



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

**"You Should've Seen My Grandmother; She Passed for White": African American Women Writers, Genealogy, and the Passing Genre**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Sheffield  
Faculty of Arts  
School of English

October 2015

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## Acknowledgments

A million thank yous to my supervisors, Duco van Oostrum and Rachel van Duyvenbode for your patience, encouragement, and unconditional support throughout my entire student career. It is no exaggeration to say that without your “sky’s the limit” attitude and unshakable confidence in me, I would have never considered the transition to postgraduate study. I take so much inspiration from you both in my approach to teaching. I only hope I can pay this forward in my own career.

Thank you also to the broader communities of learning and research that I’ve moved into and out of over the last 13 years at The University of Sheffield, The University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), King Edward VII School, the Workers’ Education Association, The Runnymede Trust, and York St John University. Without the encouragement of the staff, students, and colleagues that I’ve met along the way, I wouldn’t have gotten this far.

And of course, I couldn’t have managed this without the love and support of my family and friends. I’d especially like to thank my husband, Ian, who I met only a few months after I began this piece of work seven years ago. He has supported my decision to pursue a part-time, self-funded, doctoral degree without question and despite the enormous impact the process has had on our quality of life. Thanks also to my parents, Sylvia and Jim, who have always encouraged me to pursue my wildest ambitions and to be myself. The project is so ‘me,’ so ‘you,’ so ‘us.’ Traces of all we’ve talked about, thought about, know, resist, and embrace as an interracial family can be found on every page of this thesis. And my love and thanks to the extended family that I’ve amassed over the past 7 years (my amazing in-laws and supportive step-family) for the dinners, wine, hugs, pep-talks and the interest you’ve shown in what I do and who I am. It’s kept me going.

Finally, to all of you who gave me the space (literally and figuratively) to undertake this research, who bought me drinks, coffees, and dinners, gave me somewhere to sleep, offered me somewhere to live, helped me find a job, employed me, worked with me, took a chance on me and my ideas, who listened to me, counselled me, and cared for me – I thank you. Couldn't have done it without you.

## Abstract

This thesis critiques the prevailing assumption that passing is passé in contemporary African American women's literature. By re-examining the work of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Dorothy West, Alice Walker, and Barbara Neely, I argue that these writers signify on canonical passing narratives – Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and *Clotelle* (1867), Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), Larsen's *Passing* (1929), and Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933) – in order to confront and redress both the historical roots and contemporary contexts of colourism.

As well bridging this historiographic gap, I make a case for reading passing as a multivalent trope that facilitates this very process of cultural interrogation. Rather than focussing on literal episodes of passing, I consider moments of symbolic, textual, and narrative passing, as well as the genealogical and intertextual processes at play in each text which account for the spectral hauntings of the passing-for-white figure in post-civil rights literature. In Chapter 1, I examine the relationship between passing and embodiments of beauty in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Bambara's "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods" (1974) and Neely's *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994). In Chapter 2, I discuss passing, class, and capital in Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) and Dorothy West's *The Wedding* (1995). In Chapter 3, I suggest that Walker and Morrison revisit Larsen's *Passing* in their short stories "Source" (1982) and "Recitatif" (1983). Finally, I conclude this project with a discussion of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015) in order to demonstrate the continued centrality of the passing trope for authors interested in colourism, genealogy, and black women's experiences.

It is all a petty, silly matter of no real importance, which another generation will comprehend with great difficulty.

(W.E.B. Du Bois, Review of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, qtd. in Smith-Pryor, 56.)

## Introduction: Genealogies of Passing

### Thesis Aims and Methodology: Tracing the Passing Trope

You should've seen my grandmother; she passed for white, married a white man, and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or my aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally they got the message of no message and let her be. Almost all mulatto types and quadroons did that back in the day—if they had the right kind of hair, that is. Can you imagine how many white folks have Negro blood hiding in their veins? Guess. Twenty per cent, I heard. My own mother, Lula Mae, could have passed easy, but she chose not to. She told me the price she paid for that decision.<sup>1</sup>

(Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* 3-4)

On the very first page of her much publicised, highly-anticipated, eleventh novel *God Help the Child* (2015), Toni Morrison invokes the anachronous passing-for-white figure.<sup>2</sup> In her explanation of why her relationship with her “blue-black” daughter Bride has disintegrated, the light-skinned narrator Sweetness invites the reader to pass back in time with her and imagine the lightness of her grandmother’s skin (“[y]ou should’ve seen my grandmother”); she calls upon the antiquated language of the genre (“mulatto,” “quadroons,” “Negro blood”); and wonders how many people have been affected by the passing of their ancestors across what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as “the color-line” (*Souls* v).<sup>3</sup> And yet a deep sense of paradox marks this piece of writing – the passing figure from the traditional genre is summoned, but is absent. Indeed, there is a sad irony in

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<sup>1</sup> My supervisors have given permission for me to use MLA citation style. Where provided, page numbers are parenthesised in-text.

