, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in a 1996 piece for *The New Yorker*, Anatole Broyard and his well-documented relationship to both literature and the practice of reading offer a way to theorize literacy (to read and to be read) as an epistemology of racial difference. Or as Broyard once wrote, “I am a literature rather than a personality.” This chapter then moves from Broyard to the literal text he likely inspired, Philip Roth’s novel *The Human Stain* (2000). Detailing the undoing of an African American classics professor passing for Jewish amidst a climate of stifling political correctness and the nation-wide sex panic brought on by the Clinton-Lewinsky scandals, *The Human Stain*, I contend, is a text anxiously obsessed with literacy. With one character pretending to be illiterate, another a literature professor and the novelist writing his story making up the cast of characters in this small, New England town, *The Human Stain* is an opportunity to think about the limits and possibilities of bodies as texts, epistemologies in im/posture, and rhetorical liberalism. Finally, in Chapter Five, “I Am African?: Globalization and the (Black)Face of AIDS,” the otherwise domestic ideologies of Myrdalian-liberalism go transnational through the consideration of two strikingly similar transatlantic advertising

campaigns. In 2006, both Kate Moss and Gwyneth Paltrow affect blackness in order to raise awareness and money for the HIV/AIDS pandemic particularly felt in sub-Saharan Africa. I argue that their photographs image the logics of racial im/posture by effacing the body of the African woman while also pointing to the ways in which blackness has been called upon to simultaneously represent and displace the realities of the global HIV/AIDS crises.

The seemingly disparate texts comprising “Spectacles of American Liberalism: Narratives of Racial Im/posture” include the literary genres of memoir, autobiography, fiction, and speculative fiction, the legal brief, the film, and the photograph. Although I read these texts from my own epistemological disciplining of literary studies, the methodology employed here is an interdisciplinary one indebted to performance and visual studies, race and queer theory, as well as new Southern studies. The project intervenes in the conventional thinking around racial masquerade by reframing the temporality of what has largely been considered an issue of the 19th and early 20th centuries as well as by considering these texts through the anxieties, ironies, contentions, and fetishizing of the discursive legacies of American liberalism. It is important then that this project situates the literary alongside the popular and visual text by insisting that the traces of Myrdalian-liberalism are found throughout our cultural, social, political, and economic landscapes. The goal of this project is to follow these traces to their often surprising, ironic, expected, ridiculous, and sometimes, unfortunate, performances. By considering texts that index the ephemeral and mercurial nature of race and racial belonging, this project foregrounds the following questions: What is the relationship between representations of blackness and its lived

experiences? How does racial im/posture expose the fragile absurdity of difference? How does racial im/posture make us self-aware of our own constructedness as raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies as well as citizens? Can racial im/posture ever truly challenge white supremacy? And, under whose authority is black authenticity defined and for whom? In a contemporary moment wrestling with the significance and place of difference to the idealization of the body politic (read debates around gay marriage, immigration, and the future of race in the wake of “Obama-mania”), these questions are immediately necessary and revealing.

Chapter Two –

A Secondhand Kind of Terror: Grace Halsell and the Ironies of American Liberalism

As Lorraine Hansberry had observed, it's a special time to be young, gifted, and black.

Grace Halsell
September 16, 1969¹

When Grace Halsell cited Lorraine Hansberry's affirmation of a talented generation of black youth, she had recently, and most ironically, finished a course of medication to construct her own spectacular blackness. Armed with the curiosity and mobility of a free-lance journalist, the economic security of a former White House staff writer for the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, and the reckless courage of the daughter of an infamous cowboy and westward expansionist, Halsell left the presumable comforts of Southern white womanhood to darken her skin and "become" an African American woman. The end of her six-month racial im/posture in both Harlem and Mississippi saw the publication of the best-selling memoir, *Soul Sister*, a book Johnson himself insisted should be "read by all Americans." Acknowledging she did not try blackness in order to solve Du Bois's stubbornly persistent "problem of the color line," Halsell instead "wanted to open my mind, my eyes, my pores, to the dilemma of race in America, and to share those experiences without making claims to the discovery of fresh truths about ourselves. I searched for light and understanding in the knowledge that any other terrain was unimportant . . . I needed this

¹ Grace Halsell, Journal Entry, 16 September 1969. Grace Halsell Collection. Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

experiment.”² Privately citing Hansberry’s motto, “to be young, gifted and black,” the title of both a posthumously produced play and a literary mosaic of unfinished works, interviews, and journals, Halsell parroted the rhetorics of a burgeoning black power movement along with the playwright’s loving and urgent charge to a new generation of black writers.

“Though it be a thrilling and marvelous thing to be merely young and gifted in such times, it is doubly so, doubly dynamic—to be young, gifted *and black*,” Hansberry affirms. She continues, “Write about *our people*: tell their story. You have something glorious to draw on begging for attention . . . This nation needs your gifts.”³ Willingly available and hungry for an experimental (read reversible) difference, Halsell’s self-described porous and open body paradoxically decontextualized and took up Hansberry’s charge. She does so even at the moment of a decisive, sociopolitical shift from the integrationist tactics structuring much of the political motivations behind the civil rights movement to the more radicalized demands of black power, a radicalization largely motivated by the crises in late 1960’s American liberalism.

While many white liberals hailed the end of de jure segregation as the solution to racial inequality in the United States, it became clear in the wake of the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that, however historically monumental the legislation, the institutionalized oppression facing African Americans was as much about economic security, housing, and

² Grace Halsell, *In Their Shoes* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1996), 2.

³ Robert Nemiroff, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 256-57. Emphasis in original.

employment as it was the mere fact of segregation. Consequently, the radicalized youth comprising the left, including the white-led and dominated New Left represented by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the highly visible activists in the burgeoning Black Power movement, grew more skeptical of those same white liberals who once fought for integration but balked as their increasingly revolutionary demands pushed beyond the physical geographies of the South making uncomfortable linkages between white supremacy, capitalism, and the imperialism represented by the Vietnam War. Dissatisfaction with what many began to see as the failed promises of mid-1960's American liberalism erupted in a 1968 that saw 125 urban riots both in protest of the status quo and in mourning of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. "The old Myrdalian paradigm, it seemed, had been pushed to the breaking point. Either the American dilemma—now reformulated to demand not simply the end of formal discrimination, but the eradication of entrenched socioeconomic inequality—had to be resolved, or its contradictions would destroy the democratic spirit of the nation."⁴ Since Halsell chose to embark on her pilgrimage into blackness just as black separatists began to question and reject the place of white liberals within the movement, this chapter attends to the ironies of Halsell's spectacular investment in Myrdalian-liberalism during its own ideological crisis, as well as her assumptions of the performative meanings of black womanhood then situates Octavia Butler's speculative novel, *Kindred*, to contend those very assumptions. Further, it

⁴ Carol A. Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185.

argues that Halsell's im/posture indexes Myrdalian-liberalism's ultimate demand for "properly" gendered, classed, and sexualized bodies.

As a self-described "descendent of slave-holders and Civil War veterans,"⁵ Grace Halsell was born May 7, 1923, in Ft. Worth, Texas, to a then sixty-three-year-old father and only thirty-year-old mother, Ruth Shanks. Encouraged to "exert free will"⁶ by a father whose 1957 *New York Times* obituary headlined, "Harry H. Halsell, 96, Indian Fighter, Texas Rancher who Once Outfoxed Geronimo Dies," Halsell, despite growing up near native communities, assumes that "color was not a conscious fact in my early years" (11). Halsell did not become "personally interested" in either the ethical and/or legislative gains made by the civil rights and black power movements rapidly altering her political and social landscapes until a book recommendation at a State Department reception early in 1968 threw race immediately into relief. Halsell writes, "I bought *Black Like Me* and plunged into it . . . 'I could do that . . . I could be black'" (9). Written by another Fort Worth native, 1961's *Black Like Me*⁷ chronicled John Howard Griffin's now iconic sojourn into "oblivion," a six-week trek through the Jim Crow South as a black man. Unlike Ray Sprigle who in 1948 let the racializing logics of de jure segregation simply assume his blackness, Griffin used a combination of sun lamps, the vitiligo corrective medication Oxsoralen, and a stain to

⁵ Grace Halsell, *Soul Sister* (Washington, D.C.: Crossroads International Publishing, 1999), 11. All subsequent citations of this text will be indicated by in-text citation.

⁶ Grace Halsell, *In Their Shoes* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1996), 32.

⁷ John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York: Signet Books, 1961).

darken his skin. The resulting spectacle of Griffin's physical transformation, and consequently, harrowing confrontations with "Dixie terror,"⁸ ensured not only the wild success of his narrative, but also, its long-standing place in high school curricula as the ur-text of respectful empathy. Along with countless generations of adolescent readers, Halsell found in the pages of *Black Like Me* Myrdalian-liberalism's cure for acute racial myopia: racial passing as racial im/posture. As Gayle Wald writes in *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, "Racial passing, in addition to signifying a manner of being seen according to the technologies of vision through which 'race' is both constituted and experienced, is also and explicitly a *way of seeing*."⁹ This racial im/posture, then, a radicalized version of sentimentality necessitating one's body stand in for, and amongst, the "other," gave Halsell a disorienting perspective on twentieth-century U.S. race relations that would provide not only a warped interpretation of what black womanhood meant in 1969, but also, a perversely constructed opportunity to "get off this damn pedestal." As an independently mobile, employed, divorcee, Halsell already teetered on the idealized column of Southern white womanhood. Her privileged need for otherness represents a desire to completely, albeit temporarily, shed whiteness, appropriating black experience much like Norman Mailer's 1957 advice to a post-World War II generation of aspiring hipsters to

⁸ For a discussion of "Dixie terror" see Chapter One of this project.

⁹ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 154. Emphasis in original.

perform aesthetic interpretations of black masculinity as a way to mark the unmarked and tragically “square” white male body.

Moved by Griffin’s example and with newly “open eyes,” Halsell began an intimate correspondence with him in March 1968 that would last until Griffin’s death in 1980. “I want to know you,” (15) she writes. She receives her chance on April 3 with Griffin in town delivering a lecture at the University of Baltimore. Although many like-minded readers of *Black Like Me* sought Griffin’s encouragement and advice for their own racial im/postures, it was this initial meeting and ensuing friendship that convinced Griffin Halsell could pull it off. In a May 23 recommendation letter to Robert Gutwillig, editor of the New American Library, a division of Penguin Books, Griffin expressed as much:

Let me just say that many people have approached me about such a [race-switching] project and I have consistently discouraged it, because it is dangerous and it takes very special gifts of perception . . . When Grace Halsell suggested this to me, I jumped at the idea enthusiastically, because she combines the experience and the perception and the ‘feeling’ more than any person I know: -- I urged her to do what I have always discouraged everyone else from doing.¹⁰

With the support and mentorship of the man she would call “Soul Brother Number One,”¹¹ Halsell prepared herself for what she initially conceived as a full year passing as a black woman.

¹⁰ John Howard Griffin, Letter to Robert Gutwillig, 23 May 1968. Grace Halsell Collection. Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

¹¹ Grace Halsell, Letter to John Howard Griffin, 20 March 1978. Grace Halsell Collection. Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

Halsell's medicalized blackness was developed and maintained by the same team of renowned dermatologists Griffin used almost ten years prior: Robert Stolar, John A. Kenney of the Howard University School of Medicine, and Aaron B. Lerner of the Yale University School of Medicine. Under their guidance, Halsell took a regimen of Tsiroralen and the topical ointment Zetar, medications given for vitiligo that both (re)condition the skin to receive sunlight and enlarge the secretory cells responsible for injecting pigment into the skin. She then supplemented the effect of the medications with weeks basking in the tropical suns of St. Thomas and Puerto Rico, hair dye, and black contacts. Along with the physical transformations of her body, Halsell learned blackness by enrolling in what could be considered John Howard Griffin's correspondence course, "Racial Im/posture 101." Responding to her anxious queries on how to affect the "identity . . . in mind,"¹² Griffin gives her this advice:

I think the best thing is to keep the story as near the truth as possible . . . (We must avoid giving the racists the material to discredit you later – they will love to put on that you went there [Mississippi] under false pretenses.) Certainly with Negroes, I would tell the exact truth, that you are doing a kind of 'lady' *Black Like Me*; you are from Fort Worth. Once you are in the Negro community it is just assumed that you are Negro, so you will not need to make any explanations because none will be asked . . . If Negroes ask questions you can give honest answers; if whites (especially strangers) ask questions just assume that cold-staring 'sullen' attitude and mumble the minimum replies . . . this is what most Negroes do now, when the questions are unwarranted.¹³

¹² Grace Halsell, Letter to John Howard Griffin, 19 April 1968. Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

¹³ John Howard Griffin, Letter to Grace Halsell, 20 April 1968. Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

Here, Griffin instructs Halsell in a performance of blackness where black bodies (and/or at least the narratives detailing their experiences) are conveniently absent. Black bodies are necessary only when their oversignification marks the racial im/postor through proximity. Otherwise, blackness is excavated from the white imaginary, summoned in all the complexity of its “sullen” and “mumbl[ing]” suspicion.

Beyond the medical interventions made to the physical body, Griffin schools Halsell in a set of racial templates that function like, and stand in for, the “real truth” about race and racial difference in this imagined social. In *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, John Jackson writes, “Classifications by race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality are all such shortcuts, templates we use in lieu of absolute interpersonal transparency. We employ them to get at the truth of the world, to get at *the real world*.”¹⁴ While the machinations of the social demand that the assumptions, stereotypes, and ideologies that cohere to create these templates are naturalized to the point of invisibility, racial im/posture spectacularly exposes their arbitrary logics. This is supposedly what it means to not only *act* black, but more importantly, *become* black in a late 1960’s moment. Or, for the racial im/postor, passing is being. Under the scopic regimes of racialization, being “taken for” and “assumed to be” gives one experiential and moral authority. It is with this authority that Griffin explicates the presumed schism between the public and interior lives of African Americans as he schools Halsell in his interpretation of the effects (and affect) of W.E.B. Du

¹⁴ John L. Jackson, Jr., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago, ILL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 17. Emphasis in original.

Bois's double consciousness. Griffin suggests that blackness must be staged for the appealing benefit of white audiences, and that it is only in these moments of interracial interaction that it is performed. Appropriating the practicum of anthropological fieldwork and the moxie of investigative journalism, Griffin conceives of "racial passing as a methodology."¹⁵ Griffin claims, as participant observer, an exclusive insight that allows him to both recognize and decode these performances of black embodiment. Without acknowledging the performativity of racial difference, however, Griffin obscures *intra*racial anxieties about black authenticity and belonging often played out at the intersections of class and sexuality.

"A Kind of 'Lady' *Black Like Me*"

While readying Halsell for her curtain call, both she and Griffin were concerned with, and motivated by, the gendered nuances Halsell's femininity could bring to a white readership's understanding of black America. "After all," Halsell writes, "*Black Like Me* was written by a man . . . I wondered if it were possible for a white woman to expose herself to that mind-deadening malady of second-class citizenship and report its effects" (11-12). Before Halsell's intervention, racial im/posture was a decidedly masculinist enterprise, and, at least for Griffin, his temporary blackness was an anxious forfeiture of whiteness that revealed the instability of his own deeply dependent and interlocking heterosexual

¹⁵ Wald, 159.

masculinity.¹⁶ In the same letter to editor Robert Gutwillig, Griffin anticipates the insights to be gained via Halsell: “I have also felt that this [racial im/posture] should be done by a woman, and felt my own work deficient because I believe there are insights that only a woman can get.”¹⁷ Selling Halsell with invocations to a gynocentric ideal of female intuition, Griffin recognizes his blindness regarding the experiences of black women in his own exposé but still positions himself as the guiding authority on how to perform black femininity. “Always act suspicious,” Griffin warns, “especially of men asking questions, and especially of the police, suspicious, uneasy and ready-to-run; because certainly the fear of rape is widespread.”¹⁸ While Griffin is supposedly speaking to the gendered differences between his own experiences and what he anticipates Halsell will encounter as a black woman, his vague warning also recalls his own sexual vulnerability. No longer able to rely on the normalizing logics that ensured the respectability and power arbitrarily conferred upon white heterosexual masculinity, Griffin’s racial im/posture queered him.

While hitchhiking from Biloxi, Mississippi, to Mobile, Alabama, for example, Griffin experienced assumedly unexpected and unwanted sexual advances from the white men willing to give him a ride. He writes,

It quickly became obvious why they picked me up. All but two picked me up the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book . . . All

¹⁶ Ibid, 156.

¹⁷ John Howard Griffin, Letter to Robert Gutwillig, 23 May 1968. Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

¹⁸ John Howard Griffin, Letter to Grace Halsell, 20 April 1968. Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

showed morbid curiosity about the sexual life of the Negro, and all had, at base the same stereotyped image of the Negro as an inexhaustible sex-machine with oversized genitals and a vast store of experiences, immensely varied. They appeared to think that the Negro has done all of those 'special' things they themselves have never dared to do. They carried the conversation into the depths of depravity.¹⁹

Perhaps it is this same-sex, sexual vulnerability that prompts Griffin's cautionary advice on the threat of sexual violence during Halsell's blackness tutorial, or perhaps it was his readied masculine "impulse" to protect Southern white womanhood. Either way, Griffin insists that understanding the widespread threat of sexual violence is an essential part of constructing a recognizable and legitimate performance of black womanhood. Notably, Griffin is ambiguous here (of whom is she to fear exactly?), but in the logics of *Soul Sister*, Halsell interprets his warnings through her long-conditioned fear of black male sexuality. While white men accost Griffin in the pseudo-private, transitory space of the automobile, Halsell anticipates rape by black men, animating the myth of the black male rapist. Summoning the readily available hyperbole of this particularly, but no longer exclusively, Southern fiction, Halsell writes, "The white man says the black man is a beast and marauder, he will rape you, rob you, he is mean as the devil (you know the devil has got to be black)" (50). Halsell reveals that proper Southern white womanhood is predicated on the paranoid expectations of a pathological black male sexuality. This fear produces her white womanhood while supposedly ensuring that whiteness is protected from a willful and polluting miscegenation.

¹⁹ Griffin, 85.

As Riché Richardson reminds in *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*,

The myth of the black rapist that emerged in the South in the wake of Emancipation functioned in some ways as the obverse of the Uncle Tom and was rooted in even more explicitly perverse scripts of the black masculine body and sexuality. It was a myth that cast black men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and construed them as inherently lustful and primitive. It was rooted in the growing panic about racial intermixture in the South that emerged after slavery ended, reflected the region's obsession with protecting white womanhood to ensure the purity of the race, and served as a primary rationale for lynching in the region.²⁰

She later concludes, “the myth of the black rapist is one of the most virulently racist stereotypes of black masculinity in this nation’s history.”²¹

Since blackness for the racial im/postor demands a spectacularized vulnerability to a real and perceived threat, Halsell and Griffin demonstrate that the expectation of Dixie terror is largely motivated by the explicit fear, and perversely disturbing anticipation, of racialized sexual violence. While Griffin maintains it is his new blackness that provides the alibi for queer encounters with curious and vulgar white men, Halsell understands the threat via her relationship to a white woman body steeped in its own regionally sanctioned mythologies. “Yes,” she admits, “I’ve packed all of my old fears, right in with the nylons and hairbrush. I’m not *supposed* to go [to Harlem]” (50, emphasis in original). Halsell

²⁰ Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 4-5.

²¹ *Ibid*, 36.

continues, “No telling what’s going to happen to a good white woman like me” (51).

Despite the medical and topical interventions darkening her body landscape, it is as if the rapaciousness of black sexuality would undoubtedly hunt down and uncover the “real truth” of her whiteness. In other words, she may inhabit Harlem as a presumed black woman, but she would always be a white rape victim.

As Griffin’s warning and Halsell’s fears prepare her for the psychic imaginings of what black womanhood must be like, they also directly impacted how she chooses to embody her “synthetic blackness.”²² In a September 2, 1968, letter to dermatologist Robert Stolar Halsell exclaims, “I’m beginning to see several benefits in being a man! I could wear long-sleeved shirts and trousers and just have a dark face and dark hands.”²³ During a month of nearly nude sunbathing and almost overdosing on vitiligo-corrective medication in the desperate attempt to get an even coloring on her entire body, Halsell fantasizes herself both black and in drag, longing for the masculine privileges of Griffin’s seemingly easier embodied affect. Never anticipating displaying his entire body to the gaze of anyone aside from his own reflection, Griffin prepared his blackened body to pass only in public (much like the theatrical corkings necessary to grace the minstrel stage). Contrastingly, Halsell suggests that to successfully perform black womanhood, her *naked* body must be able to withstand the scrutinizing gaze of racializing surveillance. By readying her privates for the

²² Grace Halsell, *Black/White Sex* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1972), 22.

²³ Grace Halsell, Letter to Robert Stolar, 2 September 1968, Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

private, Halsell gestures toward the vulnerability of black women, eerily foreshadowing the uncomfortably ironic end of her memoir.

Once Halsell's body reached a "beautiful color (good enough to eat I suppose – if you like caramel),"²⁴ she moves to Harlem to begin her adventures in blackness. "Why was I really going to do it?" she queries. "My emotions answered: I need this experience. I have been on the outside looking in. I have smelled the colored people's collard greens and their living-up-close-together smells. I am now going to knock on their doors and say, black people let me in there with you!" (13). Imagining the wafting and iconic black neighborhoods of Harlem as a restricted "black enclave" (51), Halsell refuses the fantasy of the culturally rich, endlessly accessible Harlem that drove the white middle class uptown for exotic nights of jazz and gin during its Renaissance. Instead, she constructs an urban wasteland marred by the blight of over-industrialization and the accumulating detritus of modernity. "So the bus moves towards Dante's inferno," she writes. "No not Dante's but Claude Brown's, James Baldwin's, Billie Holiday's. And through my roiling mind: *Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here*" (50-51, emphasis in original). While in the visual logics of racialization skin color remains the most salient feature of black identity and belonging, *Soul Sister's* readership cannot experience the visual impact of Halsell's blackened body. Consequently, Halsell must affect her blackness in the logics of the memoir by situating herself within the alien and alienating spaces of a black public, one "peopled by Dickensian

²⁴ Grace Halsell, Letter to Aaron Lerner, 13 November 1968, Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

elements, drunks, pushers, thieves, murderers, dope addicts, the deprived, the predator” (50) along with the sonic markers of an aestheticized violent poverty. She writes, “At first I listen to the noises . . . The sirens that wail endlessly. Another overdose? Another stabbing? A .38 in the chest? A murder? A fire? All night the sirens tell the story of Harlem—a cacophony of heartache, tragedy, trouble” (61). Harlem’s cacophonous soundings resurrect the nightmarish fantasies of urban blackness already haunting the white imaginary. Absent of black humanity, Harlem is an-other world of the dying and marauding undead, a “pantheon of villains” (50). It is this exotically dangerous and terrifyingly seedy black metropolis that structures Halsell’s blackness.

In a hellscape like Harlem, affecting blackness simply becomes a spectacular performance of long-suffering survival, one Halsell stages on her first morning in the city. Attempting to authenticate an assumptive class position by purposely coming to Harlem with only twenty dollars, Halsell awakens to find her feet “swollen into enormous clubs, misshapen and unsightly. Blisters sprout like rampant mushrooms, covering my heels, soles and toes. I try to get out of bed. I cannot walk. I find myself on my hands and knees on the dirty floor” (60-61). Halsell’s infected blisters are the consequence of severe sun-poisoning and third-degree burns from her month baking herself black in the tropical sun. She seeks medical attention at Harlem Hospital. “‘*You people,*’ [the doctor] lectures me, ‘should bathe more often. Your feet are *dirty!*’ He says there is nothing wrong with my feet. ‘Just blisters’” (66, emphasis in original). Although she receives the systemic substandard health care that often structures what U.S. blackness feels like, Halsell insists it is her now

hyper-sentient body (and not her experience with structural inequities) that marks her as representative of the suffering endemic to black embodiment. Even after she relies on the privileges of whiteness to access funds and travel back to Washington, D.C., to receive personalized dermatological care from Dr. John Kenney, Halsell imagines her aching body as the corporeal occasion for her communal belonging. She writes, “*I, black woman . . . human, female—ache—because we know pain and we welcome pain*” (46). As Halsell settles into Harlem working as a secretary, ironically in that same hospital, suffering creates a black community by structuring a “we” on which Halsell can lay claim. In so doing, she transforms the unwieldy diversity of Diaspora into a coherently rooted and defined community that bonds through both the physical trauma of racialized brutality and the psychic trauma of collectively remembered and intuited pain. She writes, “[Negroes] understand me, they are my fellow sufferers. We recognize that the ghetto is hell but that we’re in it together. And the spirit is plain: for four hundred years we’ve smiled, licked boots, played prostitute, told the lies the white man wanted to hear. We put our best selves forward, giving the white man not only our physical energies as field and house slaves, but our best music and religious devotion” (70-71). “More than bone-weary” (144), Halsell constructs a narrative of black being, a performative shuffling subservience and communal martyrdom she imagines as her newly acquired ancestral legacy. Excising the realities of individual and collective black resistance, Halsell invents a historical record in which she can situate herself without being responsible to the structural inequalities that produce and sustain racial difference. In other

words, Halsell fantasizes and performs a blackness both enabled and paralyzed by vulnerability.

As Halsell begins to emotionally situate herself within Harlem's black spaces, her memoir betrays an anxious vacillation between her "white interiority" and her "black exterior," an anxiety most often exposed when race is refracted by gender and sexuality. Specifically undertaking a "lady *Black Like Me*" as Griffin describes her racial im/posture, names herself ambassador to and for African American women. However, while living in a Harlem Guest House amidst the very women she purports to speak for she finds the setting "alien, depressing, unnatural . . . We are all *women*, with mysterious, unfathomable, tragic-marvelous secrets that in one sense unite us. Yet I know I will know them only in a superficial way. They have lived their lives on one planet, so to speak, and I on another" (78, emphasis in original). Halsell's unsettling close encounter with black womankind is revealing. It is a reminder that as Halsell prepared for her dally into black womanhood, she did not find it necessary to consult any black women before becoming one, and her missed recognition might signal a subconscious awareness that her approximated blackness had not given her the immediate insight she anticipates. Here, Halsell exposes the very limits of Myrdalian-liberalism since in its logics overcoming difference is only a matter and circumstance of the heart. By constructing black women as unknowable, Halsell gestures toward the failures in the very ideological impulses of the project, as if this radical experiment in sentimentality might not prove the correct methodology for understanding,

and more importantly, coercing her reader's to appreciate the mysteriousness of the African American community and the precariousness of U.S. race relations.

The Ironies of Fate: Queerness and Sexual Violence at the Color Line

In order to ensure her racial im/posture remains a successful one, Halsell displaces her anxieties from the shaking ideologies upholding its Myrdalian-liberalism enabled logics to a more acceptably familiar repository for white racial anxiety – black sexuality. As quickly as Halsell realizes she has transformed herself black to find that she might “know [black women] only in a superficial way,” she clues her reader to what troubles her epistemological shortcomings. She writes, “I have heard among Harlem men that the Guest House has women who make love only with other women” (78). Recalling the queering of mentor Griffin, Halsell locates the intergalactic differences between she and her new mysterious housemates at the site of queerness, and thus, recovers sentiment's investment in the project. By offering alternative models of black womanhood, the Guest House lesbians disturbingly give Halsell the excuse to avoid authentic interpersonal relationships. Since these are not the women Halsell has come to feel and speak for, she refuses to allow their dynamism to complicate her relationship to, and/or understanding of, blackness. Instead, Halsell castigates black queerness, particularly black female masculinity, with the same terror she envisions black male sexuality, consequently making Griffin's epistolary warning: “the threat of rape is widespread,” all the more creepily instructive. Halsell continues, “Now seeing the virile women with muscles like a dockworker's I think that the ‘fate worse than death’ would be assault by a female” (78). Recasting the doggedly persistent, psychic tableaux of a

rapacious black male sexuality with the body of a black stud²⁵ collapses the spectrums of masculinity upon itself, suggesting that however embodied, black masculinity is always threatening.

For Halsell, queerness is a warped, funhouse mirror distortion of traditional gender roles. After witnessing the chivalry with which one woman, whom Halsell calls “masculine protector-lover,” diverted unwanted, male attention from her partner, Halsell concludes, “I suddenly see that being a real Negro male—strong, aggressive, leading—and being a real Negro female—feminine, knowing herself lovable and loving—is virtually an impossibility under the rules of white society, rules which for centuries have decreed that a black woman must work like an ox and that a black man must in all instances be submissive to the white master” (79). She continues,

I go to a ‘soul food’ restaurant. I do not see my usual waitress, who is forty-five who always wears slacks . . . I overhear the café owner say: ‘*He* must really have gotten sick, because I know that *he* would have telephoned or been here . . . and *he* has never done this before, *she* must really be sick . . .’

Confused, I ask the owner, ‘Do you mean Brownie? You keep saying *he*, then *she*.’ ‘Oh,’ the owner explains, ‘*he* is both. . .’ And he says it as lightly as he would say, ‘Oh her name is Melissa but she likes to be called Brownie,’ without any judgment on his part, but only that the decision is hers and not to be questioned by him or anyone else.

The next morning . . . I see a ‘man’ come in for breakfast. He orders eggs, bacon, and grits and then jumps from his counter stool: ‘Oh, I forgot my pill!’ he calls to a waitress. ‘I’ll be right back!’ He lives in the next door apartment building and is taking pills, I am told, to grow breasts like a woman.

²⁵ I purposefully use “stud” here instead of “butch” or “lesbian butch” to call attention to its colloquial use in the African American lesbian community as an alternative that names the unique specificity of black lesbian masculinity while highlighting its historical connection to black male masculinity that might further complicate this moment.

Later he comes in dressed in women's clothes, with an open neckline that shows his bust. Men sitting on the counter stool flirt with him, attempting, in a good-natured, mocking way to make dates (79-80, emphasis in original).

I cite this lengthy passage in its totality for two reasons. First, it demonstrates Halsell's own fascinated preoccupation with black queerness in a sociopolitical moment that witnessed the forcible resistance to police harassment by the New York City LGBTQ community in 1969. The resulting series of violent conflicts collectively called Stonewall is a watershed many credit with catalyzing the gay and lesbian rights movement. Secondly, this passage reveals that in *Soul Sister* logics, black queerness is much more about gender nonconformity than acts of same sex desire. As black lesbians are made legible via a pathologized black male sexuality, these trans and genderqueer bodies upset the otherwise authentically black space of this neighborhood soul food restaurant, forcing Halsell to reconcile these gender disruptions even in the legitimating presence of fatback and grits. It is not simply the presence and performance of gender nonconformity that troubles her, however, but what she views as the nonchalance of its acceptance – the easiness with which the café owner's tongue moves between pronouns and the open flirtations between this transitioning woman and her “otherwise heterosexual” patrons. Rather than using this moment to trouble easy assumptions about the black community's virulent homo and transphobias, Halsell anxiously insists she doesn't “want to leave the impression that I think there are more homosexuals and lesbians in Harlem than elsewhere. I don't think so.” She continues, “What does impress me is the desperate attempt of the people to break from white bondage, to ‘find’ themselves in the history of mankind” (80). Halsell sees these trans identities as the

Moynihan-esque consequence of white racism endemic to the erosion of the nuclear, black family. As an act of desperation, queerness functions how Halsell, albeit subconsciously, imagines her own blackness. Both are alternatives that move the aspiring oppressed beyond the stifling dictates of white patriarchy. Consequently, Halsell's understanding of queerness inextricably links "real" blackness to traditional ideals of heterosexual gender normativity.

Ironically enough, Halsell pathologizes black gender nonconformity at the same time she must constantly negotiate the many idealized notions of Southern white womanhood. While decidedly a Southern woman, Halsell is certainly no belle boasting of a paternally encouraged "boyish upbringing" in her 1996 memoir, *In Their Shoes*. She writes, "My father . . . bequeathed me three legacies: the idea of willpower and courage, a motivation to travel and become a full human being who incidentally was female and, perhaps most important, the gift of time. In a sense he created me by his awareness."²⁶ A fact of her childhood that structured much of her adult life, Halsell's incidental femaleness, or what I would call her "nurtured mobility," was reinforced by the legislative gains of the second wave of the women's movement. For example, even though Halsell would call Johnson "the worst boss I ever had" since "he saw me as an object which could be alluring but remained a second sex,"²⁷ her employment in the White House coincided with the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act stipulating that the "attorney general had to protect citizens against

²⁶ *In Their Shoes*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 114.

discrimination in voting, education, and public accommodations.”²⁸ It was Title VII of that act, effective July 2, 1965, that would prohibit discrimination based on sex, thus giving all women, in theory, legal recourse “to transform their issues into a structured agenda for a new liberation movement.”²⁹ That Halsell decided to pursue black womanhood shortly thereafter is not a coincidence since, as Paula Giddings made plain in 1984, “black movements are vital to the progress of feminists movements. Feminism has always had the greatest currency in times of Black militancy or immediately thereafter.”³⁰ After traveling through Mexico, Peru, Japan, and Hong Kong making a living as a freelance journalist for both foreign and domestic newspapers, Halsell found the clerical and speechwriting work at the White House a mundane, and almost, irresponsible alternative, to involving herself in the changing tide of social change forcing her to re-examine the privileges of her own Southern whiteness. “Walking the corridors of power, looking at portraits of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln,” she writes, “Why, I had asked myself, was I lucky enough to be there? What had been my credentials?”³¹ While Halsell questioned her right to walk the hallowed, male-dominated halls of the White House, she did not question her

²⁸ Ula Taylor, “The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1998): 242.

²⁹ Ibid, 242.

³⁰ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), 340.

³¹ *In Their Shoes*, 124.

impulses to become black, or her emulation of John Howard Griffin as representative exemplar of that blackness. Her subsequent fashioning of black womanhood in his image throws the irony of her pathologization of black genderqueerness in relief since Halsell herself performs a removed black womanhood that relies on the assumptive teachings of a Southern white male. Or, in other words, Griffin imagines himself “queen” in order to pass the crown to his im/postor successor, successfully blurring the lines of both race and gender for Princess Grace.

As Halsell continues to negotiate both the constraints and privileges of her gendered im/posture, she is concerned, particularly in the urban landscape of Harlem, about the trappings of class. While she finds queerness a sign of degenerate inauthenticity, Halsell craves the “realness” of a romanticized black working poor since as J. Martin Favor writes, “class becomes a primary marker of racial difference; to be truly different, one must be authentically folk.”³² And as Laura Browder writes in *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, “In Halsell’s universe, African Americans who wish to stay authentically black must explicitly commit to an agenda of poverty.”³³ Halsell writes, “I now see my job [secretary at Harlem Hospital] as the worst of all possible jobs for my purposes of trying to get an idea of how the mass of black people live. The people with whom I work are good top-level, intelligent, upper-middle-class people, and no different, the middle class

³² J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 10.

³³ Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 220.

being the middle class, from whitey” (114). After being chastised by other black women in her office for refusing to wear stockings she complained were too expensive to buy, Halsell decides to quit her job. While her co-workers were in compliance with enforcing the middle-classed, feminine standards of workplace decorum, Halsell insists that the stockings “[hold] up whitey’s standards” (116). Undoubtedly informed by the September 7, 1968, demonstrations at the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where 150 women led by the feminist organization New York Radical Women tossed the accoutrement of women’s oppression into Freedom’s Trash Can: curlers, high heels, girdles, bras, and stockings, Halsell apparently remains completely unaware of the irony in her own privileged ability to give up a well-paying job on principle. Instead she speaks as one of the “ghetto poor [who] view America’s uneven affluence with bitterness” and prepares to leave the “conditions of Negro life in the city, the garbage that isn’t picked up, the absentee landlords who refuse to fix the plumbing and eradicate the rats,” (119) for the “another world” (123) of her childhood.

Halsell chooses to continue her racial pilgrimage following in the footsteps of her im/posture mentor, John Howard Griffin, making her way by bus to the deepest South – Mississippi. “I want to experience firsthand why so many believe it’s the most backward state in the Union” (127), she writes. Less about a still lingering agricultural economy, Mississippi’s “backwardness,” lies in its iconic status as the very seat of a decidedly gendered racial terror. As the place of the 1955 lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers, the voting registration drives during the 1964 Freedom

Summer and the subsequent lynchings of Mississippi Freedom Project workers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney that same year, Mississippi had become the paradigmatic symbol for the South's need for, and resistance to, the demands of the civil rights movement. For example, in response to the violent murder of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) "reproduced a [1935] lynching photograph, adding to the original image the statement and accusation: 'MISSISSIPPI.'" ³⁴ As the South remains the "national other" ³⁵ and repository for the sins of the rest of the country's racial past, Mississippi is the other's other. Leigh Raiford continues, "'MISSISSIPPI' is best understood as the site of persistent, relentless, and unforgiving racial terror. By using an image from the past, SNCC also acknowledges and remembers the history and legacy of lynching in Mississippi." ³⁶ When Halsell alights from the bus in Jackson, Mississippi, she does so conscious of the hauntings of that past. She writes, "Because I am a creature, so to speak, of 'the Confederacy,' this trip represents an excursion into the past, a reliving of a part of my life, with glimpses into old secrets long buried, yet still vivid and intimidating" (127). However intimidating, Halsell suggests the racial im/postor must confront not only the psychic legacies of the South, but its physical geographies as well.

³⁴ Leigh Raiford, "Come Let us Build a World Together: SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Quarterly* 59 (December 2007): 1151.

³⁵ For more on this idea see Houston Baker and Dana Nelseon, eds, "Violence, The Body, and 'The South,'" *American Literature* 73 (2001).

³⁶ Raiford, 1152.

Recognizing the difficulty in assimilating into Jackson's black community since "all strangers in the South are suspect" (131), Halsell seeks the protection and guidance from members of the local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The recipient of their gracious hospitality and over a plate of ribs, Halsell hears "several of the most gripping accounts of Klan bombings and lynchings . . . these acts of terror, all in Mississippi, I listen like any interested yet *detached* observer" (153, emphasis in original). Here, Halsell sits as witness as these African American Mississippians articulate the threats to their own survivability. In the face of this frank truth-telling, Halsell chooses this moment to out herself and disclose her whiteness, thereby announcing the detachment she previously only felt. Post-disclosure, Halsell is quickly made to realize the danger her presence puts them in: "If the Klan find out where you're staying, they'll kill us and you," Winson [director of Jackson's NAACP] cautions. "If there's anything them peckerwoods hate worse than a *nigger* who talks back to them it's a white woman living with the *niggers*" (155, emphasis in original). Rather than place this already vulnerable community in further peril, she decides she must continue her racial sojourn elsewhere.

Upon reaching the "Delta, an area of rich land and poor people, in the northwest corner of Mississippi" with "towns [that] seem self-contained, barricaded against strangers, fretful, and lonely," (166) Halsell suffers the consequences of violating the de facto segregation still lingering after the legal defeat of Jim Crow. Rather than serving as a camouflaged witness to the realities of living black in the Deep South like Sprigle and Griffin before her, Halsell is bent on provoking the status quo. For example, the police are called

on her for daring to ask to use a telephone in the white waiting room at the Greyhound bus station, as well as for attempting to integrate a white, Southern Baptist congregation in the middle of Sunday morning service. Halsell undertakes these non-violent, civil rights movement-inspired strategies without any contextual understanding of the needs and wants of this community. Much like those white parents who think every black man wants to marry their daughter, she assumes that black people in this community want to attend that white church. As Halsell becomes the agitator most Southern whites feared came from the North, she still experiences the conflicting duality of her im/posture. She writes, “I feel disembodied, a cipher floating in a void . . . I do not feel a Negro; yet . . . I cannot be my old self either” (192), a “secondhand kind of terror” (157). Stranded on the virgule, the cut between these raced realities, it is finally Halsell’s employment as a domestic day laborer that sutures black authenticity to her embodied racial feeling.

In pursuit of the folk and work, Halsell is put in contact with the Wheeler family through the Mississippi State Employment Office. After receiving passing instructions from a hurried Mrs. Wheeler to “clean the commode, clean the tub, clean the floors, run the sweeper, do the washing, [and] do the ironing” (194) in order to earn her \$3 daily wage, she is left alone in the two-story colonial only to be surprised when Mr. Wheeler comes home unexpectedly. She writes, “I do not look at him directly but keep my eyes to the laundry, yet I sense he is staring at me, and in that moment of silence, I feel he is somehow magnetized” (195-196). After “asking the usual” such as her name and where she’s from, Mr. Wheeler retires to the upstairs master bedroom.

Soon from [the] suite comes a thunderous clap . . . and simultaneously he shouts, 'Come quick!'

Hurrying upstairs, I walk swiftly into the bedroom. Instantly the door slams behind me and as I turn around I find myself encircled in Wheeler's arms. I am momentarily overwhelmed. He presses his mouth roughly against mine and forces his body against me, muttering hoarsely about his desperate need for 'black pussy' . . .

'Only take five minutes, only take *five minutes*,' he mumbles, partly pleading, partly threatening. 'Now quieten down! Just gotta get me some black pussy!' . . .

I loose one arm enough to reach up and, with the last of my strength and willpower, I push the large framed [family] picture from its moorings and send it careening down. It grazes the back of Wheeler's head. His flushed face dissolves from lust into hatred. 'You black bitch!' he cries, shaking with anger. More menacingly he adds, his voice lowered to a whisper: "I ought to kill you, you black bitch!"

I suppose I should feel terror-stricken all over again; the lord and master is in a state of mind where nothing might faze him, and where the urge to satisfy himself as a punitive act may be strong. But curiously my feeling is one of utter relief. Then, feeling more contempt than fear: 'Go ahead, you coward!' I dare him. 'You wouldn't have the nerve!' (197, emphasis in original)

This is a deeply uncomfortable scene mired in the ironies of authenticity, race, and power, ironies not completely lost on Halsell herself. She writes, "Now I reflect how I had gone with trembling heart to the ghetto, Harlem, fearful that a big black bogeyman might tear down the paper-thin door separating my 'white' body from his lustful desires. And now it had been a white, not a black, devil whose passions had overwhelmed him" (202). Seeing Halsell as nothing more than available pussy for the taking, Wheeler performs his part in the well-rehearsed script dictating the interactions between white men and black women in the precarious space of the domestic. In *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*, Candice Jenkins writes, "The vulnerability that African Americans have been subject to at the hands of white racism often *is* the vulnerability of intimacy, not simply because black

people have been the objects of white desire, but because black bodies have been assumed always to be excessively proximate and desirous bodies, bodies too readily revealed or exposed, too willing to reveal and expose others.”³⁷ The violent consequences of Halsell’s assumed blackness expose the very real precariousness of black women, particularly those working and living as domestics in the South. As Riché Richardson frankly writes, “although white women may have been perceived as the only legitimate victims of rape in the South, the black female body has been more susceptible as the object of sexual brutality by white southern men.”³⁸ Richardson suggests what Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class* makes plain, that the myth of the black male rapist is inextricably linked to the perceived sexual availability of black women. Davis writes, “The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous . . . If Black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white men. Viewed as ‘loose women’ and whores, Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy.”³⁹ Bolstered by the credibility of her whiteness, Halsell’s cries are imbued with the legitimacy black women survivors of sexual violence lack. While segregated publics construct black masculinity for both Ray Sprigle and John Howard Griffin, the “vulnerability of intimacy”

³⁷ Candice M. Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 19-20. Emphasis in original.

³⁸ Richardson, 59.

³⁹ Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 182.

moves Halsell from performing to being as she articulates a black womanhood constructed in the wake of white masculine rapaciousness and foreshadowed by her decision to affect a blackness that could pass naked. “I begin to see the role of the black woman in Wheeler’s home objectively,” she writes, “she is me” (201). In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Saidiya Hartman argues that the iconic beating of Frederick Douglass’s Aunt Hester structures his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. She writes, “Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement ‘I was born.’”⁴⁰ Hartman refuses to reproduce this primal scene provocatively and rightly arguing that the easy circulation of this scene and others like it “immures us to pain by virtue of their familiarity,” “reinforc[ing] the spectacular character of black suffering.”⁴¹ Primarily concerned with plumbing those supposedly banal nineteenth-century scenes where terror is either indiscernible or purportedly absent, Hartman’s intervention also allows those still captivated by the spectacular to reconsider its instrumentation. Functioning much like Hartman’s reading of the haunting specter of Aunt Hester’s beating, Halsell’s spectacle of near-rape is *Soul Sister’s* denouement and the generative act of her black womanhood. While the medical interventions to her body landscape immediately shape Halsell’s blackness in the racializing logics of visibility, her black womanhood is authenticated specifically through the threat of

⁴⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 3.

rape. What makes this scene so incredibly perverse, then, is that Halsell needs this spectacle of racialized sexual violence for this domestic production of racial belonging. So while *Soul Sister* gestures toward the vulnerability of black womanhood, its uncomfortable irony is an affront to black women.

The Darker Sisters Speak

Halsell, with self-absorbed good intentions, sought to appropriate blackness as a representative mouthpiece for African American women. In the language of sentiment, Halsell seeks to feel the other in order to testify on behalf of a presumably silent or incapable black community before a curious white readership. “It seemed to me,” she writes, “I was in a good position to notice all the fetters binding my darker sisters” (12). However, while black women in the United States have been the authors of their own experiences since early in the nineteenth-century, Halsell’s presumptive representation does not acknowledge that black women can and often do speak for themselves. In fact, the year after *Soul Sister* hit bookstore shelves would see the publication of a number of eventually canonical texts by black women writers including Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Cade’s edited anthology *The Black Woman*, and Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Halsell’s presumption also fails to consider the historical restrictions on, and denial of, access barring women of color from industries of publishing, a fact that would eventually prompt Audre Lorde’s 1980 statement to Barbara Smith setting the founding of Kitchen Table Press in motion: “We need to do something about publishing.”

While Halsell's narrative hubris obscures the literary histories of black women, *Soul Sister* invokes scenes of subjection from the African American literary canon. Notably, the attempted rape scene provides the legitimate excuse to allow Halsell to return to the comforts of whiteness much like how a near-rape scene functioned in Octavia Butler's 1979 speculative novel, *Kindred*.⁴² A fantastical story about slavery, sexual violence, interracial desire and the subsequent hybrid family trees that tangle into contemporary U.S. race relations, *Kindred* follows protagonist Edana (Dana) Franklin, a writer living in 1976 southern California who is called across time and space to antebellum Maryland whenever her white ancestor, Rufus Weylin, faces life-threatening danger. Although Rufus demonstrates his potential to become a cruel and selfish slave owner with each of Dana's "visits," her own survival relies on keeping Rufus alive until his daughter, her great-grandmother, is born. She is then only able to return to the narrative present when she believes her own life to be in danger. In one of the earliest of these scenes, one of the patrollers, precursors to the Ku Klux Klan who made their living terrorizing and hunting down runaways and insurrectionary slaves, catches Dana. Butler writes, "He tore loose my bra . . . I was only able to move a few inches before he pinned me down . . . I grasped [a tree limb] with both hands and brought it down as hard as I could on his head . . . If the man came to and found me nearby he would kill me . . . I fell, slowly it seemed, into a deep starless darkness."⁴³ After rescuing herself by wielding a branch, the representational figuration of the kinship networks she is trying to

⁴² Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (New York: Griot Editions, 1999).

⁴³ *Ibid*, 727.

maintain, Dana would open her eyes in 1976 propelled by fear back to the security and privileges of the future in a scene of violence similar to Halsell's own. Rather than reveal the "truth" of her body, Halsell escapes back into whiteness after releasing herself from the grip of her attacker with the literal and symbolic force of the family portrait, the image of bourgeois respectability that must have stood silent witness to Wheeler's other rapes and attempted rapes. While temporally disjointed, these intertextual echoes allow a reconsideration of Halsell's conclusion, one that forces questions around the framing of the act of sexual violence itself and her subsequent disavowal of black women's resistance.

Butler's *Kindred* allows her reader's to imag(in)e not only the suffering and vulnerability that Halsell insisted defined blackness, but black women's survival as well. By disrupting our spatiotemporal relation to the conditions of the antebellum South, Butler reimagines the slave narrative, filling in the strategic silences and deference to propriety and decorum constraining black women writing themselves and their communities in the nineteenth-century. Butler's most exemplary literary precedent would undoubtedly be Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. A look at the perilous conditions of black women and girls under slavery, *Incidents* reveals that "the slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers."⁴⁴ Jacobs bemoans how the peculiar institution denies black women the opportunity to attain and/or maintain the respectability that is the middle-class white

⁴⁴ Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1973), 49.

women's assumed birthright. Remaining within the confines of nineteenth-century propriety, Jacobs details the "trials of girlhood"⁴⁵ – the physical and sexual abuse she received from her master, Dr. Flint. She writes, "[Flint] came every day; and I was subjected to such insults as no pen can describe. I would not describe them if I could; they were too low, too revolting."⁴⁶ Seeing as *Kindred* is a neo-slave narrative and not a historical account of slavery, Butler employs the speculative to do the cultural labor of fully representing the stark complexities of black women's resistance writing in the suggestive gaps Jacobs could not and would not articulate.

While Halsell also creates a temporally speculative landscape that renders a black woman body legible, she does so by projecting Jacobs's previously "unspeakable" against a constructed narrative landscape that spectacularizes what she imagines as her own exceptionalized resistance. Although this narrative conclusion legitimates her transformation from white to black woman, Halsell rests on her then-unseen whiteness unable to fully surrender her racialized privilege. Knowing that she does not need the wages from her temporary domestic work, knowing that indeed this blackness is only temporary, Halsell challenges her attempted rapist. As she taunts her perpetrator, she does so with a defiance she assumes most black women in a similar situation would not have the courage or economic opportunity to display. "I have heard many Negro maids say that their greatest fear is being in the house alone when the white man comes in. As one bitterly commented,

⁴⁵ Ibid, 26.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 79.

“They pay you fifteen dollars a week, and then expect to get you to’ . . . Traditionally, if the negro woman wants to keep a job, she all too frequently has to submit to the white man’s desires” (198-199). Halsell continues, “Suppose the black woman in [Wheeler’s] frenzied embrace had been a mother of hungry children, waiting for her to bring them food. Could she have resisted his advances? Run from home without collecting *any* money for her day’s labor?” (202, emphasis in original). Washed in the wild fantasies of Dixie terror, Halsell’s Mississippi is one of “big houses,” and “lords and masters” the antipode of *Soul Sister*’s Harlem. Here, the South is a premodern space severed from industrialization and the gains of the civil rights movement. Although she had previously heard the harrowing accounts of terror in response to black resistance from members of the NAACP, this is not the Mississippi that set the necessary conditions for Stokely Carmichael’s articulation of black power only a few years prior. Instead, Halsell’s invocations to a pre-emancipation South transform Halsell from temporary domestic laborer to atypically heroic, antebellum house slave.

A hybrid mix of journalism, memoir, and traveling writing, *Soul Sister* clearly challenges the boundaries of literary genre, but more specifically, the resonances between it and both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Kindred* nuance an understanding of genre and racial im/posture. Appropriating the politically sentimental logics of the slave narrative and the constructed fantasy of speculative fiction, *Soul Sister* is a text dependent on the genres comprising the African American literary canon. Although Halsell’s racial im/posture happens in the “real” (as much as we can call the constructed machinations of the social

“reality”), her anticipatory (re)imaginings of Harlem and the South, as well as the uncomfortable irony of the master/employer’s demand for black pussy makes a call for a theorization of racial im/posture as a liberalism-enabled, speculative fiction that relies on the strategic disclosure of the slave narrative. In *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative*, Fred Hobson bolsters this claim by articulating a “form of southern self-expression not seen *until* the 1940s . . . in which the authors, all products of and willing participants in a harsh, segregated society, confess racial wrongdoings and are ‘converted’ in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment.”⁴⁷ Reading the varied work of Lillian Smith, Sarah Patton Boyle, and Larry L. King, Hobson coheres a genre around the need to witness, testify, and expatriate. The racial im/postor then is the hyperbolic racial convert, one that articulates Southern white selfhood by “leaving behind the established southern order . . . as well as the Southern white community”⁴⁸ in a radical and literal corporealization of difference. Hobson also argues that “the white racial conversion narratives . . . are also, in their ways, ‘slave narratives,’ which is to say, also freedom narratives. That is, these writers too escape a kind of bondage, flee from the slavery of a closed society, of racial prejudice and restriction, into the liberty of free association, free expression, brotherhood, sisterhood—and freedom from racial guilt.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 1-2. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

While Hobson's repenting Southerners undergo a social baptism influenced by the theologies of Calvinist Southern baptism, Halsell's secular, confessional exposé reveals the sins of the white South as well as her own individual race blindness. "I never regarded Negroes as a part of my society. They were simply part of the landscape" (11), she admits. What Hobson neglects, however, is that reading white conversion narratives as synonymous with the slave narrative ignores the generic constraints on the African American slave narrative that necessitated legitimating documents to validate, and vouch for, experiences of black life. Immediately met with skepticism, black self-writers were never in possession of their own authorial authority. Even in the late-1970's reworking of the genre, *Kindred's* protagonist articulates her own lack of authority as an experiential witness. Butler writes, "I looked back at the brick building of the Historical Society, itself a converted early mansion. 'If we told anyone about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane.'"⁵⁰ Of course, Dana's spatiotemporal travel relies on a willing suspension of disbelief, but her anticipation of skepticism also gestures toward the historical incommensurability between black bodies, self-authorship, and credibility, a credibility Halsell's own speculative misadventures are immediately granted.

Sexing Myrdal

This experiential authority allows Halsell to proffer conclusive arguments on the root causes of U.S. race relations. She writes, "Sex is what's important, it's the root of all our racial frustrations (and a few more besides!), and the basis for three centuries of lies" (202).

⁵⁰ Butler, 948.