<sup>2</sup> This project focuses deliberately and specifically on representations of ‘black-to-white’ passing in the United States. For more on additional (and intersecting) modes of passing, see Elaine Ginsberg’s *Passing and The Fictions of Identity* (1996) Sinead Moynihan’s *Passing into the Present* (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, I use the terms ‘black’ and African American interchangeably throughout this thesis. F. James Davis uses the word “black” to describe “persons with any black African lineage” (5). On occasion I prefer to use it to draw attention to the political import of the word in the post-Civil Rights era.

Sweetness's remembrance of a grandmother who disowned her children, refusing to accept their letters, offering only the "message of no message." Similarly, Sweetness's desire for others to bear material witness to a woman who cannot be witnessed, who has vanished, passing out-of-reach and out-of-sight is bittersweet. Clearly then, in this novel (to which I return in the coda to this project) Morrison is not writing within the genre of literary passing, but she is alluding to it and in just one short paragraph she masterfully conveys a deep sense of ambivalence towards the passing figure which is not only representative of her oeuvre, but is, I argue, characteristic of the work of her literary 'generation.'

Bringing such allusions to and revisions of the passing genre in contemporary black women's writing into dialogue for the very first time, this thesis examines passing, not simply as a literary subject, but as a multivalent trope which facilitates a process of genealogical interrogation of the past in order to comprehend the present. I argue this intertextual engagement enables writers to exorcise, confront, and invoke the spectre of the passing figure specifically in order to address contemporary contexts of colourism or "the prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (Walker "If The Present" 290).<sup>4</sup> In addition to Morrison, authors as diverse in style as Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Neely, Gloria Naylor, Dorothy West, and Alice Walker experiment with "the passing theme," a phrase that Juda Bennett uses to describe the ways that "passing is conceived, debated, remembered, fantasized and discussed," rather than simply enacted in a text ("Toni Morrison" 206; 210). Like Bennett, I am interested in how writers "refer to [this] narrative tradition, without fully participating in it," often "ignoring biology and phenotype for fantasy and imagination," "reshap[ing] the passing trope to address contemporary concerns of racial identity" ("Toni Morrison" 208; *Queer Pleasure* 144).

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<sup>4</sup> I use the phrase 'passing-for-white figure' to refer those who could, would, have, or might pass-for-white. The passing-trope and the light-skinned body are mutually evocative and implicating in the African American literary imagination.

In this introductory chapter, which is longer than average because I draw upon close readings of relevant texts spanning the twentieth century – including Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1974), Barbara Neely’s *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), Lisa Jones’s *Bulletproof Diva* (1994), Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998), and Rebecca Walker’s *Black, White, and Jewish* (2001) – I outline the historical, literary, theoretical, and cultural contexts that inform my research, mapping out a genealogical web of passing that black women both draw upon and craft.

### **Multiple Ways of Reading Passing**

This project uses and develops a framework for reading passing in contemporary fiction offered by Juda Bennett in his analysis of Morrison’s oeuvre. In his article “Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative” (2001), Bennett argues that “in each of her seven novels and in her sole short story,”<sup>5</sup> Morrison “invokes the passing myth, sometimes in only one or two paragraphs and often with indirection” (205). He argues her works can be divided into:

- (i) Texts that contain “characters who are not capable of physically passing for white” and where “passing has been radically reconfigured to exclude the traditional light-skinned figure of ambiguity” and replaced with “allusion to and parody of passing” (206), for example, Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970); “Toni Morrison” 206-8).
- (ii) Texts that contain “characters capable of passing for white” but who are “presented indirectly through memories that are partially lost, distorted, or made ambiguous in the telling” (206), for example, Sing in *Song of Solomon* (1977); “Toni Morrison” 208-211).

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<sup>5</sup> *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), “Recitatif” (1983), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997).

- (iii) Texts that contain “characters whose racial identity is obscured from the reader” (211). These texts “recast the drama of passing between text and reader” and encourage the reader to “examine the importance they place on fixing racial identity,” for example, Twyla, Roberta, and Maggie in “Recitatif” (1983; “Toni Morrison” 211-213).

While Bennett’s article represents the most extensive analysis of passing in the work of any female post-civil rights writer, because his is an article-length study, there is little space to consider the broader literary contexts of Morrison’s references to passing and until now her appropriation of the genre has remained in a literary, cultural, and historical vacuum. This is something I seek to redress in this project by reading her prose as one of many contemporary examples that draw inspiration from the conventional passing genre. By ‘conventional’ or ‘traditional’ texts, I refer to fictional works (short stories, novels, and novellas) with a plot that hinges upon African American characters who pass-for-white, and that were written between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (with a little give and take either side). Specifically, I discuss William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) and *Clotelle* (1867),<sup>6</sup> Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), and Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933). Hurst’s novel is the only traditional passing narrative that I refer to which is ‘white-authored’; although as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues “[a]lthough it’s a ‘white’ novel, *Imitation of Life* is certainly a part of the African American canon” (Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, Back Matter).

Using Bennett’s framework as a departure point, this project additionally seeks to trace and unpack moments of symbolic, textual, visual, and associative passing in the works mentioned, as well as the ways in which ‘race’ itself is

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<sup>6</sup> See M. Giulia Fabi’s article, “The ‘Unguarded Expressions of the Feelings of the Negroes...’ (1993) for a helpful overview of “the three book-form editions of *Clotel* (1853, 1864 and, 1867)” (639).

optically, metonymically, metaphorically, symbolically, and ontologically invoked or, for that matter, implied to be emulated, occluded, or repressed.<sup>7</sup> This thesis thus insists upon reading passing as a complex and multivalent trope linked to passing-for-white, with diegetic, extra-diegetic, and theoretical import.

These figurative variations complicate the common-sense interpretation of passing as a model of simulation in which “the one who passes is [...] really black; but the deceptive appearance of the body permits such a one access to the exclusive opportunities of whiteness,” an interpretation which Samira Kawash, among others, finds far too simplistic, reductive, and essentialist a model (*Dislocating the Colorline* 125). As Sara Ahmed explains, “[p]assing cannot be simply theorized as a logic of the subject (= the transformation when she or he assumes an image),” and “passing is not best understood as an event that is clearly definable in time and space” (94). P. Gabrielle Foreman notes that people do not simply “pass-for-white,” but historically have also passed metonymically or in association with other people (for example in Hannah Craft’s narrative, her darker-skinned enslaved husband passes to freedom as she passes-for-white by pretending to be her slave); they may also temporarily “pass through whiteness,” en-route to freedom, re-emerging on the other side in the black ‘community’ (508). Marcia Alesan Dawkins astutely observes that racial passing is also facilitated by a rhetorical process of synecdoche and metonymy (22):

Passers engage synecdoche when they project a racial identity as either white or black. This synecdochic move takes the [multiracial]

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the use of inverted commas around the word ‘race’ to draw attention to its constructedness, see the discussions between Todorov (“Race, Writing, and Culture”) and Gates (“Talkin’ That Talk”) in *“Race,” Writing and Difference* (1985). I refrain from using them all the way through this project, not because I believe race to be a scientific, biological or genetic truth, but because like Morrison, Gates and other critics before me, I hope that my understanding of race as a construct is evident enough in the content of my work. The same applies to the words ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness.’

part for the whole, and objectifies the passer's acceptable racial persona as a 'thing' to be perceived by dupes. (22)<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, "[i]f a passer's racial identity is black and white," he or she is often metonymically reduced "in one way which is mutually exclusive (i.e. either black or white but not both)" (23). This thesis traces such multivalent manifestations of passing in the novels I discuss, confirming that the theme persists in the post-civil rights literature.

## **Historical Genealogies and Chapter Preview**

### **Challenging the Historiography of Passing**

This project is original in its focus on the post-civil rights era (1968 - 1990s) and seeks to complicate the long-held assumption that by the turn of the twenty-first century "the passing genre" had, in the words of Michelle Elam, "long been considered passé" ("Passing" 749-750). As Elam observes, many people,

belie[ve] that racial passing has quaintly, almost nostalgically, gone the way of gramophones, congolene, and flappers [...] has died a natural death, and taken with it to the grave even the obdurate 'one-drop rule' [...] making the question of historical passing seem moot and the very notion of contemporary 'passing novels' almost oxymoronic. ("Passing" 749)<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, in the post-civil rights era passing-for-white was seen as unfashionable at best, treacherous at worst, and after the passing of civil rights legislation enfranchising African Americans, ostensibly unnecessary. Elam suggests that the

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<sup>8</sup> In her reference to the "dupe," Dawkins borrows from Amy Robinson who reads the "cultural performance of passing" as a "triangular theater of identity" between the passer, duper, and the in-group clairvoyant. For more on this see her article, "It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest" (1994).

<sup>9</sup> See also Elam's book-length study, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011).

trend for passing was, “given an easeful death by the 1967 *Loving v. State of Virginia* Supreme Court decision legalizing interracial marriage” (749). Indeed, other landmark decisions such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* [1954, 1955; which overturned the “separate but equal” justification for segregation proffered via *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896)]; the *Civil Rights Act* (1964; which barred discrimination on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, and nationality); and the *Voting Rights Act* (1965; which outlawed racial discrimination in voting practices) undermined the necessity and centrality of passing as a strategy for accessing ‘white’ spaces, attaining suffrage, gaining employment and marrying freely (although, obviously these measures did not completely eradicate its effectiveness in attaining positions of privilege; a paradox that inspires much of the fiction I discuss).<sup>10</sup>

Even before such landmark decisions were approved, passing-for-white was vociferously and publically repudiated by several light-skinned African Americans in the black press. For example, despite temporarily passing-for-white to pursue an undercover investigation into lynching in the South, in his 1947 article for *Negro Digest*, “Why I Remain Negro,” the light-skinned leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Walter White, laid claim to blackness, “in [his] spirit and [his] heart.”<sup>11</sup> In 1952, *Jet*

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<sup>10</sup> Fascinatingly, *Plessy v. Ferguson* revolved around a case of passing for white - see Wald, *Crossing the Line* (12); Mark Golub’s article “Plessy as ‘Passing’: Judicial Responses to Ambiguously Raced Bodies in *Plessy v. Ferguson*” (2005); and Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible* (55-77). For a useful timeline of civil rights legislation and events see Dierenfield *The Civil Rights Movement: Revised Edition* (2013). For contemporary coverage of *Loving v. Virginia*, see Simeon Booker, “Kill Laws Against Mixed Marriages” (1967). For a recent take on *Loving*, see Kennedy’s *Interracial Intimacies* (2013). See also Nancy Buirski’s documentary, *The Loving Story* (2011). For a great cultural study of the post-civil rights era, see Richard Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (2008).