Halsell's conclusions were not confined to the logics of her generically syncretic text, but also, they set the stage for her pseudo-sociological study, *Black/White Sex*. Published in 1972, *Black/White Sex* culls a series of interviews taken from individuals involved in various sexual escapades that traipse back and forth across the black/white binary. By interrogating the taboos behind interracial desire, Halsell insists that the myths and realities of cross-racial sex, and not structural inequalities and institutional racism, are the foundation of hundreds of years of racial terror and oppression. Excising the structurally based realities of U.S. race relations is the calling card of Myrdalian-liberalism, the post-World War II ideology that makes race an intimate matter residing in the "hearts and minds" of primarily white America. In fact, Halsell assumed the arguments put forth in her study were the missing piece to the interracial intimacy described as necessary in Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, so much so, that she asked Myrdal himself to write her introduction. In an August 7, 1971, letter Halsell writes, "I am familiar with your studies and find your books invaluable . . . I would like so very much if you could write the introduction for this new book."⁵¹ To her surprise, he refused. "I have read your new book," Myrdal replies in an October 26 letter. "Let me first give you the negative answer that I am not prepared to write a preface."⁵² Although Myrdal politely excuses himself from Halsell's request citing the never-completed follow-up to his 1944 landmark study, he questions the importance Halsell places on

⁵¹ Grace Halsell, Letter to Gunnar Myrdal, 7 August 1971. Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

⁵² Gunnar Myrdal, Letter to Grace Halsell, 26 October 1971. Grace Halsell Collection, Special Collections Library (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University).

interracial sex. “I would like to discuss with you what role sexual complex really plays in race relations in the United States. Your book is full of insight. Nevertheless I question the importance of this factor.”⁵³ Clearly when Gunnar Myrdal wrote, “*the moral struggle goes on within people and not only between them*”⁵⁴ he was not speaking of the clandestine, funky, taboo desires and sex acts Halsell freely describes, but rather, a deeply internal condition of the soul. For Myrdal to sell his particular brand of palatable liberalism, he must do his best to disavow the cross-racial sexual desire and sexual violence that could lead to the miscegenation that would apparently force the collapse of the black/white binary. Or as he writes, “Even a liberal-minded Northerner of cosmopolitan culture and with a minimum of conventional blinds will, in nine cases out of ten, express a definite feeling against amalgamation . . . He may sometimes hold a philosophical view that in centuries to come amalgamation is bound to happen and might become the solution. But he will be inclined to look on it as an inevitable deterioration.”⁵⁵ Myrdal rejects any anxious suspicion that his prescriptive cure for U.S. race relations might sacrifice racial purity by displacing amalgamation, the apocalyptic consequences of interracial, heterosexual sex, onto the dystopian fantasies of an unforeseen future. So while Halsell’s spectacular body is helpfully distracting, turning heads from the increasingly fraught shift from the accommodationist

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), lxxx. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 57.

civil rights movement to the more separatist black power movement by offering Myrdalian-liberalism as a still viable political option, Myrdal's refusal signals it, and/or the scenes of its subjection it undergoes, cannot fully service liberalism's needs. Halsell's experiences should have solidified her place alongside her more memorable mentor, however, Griffin's narrative was particularly suited to the tastes of a white reading public that might be uncomfortable with Halsell's frankness and the projected future of her disturbing "sociological" conclusions. The failure to appease liberalism's demands for a viable spectacle allows Halsell to be easily forgotten. Case in point, when John Howard Griffin died in 1980 of diabetes complications, rumors abounded that his death was from skin cancer resulting from his racial masquerade. Ironically, it was Halsell who in 2002 died from a tragically long battle with the skin cancer, multiple myeloma, a direct result from her six-month martyrdom to the "ineffable despair" (14) of blackness.

Warning: blackness can be fatal.

Chapter Three –

The Laws of the White Negro: *Malone v. Haley* and *Soul Man*

It's an extraordinary idea, when you think about it: as though someone would willingly shoulder the stigma of being black in a racist society for the sake of a little extra professional consideration that guarantees nothing but suspicions of foul play and accusations of cheating. But it demonstrates just how irrationally far the suspicion of fraudulence can extend.

Adrian Piper
“Passing for White, Passing for Black”¹

In 1975, nearly two decades before Adrian Piper pondered the extraordinarily outrageous idea that someone would willingly give up the social, political, and economic privileges of whiteness to access the contrastingly temporary benefits of an affirmative action policy, twin brothers, Philip D. and Paul D. Malone, took the civil service test for employment by the Boston Fire Department. With the low scores of 69 and 57 respectively,² the self-identified “white” brothers both failed the entrance exam. Later that same year the Boston Fire Department began recruiting “minority” candidates, defined solely as “black” and/or “Hispanic,” under a newly established affirmative action policy mandated by a federal consent decree.³ Two years later when the city’s civil service test was administered again, the Malone brothers reapplied, this time as “black” applicants. Ironically

¹ Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” *Transition* 58 (1992): 9.

² Christopher A. Ford, “Administering Identity: The Determination of ‘Race’ in Race-Conscious Law,” *California Law Review* 82 (October 1994), 1232.

³ See *NAACP v. Beecher* (1974) stipulating that the city’s personnel administrators maintain a separate pool of minority candidates to be drawn from when there are vacancies in either the police or fire departments.

with exactly the same scores and after having been certified minorities before a fire department official, the Malone twins began their careers as Boston firefighters in 1978.

As the Malone brothers sought promotion to lieutenantcy after a decade of service to the department, Fire Commissioner Leo Stapleton noticed the two were listed as black on the promotion rosters when he “understood that they were White.”⁴ The discrepancy between Stapleton’s personal understanding of the Malones’ racial identity and its documentation was enough to begin an investigation of the Malones under the fraud provision of the Massachusetts Civil Service System. Under Personnel Administration Rule 3(4)(c), an administrator could “declare a candidate’s appointment invalid . . . [after determining] the . . . making of a material false statement by any person in his application.”⁵ During the subsequent two-day evidentiary hearing in June 1988, hearing officer Hilda I. Lopez-Soto judged the Malones’ blackness with a three-pronged criteria put in place by the Massachusetts Personnel Administration in 1984. That criteria included: “(i) visual observation of physical features; (ii) documentary evidence establishing black ancestry, such as birth certificates; and (iii) evidence that the Malones or their families held themselves out to be black and are considered black in the community.”⁶ Although the brothers claimed to have discovered a black maternal great-grandmother between the taking of the two exams,

⁴ Tseming Yang, “Choice and Fraud in Racial Identification: The Dilemma of Policing Race in Affirmative Action, the Census, and a Color-Blind Society,” *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 367 (Spring 2006), 388.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Malone v. Haley*, No. 88-339 (Mass. Sup. Jud. Ct. July 25, 1989).

Paul and Philip Malone were fired from the Boston Fire Department for racial fraud after failing to meet any of the established criteria for blackness. During the appeal, Judge Herbert L. Wilkins of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court upheld their termination.

When Peggy Hernandez and John Ellement broke the Malones' story for *The Boston Globe* on September 29, 1988,⁷ they not only launched the twins into the national spotlight, but also put the issue of racial fraud at the forefront of, at least, Boston's sociopolitical and cultural imaginary. Two days after their article ran Mayor Ray Flynn ordered a review of the hiring practices in each of the city's fire and police departments, and throughout its public school system as well.⁸ All three were under similar federal mandates to increase minority representation. In the wake of the case of the "Mixed up Malones,"⁹ both city councilors and local media outlets received anonymous tips "outing" other, mainly fire department personnel, for also falsifying their racial identities. During months of intense media scrutiny, the investigation was fueled by paranoia and anxiety about the possibilities of entrenched, city-wide corruption, the unrelenting scapegoating of "otherwise good guys"¹⁰ (read innocent white men), and ultimately, the demonstrably permeable boundaries of, albeit paper, racial

⁷ John Ellement and Peggy Hernandez, "Two Fight Firing Over Disputed Claim They Are Black," *The Boston Globe* 29 September 1988: 29.

⁸ John Ellement and Peggy Hernandez, "Minority Hiring Review Ordered," *The Boston Globe* 30 September 1988: 1.

⁹ Bella English, "Color Coordinated," *The Boston Globe* 12 October 1988: 21.

¹⁰ Peter S. Canellos, "Race Fraud Triggers Memories of Discord," 1 November 1988 *The Boston Globe*: 15.

categories. While the Malones continued to occupy the center of the spectacle, thirteen other firefighters were investigated that year for allegations of racial misrepresentation. Of that thirteen, all of whom self-identified as “Hispanic” on their civil service examinations, five were determined white and consequently terminated from their departments including Edward P. Kenney, son of the Deputy Fire Chief.¹¹ Although “Hispanic remain[ed] the most abused category,”¹² far less attention was paid to its wrongful appropriation than to the alleged blackness of the Malones. Perhaps a case like Kenney’s was simply lost in the racial panic, but more likely, “Hispanic” lacked the concrete visual markers that made it immediately identifiable, and thus, it failed to serve the scopical framings of the spectacle. Unlike the Malones, for example, no mention was made of the other terminated firefighters’ hair texture, skin or eye color. This is coupled with the fact that (mis)allegations of “Hispanic” or brown just might upset the mythically neat binary of black and white.

With Piper’s incredulity in mind, this chapter attends to the textual and material “evidence” comprising the Malone brothers’ racial im/posture as a legal, social, visual and literary text anxiously negotiating the supposedly precarious power of white masculinity in the face of the reparative legislative policies of American liberalism. Up until now, racial im/posture has been defined by an appropriation of an embodied blackness that, however complicated, surprising, infuriating and/or misguided, is purportedly for the benefit of

¹¹ Steve Marantz, “Two Fired in Firefighter Eligibility Probe,” *The Boston Globe* 1 June 1990: 21.

¹² Patricia Wen, “Schools on Look Out for Affirmative Action Abuses,” *The Boston Globe* 18 October 1988: 48.

solving the dilemma of race relations exclusively across the domestic black/white binary. However, the Malone case exposes the economic incentives of racial im/posture. The Malones also challenge, and ultimately nuance, the understanding that racial im/posture must necessarily demand that the im/postor attempt to embody blackness at all. The decision of the Massachusetts Judicial Supreme Court to affirm Lopez-Soto's decision to fire the brothers works to redeem the "authenticity" of those very white, male bodies it seemingly sought to expose with its criteria for "objective" blackness. The case is then read alongside *Soul Man*, the highly controversial and routinely panned 1986 film chronicling the racial consciousness of an upper-middle class, white, male Harvard Law student who passes for black to gain access to a scholarship designated for an African American student.

Subjective Objections: Locating Blackness in *Malone v. Haley*

In almost every legal citation of *Malone v. Haley* as well as in the fury of *Boston Globe* articles chronicling its development, the Malone twins are categorized, and ultimately defined by, their "fair-hair" and "light-skin." And while, unlike many other states,¹³ Massachusetts has never had a "blood quantum definition of race,"¹⁴ Lopez-Soto employed the generally held assumption that, like pornography, you know race when you see it. She states, "I visually observed the Malone brothers at the hearing. They each appear to me to have fair skin and fair hair coloring, to have Caucasian facial features. Based on my visual

¹³ For example, Virginia has always been one of the most pioneering states regarding legal definitions and requirements for racial classifications made particularly evident in the state's miscegenation statutes.

¹⁴ Yang, 394.

observation, they do not appear to be black.”¹⁵ Although the Massachusetts Personnel Administration’s three-tiered criteria for racial identity required more than a simple visual survey of the Malones’ alleged blackness, it is obvious that if the Malones “looked black” in any traditional, phenotypic understanding of African descent they would have never been forced to withstand an investigation of racial fraud despite the inconsistencies in their 1975 and 1977 applications.

After establishing the Malones’ visual whiteness, both Lopez-Soto and Judge Wilkins turned to documentary evidence. As a foundational document in one’s paper identity, birth certificates legally root an individual to home, confirm or disavow legitimacy, and fix racial categories, although, as Christopher A. Ford suggests in “Administering Identity: The Determination of ‘Race’ in Race-Conscious Law,” the racial formula used by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) to establish an infant’s race is both “quirky” and “questionable.”¹⁶ From 1950 to 1989, the NCHS determined the race of a child from the “self-reported race of its parents”¹⁷ in the almost exclusive adherence to rules of hypodescent that still work to maintain the fictionalized purity of whiteness. Ford writes, “This coding algorithm embodied a number of curious assumptions. One notable characteristic is that any coupling between White and non-Whites was deemed to produce non-White children. White racial status could only be removed by inter-group parentage,

¹⁵ *Malone v. Haley*

¹⁶ Ford, 1257.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

never gained.”¹⁸ For the purposes of the court, the Malones’ birth certificates corroborated their visually assumed whiteness and “established [their] White racial identity . . . for three generations.”¹⁹

After failing to locate the imprint of blackness in either the body or its paper trail the court considered the racial identity of the Malone family within an understanding of community. Here, the search for blackness moved from an emphasis on racial self-identification to communal recognition, and implicit in this move, is that each would corroborate the other. As long-time residents of the Boston suburb of Milton, a small town with the largest per capita population of Irish Americans in the United States, the Malones once again failed to meet the stipulations of the court. Frustrated, Philip’s wife, Marsha Malone, complained to the local media: “What do they want us to do, hang a sign on our front door saying we’re black?”²⁰ While, of course, hanging a sign proclaiming one’s blackness seems ridiculous, what the court demands and Marsha mocks is an understanding of the public life of black identity. It is this publicity coupled with the scopic production of racial difference that so often makes othered bodies vulnerable. In an opinion piece for *The Boston Globe*, staff writer Bella English satirically questions just how blackness might structure the Malones’ public identities. “Did real estate agents try to steer them toward certain areas

¹⁸ Ford, 1258.

¹⁹ *Malone v. Haley*

²⁰ Quoted in Catherine R. Squires, *Dispatches from the Color Line: The Press and Multiracial America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 88.

of town because they were black?,” she writes. “How many IDs do they have to use to cash a check at the local hardware? When they go shopping, do security guards trail them around the store? When they visit friends in all-white neighborhoods, how long does it take before the first police car shows up? How hard is it to hail a cab? How many basketball jokes do they have to endure? Do they ever take abuse for having mixed marriages?”²¹ As English projects the realities of harassment, surveillance, and curiosity that contributes to the experiential meaning of black masculinity, she exposes the absurdity of the Malones’ claim. With only a momentary blackness (the marking of the box), the Malones accessed the associative benefits of blackness while still ensuring the daily privileges of white embodiment.

While *Malone v. Haley* remains a definitive case of opportunistic fraud, the “objective” criteria the court demanded provides a provocative lens for the consideration of the ideologies and naturalized social fictions that cohere under the sign of race. As a legal case, *Malone v. Haley* has its generic limits. For example, we are unable to gain a sense of the interiority of the Malone brothers. Since the twins are constructed through failure and fraudulence they are only made visible in their encounter with the law. Unlike in previous chapters where the genres of fiction, journalism, and memoir paint a portrait of not only the experience of racial im/posture, but also, the individual’s engagement with, and as, the other alongside a growing racial consciousness, *Malone v. Haley* does not, and ultimately cannot, be called upon to provide that perspective. While not at all an equivalent experience, Toi

²¹ English, 15.

Derricotte's deeply personal and often painfully poignant memoir, *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey*, not so surprisingly exposes the logics behind *Malone v. Haley*. As a self-identified, light-skinned African American woman often assumed to be white, Derricotte details her experiences from outside the structuring corporeal regimes of essentialized blackness and instructively confronts each of the criteria for "objective blackness" set forth by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Ultimately Derricotte demonstrates how the social and legal facts and fictions in the production of racial difference influence and inform one another. For example, Derricotte writes, "I'm sure most people don't go around all the time thinking about what race they are. When you look like what you are, the external world mirrors back to you an identity consistent with your idea of yourself. However, for someone like me, who does not look like what I am, those mirrors are broken."²² In the discourses of U.S. racialization blackness is at its most palatable when it is immediately perceived. Recognizable blackness is presumably knowable, consequently contained, and ultimately commodifiable. Derricotte reminds of the often fragile relationship between being, perception, and self-identification revealing the very limit of deterministic visibility.

By avoiding the immediate hazards of visibility, Derricotte's racial indeterminacy gives her precious insight into the logics of racialization while also providing her the opportunity for self-identification that, contrastingly, recognizable black bodies are not given. Of course, this does not suggest that this privilege comes without its own set of anxieties and consequences. Derricotte writes,

²² Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997): 25.

On the first day of school, when the nun put the index card on my desk on which we were to neatly pen our names and addresses, and check the one appropriate box—Negro or White—I hesitated as long as I could. Was it a test to see if I'd lie? Though both my parents look white, could they know because of something one of them had said? Could I leave it blank? I had a sense that checking 'Negro' would mean I would become something confusing. Perhaps later they would read the card and think I had made a mistake—why wouldn't they think I was white? But they taught us that the eye of God sees all. 'Negro,' I finally checked.²³

Presented with the dilemma of choice, Derricotte pauses before the provocative space of the box. Confronted with the possibility of disavowing her blackness, this quiet moment of self-identification initiates Derricotte into a conflicted relationship between her intuited understanding and the public perception of her racial identity while recalling the importance of consistent documentation²⁴ seen in *Malone v. Haley*.

Recognizing the contradictions between her body and its permanent record, Derricotte reconciles this supposed disjunction by holding blackness within an understanding of community. She writes, "I once said you are black because of who you first love, the first people whose skin you touched."²⁵ She continues, "When I was young, all my friends, all my family's friends, all my family were black; maybe their skin wasn't black, but they all identified themselves as black. Everyone I touched, everyone who touched me,

²³ Derricotte, 89.

²⁴ It is important to acknowledge how the lack of access to proper papers for mostly brown bodies migrating from the global south structures the simultaneity of both their hypervisibility and invisibility before the state. The mis- and/or undocumented then become the dystopian threat to national borders and the homeland's (in)securities.

²⁵ Derricotte, 106.

everyone I loved was black inside their heart, and whatever made them black—even if it wasn't their skin—was there all the time I was feeling love and rage for them."²⁶ Raised in the upper classes of Harlem black society, Derricotte's black community held in their light, bright, yellow, and red-boned skins the evidence of slavery and intraracism historically based on white supremacy, and consequently, colorism. Still, Derricotte situates blackness as an intangible communal connection in the spaces between people reinforced by the collective history of the penalties of racialization. She writes, "I cannot conceive of white people having a communal pain that equals the compelling energy and focus that comes from being black in our society. We are black because we can talk to each other and understand each other so instantly and so well with so few words."²⁷ Blackness is an affirmation of the intimacies produced by shared testimonies of vulnerability. And while Derricotte finds this an important part of how she contours and sustains her racial belonging, Adrian Piper in "Passing for White, Passing for Black," finds these moments a presumptuously intrusive form of racial interrogation. To prove the threshold of blackness her body is unable to, the oft-assumed white Piper must pass what she calls the "Suffering Test." She writes, "I have sometimes met blacks socially who, as a condition of social acceptance of me, require me to prove my blackness by passing the Suffering Test. They recount at length their recent experiences of racism and then wait expectantly, skeptically, for me to match theirs with

²⁶ Derricotte, 106-107.

²⁷ Derricotte, 108.

mine.”²⁸ Although Piper describes these interactions as both “alienating” and “demoralizing,”²⁹ they suggest that blackness becomes legible in the rehearsal of mutually recognized scripts figuring black bodies as the vulnerable characters within melodramas of race and racism.

Imagin(in)g Sarah Carroll, Or, Mama’s Maybe

Bringing both Toi Derricotte and Adrian Piper’s experiences as African American women shaped by their racial ambiguity to bear on *Malone v. Haley* raises the specter behind the entire Malone defense. “Let’s face it,” Hortense Spillers opens her now canonical 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” “I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar,’ ‘Sapphire’ and ‘Earth Mother,’ ‘Aunty,’ ‘Granny,’ God’s ‘Holy Fool,’ a ‘Miss Ebony First,’ or ‘Black Woman at the Podium’: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here I would have to be invented.”³⁰ As Spillers reveals the black woman through her various ideological and cultural (mis)namings, she creates the representational possibility for a naming and recognition of Sarah Carroll. In all the research completed for this chapter her name appeared very rarely. Instead Carroll’s place in the legal and journalistic archive is

²⁸ Piper, 7.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 257.

marked by the more commonly used matrilineal descriptions of “great-grandmother” or to the more cautious writer, the “alleged great-grandmother.”

For most critical race theorists and legal scholars citing the case, Carroll’s blackness is only a ludicrous implausibility, and therefore, a largely unremarkable visual interruption into the proceedings at best and a desperate gesture in the midst of a clear case of fraud at worst. Her “sepia-toned” photograph was subsequently thrown out as unnecessary during the original administrative hearing conducted by Lopez-Soto only to be briefly considered material evidence during the appeal heard by Justice Wilkins. He writes, “Against this evidence [the Malones’ birth certificates], the only indication of black ancestry offered by the Malones was the questionable and inconclusive photograph of a woman they claimed to be Sarah Carroll, their maternal great-grandmother.”³¹ In this “questionable” photograph, Carroll’s body must submit to the racial gaze while Wilkins undoubtedly scrutinized her sepia face and hair for racial tells. Her image, however, confounded his idea(l) of a visually and/or legally conclusive and definitive blackness. Despite the scrutiny and without history, narrative, and context, Carroll disappears from the frame to be replaced by the speculative racial fantasies of her possible great-grandsons and the inquiries of the court. The projected signification of Carroll’s body was given two options: either she was the African American and/or Irish ancestor of the Malone twins or a completely unrelated woman whose usefully inconclusive photograph and lack of known history was co-opted for this liberalism demanded affirmative action drama. In either circumstance, “Sarah Carroll” was

³¹ *Malone v. Haley*

synonymous with a strategic anonymity upon which the burden of proof, in this case an evidentiary blackness, could be projected.³²

Although Carroll's image failed to conclusively intimate its own racial truths, her unique status in the Malones' claim to blackness gestured toward the very legal discourses through which that claim was made. Not only was their defense insistent upon the socially prescribed rules of hypodescent, but also, by hinging their blackness on a maternal great-grandmother, it recalls *partus sequitur ventrem*, the colonial Virginia slave law that determined, in breaking with the English tradition of *partus sequitur patrem*, that the legal status of a child would follow the "condition of the mother."³³ Spillers writes, "The African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely legal because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law."³⁴ Enacted to ensure an endless supply of slave labor, the law of the mother situates the reproductive black woman's body as the (re)source of blackness, and thus,

³² I am not interested in whether Sarah Carroll and/or the woman entered as "evidence" in *Malone v. Haley* is "black" or not. I am interested, however, in how her "inconclusiveness" could be read as a deliberate refusal to stand at the perilous intersection of race and law.

³³ Kenneth M. Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 193.

³⁴ Spillers, 278.

according to Alys Eve Weinbaum in *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought*, establishes her status in the machinations of nation and race.

In the United States, black maternity has been persistently constructed as antithetical to national belonging. In a nation whose ideology of inclusion has been grounded in notions of biological, reproductive, and thus genealogical connection, being an ‘American’ entitled to the exercise of full civil rights has often required having a white mother, herself descended from a family whose Anglo-Saxon pedigree is uncontaminated by so-called interracial sex or miscegenation. Insofar as the concept of Americanness has been regarded as coextensive with whiteness, the exclusion of blackness, and the marginalization from the nation of those women thought to reproduce it, have been mainstays of U.S. social and political culture.³⁵

By pinning their great black hopes on this maybe black woman body, the Malone brothers do so for an opportunistic privilege that does not undo the historical insistence on the benefits of whiteness or its synonym with U.S. Americanness. They do, however, reveal, even in a contemporary moment, the economic potential of the black woman body, a revelation particularly important in the discursive wake of the infamous Moynihan report’s pathologization of black maternity. Moynihan writes, “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”³⁶ Add to this the terrifying image of the welfare, teen, and crack mother that so

³⁵ Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004): 188.

³⁶ Daniel P. Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965), 2.

dominated the cultural construction of black maternity during the Reagan era³⁷ (Claire Huxtable notwithstanding) and we are reminded that the 1980s witnessed a particularly insidious vilification of black motherhood as the irresponsible and reproductively unbridled drain on the resources of the nation-state. Although one could argue that the Malones never intended for their racial im/posture to be made public, the otherwise negated excessiveness of the black woman body coupled with the law attempting to control it become useful in the maintenance of their opportunistic privilege. With the allegedly appropriated blackness of Sarah Carroll, the Malone twins suckle the same economic resources as Reagan's army of crack babies.

On the Affirmative Actions of White Masculinity

Sarah Carroll's paradoxically precarious place occupying both the margin and the center of the Malones' claims to blackness suggests that *Malone v. Haley* is as much, or possibly more so, about whiteness, and white masculinity in particular, then it is about blackness. While the courts determined the Malones to be "white," here an assumedly monolithic and coherent racial category, most *Boston Globe* accounts of the case insisted on figuring Philip and Paul as Irish American particularly. Irish America constitutes a highly visible and widely celebrated American ethnicity in the contemporary cultural imagination

³⁷ For more see Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Book, 1992); Jimmie L. Reeves, "Re-Covering Racism: Crack Mothers, Reaganism and the Network News," in *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States*, ed. Sasha Torres (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

(think St. Patrick's Day and "kiss me I'm Irish" t-shirts). Irish Americans have struck a workable balance between assimilation into the larger understanding of U.S. whiteness and maintaining community via commodifiable markers of ethnic difference.

Of course the status of the Irish in the United States was not always such an inspirational model for how to negotiate the melting pot. The history of the Irish in America is a peculiar one³⁸ that initially challenged and strained colonial constructions of whiteness. In 1790 Congress enacted "that all free white persons who, have, or shall migrate into the United States, and shall give satisfactory proof, before a magistrate, by oath, that they intend to reside therein, and shall take an oath of allegiance, and shall have resided in the United States for one whole year, shall be entitled to the rights of citizenship."³⁹ As Matthew Frye Jacobson in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* so effectively argues, the colonial construction of whiteness was synonymous with capacity for self-governance, conflating proper citizenship with the white male body.⁴⁰ As the Irish fled famine in the mid-nineteenth century their large numbers began significantly to complicate the seemingly stable construction of whiteness implicit in the 1790 naturalization law for the first time. Jacobson continues, "In 1847, among the worst years of

³⁸ For more see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009) and Dale T. Knobel, *The Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1986).

³⁹ Quoted in Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 22.

⁴⁰ Jacobson, 25.

the Famine in Ireland, total immigration to the United States leaped to 234,968, of whom nearly half (105,536) were from Ireland. From 1846 through 1855 a total of 3,031,339 immigrants came ashore in the United States, including 1,288,307 from Ireland.”⁴¹

Threatening Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the new republic, Irish immigrants forced a recasting of what whiteness meant deeply dependent on their own othering. “By far the more powerful language of racial differentiation applied to the Irish . . . In the 1840’s American comment on the ‘Irish character’ became not only more pejorative but also more rigidly cast in a racial typology . . . Negative assessments of Irishism or Celtism as a fixed set of inherited traits thus became linked at mid-century to a fixed set of observable physical characteristics, such as skin and hair color, facial type and physique.”⁴² This othering or “racial Irishness”⁴³ placed the Irish in both physical and hierarchical proximity to the nation’s strategically most unfit for citizenship – individuals of African descent.

As the Irish crowded into the working class neighborhoods of Northern cities they found themselves sharing space with not only other, mainly German, European immigrants, but free blacks as well. Their proximity is evidenced in colloquial language (“‘smoked Irishman’ was nineteenth-century rural slang for ‘Negro,’”⁴⁴ for example), violence like that

⁴¹ Jacobson, 43.