<sup>11</sup> For details on the impact of passing in White’s life see Kennedy, *Sellout* (148-150). White “temporarily” passed-for-white in order to investigate lynching in the South (Kennedy “Racial Passing” 1148-50). Roi Ottley, a dark skinned African American “became the adoptive father of the little girl at the center of a lawsuit (*Green v. City of New Orleans*) to determine the girl’s race” (Kennedy “Racial

magazine featured the headline “Negro Singers Who Refuse to Pass,” on its cover and as Gayle Wald highlights, features in popular African American magazines with titles such as, “Why Passing is Passing Out,” and “I’m Through with Passing.” “articulat[ed] collective values of pride in ‘Negro’ identity and challeng[ed] the social and economic pressures that promote passing as an ‘alternative’ to racial segregation” (*Crossing the Line* 119).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there is a sense that fears about passing were not specific to white Americans; if passing had become a moral panic, the black press certainly fanned its flames. In White’s article, he estimated that, “[e]very year approximately 12,000 white-skinned negroes disappear” over the colour line, while in *Ebony* magazine (1948), African American journalist Roi Ottley suggested an enormous ‘total’ of between five and eight million African Americans who were passing-for-white (qtd. in Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies* 285-6).<sup>13</sup> Ottley’s article, accompanied by a quiz asking African American readers to ‘spot the passer,’ or to identify the ‘folk devil’ if you will, could only serve to demonise the ‘interloping’ passer figure in the black community.<sup>14</sup>

While no noteworthy literary passing narratives were published during the post-civil rights period I focus on here, critics generally agree that the genre re-

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Passing” 1147n8; Kennedy *Interracial Intimacies* 37-8). For more information on Green v. City of New Orleans see also Karla F.C. Holloway’s *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature* (2014: 93-96).

<sup>12</sup> See also Lynn Washington and Julie Cary Nerad’s chapter, “A Cousin to Blackness” in *Passing Interest* for a good list of confessional magazine articles about passing from the 1950s (Nerad 89n3). Also see Samira Kawash’s *Dislocating the Colour Line* for a further consideration of the literary historiography of passing (126-7).

<sup>13</sup> Roi Ottley’s article, “Five Million U.S. White Negroes” was published in *Ebony* magazine (March 1948). This article is detailed in Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* (281).

<sup>14</sup> The timing of White and Ottley’s fear mongering about the numbers of passers in The United States resonates with a post-World War II fear about communist interlopers and the unreliability of visual difference. Indeed, in the same year as White’s article, *Look Magazine* featured an oft cited, “How to Spot a Communist” feature (see Englehardt 116-7). I, of course, borrow the phrases “moral panics” and “folk devils” from Stanley Cohen’s seminal work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972).

emerged at the dawn of what Danzy Senna describes as the “Mulatto Millennium”. For instance, Marcia A. Dawkins argues “a new passing renaissance” was “revived in the 1990s” in the works of black and white writers (2). In addition to Senna’s novel *Caucasia* (1998),<sup>15</sup> other millennial novels such Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999) and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) also feature passing plots. Patricia Jones’s *Passing* (1999), which examines the legacies of colourism in one African American family, and Heidi Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* (2011), which critiques the ‘tragic mulatto’ trope, have similarly since drawn upon the genre. This “renaissance” stretches beyond the United States, too. Canadian writer Esi Edugyan’s *Half Blood Blues* (2011) features the problems faced by African Americans in wartime Germany and France who are unable to pass and most recently, British author Helen Oyeyemi evokes the genre in her novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) set in Massachusetts, USA. In Elam’s words, then, “[t]hese narratives of racial passing [...] have risen as if from the dead not to bear witness to past issues, but to testify in some of the fiercest debates about the viability of race in this ‘beyond race’ era [...] racial passing is born again” (750).