⁴² Jacobson, 48.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95.

of the 1863 draft riots,⁴⁵ and most significantly, through the performance of blackface minstrelsy. Eric Lott writes, “The Irish elements of blackface, including the fact that minstrel characters were surely influenced by Irish low-comedy types from the British stage, no doubt made possible the Irish ascendance within the minstrel show, affording immigrants a means of cultural representation from behind the mask.”⁴⁶ Blackface provided the Irish a means to distinguish themselves from “authentic” black bodies and “had the effect of promoting socially insecure Irishmen (actors as well as audiences), an ‘Americanizing’ ritual.”⁴⁷ As a theatrical practice, blackface minstrelsy is a significant part of how racial im/posture is theorized. Blackface makes a spectacle of its own artificiality that when brought together with the logics of passing and the enabling ideologies of Myrdalian-liberalism creates the particularities of racial im/posture. It is absolutely no coincidence then that the performance of blackface minstrelsy would contribute to the shoring up of Irish American whiteness in the nineteenth-century, and that the Malone twins would use racial im/posture to appropriate blackness in the twentieth. When once immigrant Irishness in the new republic was probationary whiteness at best, the whiteness of the Irish American Malone twins could withstand an administrative hearing and a judicial appeal. Although the

⁴⁵ In 1863, riots erupted in many Northern cities in protest of new conscription laws. Particularly in New York City working class Irish immigrants and Irish Americans took out their frustrations about the draft in general and the loophole giving upper class men the option to buy their way out of military service in incredibly violent attacks against the free black community.

⁴⁶ Lott, 95.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 96.

Malones attempted to disavow the social and economic privileges inscribed upon their white bodies, the court proceedings that portended to expose the Malones and forever mark them as frauds, ultimately, reinscribed the indelible veracity of their whiteness.

Although the Malone twins have been largely scapegoated for their fraudulent claims to blackness by both media and legal scholars, it is important to acknowledge how both structural and communal complicities upheld their efforts. While it is still unclear who knew of or condoned the Malones racial subterfuge, in an occupation known for its danger and heroism firefighting depends on the mimicry of fraternal kinship reliant upon trust and intimacy that requires the department close ranks around its own. “Remembered as ‘a big family,’ the department . . . almost literally thrived on brotherhood.”⁴⁸ According to Mike Mullane, vice-president of the national firefighters’ union, despite the intentionality of the Malones’ deceit they are not to be blamed for fraud: “Any failure of the system is not the Malones’ or anybody else’s fault,” he states to *The Boston Globe*, “If the system failed to attract qualified minorities and identify them, it’s not the fault of anyone on the force now. It’s the fault of the system.”⁴⁹ It was this machine-like system that apparently established the conditions for fraudulence in the first place by fueling an anxious atmosphere “‘paranoid’ about the need to quickly hire blacks”⁵⁰ in the face of extremely controversial antidiscrimination mandates. In 1974, U.S. District Court Judge Frank H. Freedman

⁴⁸ Canellos, 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ellement and Hernandez, “Two Fight Over Disputed Claim They Are Black,” 15.

determined that since only 19 of the 2,100 Boston firefighters were either black or Hispanic, the standard firefighting exam was necessarily discriminatory. His ruling forced the department to match the percentages of black and Latino men serving on the force with those of the general population of Boston. For many area firefighters these antidiscrimination measures threatened to erode the sanctity of the familial environment. “‘It devastated moral,’ Mullane said of the court order. ‘It destroyed the doctrine we lived by . . . most of the firefighters were against it because they had sons and friends wanting to come on . . . They hired a lot of out-of-state kids. These weren’t black kids from Roxbury . . . it was someone from North Carolina.’”⁵¹ Perhaps racial im/posture operated as way to satisfy the federal demand for increased minority representation on paper while maintaining nepotism, cronyism, and a racially homogenous department.

Consequently, the 1989 confirmation of the Malones’ whiteness came at a moment of incredibly heightened anxiety about the erosion of white male privilege resulting from both the real and imagined “threat” of affirmative action. This anxiety was exacerbated by the historical context of Boston’s violent reaction to racially reparative legislation and action. According to Jack Tager, as a city largely defined by three centuries of revolutionary upheaval and social violence, in the wake of efforts to desegregate its public schools, Boston “replaced Little rock as a symbol of white opposition to school desegregation.”⁵² With a

⁵¹ Canellos, 15.

⁵² Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 194.

violence unparalleled by any other Northern city, “the desegregation of Boston’s public schools spawned working-and middle-class opposition that lasted for years and had no match elsewhere for their duration.”⁵³ From 1974 to 1976, largely urban, working class communities of Irish American and African American Bostonians engaged in bitter and violent confrontations over the issue of forced busing. Seen as simultaneously a threat to the close-knit, ethnic neighborhoods that both characterized Boston’s rich heritage and contributed to the city’s even still immediately noticeable racial segregation, and a necessary remedy to the disproportionately funded public schools, busing became the flashpoint for racial tension and strife that lasted into the mid-1990s. As Boston’s first engagement with city-wide antidiscrimination efforts, busing became a violently divisive issue that precipitated how both contemporaneous and future efforts at affirmative actions mandates would be received and tolerated. It is this climate of binary racial antagonism that colored the reception of “minority hiring preferences” within the city’s departments of civil service.

Historically, debates on the necessity of antidiscrimination and reparative legislation aimed to redress the historical legacies of gender and racial inequality began shortly after the successes and gains of the civil rights movement when it became clear that the end of de facto segregation and the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not signal the conclusive end to discrimination. As early as 1964 *Commentary* magazine held a roundtable discussion moderated by its editor, Norman Podhoretz, to address issues of compensation and preference. He opened the “Liberalism and the Negro” roundtable as follows:

⁵³ Tager, 188.

I think it may be fair to say that American liberals are by now divided into two schools of thought on what is often called the Negro problem . . . On the one side, we have those liberals whose ultimate perspective on race relations . . . envisages the gradual absorption of deserving Negroes one by one into white society . . . Over the past two or three years, however, a new school of liberal (or perhaps it should be called radical) thought has been developing which is based on the premise . . . that “the rights and privileges of an individual rest upon the status attained by the group to which he belongs.”⁵⁴

Podhoretz continues,

the newer school of liberal thought on race relations maintains that the Negro community *as a whole* has been crippled by three hundred years of slavery and persecution and that the simple removal of legal and other barriers to the advancement of individual Negroes can therefore only result in what is derisively called ‘tokenism.’ This school of thought insists that radical measures are now needed to overcome the Negro’s inherited disabilities.⁵⁵

Naming the schism amongst white liberals that Stephen Steinberg would later identify as the “liberal retreat from race,”⁵⁶ Podhoretz articulates the beginnings of a growing anxiety about power and privilege that would plague and consequently stifle the discourses of affirmative action well into the 1990s. Working both through and against the binary schematic Podhoretz constructs for the discussion, the men around that table included James Baldwin, Nathan Glazer, Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, Sidney

⁵⁴ Nathan Podhoretz, “Liberalism and the Negro: A Round-table Discussion,” *Commentary* 37 (March 1964), 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ Stephen Steinberg, “The Liberal Retreat from Race During the Post-Civil Rights Era,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

Hook, chair of New York University's Philosophy Department, and most notably for our purposes, the auteur of Myrdalian-liberalism himself, Gunnar Myrdal.

In *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal convincingly argues that the solution to the “Negro problem,” or the differences between the promises of American liberalism and histories of racial oppression, are to be found in the “hearts and minds of white America,” thereby situating the undoing of the consequences of racialization and structural inequalities at the level of interpersonal relationships. Myrdalian-liberalism, much like classical understandings of American liberalism, maintains that the conferring of rights and privileges must rely upon the merit and fitness of the individual rather than some wholesale claim to the needs of a particular group. Faced with the early discourse of what would soon be called “affirmative action,” Podhoretz outlines the tension between a consideration of African America as a historically oppressed and deserving community, and the dictates of a liberal ideology that functions by serving the needs of the individual without regard to collective affiliations. Although the discursive logics of Myrdalian-liberalism operate well beyond Myrdal himself, his unwillingness to acknowledge a black collectivity exposes the incompatibility between this racial liberalism and real legislative action. While Myrdal admits, “certainly as a liberal, I believe that all laws and rules that discriminate against Negroes must be done away with,” he will not concede that such legislation would work to resolve his understanding of the “dilemma” of U.S. race relations manifest in the reification of the black/white binary. He continues, “We should not be so stupid as to think that this by itself will solve the problem. It won't. Prejudice will continue to exist even if the legal and institutional basis for it is

removed.”⁵⁷ Refusing to “speak of the Negro as a group,”⁵⁸ Myrdal relies on his disciplinary training as an economist and attempts to recontextualize the problem as an issue solely of class. He states, “What is needed, of course, is to lift *all* the poor people at the bottom, the people I call the ‘underclass’ . . . out of poverty and everything that poverty implies,”⁵⁹ and by doing so, “Negroes,” constituted here only of the poor, will get caught in the net of economic, and presumptively, racial uplift. Without recognizing how race and class are structurally interlocking categories, Myrdal absolves the judicial system from addressing lasting consequences of hierarchical racial categorization.

Beneath Myrdal’s reticence to name “black” a legislatively viable communal category is the anxiety that in so doing its constructed other, “white,” will be made visible. However, the previously disavowed construction of whiteness became a useful tool in the reactionary logics of neoconservatism and its ideological backlashes. Formally in 1978 when Allan Bakke charged, and the Supreme Court upheld, that “special considerations” of minority applications to the Medical School of the University of California at Davis meant Bakke suffered from “reverse discrimination,” white masculinity was exposed as a potentially disenfranchised and marginalized identity positionality. In *Invisible Victims: White Males and the Crisis of Affirmative Action*, Frederick R. Lynch provides the academic justification for white masculine injury in the face of the erosion of white male power and privilege in a

⁵⁷ Podhoretz, 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

sociological study that “sought white, male subjects through networks of friends, acquaintances, co-workers.”⁶⁰ These already networked white men shared their experiences and frustrations confronting new employment and educational schemes that refused to guarantee the privileges of their arbitrary, but previously naturalized, power. Critical race theorists such as Patricia J. Williams insist that “affirmative action is an affirmation; the affirmative act of hiring—or hearing—blacks is a recognition of individuality that includes blacks as a social presence . . . It is an act of verification and vision, an act of social as well as professional responsibility.”⁶¹ However, the men in Lynch’s text refute affirmative action as a discriminatory “racial spoils system”⁶² that, I would argue, makes no distinction between “benefit” – the aim of affirmative action mandates and a temporary bonus that must be won and/or earned; and “privilege” – an always already assumed guarantee that cannot be gained, only lost, (mis)appropriated, and/or briefly disavowed. The spectacle of the “Mixed-Up Malones” anxiously negotiated this conflation and, strangely enough, a few years before the courts confirmed their whiteness, Hollywood did so as well.

Redressing Soul Manhood

In the 1986 film, *Soul Man*, Hollywood took on the anxieties around affirmative action and the erosion of white male privilege by combining the immediately recognizable

⁶⁰ Frederick R. Lynch, *Invisible Victims: White Males and the Crisis of Affirmative Action* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 53.

⁶¹ Patricia Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991): 121.

⁶² Lynch, 3.

filmic genres of the 1980s: the palatably homoerotic, interracial buddy flick, the angst-driven teen comedy, and the exotically interracial romance, into a narrative of racial im/posture. Written by Carol Black and directed by Steve Miner, *Soul Man* chronicles the (mis)education of Mark Pelfrey Watson, a young, white, Southern Californian played by C. Thomas Howell who passes for black in order to attend Harvard Law School on a scholarship designated for an African American student. Incredibly cocky, spoiled, and overly self-assured, Watson wrongly assumes his wealthy father would continue to fund both his education and irresponsibility until dad decides to induce manhood by insisting on Mark's financial independence. After Watson realizes he needs \$53,979 to cover three years of tuition, fees, and living expenses, he panics, quickly confronting the stigma of being the son of the newly "stingy" upper class. His parents make too much for Watson to file for financial aid, and he has no credit history for a bank loan.

Desperate to matriculate and with seemingly no other options, Watson applies for, and wins, the Henry Q. Bouchard Memorial Scholarship for the most qualified black Harvard Law student from Los Angeles.⁶³ He affects his new blackness much like Griffin and Halsell by "exceeding the recommended dosage" for newly developed sun tanning pills that chemically darken the skin. He then completes his blackness with a pseudo-jheri curl wig. Although we do not see the process of Watson's racial transformation, we first witness

⁶³ While there certainly was much to protest about *Soul Man's* assumptive logics, members of the Hollywood chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were most offended by the idea that the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area could not produce at least one qualified black candidate to compete for the Bouchard Scholarship.

its result as he accepts the scholarship from the all-white selection committee, and secondly, as he reveals himself to his best friend, Gordon, played by Ayre Gross. Also preparing to attend Harvard Law, Gordon is appropriately cautious. He reminds Watson of the deep ethical implications of his im/posture: “You can’t just take a scholarship away from some black person,” as well as pointing out that Mark will have to stay black all through school. “Do you realize what this means?,” Gordon queries. “You’re going to have to be a black person . . . for three years, Mark, three years! What’s that going to be like?” Watson replies with a confident enthusiasm: “It’s going to be great! This is the ‘80s man! The Cosby decade. America *loves* black people!” Unlike im/postors such as Sprigle, Halsell, and Griffin who purposefully positioned their bodies in the likely path of racial violence, Watson appropriates blackness without regard for, or even an awareness of, Dixie terror. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Donald Bogle suggests that Watson is not the only one heralding the 1980s as the definitive decade for a love affair with blackness. He writes,

The 1980s . . . was the era when the black superstar reigned supreme in the entertainment industry. Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston shot to the top of the music charts. ‘The Cosby Show’ became the country’s number one prime-time television program. Perhaps it was not surprising that many Americans frequently lulled themselves into the assumption that the races were at peace with one another, that inner city blight and decay as well as social tension and racial inequities had ceased to exist, that indeed America’s past history of racism had vanished.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1991), 268.

Like the “many Americans” Bogle cites, Watson’s understanding of blackness assumes that the mere increase in black popular and political representation evidences the definitive conclusion of racial discrimination and is the corrective balm soothing its legacies. This assumption, however, disavows the grotesquely rampant commodification, packaging, and branding of blackness, particularly on and against images of the black male body. From pudding pops to shoes, NBA franchises to the new genre of music television, 1980s blackness was called upon to perform an economic labor that fueled the consumptive desires of Reagan’s “me” generation.

Even while Bill Cosby was America’s favorite dad and Jesse Jackson, Sr., aimed for the White House, strategically haunting images of black and working class degeneracy (crack babies, welfare mothers, black-on-black crime, and Willie Horton, for example) continued to proliferate the cultural landscape holding African America in the white imaginary within a complex dialectic of love and fear. In *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before That Negroes)*, Nelson George moves beyond representation and locates the conflicting sensibilities around race in this decade in the temporal distinctions of the term “post-soul.” He writes, “‘Post-soul’ defines the twisting, troubling, turmoil-filled, and often terrific years

since the mid-seventies when black America moved into a new phase of its history.”⁶⁵ He continues,

The post-soul years have witnessed an unprecedented acceptance of black people in the public life of America. As political figures, advertising images, pop stars, coworkers, and classmates, the descendents of African slaves have made their presence felt and, to a remarkable degree considering this country’s brutal history, been accepted as citizens, if not always as equals. Unfortunately, . . . the achievements of role models have not necessarily had a tangible impact on the realities of persistent poverty, poor education, and lingering, deep-seated social discrimination.⁶⁶

With a nod to Nelson, Mark Anthony Neal also uses “post-soul” to “describe the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements;”⁶⁷ however, he helpfully and “more specifically . . . locate[s] the beginnings of the post-soul era in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* challenge to affirmative action in 1978.”⁶⁸ Neal sutures “post-soul” to the supposed loss of white male power, allegations of “reverse discrimination,” and the judicial beginning of the long undoing of liberalism’s reparative legislation. For both Nelson and Neal then, “post-soul” captures the paradoxes of a generation that both benefited from the gains of the civil

⁶⁵ Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before That Negroes)* (New York: Viking Press, 2004), ix.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

rights and black power movements as well as suffered its neoconservative and often violent backlash.

Despite the precariousness of racialization for the “post-soul” generation, Watson liberally appropriates blackness without concern for either the historical or contemporary consequences of his new difference. This casual appropriation is similarly reflected in the title of the film itself, a reference to the 1968 Grammy winning song “Soul Man.” Written by Isaac Hayes and David Porter and performed by R&B duo, Sam & Dave, “Soul Man” was not only the most successful single released by legendary Stax Records, but also, it captured the spirit of the burgeoning black power and pride movements of the late 1960s. “‘That was during the days of civil rights struggles,’ recounts Isaac Hayes. ‘We had a lot of riots. I remember in Detroit, I saw the news flash where they were burning [the neighborhoods]. Where the buildings weren’t burnt, people would write ‘soul’ on the buildings . . . So I said, ‘Why not do something called ‘Soul Man’ and kind of tell a story about one’s struggle to rise above his present conditions.’”⁶⁹ “Soul” publicly identified the African American owned and operated businesses of Detroit becoming a literal marker of community, pride, and absolution that Hayes and Porter then translated into the funk and rhythm of the record. As Rob Bowman writes, “It became an anthem for black America.”⁷⁰ All this is lost in Mark Watson’s easy interpretations of black identity, making his soul

⁶⁹ Quoted in Rob Bowman, *Soulsville, U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 128.

⁷⁰ Bowman, 128.

manhood much more akin to the song's 1979 Blues Brother cover than its original. For example, the ease with which Watson constructs his blackness is evident when he and Gordon reach Cambridge. As Watson picks up his check from the financial aid office, the administrative assistant discovers the inconsistencies between Mark's recognizable blackness and the "x" designating "White/Caucasian" on his application materials. As "Soul Man" scores the scene, the assistant pauses, briefly scrutinizing Watson's face and then assumedly dismisses the documented whiteness as a clerical error. She then brings Watson's physical and paper identities into accord by correcting the presumptive mistake. If only the Malone brothers also had a bottle of White Out.

Now with a coherent racial identity, Watson begins a performance of blackness structured completely through cliché and stereotype. For example, he decides to take Criminal Law 101 only because Professor Banks, played by James Earl Jones, was a "brother," and smugly answers "right on" when Banks calls the roll. Watson then attends the first meeting of the rumoredly militant Black Law Students Association costumed in a beret, sunglasses, camouflage pants, and black turtleneck in an ignorant mocking of the iconography of black power and the Black Panther Party completely removed from any ideological and/or historical context. And while Watson attempts to control the representational excesses of his "cartoonish blackness,"⁷¹ it becomes quite clear that the interpretation of it, and black masculinity in particular, will never be completely under his

⁷¹ Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 227.

control. In *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*, Maurice Wallace theorizes the particularities of black masculinity through the concept of "enframing" arguing that the black male is "framed" much like a photograph or visual image. As a conceptual trace of the filmic gaze and based on a politics of sight, "enframing" polarizes the black male as simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, fixing his stereotyped image in the minds of the white imaginary through spectragraphia, a "chronic syndrome of misrepresentation."⁷² For example, although Mark insists he is "not that good," two intramural basketball team captains fight over "Marcus Washington," the projected fantasy, and repeated misnomer for an assumedly athletic Mark Watson. This fantasy is undone in a film montage that cuts between shots of Watson and "real" black man, Leon, whose skillful layups and effortless dunks not only make Mark's lack of competency on the court even more apparent, but also, reinscribes the well-worn discourses both celebrating and fearing the natural athleticism of the black male body. In *Hoop Roots*, John Edgar Wideman locates these discourses in the historical legacies of slavery. He writes,

Convict body, field hand body, too unadulterated African, too raw, too black, too powerful and quick and assertive for most whites and some colored folk to feel comfortable around until Michael Jordan arrived and legitimated . . . complexion and physique, mainstreaming them, blunting the threatening edge, commodifying the Jordan look, as if the physical, sexual potency of a dark, streamlined, muscular body could be purchased.⁷³

⁷² Maurice Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 31.

⁷³ John Edgar Weidman, *Hoop Roots* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 40.

The idea(l) of this dangerously alluring physicality and prowess is apparent in the next scene when Watson goes to bed with Whitney Dunbar, a Radcliffe senior with a passionate interest in race, via sexual, relations. Although Whitney claims, as she basks in their afterglow, that “I really don’t feel like there is any black or white, only shades of grey,” she is only able to make sense of Watson through a fetishized fantasy of black male sexuality. “I mean it was like I could really feel four-hundred years of oppression and anger in every pelvic thrust!” Whitney exclaims. White womanhood, thinly portrayed here as the “sex-crazed white girl,” is legible only through a promiscuous curiosity and a voracious appetite for men of color. Later in the film Whitney is overheard telling a native, male student her theories on “shades of pink.”

While the relationship between Whitney and Mark is presented as purely physical frivolity, Watson’s growing racial consciousness is linked to the relationship between he and Sarah Walker, a black classmate and single mother played by Rae Dawn Chong. Walker is a woman after Claire Huxtable’s heart. She is earnest, hardworking, beautiful, family-oriented, and repeatedly demonstrates her qualifications for the rigors of Harvard Law School. At first she is turned off by Watson’s aggressive cockiness but the two establish a connection with a montage chronicling long nights in the library while studying for finals. They become romantically involved after Sarah shares a rather common moment of covert racism: “So George [her son] and I are at the checkout counter and the girl goes, ‘if you have food stamps I need to see them first.’” The laugh he shares with Sarah at the cashier’s assumptions of Walker’s because-of-her-race class positionality reinforces in the film’s logics

Watson's "authentic" blackness beyond pure stereotype. It is a blackness produced through mutual recognition and testimony much like that described by Derricotte.

Throughout the film Watson's racial consciousness is chronicled by his personal confrontations with racism and discrimination and then measured through his reactions to a number of "off-color" jokes. When he first arrives on campus he overhears two classmates: "You've got 10 black guys and one white guy what do you call the white guy? Quarterback! You've got a thousand black guys and one white guy, what do you call the white guy? Warden!" Assuming they were not in mixed company the two students apologize when they realize their unintended audience: "Sorry, no offense. Just a joke." "Hey, no problem," Watson responds. As his feelings grow for Sarah and only after he experiences racial violence, do the jokes begin to affect him. Watson is pulled over by the police for driving while black in a quiet, residential neighborhood and then arrested and jailed for "misplacing" a driver's license he purposefully conceals so as not to expose his whiteness. He suffers the penalties of his inconsistent documentation at the hands of an angry sports team spending the night in the same cell. With its Cambridge, Massachusetts, setting, *Soul Man* locates overt racism in the hearts and minds of greater Boston's Irish Americans, identifiable in the logics of the film by kelly green t-shirts. In an earlier scene Mark's landlord, Roy McGrady, uncomfortable with a black tenant and who wears green throughout the film, promises the building owner he will surveil Watson until he finds some evictable offense. Also wearing green, the jailed men take out their frustrations over "losing to a bunch of niggers" on Mark's proximately substitute body.

Although we never witness this act of racial violence, Watson's battered body stands as its evidence in the next scene as he rushes to make his Criminal Law class. Assuming that his night in jail and visible bruises would be enough to excuse him from the day's assignment, Watson appeals to the commonality of he and Professor Banks's blackness for leniency: "I just spent 18 hours in a jail cell getting pulverized by drunken bigots . . . I would think *you* could understand." To Watson's surprise Banks is not interested in commiserating Mark's experience: "You'll get no special treatment from me . . . And if that means you've got to work twice as hard as these little white shits then you damn well better work twice as hard." He then reminds Watson that he can do his homework in jail, a comment that at first seems dismissive but ultimately recalls that during the civil rights movements members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee would routinely work with professors to keep up their schoolwork while behind bars.

Despite suffering some of the vulnerabilities that come with blackness, Watson only regrets the ethics of his racial im/posture when he finds out how his appropriated blackness negatively affects Sarah. After discovering that Sarah hails from San Diego and would have been the recipient of the Bouchard scholarship if no qualified Los Angeles resident had been identified, Mark determines to (re)set the record white. Before he is given the chance for self-disclosure, the generic hijinks of situational comedies ensue when Sarah, Whitney, and Mark's parents end up in his apartment at the same time forcing him to reveal his blackness to his parents and his whiteness to Sarah. Knowingly facing expulsion for his fraud, Gordon and Watson organize a special open hearing of the Student/Faculty Judiciary Committee

preemptively to clear Mark's name. With Gordon posing as Watson's "chief counsel," he delivers an impassioned defense before the judiciary committee chaired by Professor Banks as well as curious students including both Sarah and Whitney that I find necessary to cite in its entirety:

Mark feels that he has done a grave injustice in accepting the Henry Q. Bouchard Memorial Fellowship. His sole desire is to set the record straight. And to make the fullest possible reparations for the damage he's done. First, to the individual who otherwise would have received those funds, but also, to the institution whose trust he has forsaken. And last, but by no means least, to the society whose laws he has transgressed. In thus coming forward my client throws himself upon the mercy of this committee. But I ask you, before you pass judgment on him I ask you to consider the mitigating circumstances surrounding his crime. My client was in a position of dire financial need at the time he improperly accepted the Bouchard fellowship. In his efforts to come by the money honestly he encountered nothing but hostility and rejection at every turn. In fact, one could argue that it was the lack of understanding of my client's special needs on the part of the governmental, financial, and academic establishments that drove him to his crime! But it goes way beyond that ladies and gentlemen, 'cause my client is a victim of society in a still deeper sense. After all, who made him what he is – weak, greedy, unable to support himself by honest labor. Can we blame him for the environment in which he is raised? For the warped values which he learned from earliest childhood? For the people with whom he was surrounded? People who, as much as it pains me to say it, give daily evidence of underdeveloped intellect and deteriorating moral fiber? In short, can we blame him, ladies and gentlemen, for the color of his skin!? I think not. And I trust that this committee will find the heart, nay the soul, to be lenient, and to share with me my hope that despite his race and upbringing my client may yet become a useful member of society. Mark Watson, come on down!

On dramatic cue, Mark reveals himself to the anxiously awaiting, and subsequently, appropriately shocked, crowd of faculty and students sans wig and cosmetically contoured black skin. In penance, Watson names the conditions of his own reparations to Professor Banks by offering to pay Sarah the full amount of his scholarship plus interest, volunteering

to complete legal aid work in a black community, and insisting on a contract binding him to donate a fixed amount of his future income to a scholarship in Walker's name. In spite of Watson's ready *mea culpa*, Professor Banks decides not to expel him from school or file criminal charges only when he realizes the lasting impact of Watson's racial im/posture. "You must have learned a great deal more than you bargained for in this experience . . . you've learned what it feels like to be black," Banks suggests. "No sir, I don't really know what it feels like," Watson responds. "If I didn't like it I could always get out. It's not the same." In this almost unsettlingly poignant moment, Watson admits the differences between the temporary benefits of his opportunistic blackness and the naturalized permanency of white privilege.

Although Gordon and Mark were able to ensure Watson's continued place at Harvard Law, his full redemption came not from Banks's forgiveness, but from Sarah's. Confronted once again with the racist jokes of his classmates: "What do you call a black test tube baby? Janitor in a drum," again white Watson finally appropriately responds by punching the two comedians in anger, inspiring Sarah to reconsider him romantically. By defending blackness and consequently winning Sarah's heart, interracial heteronormativity redeems Watson. While Banks represents the authoritative voice of the academic institution, the relationship with Walker offers the displaced white male an opportunity to claim the place of the supposedly always already absent black patriarch, thereby repositioning white masculine power at the head of the otherwise fractured nuclear black family. Watson's racial

im/posture then affords him the experiential sensitivity to assume stewardship over Moynihan's purported black family in crisis.