Unsurprisingly, then, literary scholarship on passing tends to focus on texts published before the Civil Rights era or jump ahead to those of the twenty-first century; the gap between has not been adequately addressed. For example, M. Giulia Fabi’s *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (2001) offers revisionist interpretations of nineteenth-century texts rather than seeking new readings of contemporary works. Even though Gayle Wald’s *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (2000) opens with a discussion of contemporary literature, it concludes with a consideration of John Howard Griffin’s 1960s ‘reverse-passing’ narrative *Black Like Me* (1962). In *Passing Into the Present* (2010), Sinéad Moynihan sets out to, “[contest] the conventional historiography of literary passing, usually associated with the period stretching from post-reconstruction to the civil rights era (1890s to the 1960s)”

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<sup>15</sup> In the UK, *Caucasia* was published as *From Caucasia, With Love*. All page citations make reference to the UK edition included in the works cited list.

but does this by selecting texts from the 1990s as her departure point (*Passing into the Present*, Back Matter).<sup>16</sup> At the time of writing, the latest edited collection on the topic, Julie Carey Nerad's *Passing Interest: Racial Passing in US Novels, Memoirs, Television, and Film 1990-2010* (2014), similarly skips ahead to the 1990s as its starting point for discussion.<sup>17</sup>

While Judith Berzon's extensive survey *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (1978), Deborah McDowell's seminal introduction to Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1986), and Hazel Carby's chapter on passing in nineteenth-century African American women's writing in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987) are all published during this period of apparent reticence on the topic, passing is still implicitly framed as something to 'look back on' rather a topic for examination in contemporaneous works. Curiously, the index of Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists* (1980) does not even list the word "passing" despite the author's discussion of several novels associated with the genre – including Frances Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1892). And, even though Hortense Spillers turns to 'the mulatto' as a theoretical construct in her essay "Notes on an Alternative Model – Neither/Nor" (1989) she adds the caveat that, "a retrieval of this topic will [...] appear anachronistic and irrelevant to African American critical projects at the moment," because the topic was so unpopular (301).<sup>18</sup> And so the

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<sup>16</sup> Moynihan's PhD thesis, "Fictions of Law and Custom" (which forms the basis for *Passing Into The Present*) is a study of *fins de siècle* writing, which is not necessarily obvious from the title of her book. This better contextualises the historical scope covered in her book.

<sup>17</sup> Nerad offers several legitimate reasons why she opts for 1990 as the starting point for her edited collection (see *Passing Interest* 5-6). Wibke Reger's *The Black Body of Literature* is an excellent introduction to the themes of colourism in some of the same works featured here but side-steps a focus on literary passing.

<sup>18</sup> I use the outdated term 'mulatto' or 'mulatta' in this work to refer to the 'tragic mulatto' stereotype, not to refer to people of multi-ethnic or multi-racial origin. Some critics make distinctions between the literary 'mulatta/o', who has one 'white' and one 'black' parent; 'quadroons' who have one 'mulatta' parent and one 'white parent'; and the 'octoroon' who has one 'mulatta' grandparent [or a half, a quarter or an eighth of 'black blood' respectively [see F.J. Davis (5-6),

research I present here seeks to bridge a historiographical gap in literary passing between the civil rights era and the mulatto millennium.

Simply because there was, as Dawkins suggests, a “cultural shift” in the 1960s and 1970s where “nationalist ideologies belittled passing and its narratives, hoping to make them a relic of the past” (1), this does not preclude the possibility that passing is still being discussed during this time, even if it is being invoked in a deeply ambivalent and indirect way. To take the epochal year of 1968, which Alvin Tillery Jr. suggests marks the beginning of the post-civil rights era and thus this “cultural shift” that Dawkins identifies, it is clear that the American interest in passing had not waned (Tillery Jr. 127). Certainly, it was an era of great change and upheaval. The passage of the final major Civil Rights Act of the era in April 1968 came just days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, which sparked rioting, arson, and looting in 110 U.S cities, the deployment of “57,500 National Guard troops,” and “the largest domestic military mobilization since the Civil War” (Burns 2). And of course, there were very public endorsements of black pride; James Brown’s anthemic, “‘Black is Beautiful’: Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud,” which celebrated black culture, aesthetics, and identity was released in August and a month later, the NAACP organised the first Miss Black America pageant as a “‘positive protest’ against the exclusion of black women from the Miss America title” (Craig 3).<sup>19</sup> And yet a little over a week before Tommie Smith and John Carlos memorably raised their fists in a Black Power salute at the Olympic Games in Mexico City in October that same year, actress Ellen Holly became “the first principal black actress” to appear on American daytime

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Kennedy *Sellout* (17-18), and Chesnutt (145)]. Samira Kawash chooses to distinguish between the “mulatto” and the “passer,” but this distinction, for the purposes of this study is irrelevant (*Dislocating* 134). When I discuss the ‘mulatta’ I refer to those light-enough to pass, regardless of any ‘percentages’ of heritage, and indeed whether they even choose to pass-as-white.