While there are striking differences between the generic constraints of the judicial proceedings of *Malone v. Haley* and the supposedly entertaining pursuits of a film like *Soul Man*, the film's reactionary logics read like a scripted redress of the fraudulent Malone twins. In particular Gordon's defensive monologue eerily resituates the Malones as the, albeit unethical, victims of a system that forces desperate white men into a complicated and excusable relationship with appropriated blackness. In the logics of Hollywood, silver tongued, aspiring lawyers perform a case for the corruptness of not profitably opportunistic individuals, but the perversity of a reparative legislative system that, in order to function, must pursue racial difference at the cost of a color-blind meritocracy. Consequently, the otherwise invisible and comfortably overlooked category of whiteness becomes an undeserving spectacle. As Gordon implores us to consider the warped society that has so crippled and damaged the power of white masculinity, he places the white male body at the center of a courtroom melodrama otherwise reserved for bodies of color. *Soul Man*, on behalf of the Malones, traffics in the prevailing fiction of the categorical innocence of whiteness, an innocence that then excuses otherwise previously law-abiding citizenry to resort to acts of fraudulence.

Chapter Four –

The (II)literacy of Race: Anatole Broyard and *The Human Stain*

“I want to begin by confessing that I’m an impostor.”

Anatole Broyard

“The Patient Examines the Doctor”¹

When enigmatic literary critic Anatole Broyard stood before an auditorium of medical professionals at the University of Chicago Medical School in April 1990 to deliver his opinion on the dynamics of the patient-doctor relationship, his self-declaration of “impostor” was likely dismissed as expectedly banal. Since Broyard admittedly had “no relationship with doctors”² prior to being diagnosed in 1989 with a metastatic prostate cancer that in only a few short months would spread to his bones and lymphatic system, his demand for a “charismatic” doctor who “can treat body and soul”³ seemed well outside his literary expertise. However, Broyard’s confession is most ironically provocative when considered against the sometimes speculated and then posthumously confirmed disavowal of his racial identity. For many, Broyard’s secret was exposed six years after his 1990 death when literary mogul Henry Louis Gates, Jr., published “White Like Me: The Passing of Anatole Broyard,” a piece in *The New Yorker* publicly memorializing Broyard’s “passing”

¹ Antaole Broyard, *Intoxicated By My Illness: And Other Writings on Life and Death* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1992), 33.

² Ibid.

³ *Intoxicated*, 40.

(pun intended).⁴ Gates begins his outing of Anatole with a 1982 anecdote. While renting Broyard's eighteenth-century farmhouse in Fairfield, Connecticut, investment banker Richard Grand-Jean discovered that the biography for Broyard's *Commentary* essay, "Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro," had been removed from that particular copy.⁵ Years later Grand-Jean found that in an intact copy of the article the note read: "Jean-Paul Sartre analyzed the psychological effects upon the personality and behavior of Jews of an unsympathetic surrounding world. Anatole Broyard attempts a similar analysis of the American Negro, which he knows first hand."⁶ For Grand-Jean and then Gates, Broyard's "first hand" knowing signaled not simply a close association with or understanding of U.S. blackness, but intimated something much more specific about his identity, or as Gates writes, "Broyard was born black and became white, and his story is compounded of equal parts pragmatism and principle."⁷ Gates use of the word "story" is telling here for it is narrative that structures not only Broyard's professional life as a notable and long-time critic, literary gatekeeper, columnist, and editor for *The New York Times*, but his racial life and its afterlife as well. This chapter takes advantage of Broyard's relationship to literature, reading, and writing by

⁴ Since its 1996 publication, "White Like Me" has been anthologized under the truncated title, "The Passing of Anatole Broyard." For example, see *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997).

⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "White Like Me," in *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker*, edited by David Remnick (New York: Random House, 2000), 275.

⁶ Anatole Broyard, "Portrait of an Inauthentic Negro: How Prejudice Distorts the Victim's Personality," *Commentary* 10 (July 1950), 56.

⁷ Gates, 276.

detailing his complicated refusal of blackness as it is structured through analogies of literature. It then moves to a reading of the novel Broyard likely inspired, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. By considering a novel obsessed with the act of reading, the chapter attends to theories of racial performance by articulating an epistemology of race dependent on the ideas of bodies as texts and the social construction of literacy.

Born July 16, 1920, to Paul Anatole Broyard and Edna Miller, Anatole, along with his two sisters Lorraine and Shirley, was raised in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The Broyards were an established, but economically modest, self-identified Creole of color family descended from French settlers and *gens de couleur libre* (free people of color) from St. Domingue.⁸ Up until 1803 when the United States acquired the territory from Napoleon, Louisiana fluctuated between French and Spanish ownership. New Orleans, its largest port city, had a sizable native population and a large influx of both white and black refugees from St. Domingue (present day Haiti) after its 1802 revolution, consequently the racial histories of New Orleans troubles the supposed exclusivity of the black/white binary with a tripartite system of racial classification (white, black, and free people of color and/or Creole.) Notably, "Creole" remains an incredibly contested racial, social, legal, and class distinction that simultaneously, and paradoxically, connotes a wide range of kinship networks and communities, thereby stretching the boundaries of easy racial categories. In "People of Color in Louisiana," an obviously dated but still foundational study of Creole culture, Alice

⁸ Bliss Broyard, *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life—A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007).

Dunbar-Nelson helpfully writes, “The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition [of Creole], and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly more apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive and wholly unique.”⁹ In *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, Virginia R. Dominguez recognizes the “conscious manipulation of identity throughout the history of Louisiana,”¹⁰ and consequently, resists a static definition in favor of holding the ambiguity of the term in its “different modes of self-identification, varying degrees of self-awareness, ongoing processes of change in social identification, and conflicts, myths, and controversies surrounding the epistemological and social bases for identification.”¹¹ Despite Creole’s contended and porous definition, Gates seemingly oversimplifies the Broyard’s racial identification as “Negro.” He writes, “the conventions of color stratification within black America—nowhere more pronounced than in New Orleans meant that light-skinned blacks often intermarried with other light-skinned blacks, and this

⁹ Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana” in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color* edited by Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁰ Virginia R. Dominguez, *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), xiv. For more see also Andrew J. Jolivéte, *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007.)

¹¹ Dominguez, 20.

was the case with Paul and his ‘high yellow’ wife, Edna . . . In any event, the family was identified as Negro, and identified itself as Negro.”¹² However, when the Broyards moved to the largely working-class borough of Brooklyn, New York, the one-drop rule and hypodescent did in fact reposition them as such. Joining the thousands of other African American Southerners migrating to the North in the 1920s, Paul and Edna gave up the status Creole afforded them in New Orleans to pursue the promises and benefits of a post-World War I, industrialized North. Although the Broyards’ new neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant was once the home of Weeksville, a nineteenth-century community established by African American freedmen,¹³ “Creole” still did not translate, and what they found as Brooklyn’s binary racial reality operated under different assumptions of the economic, social, and legal liabilities of color than the triad developed in New Orleans. As a skilled master carpenter facing the economic disadvantages of the near exclusively white labor unions, Paul utilized the privileges of his “light-skinnedness” and began occupationally passing for white.

Paul’s decision was, of course, a common one. For many whose corporeality allows for an assumptive whiteness, passing to gain access to otherwise restricted social and employment spaces functions as, simultaneously, a strategically subversive, banal, and (un)intentional act of racial performance. For example, although Irene Redfield, Nella Larsen’s protagonist in her 1929 novel, *Passing*, took tea in the whites-only rooftop restaurant

¹² Gates, 182.

¹³ Weeksville was settled to escape the misplaced violence waged against free blacks during the 1863 Draft riots. It was rediscovered in the 1970s by historian James Hurley and its three remaining structures have since been named a national historic site.

of the Drayton Hotel after a tiring day of shopping, she did so while maintaining a distinction between her temporary excursion across the color line and what she saw as the “hazardous business of ‘passing’”¹⁴ permanently. Or as Randall Kennedy succinctly writes, “Blacks have engaged in temporary passing in many . . . settings. To advance occupational ambition, some passed as white during the workday, while presenting themselves as African American outside of the workplace . . . Other blacks have passed as white in order to shop, sleep, or eat meals at racially exclusive establishments.”¹⁵ Presumably, young Anatole learned the mercurial nature of race by witnessing his father’s daily manipulation of the color line, but it was not until World War II, after briefly attending Brooklyn College, that he began to explicitly trouble that line himself.

Rather than waiting for an inevitable draft, Anatole enlisted in the still segregated army and prepared himself for deployment by marrying and having daughter Gala with Aida Sanchez, a Puerto Rican woman who, along with Anatole, checked “white” on their marriage license. This moment of documented self-identification marked the intentional “beginning of [Anatole’s] living as a white man,”¹⁶ and ironically, it was during this initial whiteness that Broyard was made captain of the 167th Port Company of all-black stevedores. After returning from military service and ending his relationship with Sanchez, Anatole enrolled in classes at the New School for Social Research on the G.I. Bill and found an intellectual

¹⁴ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 30.

¹⁵ Randall Kennedy “Racial Passing,” *Ohio State Law Journal* 62 (2001), 1146.

¹⁶ *One Drop*, 369.

home in the artsy and literary community of Greenwich Village. In *Kafka Was the Rage*, Broyard's posthumously published part-memoir, part love letter to both the city and its burgeoning sexual freedom, Broyard memorializes postwar New York City. In his 1989 prefatory remarks he writes, "We were all so grateful to be there—it was like a reward for having fought the war. There was a sense of coming back to life, a terrific energy and curiosity, even a feeling of destiny arising out of the war that had just ended. The Village, like New York City itself, had an immense, beckoning sweetness . . . We weren't strangers there, but familiars . . . We shared the adventure of trying to be, starting to be, writers or painters."¹⁷ In 1946, the Village held the promising potential of reinvention, and the students, writers, readers, dancers, artists, and drifters comprising its signature eclecticism sought to unmoor themselves from a stifling social conformity largely based on what they saw as the provincial constraints of the past and the prescriptive dictates of kinship.

If Brooklyn was a space structured by the black/white binary, the Village offered the potential for the electivity of race, an idea(l) seeded in Brooklyn and then fully flowered in Manhattan that, for Broyard, was inextricably linked to literature. As the Village fueled his penchant for writing and reading, Broyard, along with the rest of the Village's literati, found the recipe for a complete reinvention of self in the pages of books. He writes, "When I left Brooklyn to live in the Village, I felt as if I had acquired a new set of relatives, like a surprising number of uncles I had never met before, men who lived in odd places,

¹⁷ Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Carol Southern Books, 1993), vii.

sometimes abroad, who had shunned family life and been shunned in turn . . . These uncles were, of course, my favorite authors, the writers I most admired . . . These uncles, these books, moved into the vacuum of my imagination.”¹⁸ Broyard eschews biology for a fantasy of a queered family governed by patriarchs Kafka, Wallace Stevens, and D.H. Lawrence. He continues, “They were all the family I had now, all the family I wanted. With them, I could trade in my embarrassingly ordinary history for a choice of fictions. I could lead a hypothetical life, unencumbered by memory, loyalties, or resentments . . . Nobody in the Village had a family. We were all sprung from our own brows, spontaneously generated.”¹⁹ Although Broyard’s experiences prior to the Village were probably substantially more “unconventional” than many in his circle, here he constructs a discontented ordinariness that allows his past to pass. He then takes refuge in literature in the same way Norman Mailer encouraged “square” white men to seek salvation from blandness via appropriations of black masculinity in his 1957 essay, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster.” Broyard writes, “It was if we didn’t know where we ended and books began . . . We took them into ourselves and made them into our histories.”²⁰ To suggest that books can transport one to a chosen time and place, or allow one to gain access and insight into another culture or experience seems cliché, for Broyard, however, a book sets the

¹⁸ *Kafka*, 28-29.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 29-30.

conditional possibilities for a bohemian amnesia, a permission to forget, disavow, and literally lose self in its pages.

Not only did books replace Broyard's familial past, but he relied on a metaphor of literature to explain his present as well. In the midst of the postwar craze for psychoanalysis, Broyard allowed his literary self to be read through its analysis. Sitting in Dr. Schachtel's Upper West side apartment, Broyard admits he "saw himself as a first draft"²¹ in need of revision and, although the analyst is charged with interrogating and disclosing otherwise obscured truths, Broyard is uncomfortable being too readily legible: "I was . . . easy to read . . . I felt I had to do something to redeem myself."²² Rather than "redeeming" himself by disclosing his blackness, Broyard chose to feed his therapist an admittedly false line about being unhappy in love. He confesses, "I wanted to discuss my life with [Dr. Schachtel] not as a patient talking to an analyst but as if we were two literary critics discussing a novel . . . I had a literature rather than a personality, a set of fictions about myself."²³ The irony of seeking out the insightful interrogation of therapy only to imaginatively obscure the "truth" of one's life assuredly was not lost on someone as indebted to literary theory as Broyard. His insistence on doing so bespeaks not only of how psychoanalysis had come into vogue as a fashionable accessory of the literati, but also, it evidences Broyard's career-long, and subsequent, trademarked vacillation between the self-bearing demands implicit in the genres

²¹ Ibid, 48.

²² Ibid, 49.

²³ Ibid, 52.

of autobiography and memoir and his sometimes subtly intimated, but ultimately concealed, blackness. It is important to note, however, that taking creative license with the constraints of autobiography does have precedent in the canon of African American literature. Audre Lorde, for example, provocatively pushed the expectations of self-writing with her 1982 “biomythography,” *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Like Lorde, Broyard used memoir to creatively (re)write himself.

This (re)writing in light of Broyard’s passing is suffused with racial ironies and his most ironic piece is undoubtedly the same *Commentary* essay that gave Richard Grand-Jean pause in 1982. Borrowing liberally from Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1948 essay, “Portrait of an Inauthentic Jew,” in the pseudo-sociological, “Portrait of an Inauthentic Negro,” Broyard analyzes the effects of prejudice and discrimination on the performances of blackness in a mid-twentieth century moment, and he spends most of the essay identifying his five distinct categories of black inauthenticity. Firstly, Broyard (re)defines “minstrelization” as a behavior similar in attitude to the Uncle Tom “resulting from the inauthentic Negro’s acceptance of his situation as defined by the anti-Negro.”²⁴ He then defines “romanticization” as the second mode of black inauthenticity that misguidedly “finds virtue”²⁵ in celebrating both the specificities and suffering of U.S. blackness. In a racialized performance that inverts “minstrelization” by purposefully performing negative black stereotypes, the third inauthentic personality is the “rejected attitude.” From rejection, Broyard loosely theorizes

²⁴ “Portrait,” 59.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 60.

“bestialization” as the fourth and most “damaging inauthentic type of all” whose “antagonistic” and “primitive” performance of blackness seems to be much more about class than race, or as he writes, “bestialization takes many forms, the most common being voluntary speech mutilations, both of syntax and intonation, such as, ‘Man, wut choo think you gonna do?’”²⁶ The offensive uncouth of the bestial type is directly countered in the almost equally offending fifth category of “role-inversion” characterized by a “meekness, prissiness, unspontaneous religiosity, and highly effeminate male homosexuality.”²⁷ This singularly explicit distinction of gender and sexuality stands in contrast to the rest of the essay where black inauthenticity is constructed exclusively based on pathologized caricatures of heteronormative masculinity eclipsing any real consideration of black women or black queerness. Here, inauthenticity is an intentionally masculine performance, a “voluntary mutilation” that creates the subsequently justifiable conditions for discrimination and prejudice. While Broyard is meticulous in his demonizing characterization of black inauthenticity, he is far less precise about how authenticity is performed and/or embodied probably because he advocates for a blackness that is only distinguishable by skin color. He writes, “If the majority of Negroes would authenticate themselves – i.e., prove themselves fundamentally ‘different’ only in appearance – this would be an extremely important step in

²⁶ Ibid, 62.

²⁷ Ibid.

validating their desperately needed identity.”²⁸ Adhering to a black identity is the conscious acceptance of a racial liability otherwise overcome through complete assimilation. Broyard continues, “the NAACP, the Urban League, the progressive papers, *et al*, would explain that ‘you [white people] made him [the inauthentic Negro] that way.’ And maybe you did, but that doesn’t mean that you alone can unmake him by simply reversing the process. You can let him know that your mind and heart are open; the rest is up to him.”²⁹ In this explicit reference to Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, Broyard reframes the dilemma’s solution. Instead of insisting on the moral penance of solely white America as Myrdal does, Broyard recasts African Americans as the actors in this melodrama of reconciliation, as white folks passively wait for black folks to “get it together.” Although he recognizes that, due to phenotype, “the Negro usually cannot conceal his identity,”³⁰ he ultimately makes the often violent consequences of racialization the responsibility of othered bodies.

While certainly not suggesting Broyard articulate an idealized notion of an essential blackness, his refusal to recognize any particularity in the black experience recalls George S. Schuyler’s 1926 essay, “The Negro-Art Hokum.” Arguing that black cultural production in the United States is much more about the imprint of an amalgamated national belonging than racial difference, Schuyler writes,

²⁸ “Portrait,” 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Portrait,” 57.

If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock . . . how much truer must it be of the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years. Aside from his color, which ranges from very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American.³¹

During the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement deeply invested in identifying and debating the political and aesthetic contours of black cultural production, Schuyler's essay stands in stark contrast to Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," a call made that same year urging a generation of young black writers to "express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."³² The difficulties in defining and celebrating a uniquely black aesthetic while still sustaining the incredible diversity of black life and experience has been the provocative tension of black cultural production throughout its history in the United States. Subsequently, the accompanying questioning, critique, and fantasy of authenticity is of particular importance to the ideological frames of the New Negro movement, and although Broyard situates "Portrait of an Inauthentic Negro" in an almost exclusive textual relationship to Sartre's work of nearly the same name, it is deeply conversant with and indebted to these very discourses.

³¹ George S. Schuyler, "The Negro Art-Hokum," in *African American Literary Theory* edited by Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 25.

³² Langston Hughes, "The Negro Arts and the Racial Mountain," in *African American Literary Theory* edited by Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 27.

During the New Negro movement the black literati established and debated working criteria for the black writer in essays such as W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), and Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), and it is clear in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that the conscious disavowal of this aesthetic is a matter of not only low black-esteem, but also corrupts the very potential for one's art. Hughes writes,

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,' meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white.' And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this 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.³³

This introductory anecdote about the unnamed Countee Cullen could just as eerily refer to Anatole Broyard, or as Gates writes, "he resolved to pass so that he could be a writer, rather than a Negro writer."³⁴ With a near-whiteness Cullen did not embody, Broyard rejects the implicit racial demands of Harlem for the identity experimentalism of the Village, aspiring towards an imagined literary canon once, and, even after the academic culture wars, sometimes still, assumed to be universal. Gates continues, "In his terms, he did not want to

³³ Hughes, 30.

³⁴ Gates, 278.

write about black love, black passion, black suffering, black joy; he wanted to write about love and passion and suffering and joy.”³⁵ In 1954 Broyard seemingly did just that with the achingly intimate and haunting essay, “What the Cystoscope Said,” an essay originally published in *Discover No. 4* edited by Vance Bourjaily and since reprinted widely in other anthologies of beat literature. Detailing his father’s 1948 death from cancer, Broyard writes candidly of fathers and sons, mortality, fear, and longing: “‘Pop,’ I said bending nearer, ‘Pop,’ but as I opened my lips to let out his vowel, he gave a huge sigh and shot a great breath into my mouth. I caught it full, and it went all through me. I swallowed it like a toast, not knowing whether it was poison or elixir. I swallowed it full, and it inflated me until I swelled incredibly in the mirror of his eyes.”³⁶ In words as lyrical and intimate as these, “What the Cystoscope Said” set the literary world on fire inspiring Atlantic Monthly Press to offer Broyard a then unprecedented advance to pen the next autobiographically-based great American novel. However, as the literary world waited “with bated breath for this great novelist who was about to arrive,”³⁷ an excruciating, multiple decades long writer’s block plagued Broyard, exacerbated by the pressure of this enormous expectation. The novel was never published in his lifetime. Instead his literary skills would make or break the careers of both emerging and established writers in his daily book reviews for *The New York Times*.

³⁵ Gates, 207.

³⁶ *Intoxicated*, 126.

³⁷ Gates, 207.

There are many literary critics who saw a direct connection between this intense writer's block and Broyard's racial inauthenticity, and they speculated, according to Gates, "that the reason Broyard couldn't write his novel was that he was living it—that race loomed larger in his life because it was unacknowledged, that he couldn't put it behind him because he had put it beneath him. If he had been a different sort of writer, it might not have mattered so much."³⁸ It was only in the growing awareness of the close imminence of his death that Broyard began to write furiously. As if with fever he penned the central essays that his wife Sandy would later collect and publish under the title, *Intoxicated By My Illness*. Perhaps he understood that upon the discovery of his passing his life would be written for him and well beyond his control, or perhaps the essays were finally a therapeutic balm for a man who found both confidence and great anxiety before the page, either way, for reviewer Eugene Kennedy, Broyard's "literary sensibility was ignited, his mind flooded with image and metaphor, and he decided to employ these intuitive gifts to light his way into the darkness of his disease and its treatment."³⁹ Once again Broyard *is* the literary text, an actual narrative of racial im/posture.

Ironically, although Broyard sought a literary career unfettered from the burdens of racial representation, the posthumous revelation of his "true" blackness will forever color both the memory of his body and his body of writing as well. In "Anatole Broyard's Human Stain: Performing Postracial Consciousness," Brett Ashley Kaplan writes, "Many of [his]

³⁸ Gates, 289.

³⁹ Eugene Kennedy, "Writing His Way to the Finish," 10 May 1992 *The New York Times*: 7.

essays, read against Broyard's passing, powerfully reflect the mark of his unsaid past . . . It is hard not to read Broyard's works as though his knowledge of his 'secret' had not . . . 'permeated his everyday thinking.'"⁴⁰ If Kaplan had been talking about the now aware reader of Broyard's work rather than Broyard himself, he would be correct. It is incredibly difficult to now read Broyard's work, particularly his autobiographical essays, without combing them for quiet betrayals of blackness. It is a close reading practice I constantly, almost unthinkingly, employed during the research for this chapter, and thus, it raises still necessary questions around issues of privacy, disclosure, ethics, and the role of the literary critic. Reading Broyard, who consciously constructs himself as a text, invites not only such a reading, but places the literary theorist in an intimate relationship with the textual subject—in this case Broyard's disclosing and non-disclosing self. So, just how close is too close? How and when does the critic separate what (s)he knows of the intimate details of the author's life from their writing, particularly when considering the genres of memoir and autobiography? These questions have come up before, most notably in the recuperative memory work of establishing a canon of queer literature. However, what are the limits to this recuperation? Although my anxiety here is palpable it is instructive. For example, while this chapter is heavily indebted to Gates's article and the incredible amount of archival research and first-person interviews it comprises, I remain incredibly ambivalent about his invested need to "out" Anatole. Not only are such public racial declarations historically

⁴⁰ Brett Ashley Kaplan, "Anatole Broyard's Human Stain: Performing Postracial Consciousness," *Philip Roth Studies* 1.2 (Fall 2005): 136.

taboo in the African American community, but Broyard's daughter Bliss also implored Gates to wait to publish his article. Of course, Bliss's reticence could have had more to do with either her story being scooped or the reluctance to come to terms with her own new blackness rather than protecting and/or honoring her father's racial secret, however, "thinking through" Broyard as subject and text allows for a provocative moment of disciplinary reflection. How does a literary theorist demand the text undergo the disciplinary labor to produce a reading, and to what end? Ironically enough my own anxieties are undone by Bliss Broyard's own memoir. In *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life—A Story of Race and Family Secrets*, Bliss contributes to the textualization of her father, inventing and subsequently producing his character through her personal search for the evidentiary source of her blackness in the provocative, relentless, and nearly overwhelming archival documentation of a Broyard family traced all the way back to early 18th century France. She writes,

From my reading I'd learned that it was culture as much as a color that made a person black, and besides not looking the part, I wasn't raised knowing about that side of my heritage. But then I considered the clues during my childhood—however superficial or stereotypical—that my dad wasn't exactly white. There was the music—James Brown, the Commodores . . . and the central role danced played in my family. I'd remember the stories my father told about the nightclubs in Harlem where he used to hang out and the black company he commanded during World War II . . . I'd compare my father's style to that of other fathers: his natty dress code of slim pants and colorful sweaters, his belted jackets and carefully combed hair; and the rhythmic, graceful way he moved and talked . . . I'd consider my own kinship with black culture, which made me choose South African literature as my focus in a world lit class and jazz as my one elective during my college freshman year .

. . . When I'd weigh these factors in my mind, I'd wonder if calling myself white would make me an impostor too.⁴¹

Bliss searches through her childhood memories, resurrecting her father through stereotype, much like literary critics have mined his essays. In the spectacular wake of his death, Broyard has become not black, not white, but an im/postor writer, and his life continues to be inspiration for (re)imaginings of the passing narrative and twentieth-century racial logics. None of these (re)imaginings is more popularly recognized than Philip Roth's PEN/Faulkner Award winning novel, *The Human Stain*.⁴²

Am I Reading You Right?: Race and Literacy in *The Human Stain*

The summer of 1998 was a late century and millennial moment defined by a national obsession with sex. As the pharmaceutical miracle of Viagra hocked by presidential hopeful, Bob Dole, gave middle-aged men their grooves back, the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal of cigars, Walt Whitman, thongs, the Oval Office, and the Gap gave delightfully embarrassed Americans the permission to say “blowjobs” and “rimming” around the water cooler without the otherwise expected blushed cheeks and hushed voices. It is this moment that frames and historically marks Philip Roth's 2000 novel, *The Human Stain*. Roth writes,

It was the summer in America when the nausea returned, when the joking didn't stop, when the speculation and the theorizing and the hyperbole didn't stop . . . when some kind of demon had been unleashed in the nation and, on

⁴¹ *One Drop*, 71-72.

⁴² That Roth's novel became the 2003 film of the same name also contributed to its popularity. That Anthony Hopkins played Broyard-inspired protagonist Coleman Silk raises often asked questions about race and Hollywood's casting practices. The answers to those questions are outside the scope of this chapter.

both sides, people wondered ‘Why are we so crazy?’ when men and women alike, upon awakening in the morning, discovered that during the night, in a state of sleep that transported them beyond envy or loathing, they had dreamed of the brazenness of Bill Clinton . . . It was the summer when a president’s penis was on everyone’s mind, and life, in all its shameless impurity, once again confounded America.⁴³

Add to this panic over queer, presidential sex the dystopian anticipation of an Armageddon wrought by vengeful technology also known as Y2K, the resurgent domination of pop music led by the homoerotic yet bubble gum stylings of dueling boy bands, and the still swirling debates over the place of political correctness and it is clear that questions and anxieties around issues of propriety, security, intimacy, and morality dominated the national sociopolitical psyche.