<sup>19</sup> For perspective on the significance of Brown’s song amid the context of black beauty, see Maxine Leeds Craig’s, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen* (100-101). See also Nina Simone’s “To be Young, Gifted and Black” (1969) which she wrote for her friend Lorraine Hansberry.

television on ABC's *One Life to Live*, not in the role of a revolutionary 'soul sister' or a black beauty queen, but as an anachronistic passing-for-white character, appropriately named Carla Gray (Harley, "Timetables" 305).<sup>20</sup>

Laurence Otis Graham perhaps most humorously captures the sense of ambivalence toward a changing racial politics amid older, conservative African Americans at this time in his fascinating memoir/history/exposé of the Black elite, *Our Kind of People* (2000).<sup>21</sup> Graham recalls that even though 1968 was "a period of unrest for many blacks throughout the country," his "Great-grandmother – like the blue-veined crowd that she was proud to belong to – seemed, at times, to be totally divorced from the black anxiety and misery that we saw on the TV news and in the papers" (2).<sup>22</sup> Graham also remembers some of the contradictions and tensions in his grandmother's political stance on race. Even though she "said she didn't think much of the Civil Rights Movement," she donated money to the NAACP; despite not thinking much "of Marvin Gaye or Aretha Franklin or their loud Baptist music," she would sometimes attend Baptist church services; and while being proud that a black man finally won an Academy Award, she "was disappointed that Sidney Poitier seemed so dark and wet with perspiration when he was interviewed after receiving the honor" (3).<sup>23</sup> As Graham's anecdote suggests, in an era where being light-skinned need no longer hold the same

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<sup>20</sup> See Douglas Hartmann's *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* (2003) for a useful and detailed analysis of Smith and Carlos's demonstration and the excellent documentary *Salute* (2008) for an account of the enormous difficulties white Australian athlete Peter Norman faced when he returned to Australia after sharing the podium with Carlos and Smith. Ellen Holly writes extensively about passing and the experience of playing 'Carla Gray' in *One Life: The Autobiography of an African American Actress* (1996). See also Dalton Narine's "Blacks on Soaps: From Domestics to Interracial Lovers" (1988; 94-98).

<sup>21</sup> Graham's work is very useful for an ethnographic insight into passing amid the upper-classes. He even includes "The Rules of Passing" based on suggestions and advice in the black upper classes on how to successfully pass (381).

<sup>22</sup> The term "blue vein" implies that "one's skin was light enough that one's veins were visible on one's arm" (Kerr, *Paper Bag Principle* 55).

<sup>23</sup> Poitier was the first African American to win the Academy Award for Best Actor in 1964 for *Lilies of the Field* (1963; *Timetables* 293).

economic, social, legislative, and cultural capital, whiteness and all it connotes continued to be prized and valued by the black middle classes.

So even though Samira Kawash suggests that “the ending of legal segregation and the transformations in racial politics of the 1960s made the theme of passing politically irrelevant,” that “[p]assing had disappeared from popular racial discourse and representations,” and that “[b]y the 1970s discussions of passing were by and large confined to literary studies of passing fiction,” I argue that the opposite is true (126-7). If anything, the civil rights and Black Power movements presumed to be responsible for the demise of the passing genre foster its literary re-visitation in several ways and each of my chapters looks at one of these contemporary contexts in more depth.

### **Diachronic and Synchronic Contexts: Chapter Preview**

This project contends that black women writers invoke passing in a way that speaks to both diachronic and synchronic contexts in order to address both historic and contemporary political and social concerns regarding race, colour, and privilege in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Each writer retains an interest in the tropes and motifs of the historical genre including: slavery; ‘miscegenation’ or interracial relationships; hypodescent and parentage; the racialised body and questions of visibility; ‘the tragic mulatta’ stereotype; class status and social climbing; and [pseudo] scientific readings and legislation of race, while simultaneously addressing their own cultural moment.

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<sup>24</sup> I use these Saussurean terms in much the same way as Bernard W. Bell in his study of the contemporary African American novel which offers “both a diachronic and synchronic” charting of the dialectic between present and past, “concurrent and overlapping residual and emergent as well as dominant cultural, narrative and aesthetic movements” as “aspect[s] of the African American aesthetic [...] move cyclically from residual to emergent” (xiv). See also Ashraf Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives* for an excellent diachronic/synchronic methodology.

In Chapter 1, “‘Black is Beautiful’: Passing-for-White and Notions of Beauty,” I discuss Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Cade Bambara’s short story “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drugs N Goods” (1974), and Barbara Neely’s sophomore novel *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994) as texts which invoke the passing theme in response to the ‘black is beautiful’ movement. Historically, ‘whiteness’ and ‘beauty’ have long been mutually evocative in the Western imagination. As Richard Dyer suggests, the colour white “carr[ies] the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority,” but that, “[e]ven without this philosophical gloss, white people have long considered themselves the most beautiful of people, especially white women” (71). This very discourse of beauty was used to justify the treatment of black women in plantation slavery. Shirley Tate, author of *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (2009), observes that in the United States and Caribbean, “European concepts of beauty were based on notions of purity, delicacy, modesty, asexuality and physical frailty” and “[w]hiteness was about the embodiment of beauty while black women were viewed as physically strong, immodest and as exuding an animal sensuality” (“Black Beauty” 301). As bell hooks notes, this discourse has since permeated the “black community”; “the fair-skinned black woman who most nearly resembled white women was seen as the ‘lady’ and placed on a pedestal while darker-skinned women were seen as bitches and whores” (*Ain’t I A Woman* 110; also cited in Dyer 71).

The ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement drew its energy from the determination to invert, undermine, and reject this discourse. As Maxine Leeds Craig suggests the ‘Black is Beautiful’ slogan, although “never synonymous with any one political organization,” was embraced “to refer to the new practices of self-presentation and the newly expressed appreciation of dark skin and tightly curled hair that became widespread in African American communities in the late-1960s and early-1970s” (23). There is an assumption that as soon as ‘Black became Beautiful’ passing (and light skin) became passé, that this wave of pro-black rhetoric somehow washed away any remaining traces of this history of colourist discrimination. Danzy Senna, who grew up in the post-civil rights era, recalls that

despite her own ability to pass-for-white, her parents, “influenced by the Black Power movement,” encouraged her to self-identify as black, “[b]ecause ‘Black is Beautiful’” and “[b]ecause Black is not a burden, but a privilege” (“Mulatto Millennium” 16). Ytasha Womack suggests that the topic of passing was “largely shunned with the dawning of the ‘Black is Beautiful’ and Civil Rights movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s” (Womack 80), and even the director of *Imitation of Life* (1959) Douglas Sirk later suggested that his work “is about the situation of the blacks [sic] before the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’” (Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* 130; and qtd. in Stern 284).

Certainly, the shift towards a ‘Black is Beautiful’ philosophy in the late 1960s undermined the very ethnocentric and literary notions of feminine beauty that the passing genre celebrates; but it therefore seems logical that black women writers who are themselves too dark-to-pass would revisit the genre in order to respond to this change. With additional reference to William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* and Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), I consider Morrison’s, Bambara’s, and Neely’s work in light of this changing discourse of ‘beauty,’ desirability, ‘race,’ and embodiment, and as responses to the expression of colourism as an aesthetic preference.

In Chapter 2, “Passing and Privilege: Colour, Class and Capital,” I discuss the ways that Gloria Naylor in *Linden Hills* (1985) and Dorothy West in *The Wedding* (1995) invoke and revisit the passing genre’s themes of family, marriage, and descent to explore the persisting relationship between “whiteness” and privilege among the black middle classes. The origins of colourism as an economic and class-based discourse can be traced back to plantation slavery. F. James Davis suggests that a “‘genteel tradition’ among mulattoes began in the ‘big house’ on the plantation,” when “slave servants learned white manners, habits, beliefs, and the master’s English rather than the pidgin dialect of the field hands” (39). Indeed, “[m]ixed-race slaves were more likely than blacks to receive some education, to eat from Big House’s kitchen, to be better clothed and shod, and have greater freedom of movement on and off the plantation” (Bodenhorn 66). Post-

emancipation, light-skin continued to be associated with various forms of privilege (social, cultural, economic) and this trait was coveted and carefully guarded by the black upper classes. Despite the fact that the very Jim Crow legislation ('one-drop' hypodescent rules, anti-miscegenation laws and *de jure* segregation) that cultivated the desire to pass-for-white began to erode in the decades following *Brown vs. Board* (1954), the *Civil Rights Act* (1964), the *Voting Rights Act* (1965) and *Loving vs. Virginia* (1967), this did little to quash the persisting synergy between status and light-skin among African Americans. As Kimberly Norwood and Violeta Solonova Foreman note, darker-skinned African Americans are "arrested and incarcerated at higher-percentages," "receive longer prison sentences," and "are more likely to be on death row," than light-skinned African Americans who remain "more employable and employed," "earn more money, have more overall wealth, tend to marry higher on the socioeconomic ladder, and are perceived as being more competent than darker-skinned blacks" (16). I suggest that Naylor and West revisit and revise the plot and tropes of two seminal passing novels, Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) to address the relationship between colour, class, and capital in twentieth century America, specifically the ways that whiteness, as a form of a symbolic capital, is passed from generation to generation.

And in Chapter 3 with reference to Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), I examine how Alice Walker and Toni Morrison invoke the passing theme in their short stories of the 1980s by way of interrogating the very identity politics that Bambara and Neely celebrate. One of the most common criticisms levied at passing novels is that they reinforce essentialism by insisting upon notions of 'authentic' race. Ironically, it is this very same dynamic (the essentialising of identity) that re-emerges in the Black Nationalist, Black Power, 'Black is Beautiful' movements of late-1960s and 1970s to encode 'authentic' blackness. As Norwood explains, the very one-drop rule (which I return to shortly) "initially used to enslave Blacks" (and for that matter, to maintain racial distinctions in the passing genre) ironically, "has now become a unifier of Black people," "is currently

warmly embraced by many in the Black community," and "has come to be considered essential to maintaining pride in the Black ethnic identity" ("Virulence" 159-60fn38). Norwood describes this guarding of authentic blackness as "BlackThink™" – an inverted form of colourism where darker skinned African Americans exclude and discriminate against those with lighter skin:

Blackthink™ is a form of prejudice. It assumes and demands that all Black people think a certain way. It presumes that all Blacks are unquestionably liberal, pro-affirmative action, pro-choice, pro-gay rights, pro-welfare, and most definitely anti-Republican. Some segments of our society not only harbour this presumption but go a step further: they devalue and marginalise those who fail to comply with Blackthink™. These segments of society are the self-appointed guardians of blackness [...].