Against this 1998, Roth once again calls upon Nathan Zuckerman, a recurring character from the rest of what has been called the “American Trilogy” of which *The Human Stain* is the final installment. Throughout the novel, Zuckerman writes, narrates, and imagines the life of Coleman Silk, a forcibly retired classics professor and once dean of faculty at the New England liberal arts school, Athena College. The unlikely friendship between the two begins when an enraged Silk demands that the reclusive writer finish penning his autobiography, an angry, fragmented, and sprawling narrative tentatively entitled, *Spooks*, the supposedly racial epithet that prematurely ends Silk’s long and distinguished career in academia. During what would be shorthanded in the novel as “the incident,” Silk takes roll in his ancient Greek literature class for the first four weeks of the course, however,

⁴³ Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Vintage International, 2000), 3. All subsequent citations of this text will be indicated by in-text citation.

“As there were still two names that failed to elicit a response by the fifth week into the semester, Coleman, in the sixth week, opened the session by asking ‘Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?’” (6) Coleman’s career unravels in the combination of the two absent students’ inconveniently coincidental blackness and the otherwise unremarkable use of the word “spooks.” Roth writes, “Later that day [Coleman] was astonished to be called in by his successor, the new dean of faculty, to address the charge of racism brought against him by the two missing students, who turned out to be black, and who, though absent, had quickly learned of the locution in which he publicly raised the question of their absence” (6). In a relatively contemporary moment, “spook” stands in stark contrast to the still most volatile and, for some, unforgivable racial disparagement, “nigger,” whose utterance from the nineteenth century until now can still be the catalyst to the end of friendships, careers, and sometimes lives.⁴⁴ Somewhat debatably unlike nigger, spook holds some ambiguity in its signification, an ambiguity Silk insists upon in his own defense: “For the thousandth time: I said spooks because I mean spooks. My father was a saloon keeper, but he insisted on precision in my language . . . Words have meanings . . . If we look in the dictionary, what do we find as the first meaning of ‘spook’? The primary meaning. ‘1. *Informal.* a ghost; specter” (84). Presumably, Coleman would have kept his position if this was the definitive definition of spooks, but as Dean Delphine Roux

⁴⁴ For more on the etymological, historical, and lingeringly contemporary legacies of the word see Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

reminds him, “Dean Silk, that is not the way it was taken. Let me read to you the *second* dictionary meaning. ‘2. *Disparaging*. A Negro.’ That’s the way it was taken” (84, emphasis in original). As both Roux and Silk cling to the distinctiveness of the two seemingly disparate meanings, what they refuse is the interconnection between “1” and “2,” or that spooks as racial epithet is wholly dependent on its first and primary understanding. In *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, David Marriott theorizes spooks through Frantz Fanon’s experience in *Black Skin, White Masks* when the very otherness signified by his skin terrified a young child: “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!”⁴⁵ Taking on this French child’s unbridled Negrophobia, Marriott suggests, “spook . . . speaks intimately to the terror within ourselves . . . [it] reveals a connection between race and terror, magic and surveillance, idolatry and power . . . In modernity, black life has always been the name for this scary thing, repeatedly projected onto the scrim, as it were, of white hatreds and terrors. Hence the history of ‘spooks’ as a racial slur, a condescension passed on by popular media culture.”⁴⁶ In Roth, the spoken “spooks” and its ensuing scandal function to not only undo Coleman’s career and, as he charges, kill his wife Iris as well as satirize the pseudomorality of contemporary U.S. academia, but more importantly, the word exposes the very racial specter haunting Coleman’s own life. Contrary to what he both constructs and allows people to

⁴⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, Grove Press, 1967), 112.

⁴⁶ David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 1.

assume, Coleman Silk is not one of only a handful of Jews among the Athena College faculty, but is a black man passing for Jewish.

The “truth” of Coleman’s blackness is revealed through the imaginative speculation and hearsay of the not altogether reliable narrator, Nathan Zuckerman. While Silk’s secret blackness was revealed to Nathan at the end of the novel, and although Coleman maintains his family was Jewish “in little more than name,” (61) Nathan first attempts to place Coleman’s corporeality in the visually determined schematic for Jewish Diasporic physicality. “All in all,” Zuckerman concludes, “[Coleman] remained a neat, attractive package of a man even at his age, the small-nosed Jewish type with the facial heft in the jaw, one of those crimped-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white” (16). Unlike Broyard who passed for some mythical category of unmarked whiteness, Coleman’s ethnoreligious particularity happens virtually by accident. Growing up in the New Jersey neighborhoods of East Orange, Coleman not only excelled academically, but also, made a name for himself on the amateur boxing circuit training and competing behind his parents’ back and under the guidance of the well-respected and winning coach, Doc Chizner. Seeing Coleman’s potential for a boxing scholarship to college, Chizner takes him on a tryout at the University of Pittsburgh. Roth writes, “It wasn’t that on the way up Doc told him to tell the Pitt coach that he was white. He just told Coleman not to mention that he was colored. ‘If nothing comes up,’ Doc said, ‘you don’t bring it up. You’re neither one thing or the other. You’re Silky Silk. That’s enough’” (98). As Doc encourages Coleman to let his athleticism, or his

Silky Silkness, stand in for his identity, Coleman realizes concretely for the first time that the blackness of his otherwise “ultra-respectable” (122) middle-class family did not manifest itself in his skin. Blackness here is an unspeakable and assumedly unimagined category. Roth continues, “‘He won’t know?’ Coleman asked.” Doc responds, “How? How will he know? How the hell is he going to know? Here is the top kid from East Orange High, and he is with Doc Chizner. You know what he’s going to think . . . You look like you look, you’re with me, and so he’s going to think that you’re one of Doc’s boys. He’s going to think that you’re Jewish” (99). In this moment Doc gives Coleman not only the incentive, but also, the permission to disavow blackness and appropriate Jewish identity. Due to the historical particularities of transnational migration, displacement, statehood, genocide, conversion, and resilience, the category of Jewish continues to be a rather porous one. In *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* Eric J. Sundquist writes, “Jews may cease to be Jewish—by ignorance of their ancestry, by apostasy and conversion, or simply by the slow erosion of assimilation . . . yet however sympathetic to African American rights or immersed in African American culture, however, much as they might willingly give away the property of whiteness granted them in the United States, Jews can be black only vicariously.”⁴⁷ Sundquist continues, on the other hand “Blacks . . . can easily be Jews—by birth, by study and conversion, or if they are light-skinned enough by passing.” Passing as Jewish here is not a process of becoming or conversion, nor does Coleman attempt to

⁴⁷ Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 504.

situate himself within the legacies of both a painful and triumphant history or acknowledge the very real possibility of anti-Semitism in 1940s New Jersey. Historically Jews in the United States were considered to be intrinsically different on the basis of race, a difference supposedly evident in a markedly Jewish physicality identified, most stereotypically, by the nose and hair. According to Matthew Frye Jacobson in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, popular culture of the 1940s began to question the reliance on notions of a distinctive Jewish corporeality as the basis for a fundamental Jewish difference.⁴⁸ For Jacobson, this questioning is most evident in Laura Z. Hobson's 1947 *Gentleman's Agreement*. Hobson suggests with character Philip Green that if a "Gentile" could pass for a "Jew" and still experience anti-Semitism their very "interchangeability" necessarily undermines those historically racialized categories. Coleman is invited to slip into Jewishness via a transferable proximity, one that does not follow him when his family forces him to refuse the possibility of a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh and attend Howard University as originally planned.

Founded in 1867 and still one of the most prestigious historically black universities, Howard for many African Americans continues to be an engine for black respectability, class mobility, and racial uplift.⁴⁹ For Coleman, however, Howard demands allegiance to a

⁴⁸ Matthew Frye Jacobson *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 128-129.

⁴⁹ For more on this largely middle-class ethos of civilizing help see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

particular type of classed blackness that trades on one's individuality for a crushing communal belonging. Or as Roth writes,

At Howard [Coleman] discovered that he wasn't just a nigger to Washington D.C.—as if that shock weren't strong enough, he discovered at Howard that he was a Negro as well. A Howard Negro at that. Overnight the raw I was part of a we with all of the we's overbearing solidity, and he didn't want anything to do with it or with the next oppressive we that came along either. You finally leave home, the Ur of we, and you find *another* we? . . . You can't let the big they impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you. Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum* . . . *Self-discovery—that* was the punch to the labonz. Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. (108, emphasis in original)

In this dizzying citation, Coleman exposes the impulses implicit in the pronoun, a grammar of self and belonging. His experience at Howard is the potential for an undoing of the self in the metamorphosis into a “Howard Negro” and an unwelcome complement to the expectations of his family. Rather than viewing the coherence in this young, black community as a haven from discrimination and tokenism and a space for the potential blossoming and understanding of a specifically black self, Coleman resists what he understands as the fateful and imposing we, i.e. the racial logics that insist upon a faithful adherence to the scripted template for middle and upper middle-class black identity. Instead, Silk seeks a rigorously singular identity well beyond, and in spite of, the fraternal, professional, and charitable organizations, blue vein societies, and cotillions that comprise the trappings of upper-crust black society.

It is important to recognize that Coleman's resistance is not only to the communal logics of racial identity, but in his invocation of *E pluribus unum*, a de facto United States motto celebrating the melting pot and/or the unity of the states, he situates himself within the shifting racial meanings of American liberalism. While it is well documented that the programs of the Works Projects Administration (WPA) often failed to meet the economic needs of working class and rural African American communities,⁵⁰ the ideologies behind the mandates of the New Deal and its legislation marked a conscious, if not altogether effective, shift toward the elimination of racial inequalities. According to Carol Norton in *Race and the Making of American Liberalism*, this shift was largely based on the growing number of African Americans relocating to the North and creating a newly viable voting bloc to whom both the Democratic and Republican parties had to cater coupled with the discrediting of biologically based theories on the "natural" hierarchy of the races.⁵¹ Sociopolitically preparing the way for the reception of Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 text, *An*

⁵⁰ "While the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) created jobs for millions of out-of-work Americans at a cost of over \$90 million (adjusted for inflation), most blacks were either placed in dirty jobs or . . . excluded from employment altogether. In fact, officially blacks faced a quota in the CCC. Although blacks were proportionately represented among the extremely impoverished, the CCC restricted the enrollment of blacks to 10 percent of the total—a quota not met in most places. There was similar discrimination against other people of color," particularly Mexican Americans who faced repatriation regardless of their U.S. citizenship and the almost entirely ignored Native American community. In Linda Faye Williams, *The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege in America* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2004), 74.

⁵¹ Carol Norton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123-124.

American Dilemma, these changes, and the ideological framework of Myrdal's text, rely on the recognition of supposedly coherent group identities, a coherence Coleman contends would undermine his individuality. Taking liberties with the experimental model of American republicanism (some might say democracy), Coleman gives himself the same permission to practice his identity. In doing so, he suggests that the history of the discourses of American liberalism has been the struggle to satisfy the often competing demands of "I," "we," and "they."

As Coleman refuses the "we" and "they" of racialization, he fetishizes the first-person "I," articulating a grammar of personhood that refutes the seeming imposition of the second and third voice. By disavowing blackness Coleman is "free to be whatever he wants, free to pursue the hugest aim, the confidence right in his bones to be his particular I" (109). By resisting the birthright of race, Coleman seeks an imagined state outside the racial contract where identity is absolute performance and passing is the method for a freeing fluidity. After dropping out of Howard, Coleman joins the Navy and, in a moment strikingly similar to Anatole Broyard's, he chooses his enlistment in the military as an opportunity to permanently declare whiteness. Ironically enough, even in the still segregated armed forces, military service for many African American men became the vehicle to both glimpse and access the privileges of manhood denied to them in peace time, particularly while serving overseas. Jennifer C. James in *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* puts it simply: "war promised to be one ground upon which

black manhood could be created.”⁵² For both Broyard and Silk, however, enlistment documents allowed for a self-selected whiteness that is then unknowingly authorized by the state. Coleman realizes “he could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose” (109). After his time in the navy, Coleman returns on the G.I. bill and begins taking classes at New York University, immersing himself in the cosmopolitan bohemianism of Greenwich Village.

Just as it functioned for Broyard, the Village provides the geographical and ideological setting for Coleman’s investment in the unbound “I,” and although he attempts to maintain the sanctity of its singularity, his racial identity is continually refracted by and through the heteronormative relationships with the female lovers he encounters there. For example, Coleman meets Steena Palsson, a white, “eighteen-year old exile from Minnesota” (111) who, after a marathon night of lovemaking, pens Coleman a rather clumsy poem. “He has a body/ He has a beautiful body—the muscles on the back of his legs and the back of his neck” (112), Steena writes. As Coleman reads this awkwardly flattering ode to his physicality, he revealingly misreads Steena’s words. Roth writes,

Rapidly reading Steena’s handwriting by the dim hall light, he at first mistook ‘neck’ for ‘negro’—*and the back of his negro* . . . Till then he’d been surprised by how easy it was. What was supposed to be hard and somehow shaming or destructive was not only easy but without consequences, no price paid at all. But now the sweat poured off him. He kept reading, faster even than before, but the words formed themselves into no combination that made sense. His negro WHAT? . . . How much of me is being seen, how much of me is being discovered? *Now I know who you are. I see clear through to the back of your negro.*

⁵² Jennifer C. James *Freedom Bought By Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 12.

But how, by seeing *what?* What could it have been? . . . and then Coleman recognized the word in the poem as a four-and not a five-letter word. What she'd written wasn't 'negro.' It was 'neck.' (112-113, emphasis in original)

This moment is a poignant one that reveals not only Coleman's insecurity despite how "easy" it is to maintain the fiction of his whiteness, but also, it establishes the issue of literacy as a central metaphor in Roth's novel. While Broyard attempts a conscious rendering of his life and body as a literary work, in *The Human Stain* it is literacy, or the act of reading, writing, and being read, that structures, and ultimately threatens, Coleman's "singularity." Taking "neck" for "negro," Coleman does what he fears most, he replaces the sinewy particularities of his body with the totality of black identity. In his racial panic, Coleman attempts to distil meaning from a close misreading that he admits makes very little logical sense. Not only does Coleman fear being seen here, he fears being interpreted. He imagines Steena's poem as his outing, and that by simple virtue of their intimacy she had the ability to read, and then rewrite, the disavowed blackness back onto his body.

While primarily but not exclusively visual, reading is a learned practice of recognition and interpretation, an acquired ability to decode and encode symbols that relies on the same set of skills required in the classification of bodies. Jenny Cook-Gumperz writes, "literacy needs to be seen as providing not just technical skills but also a set of prescriptions about using knowledge. In this sense literacy is a socially constructed phenomenon, not simply the ability to read and write . . . By performing the tasks that make up literacy, we exercise

socially approved and approvable talents.”⁵³ Understanding and identifying racial difference in the United States is not simply visual, but an interpretation of the arbitrary markers of difference (hair, skin, speech) into a supposedly coherent and classifiable entity. These categories are threatened when a body cannot be easily read, consequently prompting the presumptuous and anxious query: “What are you?” As a social construct, literacy stands as an indicator of responsibility, maturity, and eligibility for citizenship that, since it was illegal to teach a slave to read and write in most slave holding states, has a historically contentious relationship to African America.

In *The Human Stain*, literacy names an epistemology of race that Roth dramatizes through the intimate relationship between Coleman and Faunia Farley, a thirty-four year old illiterate milkmaid, janitor at Athena College, and rape survivor often demonized for her promiscuity. When the relationship began, Coleman was a seventy-one year old widower deeply indebted to Viagra and Faunia was mourning the tragic deaths of her two children while suffering the threats from her violent ex-husband. The notable differences in their class status, upbringing, and educational access forces the relationship between Coleman and Faunia into secrecy, and consequently, mars it with scandal upon its exposure. Despite these assumed incompatibilities, literacy is the real marker of difference. Roth writes, “‘You’re not up to fucking somebody who can’t read,’ [Faunia] said. ‘You’re going to drop me because I’m not a worthy, legitimate person who *reads*’ . . . ‘No’ [Coleman] told her, ‘I’m going to

⁵³ Jenny Cook-Gumperz, “The Social Construction of Literacy,” *The Social Construction of Literacy* edited by Jenny Cook-Gumperz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

fuck you all the harder because you can't” (34-35, emphasis in original). Difference, in this case (il)literacy, is the very engine of desire, the locus of attraction. Coleman craves Faunia because he remains incomprehensible to her and, for example, he can avoid haphazardly written poems that might reveal his bodily “truths.” This relationship stands in stark contrast to the brief one between Coleman and Ellie Magee, “a petite, shapely colored girl” (132) who could also pass for white if she so chose. In matters of race Ellie is supremely literate, immediately identifying Coleman’s blackness as well as instructing him how to read other racial passers living in the Village. While Coleman admits that Ellie is “a contender” (134), their similarities eliminate the potential for real passion. Roth writes, “[The relationship] continues to be fun, but some dimension is missing. The whole thing lacks the ambition—it fails to feed that conception of himself that's been driving him all his life” (135). Rather than living an honest but decidedly boring life, Coleman prefers relationships with women unable to read him. After ending things with Ellie and meeting Iris, the woman who would eventually become his wife, once again Coleman has “the elixir of [his racial] secret, and it’s like being fluent in another language” (135-136).

Although Coleman may have taken solace in Faunia’s illiteracy, she is revealed to hold a secret of her own. After both she and Coleman are killed in a car accident orchestrated by her ex-husband, Lester, Nathan discovers she has been keeping a journal since she was a teenager. He realizes,

The illiteracy had been an act, something she decided her situation demanded. But why? A source of power? Her one and only source of power? But a power purchased at what price? . . . Afflicts herself with illiteracy too. Takes it on voluntarily. Not to infantilize herself, however, not

to present herself as a dependent kid, but just the opposite: to spotlight the barbaric self befitting the world. Not rejecting learning as a stifling form of propriety but trumping learning by a knowledge that is stronger and prior. She has nothing against reading per se—it's that pretending not to be able to feels right to her. (297)

Nathan sees Faunia's performance of illiteracy as a logical component to a decidedly feminine working-class sensibility he likens to sickness. As there is no economic incentive to staging illiteracy, this "affliction" is constructed through the language of disability. Rather than seeing Faunia's secret as detrimental, illiteracy for Faunia ensures her place as a strategic outsider amongst the New England literati dominating this sleepy college town.

Intentionally positioning her status on the margins, Faunia removes herself from societal responsibilities while remaining its consummate witness each night in her journal. Faunia demonstrates an intimate relationship with reading and writing that moves it from social obligation and necessity to a productive domestic space. However, the work of journaling is gendered here, and although Nathan insists to her parents that her body of work might finger her murderer, the journal is unable to withstand the gaze of the public and/or generically uphold the category of "evidence." It stands as the opposite of the sprawling, scribbled notes ultimately comprising Coleman's biographical and public vindication completed and otherwise ghostwritten by Nathan.

Much like Broyard, Coleman is posthumously invented, and although his racial identity and sense of self is linked to the secrecies withheld in these heterosexual relationships, it is through Nathan's imaginings, speculations, curiosities, and investments that Coleman becomes the protagonist in his own narrative. Theirs is an intimate

relationship, Coleman only reveals his affair with Faunia to Nathan, for example, and it is this collaborative intimacy that establishes the conditions for Coleman's literary afterlife. And while Nathan is most certainly the author of Coleman's life story, it would not have been made possible if it had not been for the appearance of Ernestine Silk, Coleman's estranged sister, at the funeral. Roth writes,

All she did was to stand there, opposite me, expressionless, so profoundly struck dumb by the day's events and its revelations that *not* to understand who she was to Coleman would, at that moment, have been impossible. It wasn't a resemblance to Coleman that registered, and it registered quickly, in rapid increments . . . What I saw—when, at long last, I did see, see all the way, clear to Coleman's secret—was the facial resemblance to Lisa, who was even more her aunt's niece than she was her father's daughter. (317, emphasis in original)

As Ernestine stood beside the fresh gravesite, the truth of Coleman's blackness legibly materializes, and in language strikingly similar to Steena's misread poem, Nathan finally sees clear to the back of Coleman's negro. A specter literally haunting the graveyard, this black woman body is the Rosetta stone translating Coleman's secret, and simultaneously, corroborating his racial "truths." She is both witness to, and evidence of, Coleman's blackness, and while her body holds the weight of its signification, in the novel she is only this function, or as Roth writes, "She didn't even appear to be quite there" (316). She is an endless source of information on Coleman's family genealogy and childhood and even schools Nathan on notable black heroes like the pioneering physician Dr. Charles Drew and the Artic explorer Matthew Henson. But Ernestine lacks the depth of personality and provocative contradiction of many of the other characters in the novel operating instead as an encyclopedic ambassador for and of African America. Ultimately, blackness here is

produced, much like the previous spectacles of racial im/posture, at the emptied but necessary sight of the black woman body.

Chapter Five –

I Am African?: Globalization and the (Black)Face of AIDS

On September 21, 2006, international supermodel Kate Moss appears on the front cover of a special “RED” edition of the daily UK broadsheet,¹ *The Independent*, wearing, not her usual haute couture, but blackness instead. Meeting the reader’s gaze, Moss’s otherwise naked body stands in stark contrast to the white background framing it. Her hair, in a loose ponytail or bun, sits high off her forehead and what is visible of her arms are away from her body as if unseen hands rest on her hips. Although presumably only the color of her skin and hair is altered here, Moss’s identity is confirmed by the miniaturized duplicate of the image in the bottom right corner enticing readers with the promise of a “Free Kate Moss poster” inside. While we are accustomed to seeing one of the world’s most recognizable and photographed women gracing the cover of fashion magazines, the boldly capitalized directive hovering above her right shoulder instructs us on how to more appropriately read this image: “NOT a Fashion Statement: The Africa Issue – See Inside.”

The September 21 issue of *The Independent* is the second time the broadsheet sees “red” after the success of a May 2006 issue guest designed by U2 lead vocalist and celebrity do-gooder, Bono. *The (RED) Independent* reflects the collaborative effort between editors of the broadsheet and (PRODUCT)^{RED}, a division of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. Established in 2002 and first launched in the United Kingdom

¹ Images discussed in this chapter are not reproduced due to complications with reprint permissions.

with the support of the United Nations, The Global Fund defines itself as an “innovative partnership of governments, non-profit organizations, and the private sector” with the “sole purpose [. . .] to raise funds and make grants to countries, organizations and communities that urgently need financial help to allow them to respond to these epidemics.” According to the (RED) Manifesto, (PRODUCT)^{RED}, the Funds’ most recent project and the one specifically targeting the HIV/AIDS pandemic, is “not a charity. It is simply a business model” based on the disproportionate wealth of the “first world.” Hailing “first world consumers [who] have tremendous power,” the manifesto states, “What we collectively choose to buy, or not to buy, can change the course of life and history on this planet . . . If you buy a (RED) product or sign up for a (RED) service, at no cost to you, a (RED) company will give some of its profits to buy and distribute anti-retroviral medicine to our brothers and sisters dying of AIDS in Africa.” Under the sign of the strength of the once almighty dollar and pound, the (RED) Manifesto structures a homogenously wealthy community of sympathetically conscious Western consumers while encouraging the now charitable patronage of corporate sponsors such as Dell, the GAP, American Express, and Apple.

In a late summer, transatlantic mirroring of the Moss image that same year, photographs of Hollywood and the recording industries’ “A-list” including Gwyneth Paltrow appear in glossies such as *Variety*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Like Moss, Paltrow is also naked. Instead of wearing blackness, however, Paltrow is photographed in grayscale except for two stripes, one indigo the other sky blue, that streak across the apple of her left

cheek. With a ¾ profile and an elaborately beaded necklace worn high on the neck, Paltrow holds the viewer's gaze. The only other color in the image comes from the large purple caption creating its bottom border, "I AM AFRICAN." Below that, an impassioned plea written in small, capitalized, white letters, "Help us stop the dying. Pay for life-saving drugs that can keep a child, a mother, a father, a family alive. Visit keepachildalive.org to help."

While not explicitly a "business model," the nonprofit organization Keep a Child Alive is, according to its mission statement, "an urgent response to the AIDS pandemic" that much like (PRODUCT)^{RED} appeals to the sympathetic charity of a wealthy West. "How much longer will we sit by while millions of people die from a treatable disease? . . . We ask you for a dollar a day. One dollar. Something that we waste each day, but to someone in a world not so far away it constitutes another day of life. Precious Life." Giving Keep a Child Alive the edge it needs in the trendy game of charity giving, internationally recognized supermodel and CEO of Iman Cosmetics, Skincare and Fragrances, Iman Abdulmajid, known simply as Iman, functions as the organization's "Global Ambassador." Born in Somalia and raised in both Egypt and Kenya, Iman is not only the ambassador but also the authenticating African for the project. She states, "As the Global Ambassador for Keep a Child Alive I am spearheading a timely and thought provoking campaign called I AM AFRICAN, it's designed to spark a global conversation, turn heads, and create a new level of engagement about the AIDS crisis."

Before constructing an intertextual dialogue between both the organizations and the respective images of Kate Moss and Gwyneth Paltrow, it is important to first acknowledge

the transatlantic differences in both the performances and reception of blackface imagery and iconography. While it is widely documented² that as early as a few months after Thomas Dartmouth “T.D.” Rice transformed his Northern, working class, white, male body into a blackface “Jim Crow” and began shuffling and jumping his way across Northern and frontier stages around 1830, he and other blackface performers, and later blackface minstrel troupes, were making regular stops in London, Liverpool, and Manchester. In fact, blackface minstrelsy had a longer, and much more publicly accepted career in the United Kingdom than it did across the pond, particularly after the UK version took on a camp aesthetic that worked right alongside the rampant cross-dressing still providing the comedy in many British pantomimes. This is not to suggest that blackface imagery has ever been completely absent from the cultural landscape in the United States, but to acknowledge that “by the time *The Black and White Minstrel Show* began on the BBC in 1958—a Saturday night variety show with blacked-up white male singers and blonde women performers—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was pressing for an end to racist blackface performers in the U.S. . . . [The show] was axed by the BBC only in 1978, when it still pulled in five million viewers.”³ As shocking as such a recent airing of blackface *Saturday Night Live* may seem in an American cultural context, even more evident of British performances of

² For more see *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* Dale Cockrell Cambridge University Press, 1997 and *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* William J. Mahar Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

³ Patrick Barkham, “About Face,” *The Guardian* 22 September 2006: 2.

blackface is the long-standing Cornish tradition of “Darkie Day” in the fishing village of Padstow on the southern and westernmost tip of England. Only recently renamed “Mummer Day,”⁴ the festival is held between Boxing and New Year’s Day and features the residents of Padstow dancing and parading through the streets with blackened faces. Thought by some to find its origins in the early days of slavery while still others see it as a remnant of a pagan holiday otherwise suppressed by the Church, the long-standing existence of “Darkie Day” is a testament to the residents of Padstow. For decades they have defied criticism of the celebration as archaically racist and still maintain that the festival is only a harmless, “good bit of fun.”⁵ Recognizing these transatlantic specificities speaks to the rather bold decision to place a darkened Kate Moss on the cover of a British daily and only to affect Gwyneth Paltrow’s blackness with a caption.

While both Keep a Child Alive and (PRODUCT)^{RED} are presumably well-intentioned, these two advertisements, purporting to bring world attention to the specificities of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, use racial im/posture, a spectacular performance of racial impersonation enabled by the well-intentioned ideologies behind Myrdalian-liberalism and reliant on the logics of both blackface minstrelsy and racial passing, to not only bring attention to how the pandemic particularly affects sub-saharan Africa, but

⁴ Similar to a mime, a mummer is a masked actor or performer usually at a festival or fair and is traced back to 17th century Europe. In Philadelphia, for example, the annual Mummer Parade is held every New Year’s Day.

⁵ Simon de Bruxelles, “Police Race Inquiry Could End Darkie Day,” *The Times* 25 February 2005: 1.

to inspire and solicit the charity of the West. When in 1944 Gunnar Myrdal determined in his overwhelmingly influential, sociological study, *An American Dilemma*, that the solution to the “Negro problem” rested in the “hearts and minds of white America” rather than entrenched structural inequalities, he enabled a radicalized version of sentimentality that would structure how liberalism attempted to rectify its racial paradox right into the 21st century – to walk in someone else’s skin rather than their shoes. This chapter reads these two strikingly similar, visual responses to our global health crisis attending to the ways these racial im/postures reveal the revising and exporting of Myrdalian-liberalism in an age of globalization seized by the imperialist impulse of American exceptionalism. It also argues that both campaigns index how the faces of blackness configure, structure, and mediate the discursive and representational space of HIV/AIDS.

Transnational Empathies, Or When Celebrities Attack

In “From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS,” Cindy Patton poignantly writes,

In Western discourse, Africa, a continent of roughly eleven and half million square miles . . . is treated as a homogenous sociopolitical block. Yet this supposedly ‘unknown’ continent . . . is in fact far more culturally, linguistically, religiously, and socially diverse than North America and Europe. Collapsing the many cultures residing on the continent into ‘Africa’ is an act of political and cultural violence.⁶

In sharp contrast to the grossly oversimplified categorization of Africa and African peoples, both photography campaigns use the incredibly recognizable and individuated celebrity body

⁶ Cindy Patton, “From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* edited by Henry Abelove et al (New York: Routledge, 1993), 131.

to represent a pan-African identity. While Moss, through the cosmetic and digital changes to her skin, affects a corporeal blackness that triggers the scopic logics of racialization, Paltrow, with an Africanness only subtly suggested through pseudo-tribal make-up and the generically “ethnic” jewelry marking her skin, creates a rhetorical black identity. In spite of this constructed difference, the economic potential of the celebrity body must remain legible in order for the advertising campaign to work. Or in other words, the viewer must readily perceive that this is indeed Kate Moss and Gwyneth Paltrow. As commodities themselves and in the logics of stardom the celebrity’s own image is projected onto the discursive and visual space (s)he seizes to affect her Africanness. Nowhere is this more explicit than when considering the image of Moss’s burnished body. Spectacularized in its own right, Moss has made a career out of marketing and maintaining a stylish emaciation. Although the conditions of the stylishly emaciated and the famine starving body are different, sinisterly enough, this hypervisible skinny suggests that, as waif icon, only Moss can approximate the stereotypically “third-world starving,” or in this case, HIV positive, African body. Moss’s persona can be created and then neatly contained by the camera’s lens suggesting a presumed representational excess that renders the “authentic” black body incapable of facilitating this steady transnational circulation of charitable consumption.

Like (PRODUCT)^{RED}, the campaign sponsored by Keep a Child Alive employs the celebrity body, and although it features a racially and ethnically diverse group of self-proclaimed Africans including Sarah Jessica Parker, Tyson Beckford, Alicia Keys, Lucy Liu, and David Bowie, they all cohere under the sign of stardom. The photographs then rely on

the provocative disjunction between the caption that frames the celebrity body and the immediate recognition of that body *as* celebrity. This anticipated disjunction is presumably assuaged after a visit to keepachildalive.org, the organization's website. "Each and every one of us contains DNA that can be traced back to our African ancestors. These amazing people traveled far and wide. Now they need our help." Echoing this Iman states, "The campaign speaks to the African ancestry we all share. As we live our lives in the West, perhaps we forget our origins. It is well known that each of us originated in Africa from our African ancestors. Indeed it was these incredible people who traveled far and wide and whose genes are in all of us." Here Africanness is not simply a declarative statement, but the confession of an open secret. While the disciplinary conceits of much Western anthropology, literature, archaeology, science, and history have historically worked to fix Africa and its Diaspora as intrinsically other, our genomes have betrayed it as the birthplace of humanity. Both (PRODUCT)^{RED} and I AM AFRICAN trade in the common understanding of a globally shared genealogy that traces our first bipedal steps back to African soil. Rather than smearing the celebrity body with new modes of burnt cork, Keep a Child Alive need only emphasize the ancestral blackness of the genes.

Thus, keeping an African child alive is not a selfless humanitarian act, but an investment in the African body as a fleshly genealogical record of human evolution and migration. It is the push, in an age of gene fetishism, to link charitable giving to a genomic origin myth that sets the conditions for an anxious redefinition of self. Or in other words, could we read the supposedly declarative statement I AM AFRICAN as possibly not so

emphatically proud, but a subtle *I* (Gwyneth Paltrow) AM *AFRICAN*? And since the image leaves room for interpretive play, perhaps the wary “I” is that of the viewing eye/I, a hesitant, and slightly horrified, “if Gwyneth . . . then even me?” Although the visual medium of photography supposedly images an objective and neutral reality, the histories of its development alongside its strategic use in unevenly racing, sexing, gendering, and classing bodies reveals it as a technology vested in networks of power that ultimately produce epistemologies rather than document them. Mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century photography was often called upon to service the claims of science, to evidence and establish racial and ethnic “types” then naturalized in spuriously biological hierarchies of humankind. Recall, for example, Louis Agassiz’s comparative daguerreotypes of slave bodies or Eadweard Muybridge’s animal locomotion studies. Photography then is the visual technology of modern colonialism and provides the scopic justifications for hegemony and colonial paternalism. In “Photography in Colonial Discourse: The Making of ‘The Other’ in Southern Africa, c. 1850-1950,” Brent Harris writes,

The photograph offered the coloniser more than the opportunity to gaze *en masse*. It was also a tool in the categorization and representation of the colonised ‘other’ as savage, whether noble or not, or as barbarian. Photography thus helped to enable the metropolitan masses and the settlers and expatriates in the colonies to look down on the ‘inferior’ colonial ‘other.’ This ‘other’ was not only properly the subject of colonial power and control but also, in terms of social Darwinist theories of natural history, a negative measure of Western advance.⁷

⁷ Brent Harris, “Photography in Colonial Discourse: The Making of ‘The Other’ in Southern Africa, c. 1850-1950” in *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* edited by Wolfram Hartmann et al (Cape Town, South Africa: University of Cape Town Press, 1998), 21.

The imperialist “scramble for Africa” was not only a land grab for the treasured resources in and on the African landscape, but a scramble for an image of Africa as well. In order for the discursive ideologies of colonialism to be palatable, the numerous countries and peoples comprising the continent had to cohesively appear dirty, needy, primitive, and in stark contrast to the clean, civilized, and beneficence of the (white) West. Photography structured the scopic relation of coloniality – i.e. who is seen, by whom, and for whom.

While this contemporary sociopolitical moment is identified as the age of globalization, a label and ideology that often obscures the legacies of colonialism, the photographs of Kate Moss and Gwyneth Paltrow’s chic and fashionable bodies still rely on the same discourses framing colonial photography. These same discourses, however, are repackaged for the 21st century through the technologies of new media. Digital photography has revealed the already known, but previously obscured, truth of its technology, that the photograph does not, despite our investment, evidence an objective reality before the camera’s lens. Not only is the digital image constructed by the photographer but it is (re)produced in its very circulation, imbued with the multiple and often contesting meanings by both its intended and unintended audiences. We now know that photographs lie. Consequently, with that knowledge comes a simultaneous anxiety and relief. That Kate Moss becomes a black woman under the alibi of a genomic origin myth threatens the foundational claims of whiteness and its superiority. However, since her blackness is constructed through the digital manipulation of her corporeal landscape, its consequences can be easily photoshopped.

With the primacy of the Internet and the mobile phone, the digital image circulates almost endlessly as it is forwarded, copied, pasted, embedded, posted, and retouched with accompanying exclamatory questions of “Have you seen this!?” and “Is this for real?!” In the archives of the Internet, Kate Moss and Gwyneth Paltrow’s digital blackness gain an audience well beyond its print circulation in the critical, skeptical, outspoken, and uncensored discursive space of the blogosphere.⁸ Not only was this my first interaction with both the Moss and Paltrow photographs, but it is also where I discovered the most provocative visual response to the “I AM AFRICAN” campaign, Little Marvin’s piece, “I AM WHITE.” In a grayscale image, Little Marvin duplicates Paltrow’s posture. The hood of a sweatshirt replaces her necklace and two white war paint-like stripes mark his left cheek and sweep down from the top of his forehead to the tip of his nose. Little Marvin critiques Paltrow’s placidly imploring gaze with a skeptical one of his own as he cockily raises the eyebrow framing one piercingly blue eye. Where the Keep a Child Alive organization had interpolated an imagined first world audience on behalf of Africa, the bottom border of the “I AM WHITE” image reads as follows: “A child, a mother, a family – all believe that Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Lucy Liu are really Africans. Help us stop the lying.” Much like Keep a Child Alive, Little Marvin anticipates and solicits engagement from his audience – he lists his Myspace URL below his name in the image’s upper left corner.

⁸ This is not at all to sound utopian or to naively assume that the blogosphere is accessed evenly throughout the world. For some, the blog is a highly regulated, censored, and in some cases, completely inaccessible form of Internet communication.

A New York based visual and performance artist who also works in the fashion and advertising industries, Little Marvin explores the stereotyped fantasies of hypersexual and criminalized black masculinity by offering a countervisuality that destabilizes the barrage of imagery defining and categorizing black male bodies. For example, in “Wanted,” Little Marvin mimics the framings of black criminality by creating his own wanted poster for the crime of not being “black enough.” He locates his insufficient blackness in markers of class and sexuality. The poster reads, “SUSPECT IS: a polite, college-educated black male, prone to multi-syllabic sentence structures, last seen in possession of: A lack of innate athletic/sexual prowess, tendency to read, aversion to fried foods, inability to drink an entire 40 and relatively uneventful genitalia.” In what has come to be the hallmark of Little Marvin’s performance, he then placed his own wanted poster next to those actual ones distributed by the New York Police Department in Manhattan subways and on bulletin boards. Here, Little Marvin takes control of the already established visual genres of racialization reworking their racial framings as well as interrogating assumptions of black authenticity.

Similarly in his “I AM WHITE” image, Little Marvin not only pirates the logics of the Keep a Child Alive campaign, but its method of circulation as well. After having what he calls a “very visceral reaction” to Paltrow’s blackness, trickster Marvin placed thousands of copies of his image in glossy magazines throughout Manhattan newsstands and bookstores directly across from the original photographs that, coupled with widespread

Internet circulation via both his well-trafficked Facebook and Myspace pages,⁹ contributed to the image's popularity. Forcing an immediate, intertextual dialogue between the two images he offers a comic parody that disrupts and reclaims public, print, and digital space. With mismatched blue/brown eyes and a shock of digitally constructed blonde hair, Little Marvin asserts his white identity by refusing to corroborate the alibi of the genomic origin myth justifying Paltrow's African womanhood, instead insisting on a recognition of both the privileges of whiteness and the liabilities of blackness in the scopic regimes of racialization. He replaces the sincerity of Paltrow's blackness with a sarcastic whiteness that spectacularizes the very racial and geographic distance Keep a Child Alive attempts to bridge. This mocking resists and exposes the seeming inaccessibility of categorical white identity by subverting the logics of hypodescent explicit in the one-drop rule. However, Little Marvin's declaration of whiteness reveals the legacies of coercion, power, and desire that have always ignored the absurdities of the color line recognizing the often absurd, and deeply complicated constructions of race, kinship, and family that owe that complication to the peculiar histories of disavowal and violence necessary to uphold the ideological frameworks of slavery in the United States. In the wake of Little Marvin's white body, then, one cannot help but speculate that blackness for some of these Keep a Child Alive celebrity endorsers might not be only genomically-established, located instead, only a few branches up that tangled family tree.

⁹ Facebook and Myspace are popular social networking sites.

Setting an imagined “whiteness” against “Africanness,” the “I AM WHITE” image reframes the original campaign by positioning it within a decidedly domestic racial discourse. Aside from the pseudotribal stripes adorning his face that could be read as a wink and a nod to whiteface,¹⁰ Little Marvin’s critique makes no explicit mention of Africa or the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In replacing Paltrow’s im/postor body with his black masculine one, signified here by not only his physicality but also with the stereotyped dress of criminalized black youth, Marvin suggests the audacity of an appropriation of whiteness by certain classed and racially othered bodies. It is important to note, however, that, while waged as a provocative visual critique, Little Marvin’s image is enabled and limited by the very problematic absence of African subjectivity structuring Keep a Child Alive’s campaign.

Out of Africa, Out of Africans

The genomic origin myth simultaneously enabling Paltrow and Moss and infuriating Little Marvin is conflated with the misguided, racial fantasy that Africa is not only the birthplace of humanity, but the birthplace of HIV/AIDS. This happens, according to Cindy Patton, “in obvious ways (‘AIDS’ began in Africa), insidious ways (‘AIDS’ jumped species’ from green monkey to ‘African’ humans), and subtle ways (persistent descriptions of truck drivers, miners, ‘prostitutes,’ and soldiers traversing the continent), the Euro-American story of ‘African AIDS’ concerns not only racial difference but also territory transacted and

¹⁰ One might recall Dick Gregory’s “White Like You” from his 1965, *What’s Happening?*, and Eddie Murphy’s 1989 *Saturday Night Live* sketch performance of the same name.

borders gone out of control.”¹¹ Simon Watney takes it even further, arguing in “Missionary Positions: AIDS, ‘Africa,’ and Race,” “It is as if HIV were a disease of ‘Africanness,’ the viral embodiment of a long legacy of colonial imagery which naturalises the devastating economic and social effects of colonialism in the likeness of starvation-bodies reduced to ‘bundles of acute angles.’”¹² He continues, “The symptoms of this ‘African AIDS disease’ are immediately identifiable as evidence of some innate African-ness—lassitude, extreme weight-loss, huge staring eyes—the only too familiar signs of famine . . . The identification ‘African’ thus slides directly into the diagnosis, ‘AIDS.’”¹³ Although the theory that HIV came out of Africa has been widely discredited since the early years of the epidemic, in both lay and scientific understandings of the epidemiology of the virus its spurious probability and validity stubbornly persists. For example, while these Keep a Child Alive images are supposed to be raising money for antiretroviral medication for seropositive people in Africa, the caption reads “I AM AFRICAN” and not “I HAVE AIDS” or “I AM HIV POSITIVE.” In fact, the photographs’ caption contains absolutely no mention of HIV and/or AIDS, suggesting that seropositivity is always already projected upon the African body.

¹¹ Patton, 131-132.

¹² Simon Watney, “Missionary Positions: AIDS, ‘Africa,’ and Race in *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 106.

¹³ Watney, 111.

To be African then not only signifies contagion, but also, reveals an intimate relationship to death. While seropositive people in the first world “live with HIV/AIDS,” seropositive individuals in Africa are always already dying gesturing toward what Abdul R. JanMohamed poignantly calls the “death-bound subject.” JanMohamed reads the “ideological and political functions of death”¹⁴ in Richard Wright’s literary canon, and in so doing, theorizes a useful articulation of a “subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death.”¹⁵ And while JanMohamed reminds that these omnipresent threats (he cites lynching, for example) are coercive strategies for the maintenance of power, similarly, these images point to the absolute negation of African subjectivity and the complete abjection of the African body. Although these are supposedly empathetic placeholders for our dying brothers and sisters, Moss and Paltrow are imagined African here through insidious racial fantasies about apocalypse and extinction. Or as Iman laments, “if we let Africa die then we are letting the origin of our species perish.” Aside from the implicit, and obviously ridiculous, suggestion that individuals in contemporary Africa are somehow also our ancestors, here, these images become eerie trace evidence of Africa’s foreshadowed disappearance, a third world present that in an age of globalization threatens to become a first world future.

¹⁴ Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁵ JanMohamed, 2.

In *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*, editors Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah Thomas write, “Over the past three decades, massive decentralization of capital accumulation worldwide has resulted in the growth of new centers of economic expansion, while older imperial centers and sites of power have declined. Simultaneously, rapid advances in information and transportation technology, as well as the circulation of new technologies of knowledge and communication, have changed the ways in which notions of space and place are both conceptualized and experienced.”¹⁶ And while “globalization” undoubtedly names and marks this particular economic and sociopolitical moment, I would like to caution, like so many others before, against getting caught up in proclamations of its newness or its several “triumphalist accounts.” For “the processes associated with globalization have been profoundly uneven and contradictory, and the result has been an intensified polarization of capital, labor, and consumer markets between and within countries”¹⁷ that are largely based on the historical legacies of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism that have previously established extensive global linkages and economies. As a pandemic indicative of both the “necessity and danger of human contact,”¹⁸ HIV/AIDS reveals that supposedly static categories of sexuality are in fact contingent and fluid, and that desire can transcend national boundaries and disregard socioeconomics.

¹⁶ Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas, *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

¹⁷ Clarke and Thomas, 6.

¹⁸ Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

Underscored by the misunderstanding of Africa as both the font of humanity and its undoing, a much more real version of my mama's clichéd threats of maternal filicide: "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out," it is the idea of a contagious South and a vulnerable North that reminds us that these images make anxieties about globalization visible. For example, these anxieties are found throughout a Western AIDS discourse enabled by dystopic fantasies about the global consequences of, as one *Newsweek* journalist insidiously writes, "the lethal mixture of modernity and primitivism in Africa." George Will continues, "As flights leave Uganda . . . the volatile mix of refugees, soldiers, prostitutes and the attendant lack of disease surveillance may have given HIV the jump-start it needed to travel the world."¹⁹

The (Black)Face of AIDS

With images of the human immunodeficiency virus booking coach tickets on Air Pandemic for an all-inclusive vacation in "pathological tourism" that makes the rest of the world vulnerable to this otherwise unremarkable "tropical disease," in a Western imaginary, the conflation of AIDS and blackness is Africa's chief export, one wildly imported in the United States. In the early medical and popular epidemiological discourses, HIV/AIDS was seen as an issue conveniently removed from the rest of a proper and responsible American citizenry subsequently contributing to the egregious national unresponsiveness to what was, and continues to be, a rapidly growing health crisis. Displaced on easily dismissible, othered bodies by both international medical communities and popular media, HIV/AIDS in the

¹⁹ Quoted in Wald, 237.

early 1980s was constructed as a disease of the four “H’s” – “homosexuals,” “heroin-addicts,” “Haitians,” and “hemophiliacs.”²⁰ This disregard for queer, black, and (dis)abled bodies continues to structure contemporary discourses of the virus and its opportunistic syndrome. In *Contagious: Culture, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Priscilla Wald convincingly identifies and details the “outbreak narrative,” a cultural, storied genre narrating, assuaging, and exacerbating our anxieties around contagion, proximity, and ultimately, globalization. Wald writes,

The outbreak narrative—in its scientific, journalistic, and fictional incarnations—follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment . . . Outbreak narratives and *the* outbreak narrative have consequences. As they disseminate information, they affect survival rates and contagion routes. They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economics.²¹

What makes these outbreak narratives believable, infuriating, and engaging is its cast of characters, the faces, both hypervisible and invisible, that bear the representational weight of the fear and fantasy of contagion. In the shifting narratives comprising the story of HIV/AIDS in the United States, that face is often a black one.

In 1987, Randy Shilts gave flesh to one of the HIV outbreak narrative’s imaginatively recognizable faces, Gaetan Dugas, the flight attendant more commonly and widely

²⁰ Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 245.

²¹ Wald, 2-3. Emphasis in original.

(un)known as HIV's "Patient Zero." Charged with the crime of bringing human immunodeficiency virus to North America, Dugas was quickly demonized by and reduced to the titillated and vehement speculations of a hypersexual, rapacious queerness that disregarded health in favor of sexual gratification and unrepentant satisfaction. In *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, a sprawling, part-journalistic, part-fictionalized account of the first decade of this public health crisis, Shilts creatively imagines Dugas in 1982. He writes,

Gaetan stood back to give his smooth body another appraisal. He was thirty years old, the age he had never thought he would make. But he was triumphant. He was living in San Francisco, where he had always wanted to live. He had outlived all the doctors' predictions and felt quite nice, thank you, two and half years after he was told that the small purplish spot near his ear was Karposi's sarcoma.²² True, he was a bit more tired these days and sometimes breathing came hard. He would win, nevertheless, and enjoy his evening here at the baths.²³

Of course, those assholes at the CDC might scream at him for being here, but he had told them to fuck off. They were bothering his old boyfriends with phone calls and nosy questions. The other doctors could fuck themselves, too, with all their warnings that he might be spreading this thing.²⁴

²² Karposi's sarcoma is an opportunistic infection acquired by some seropositive individuals and is considered a visible sign of HIV/AIDS.

²³ Shilts refers to the public bathhouses in cities such as San Francisco, Atlanta, and New York that provide space for often anonymous sexual encounters. Baths are both heralded as important spaces of sexual freedom won through the efforts of the gay rights movement and also demonized as an institutional threat to public health.

²⁴ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 196-197.

Dugas's nonchalance here is portrayed as defiant willfulness rather than misunderstanding. He is a purposeful and deliberate murderer, a "fact" conflated both in and beyond Shilts's characterization with his ethnic-national identity as French-Canadian and his occupation as a flight attendant. In the perpetuation of the still widely believed falsity that Dugas is single-handedly responsible for AIDS in the United States rests the anxiety of the very meaning and panic of epidemic in this sociopolitical moment—that through the technologies of modernity the world has become too small, that foreign agents on incredibly mobile foreign bodies threaten the stable borders of the nation. Dugas's French-Canadian whiteness does not absolve him. Instead, he is contaminated by his occupational and queer sexual engagement with third world bodies, "an agent," Wald suggests, of "Africanization."²⁵

While Dugas and the predominately white gay men called upon to stand in for him were repeatedly constructed as the face of AIDS in its early representational discourse, as queer communities began advocating, mentoring, and educating themselves and the public on the disease – that HIV is not a "gay plague" or exclusively transmitted through queered sex acts – the face of HIV/AIDS began to change through its pervasive association with Africa particularly and blackness more generally. In *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, Cathy Cohen details the lack of attention by and to the black community around the increasing epidemic, and she locates this change in media coverage in the sensationalized November 1991 confession that Earvin "Magic" Johnson was HIV positive. She writes, "Prior to Johnson's announcement . . . the number of print and

²⁵ Wald, 238.

television stories devoted to analyzing the spread of this epidemic in African-American and Latino communities lagged behind those stories in which gay men were central, and drastically behind the number of stories examining the threat of AIDS to the ‘general population.’”²⁶ The media attention paid to Johnson’s announcement and consequent retirement from the NBA increased awareness of the impact of HIV/AIDS in communities of color on the one hand, but according to Cohen, helped to obscure the realities of the epidemic on the other. As Johnson relieved fans by unabashedly championing his own heterosexuality, “the forbidden topics regarding AIDS in black communities—homosexuality and drug use . . . would continue to be ignored, as the press focused on Magic Johnson, smiling sport icon, former ‘ladies-man.’”²⁷ Johnson’s admission of course played into the black masculine stereotypes about hypersexuality and athletic physicality, but he was certainly not the deliberately deviant monster of say a Dugas. That black face would come to dominate the sociopolitical landscape six years later in the ensuing media spectacle around Nushawn Williams.

In 1997, Chautauqua County went from the seat of a few sleepy small towns in upstate New York to what was thought to be a new ground zero for HIV/AIDS. Since local public health officials believed the then twenty-two year old Brooklyn native Nushawn Williams had infected at least nine young women and girls in the county, his name and

²⁶ Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 149.

²⁷ Cohen, 150.

photograph was released in an unprecedented violation of that and most states' confidentiality laws regarding HIV testing. That this story involved suburban and rural spaces, white women, and illegal drug use contributed to the incredible media circus as both local and national news syndicates began to speculatively report Williams could have infected women numbering in the hundreds. In *Notorious H.I.V.: The Media Spectacle of Nushawn Williams*, Thomas Shevory writes, "the numbers had taken on a life of their own in the first week after the story broke . . . to the many aliases and nicknames that were attributed to him . . . were attached new ones: '20-year-old sexual predator,' 'modern Typhoid Mary,' 'one-man HIV epidemic,' 'latter-day patient zero,' 'lethal Lothario,' 'an individual with no regard for human life,' 'maggot,' 'would-be serial killer,' and 'dirtbag.'"²⁸ Obviously this was no affable Magic Johnson, and the easy associations between black masculinity, criminality, hypersexuality, and sexual deviance coincided near perfectly with the panic of contagion. AIDS here takes on a spectacularly terrifying face, one animating all the fears and anxieties about black male sexuality and the contaminating potential of black bodies. Williams's story helped to (re)solidify the links between blackness and contagion and establish the conditions for the reception of the next incarnation of AIDS transmission, the down low brother.

Although as early as 1988, black women were being 'warned' about the 'bisexual bridge' linking the queer and purportedly heterosexual communities by the long-standing

²⁸ Thomas Shevory, *Notorious H.I.V.: The Media Spectacle of Nushawn Williams* (MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 16.

organ for black middle class respectability *Ebony* magazine,²⁹ the story presumably did not take since the face of HIV/AIDS was still predominately the promiscuous white gay male. In 2004, however, on an *Oprah* show entitled, “A Secret World: Living on the Down Low,” self-proclaimed activist and author, J.L. King, sat before a national audience and confessed to Oprah’s world that he could explain the mysterious rise of new HIV cases among heterosexual, black women. In his part-memoir, part-anthropological exposé, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of ‘Straight’ Black Men Who Sleep with Men*, King writes,

The CDC (Center for Disease Control) had not identified why black women were contracting the virus in such high numbers, but I knew one of the reasons. Men who are having unprotected sex with men but *not* labeling themselves gay are also having unprotected sex with women, thus spreading the virus. Women are getting infected by their husbands and boyfriends, who are not telling them that they are having sex with men. These men are living life on the down low.³⁰

Encouraged by the CDC, King, as native informant, made the rounds from national news syndicates to black sorority meetings exposing the DL “crisis” as part of his book tour. *On the Down Low* is dedicated not only “to all the women whose health has been jeopardized and emotional state compromised by men living on the DL, and to all women in general who may use this book as a protective guide,” but also “to men on the DL in hopes that looking in this mirror will be a catalyst to change.” Almost single-handedly, King creates and then defines the phenomena while helping to solidify the black face of AIDS in the cultural

²⁹ See Laura B. Rudolph, “The Hidden Fear: Black Women, Bisexuality, and the AIDS Risk,” *Ebony* (January 1988), 120-126.

³⁰ J.L. King, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of ‘Straight’ Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 11. Emphasis in original.

imaginary. He writes, “I put a face and name to the behavior that was infecting some of our women . . . [the DL brothers are] not in the closet; they’re behind the closet. They are so far removed from attaching themselves and what they do to a homosexual lifestyle that these men do not consider themselves gay.”³¹ King ultimately helped change the way the CDC differentiates between homosexuality, bisexuality and non-self-identified men who sleep with men or the clinical abbreviation, “non-ID MSM.”

The figure of the DL brother, however real, fictive, and/or exaggerated, usefully challenges otherwise easy assumptions between sexual acts and identities reminding us that sexuality and desire exist beyond the limiting, but assumedly universal, metaphor of the “closet.” In “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” Marlon Ross argues for a nuanced articulation of black queer sexuality. He writes, “attention to African American history, literature, religion, and social experience indicates that intragender love has been constructed along axes not simply reducible to or easily characterized by the closet paradigm and its attendant narrative of sexual evolution.”³² And while DL discourse is useful to theorize the very resistance Ross calls for, its circulation throughout the mainstream media, popular culture, and conversational space has largely demonized him as a threat to the health of black women and the already troubled nuclear black family. While the DL brother as a type is spectacularly hypervisible, the cultural anxiety or dis-ease in the wake of his big reveal stems

³¹ King, 11.

³² Marlon Ross, “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 180.

from his very invisibility, or that he otherwise “passes” as the heteronormative patriarch. Even supposed DL expert King admits, “I don’t have a sure list of signs”³³ of down low behavior since “the signs are very subtle. Unless you lock your eyes on your man whenever he is around another man, it will be next to impossible for you to pick up everything he is communicating.”³⁴ Lacking performative signs, King offers characteristic types including: the “Mature Brother, the Thug Brother, the Professional Brother, the ‘I Have a Wife/Girlfriend Brother, and the ‘I’m Just Curious Brother.”³⁵ Since this is an incredibly general and ambiguous listing, the threat of AIDS is assumed on almost any black male body, and the panic of contagion collapses onto the historical fear of black male sexuality much more broadly.

What remains strikingly evident as the composite black face of AIDS emerges is its maleness. Despite the trumped up threat of down low behavior to the health of black women, it remains a fact that the current HIV/AIDS epidemic disproportionately affects women of color in the United States as well as women throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The *(RED) Independent’s* lead story, “Give women their rights – and raise a continent” begins with this frank conjecture: “Had the white woman on our front page really been a black African she would work at least three hours longer every day; she would most likely be illiterate, be 200 times more likely to die in childbirth – and be a million times more likely to be HIV

³³ King, 129.

³⁴ Ibid, 126.

³⁵ Ibid, 135.

positive. Based on average expectancy, her life would be almost over rather than not yet halfway through.” Without statistical citation, nor an acknowledgement of how personality, religion, sexuality, regionality, class, mobility, gender expression, disability, and/or ethnicity just might destabilize this singular construction of African womanhood, the absent African woman here is reduced to a type – a dangerously reproductive, zombie drone. As the diversity of African womanhood collapses into a faceless anonymity, her image blends into the maternalized landscapes of Africa’s geographies. The cover story continues,

Women are the backbone of Africa's economy. They do most of the farming, herding and selling. They cook, fetch water, gather firewood, rear children and care for the sick and elderly. They are the pivots of the informal economy; a survey in Benin showed that women traders represent more than 90 per cent of the informal economy. Yet women are excluded from decision-making or owning land because they are often illiterate, they lack confidence and they have no political clout. Many African governments - run by men - let women's rights to education, healthcare, legal status, political representation and fair pay languish at the bottom of their list of priorities . . . Nowhere is this clearer than in education. All the studies show that, when girls are schooled, everything improves. They earn more money. Infant mortality drops; health and nutrition improve. The spread of HIV is reduced. Economic productivity rises.³⁶

Of course, (PRODUCT)^{RED} is correct to point out the importance of women to the various political and social economies comprising Africa, as well as to advocate for women and girl’s rights to education and health care, however, in the logics of the article, the value of African womanhood lies solely in its productive and reproductive potential. This lengthy quote heralds the resilience of African women while simultaneously lamenting the fact that these

³⁶ “Give Women Their Rights – And Raise a Continent,” *The (RED) Independent* 21 September 2006: 2.

women do not make more – babies and money, and one has to wonder, albeit cynically, make more for whom? For (PRODUCT)^{RED}, this is an investment in Africa’s rich natural resources including oil, diamonds, and bodies, an investment that recuperates a laboring population that will move from the “informal” to the “formal” (read transnational) economy.

Very good news for (PRODUCT)^{RED}’s corporate partners.

Ultimately, as these two disturbing photographs attempt to close the assumed distance between Africa and the West with fuzzy proclamations of shared genetic origins, they create a binary where third world problems are fixed through the salvific power of first world solutions, completely erasing community care initiatives and institutionalized health care systems developed and sustained in Africa by Africans as well as individual responses to seropositivity. While transnational capital continues to service the first world at the expense of, and based on the labor from, the global south, this “charitable” blackface is a sinister mockery of the very bodies it supposedly benefits. Sexy and alluring, these celebrity bodies catch our gaze, both encouraging our consumption while also distracting us – from the state’s reluctance to speak intervention into existence by refusing to name “genocide” and from the health disparities contributing to a domestic AIDS crisis largely affecting women of color. While the advertising campaigns of both Keep a Child Alive and (PRODUCT)^{RED} make it clear that the future of a recoverable Africa is about the future of African womanhood, ending the HIV/AIDS pandemic would mean an investment in not the economic potential of black women bodies, but an ideological and systemic (re)evaluation of

the very human value of those bodies. It is a value that neither (PRODUCT)^{RED} or Keep a Child Alive could even imagine.

Epilogue —

Recovering the Black Woman Body: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Published against the cultural backdrop of the then oxymoronic demand that “black is beautiful,” *The Bluest Eye* is a resounding indictment of the promises of American liberalism in the face (pun intended) of the negation of the little black girl body of protagonist Pecola Breedlove. With great clarity and courage, Morrison confronts black ugliness in a speculative anti-bildungsroman that, like racial im/postors Sprigle and Halsell, uses spatial landscapes to produce blackness. While Sprigle and Halsell relied on the fantasies of Dixie terror to re-racialize their bodies, Morrison constructs Lorain, Ohio, as a decidedly hostile space far above Sprigle’s “Smith and Wesson” line. In the “quiet” of Lorain, Ohio, anticipated spectacles of racial terror are replaced with a constant barrage of the violently banal images of mass culture – dimpled child stars, elegant actors and actresses, and even the pencil drawings on candy wrappers and in the pages of storybooks. Morrison contests the racial im/postor’s perverse desire for the spectacularized vulnerability of blackness with the very real and grotesquely naturalized vulnerabilities of a black girl body constantly maneuvering through the violent regimes of racialization.

In the prologue of the novel, this violent banality is an endearingly constitutive part of literacy – the Dick and Jane literacy primers. Conceived in 1927 by Zerna Sharp, illustrator and reading consultant for publisher Scott, Foresman and Company, *Dick and Jane* was to be a “revolutionary concept”¹ that included characters with whom elementary school-age children could relate. Developed by a team of editors, writers, illustrators and

¹ Carol Kismaric, *Growing Up with Dick and Jane: Learning and Living the American Dream* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1996), 21.

psychologists all under the direction of editor William S. Gray, Dick and Jane appeared in the 1930 Elson Basic Readers pre-primer after years of preliminary sketches and storyboards. Complete with colorful illustrations, bold text, simple repetitive vocabulary, and most memorably, Dick and Jane themselves, “The books were a huge success. Children loved what they saw . . . They learned the words that went along with the pictures, using the ‘whole word’ method that taught children to recognize complete words by sight, instead of phonetically sounding words out letter by letter. Teachers encouraged their pupils to think about the characters’ actions and thoughts, and to put themselves in Dick and Jane’s place, deepening their connection to the characters and to reading.”² As reading fundamentals coupled with formative lessons in empathy and sentiment, Dick and Jane (no last name necessary) are conceptualized as accessible and relatable friends, the “Everyboy” and “Everygirl” realization of a national investment in the ideals of innocent childhood. According to Debra T. Werrlein in “Not So Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*,” “The [Dick and Jane] readers treat American childhood as an abstraction that excludes all but white middle-class children.”³ In the world of Dick and Jane citizenship is abstracted then made textual flesh as the “unmarked” bodies of literacy’s celebrities stand as the normative standard for American childhood. As a curricular space visualizing and valorizing a childhood evacuated of markers of difference, the Dick and Jane readers are models of proper, docile citizenship, and consequently, palpably narrate the abstracted promises of American liberalism.

² Kismaric, 20.

³ Debra Werrlein, “Not So Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*,” *MELUS* 30 (Winter 2005): 58.

The Dick and Jane landscape, unlike Morrison's Lorain, Dixie terror's imagined South, Halsell's Harlem, or Anatole and Coleman's Greenwich Village, is an endlessly suburban present complete with stay-at-home mother, leisure-time father and three innocently carefree children – Dick, Jane, and baby Sally. By excising markers of difference as well as history itself, Dick and Jane are untouched by the depression era scarcity and thrift that frame their textual unveiling, as well as the realities of wartime. Instead, even in 1930, the peaceful suburbia of Dick and Jane realizes the potential of postwar prosperity and progress by incorporating the consumer traces of that prosperity within its pages – shiny new automobiles, colorful appliances, the newest toys and freshly manicured lawns. While purported to establish reading mastery through practical exercises emphasizing word recognition, the Dick and Jane narratives also provide an entirely different type of mastery, a literacy instructing just who can claim space within an idyllically monolithic body politic. Made most popular in the 1940s and 1950s, the Dick and Jane readers articulate a national identity that shores up notions of exceptionalized American democracy (privacy, domesticity, and productivity) in the threatening face of fascism and socialism. This mythic potential of American liberalism can only be realized in the context of the primer's watercolor pages; however, this utopian national imaginary is still portrayed as possible, if not inevitable, in both the original texts and their nostalgic recuperations. Although the primers eventually fell out of favor in the mid-1960s when demands for a more diversely inclusive elementary school curriculum made Dick and Jane seem less like “everychild” and much more like “nochild,” the inevitability of Dick and Jane brand liberalism is rearticulated in the preface of the grossly nostalgic 1996 *Growing Up with Dick and Jane: Learning and Living the American Dream*. In it Bob Sheehan, creator and star of the beloved children's television

show *Captain Kangaroo* writes, “Childhood, for every child, should be as close as possible to the ideal world of Dick and Jane. Sometimes the ugliness of our surroundings gets in the way. Never let that ugliness come from you, the parent. With love and security—and the occasional ice cream bar—our children will turn out like Dick and Jane. I’ll let you in on a secret. The Dicks and Janes of this world grow into happy human beings.”⁴ Teaching children to read offers these narratives as an inevitable future, but the “attainable” possibility is completely dependent on one’s embodied and psychic relationship to the texts.

Similar to its function in Roth’s *The Human Stain*, reading mastery produces an epistemology that reads bodies as well as texts. So when Morrison chooses to frame *The Bluest Eye* with the citation of a Dick and Jane story, she drapes her own novel with the ideologies of idealized postwar American liberalism. Extracted from the illustrations that meant so much to the original Dick and Jane, Morrison opens her novel with citation. “Here is the house,” Morrison begins, “It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? . . . Play, Jane, Play.”⁵ Morrison samples Dick and Jane presumably invoking a complicatedly nostalgic response to the text. She then disrupts this comforting recognition by removing the punctuation and capitalization from her first citation of the readers. “Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother

⁴ Bob Sheehan, Introduction to *Growing Up with Dick and Jane: Learning and Living the American Dream* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1996), 7.

⁵ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume Books, 1994), 3. All subsequent citations of this text will be indicated by in-text citation.

father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane . . . play jane play” (4). This second iteration is rendered strange but not wholly unfamiliar. It is a broken down but still functional narrative and stands in contrast to the most fragmented and disrupted final version of the familiar story:

“Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasreddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdick andjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejanesheshasareddressshewantstoplay whowillplaywithjane . . . playjaneplay” (4). While the original intention for the Dick and Jane stories was to use monotonous repetition to strengthen literacy, Morrison’s repetition is a dizzying unlearning of the familiar. Adelaide Morris writes that “the stately, reassuring rhythms of *Dick and Jane* undergo nightmare acceleration” in the third repetition “and the words fuse into a monolithic chunk of type, a block as heavy as a tablet of commandments.”⁶ Agreeing with Morris, Karla Holloway in *BookMarks: Readings in Black and White* writes, “Morrison takes the familiar text and corrupts it. It dissolves into a seamless senseless passage that mirrors the loss of the book’s main character, Pecola, the inchoate desire she has for someone other than herself, and the culpability of images that represent others and other families as worthwhile, and herself and her own as ugly.”⁷ While this third disruption renders Dick and Jane largely unreadable and incomprehensible, Dick and Jane are still decipherable. Desperate to make sense of what we see, or in other words to remain

⁶ Adelaide Morris, “Dick, Jane, and American Literature: Fighting with Canons,” in *College English* 47 (1985): 467.

⁷ Karla Holloway, *BookMarks: Readings in Black and White* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 68.

literate, we are forced to return to the site of reading cognition to make sense of the shifting suburbia. In her undoing of this iconic text, Morrison undoes this privileged tool of reading mastery by challenging its powerful signification.

As Morris suggests, Morrison's reader is manically hurtled through jarringly decomposing narratives only to confront a second prologue. "*Quiet as its kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941*" (5, emphasis in original). Unlike the ahistorical suspended present of the primers, "Here [read anywhere and nowhere] is the house" (3), the setting of Morrison's novel is a speculative 1941 deeply inflected by history, class, region, race, gender, violence, kinship, politics, and complete mass media saturation, thereby reinscribing the contingent histories necessarily missing from the Dick and Jane primers. While no marigolds grew in that fall, recognizable celebrities from Shirley Temple and Ginger Rogers to Greta Garbo populate the collective psychic landscape of Lorain, Ohio. Morrison demonstrates how each movement, action, and thought has been motivated, almost predetermined, for the community, structuring a binary culture of stifling ugliness and redemptive beauty. This is most devastatingly felt by the Breedloves, the funhouse mirror version of the Dick and Janes: "[The Breedloves] ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipating, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. [Pauline] Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so too speak, although it did not belong to them" (38). The Breedloves' ugliness "was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question. The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked

at themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance” (39). Although we never see any of the Breedloves reading a Dick and Jane primer and we only see Pauline Breedlove sitting in the darkened theatre of the cinema, “she was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty” (122), standards of white aesthetic beauty permeate the consciousness of the Breedloves family as well as the rest of the town.

Witnessed by narrator Claudia McTavver, Morrison’s novel is an anti-bildungsroman⁸ that positions Pecola as the foil to the various “Janets” ideologically working to shape Pecola’s body as ugly. Morrison writes, “Long hours [Pecola] sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (45). We are never given any detailed description of Pecola and as readers we must rely solely on descriptions of a vapid ugliness that, “although doesn’t belong to her,” Pecola is burdened to wear. This ugliness supposedly stands opposite the palatable, digestible beauty of “Mary Jane.” As Morrison describes, “Each pale wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane . . . Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort” (51). Pecola attempts to mediate the distance between the misperception and misrecognition of her body and the ideal of Mary Jane whiteness through digestion so “She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50). Pecola’s desire for Mary Jane-brand whiteness manifests in this bodily act

⁸ Reading Morrison’s novel as an anti-bildungsroman helps us to consider the bildungsroman as a literary form with a close relationship to liberalism.

of consumption, an attempt to ingest and internalize the whiteness she wishes mirrored by her own reflection.

While often transfixed by her own gaze, Pecola is a girl that is rarely seen. She is invisible to some, ignored by others, and constantly misrecognized as an “other” in her own community. However, it is Maureen Peal, new girl at school and a “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair” who correctly misrecognizes Pecola. Morrison writes, “‘My name is Maureen Peal. What’s yours?’ ‘Pecola.’ ‘Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?’” (67). As Maureen misreads Pecola’s body this moment of disruptive citation works to place a novel already draped in the rhetoric of American liberalism in conversation with John Stahl’s 1934 *Imitation of Life* a film spectacularizing racial im/posture. Based on the 1933 novel by widely successful author-celebrity and patron to Zora Neale Hurston, Fannie Hurst, the film adaptation of *Imitation of Life* depicts an interracial female dyad featuring Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert) and Delilah Johnson (Louise Beavers) as they negotiate the raising of their respective daughters, Jessie and Peola, while simultaneously running the multi-million dollar pancake restaurant and distribution business made possible by Delilah’s once secret family recipe. Garnering an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture with tear-jerking sentimentality, *Imitation of Life* interrogates hackneyed constructions of race in a rapidly accelerating modernity. Although Delilah was intended to be a character that challenged the restrictive roles African American women could play on screen,⁹ she remains a flapjack flipping mammy whose docile servility happily

⁹ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1991), 59.

pushes her out of her fair share of the pancake profits. “I’ll make the recipe a gift to you,” Delilah promises Bea, “Just don’t send me away from you.” Delilah’s face, lit in neon, becomes the trademark of the business, an enduring logo that brands Aunt Delilah as authentically servile as Aunt Jemima herself. But despite her neon immortalization, her heart just was not in the business. Instead Delilah simply wants to provide for her daughter, the tragically light, Peola, and save for an extravagant funeral, an African American homegoing ritual even Sprigle recognized as important.¹⁰

Peola suffers from a white ambition that motivates her to pass for white at the disturbingly young age of seven, and eventually, drop out of a Southern historically black college to “cross the line” and permanently disassociate herself from her mother. Delilah dies of a broken heart and Peola returns in a classic moment of cinematic melodrama to cry tears of apology on her mother’s casket. So when Maureen mistakes Pecola for the tragically passing Peola, it renders both characters haphazardly absurdly disrupting our understanding of who we know both Pecola and Peola to be. Maureen explains, “The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it . . . Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty” (67). In this moment of misrecognition, Peola’s “so prettiness” and passable ambiguity ceases to stand in sharp relief to Pecola’s ugly and definitive blackness. Maureen’s slippage disrupts the scopic logics making race legible and allows us to see both characters differently. Pecola and Peola are momentarily interchangeable, and subsequently,

¹⁰ Sprigle writes, “The compelling reason for the prominence of the undertaker in the Negro community is the driving insistence of every Southern Negro that his departure from this earth shall have at least a touch of the dignity and luxury that he never knew in his lifetime” (168).

what Maureen names when she renames Peola is a relationship to whiteness that locates both characters on the same spectrum of vulnerability to the hegemony of white aesthetic standards and culture. Both desperately want to be white, albeit Peola's body approximates, and thus, lays claim to it differently. Both are confined to and by the absolute absurdity of race and both undergo sexual and gendered violence because of it. Pecola is raped and impregnated by father, Cholly, and in the novel version of *Imitation of Life* Peola "willingly" undergoes sterilization to ensure she never surprises her white and unknowing fiancé by giving birth to a "throwback" baby.¹¹

While Peola's body affords her the privilege to pass, Pecola desperately seeks only one aspect of iconic whiteness to affect her attempt at racial im/posture: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed" (46). After Cholly rapes his daughter, Pecola abandons praying to God and pursues her eyes through other means, namely the misanthropic, pedophilic, trickster-healer Soaphead Church. Although Morrison writes in the novel's afterward that when "[her classmate] said she wanted blue eyes" she was horrified when she "imagined what she would like if she had her wish" (209), Soaphead Church does not have that same reaction. He "thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty . . . For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles" (174). After instructing Pecola to take (unbeknownst to her) rotten meat to an already sick dog and "mark well how he behaves," the dog's fatally violent reaction signals that God had

¹¹ A throwback baby is a child whose visible markers of black phenotype (curly hair, skin color, etc.) reveal the either unknown or suppressed "truth" of the black identity of one of that child's supposedly white parents. For a literary treatment of the "throwback baby" see Kate Chopin's 1893 short story, "Desiree's Baby."

honored her request. According to both Pecola and Soaphead, God grants her “bluest” eyes. In a letter addressed to God Soaphead writes, “I did what You did not, could not, would not do; I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show! I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will. And she will live happily ever after” (182, emphasis in original). Despite Soaphead’s arrogance, he’s wrong when he claims no one else will see Pecola’s blue eyes.

In a chapter headed by the Dick and Jane fragment, “looklookherecomesafriendthefriendwillplaywithjanetheywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay,” Pecola has a conversation presumably with herself. Traumatized from incest, rape, and the scorn of her community, Pecola retreats into a race-obsessed interiority. Morrison writes, “‘I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes.’ ‘*No, honey. Right after your eyes*’” (196, emphasis in original). As Pecola dialogues “right after he eyes,” we are reminded of what she has stored there, “Everything was there . . . All of those pictures, all of those faces.” Pecola’s eyes collect and feast on images, storing them as a catalog against which she constantly measures herself. Produced through and against these all-consuming images, Pecola is not speaking to herself here, but rather, she descends into conversation with the very images with which she is consumed – Jane, Shirley Temple, Mary Jane, and perhaps, Peola herself. With Maureen’s misrecognition, Pecola and Peola’s shared relationship with whiteness, their consciously similar names, and finally, the conflating of their egos, Pecola and Peola are caught in a moment of grotesque intertextuality and speculative citation. Morrison writes, “‘They are bluer, aren’t they?’ ‘*Oh, yes. Much bluer.*’ ‘Bluer than Joanna’s?’ ‘*Much bluer than Joanna’s*’” (197, emphasis in original). This

conversation disrupting time, genre, and narrative engages the generic conventions of speculative fiction through the language and metaphors of invisibility.¹² “[Pecola] squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow . . . Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left” (45). Pecola does not only wish for invisibility (“Please, God . . . please make me disappear” [45]), she accomplishes it. Pecola disappears her black girl body, removing its vulnerability from scenes of domestic violence and abuse. Her eyes, however, are remainders of that body and a reminder she is unable to render herself completely invisible – forced to stand as a silent witness. Pecola muses, “Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes’” (46). To her, new eyes would not only change how she is seen, but also, what she sees.

As Morrison troubles the literary and generic boundaries between the characters of Pecola and Peola, Peola haunts the novel as well as Pecola’s psyche. As the “first important ‘Black’ film of the 1930s,” according to Donald Bogle, “and an outgrowth of this new conscious liberal spirit [of Roosevelt’s election and the New Deal],” *Imitation of Life* was a

¹² *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, the soon to be canonical anthology of African American speculative fiction collects seemingly disparate texts by both the genre’s most celebrated and recognized “stars” like Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler as well as recuperated canonical authors like W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and Charles Chesnutt. For editor Sheree Thomas “dark matter” is a scientific theory for the invisible blackness that remains unseen and/or undetectable in space that astronomers are certain must exist. This astronomic phenomena lends not only a particularly helpful metaphor for tracking the lack of attention to the African American speculative literary canons, but also, provides a point of intersection between the genre and *The Bluest Eye*. For more see Sheree Thomas, ed, *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (New York: Warner Books, 2000).

box office success ultimately remade by Douglas Sirk into the more beloved 1959 version of the novel starring Lana Turner and Susan Kohner.¹³ Slightly against the grain, Bogle reads Peola as a “rebel against the system. Peola was the New Negro demanding a real New Deal.”¹⁴ Peola demands access to the promises of American liberalism gained only for her by passing for white. Not so strangely enough by 1970 (also the year of the publication of *The Bluest Eye*) the name “Peola” was slang terminology for a light-skinned, white ambitious, sell-out. Morphing from the less disparaging definition in Zora Neale Hurston’s own 1942 “Glossary of Harlem Slang” (“Peola – a very white Negro girl”),¹⁵ “Peola” becomes a gendered and classed epithet undermining a burgeoning pride in a distinctively African American self-fashioning celebrating the embrace of naps and kinks of all types.

As Peola moves from a tragic archetype to a cultural scapegoat, Morrison forces us to reconsider Peola by reinscribing her on the body of her protagonist. Peola, like Jane, permeates the consciousness of the women of Lorain, Ohio. Maureen declares “when [*Imitation of Life*] comes back, I’m going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times” (68) while Pauline sits pregnant in a darkened theatre only to later misremember Peola’s name when it comes to signing her own daughter’s birth certificate. Even the narrator’s older sister Frieda is a derivation in name of 1934 Peola actress Fredi Washington.

¹³ It is important to note that Susan Kohner, a Mexican and Jewish actress, played Sarah Jane (1959’s Peola).

¹⁴ Bogle, 60.

¹⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, “A Glossary of Harlem Slang,” in *Spunk: The Selected Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1985), 94.

By characterizing the spatial and psychic speculative geographies of Lorain, *The Bluest Eye* is an anti-coming-of-age-story where neither marigolds nor little black girls thrive or flourish. Narrator Claudia concludes, “I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain types of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (206). This toxic landscape is the space of the production of blackness when and where blackness is ugly. Contesting this toxicity, “Morrison offers Pecola as an unimpeachable witness against the very system that caused peola to become a household word.”¹⁶ Pecola stands as a repository for the cultural baggage of her community much like Peola does amidst the black nationalist response to the failings of the promises of American liberalism after the left began to challenge the tactical efficacy of the civil rights movement. Morrison writes, “All of our waste which we dumped on her [Pecola] and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—we felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health” (205). The young Claudia’s lament at the end of the novel could have been for either (perhaps both) Pecola and/or Peola. As Pecola’s physical ugliness renders the rest of her community beautiful in comparison, Peola allows for a moral redemption. Her melodramatic regret at her mother’s funeral renders other forms of callousness contrastingly less pathetic.

¹⁶ Jane Caputi, “‘Specifying’ Fannie Hurst: Langston Hughes’s ‘Limitations of Life,’ Zora Neale Hurston’s *The Eyes Were Watching God*, and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* as ‘Answers’ to Hurst’s Imitation of Life,” in *Black American Literature Forum* 24 (Winter 1990): 710.

By placing the little black girl body as its central figure, *The Bluest Eye* reveals how the narratives of racial im/posture considered in this project have been structured by either the spectral absence or the conscious replacing of the black woman body. From Sprigle's Eliza, Halsell's all straight black women, the Malones' Sarah Carroll, Roth's Ernestine, and Moss and Paltrow's seropositive women in sub-Saharan Africa, the figure of the black woman haunts, frames, enables, and reveals the regimes producing race animating each im/postors encounters with, and embodiment of, blackness. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison implores us to recuperate these black daughters and make room for both Pecola and Peola.

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Biography

Alisha Gaines was born and raised in Northeast Ohio and is the oldest of four. She received a B.A. in English from Spelman College in 2003. She specializes in African American literature, popular culture, and queer epistemologies. As a lifelong fan of Michael Jackson, she published “‘I Just Can’t Stop Loving You’: Michael Jackson and Queer Cultural Desire” in *American Sexuality Magazine* in 2006. She has also reviewed Ernest Hardy’s *Blood Beats Vol 2* for *make/shift magazine* and *American Book Review*, as well as Keith D. Leonard’s *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* and Paula C. Barnes and Australia Tarver’s *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance: Essays on Race, Gender, and Literary Discourse* for *American Literature*.

While at Duke, she received an Endowment Fellowship in English, a John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute Fellowship, a William Preston Few Fellowship, a Vertical Integration Grant, and a Bethune-Cookman Writing Award. She is also the recipient of a Mellon Mays Predoctoral Research Fellowship and Graduate Completion Grant. She will begin a Carter G. Woodson postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Virginia in the fall of 2009.