The dissenter [...] is de-blacked [...and] strip[ed...] of his or her racial identity. ("Virulence of Blackthink™" 147)<sup>25</sup>

This ideology, which typically finds expression in terms of whether an individual is "black enough," is something that Alice Walker in particular attempts to unpack in her short fiction. In the final chapter of this thesis then, I suggest that in Walker's "Source" and Morrison's "Recitatif," the writers both make sustained intertextual references to *Passing* to undermine the notion that blackness can be measured, located or authenticated in any way and thus destabilise the foundations of contemporary identity politics. Finally, in the Conclusion to this thesis, I return to Morrison's *God Help the Child* by way of summarising and reflecting on the key themes of each chapter and discussing the continued poignancy of the passing figure in African American women's writing.

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<sup>25</sup> A search on The United States Patent and Trademark Office website reveals that Norwood applied to trademark this phrase, first in 2004 and then in 2006 and thus presents it with a '™' sign. Athlete Jesse Owens uses the same phrase in his 1971 autobiography with Paul Neimark, fittingly subtitled, "My Life as a Black Man and an White Man". Owens uses the phrase to denounce black militants, a stance he seemingly reconsidered in his next book *I Have Changed*. See Edmondson (70-86).

## **Passing and Slavery**

As my chapter preview suggests, these contemporary works, undoubtedly look back to the origins and genealogy of passing in antebellum slavery. Indeed, as Kimberly Jade Norwood, Violeta Solonova Foreman, and Randall Kennedy observe, there are clear historical connections between slavery, colourism and passing. Norwood and Foreman explain that as North American slavery evolved into a racialised system of oppression, “needs, beliefs, justifications, and practices had the effect of placing white skin at a premium and dehumanizing black skin” (15). “It was during these times,” they argue, “that colorism took root” for “[t]he sexual unions between whites and blacks – and largely between enslaved African women and their white male captors – produced [mulatto] children,” who were “often lighter than Africans in skin color,” and who “were preferred by white society [...] because lighter-skin blacks were considered more aesthetically appealing and intellectually superior to pure Africans” (15). Moreover, as Kennedy notes, “[i]n the antebellum period, enslaved blacks who appeared to be white often fled bondage by seeking to pass” (*Sellout* 146). Harryette Mullen thus argues, “[t]he logic of passing is intrinsic in the logic of slavery, which defines the black as a facsimile or counterfeit of the white in order to deny the rights and privileges of whiteness” (82). Indeed, it is no coincidence that historians suggest that the origins of the term ‘passing’ may derive from the note or ‘pass’ written for slaves by their masters to enable them to leave the plantation without being mistaken as runaways (Bennett, *The Passing Figure* 36; Moynihan *Passing into the Present* 5).<sup>26</sup>

The textual link between passing and slavery extends beyond the slave pass; the literary passing narrative and slave narrative also share a literary heritage. As Mae Henderson notes, “[g]enealogically, the narrative of passing

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<sup>26</sup> See Carol Boyce Davies’s critique of Steve McQueen’s academy award winning film *12 Years a Slave* in which she quite rightly observes that the threat of passing is muted in the film.

traces its lineage back to the nineteenth-century African American slave narrative” and “[e]lements of the passing narrative” can be found in works about slavery including William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860), William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, A Tale of the Southern States* (1864), Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857); Hannah Craft’s recently rediscovered *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* (c. 1853-60); Richard Hildreth’s *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836); and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852; Introduction xxiii-xxiv; xxxii-iv).<sup>27</sup>

Contemporary, post-civil rights writers have continued this literary relationship. There are traces of the neo-slave narrative genre in some of the works I discuss here; West’s narrative of Old Sir and Ebony Woman in *The Wedding*, Naylor’s account of Luwana Packerville Nedeed in *Linden Hills*, and Walker’s reference to Louisa Picquet in “Source” all suggest a determination to revisit a slave past. Indeed, I would suggest that the rise of neo-slave narratives in the 1970s and 1980s and the trend for rewriting passing in these same decades parallel each other. Ashraf Rushdy argues:

In the 1960s a set of intellectual and social conditions associated with the civil rights [sic] and Black Power movements generated a change in the historiography of slavery affecting the fictional representation of slavery from the late sixties to the present. (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 3)

Similar conditions foster a return to the historical passing genre, too. A fantastic example of a contemporary text that makes reference to passing in order to

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the significance of Hannah Craft’s work, particularly in the context of black women’s writing, see Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s introduction to Craft’s book (ix - lxxiv). See also Mullen’s reading of Harriet Jacobs’s Uncle Benjamin who passes-for-white (Jacobs “IV. The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Male”; Mullen 80)

discuss the history of slavery is Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1974).<sup>28</sup> Jones's narrator Ursa is light enough to pass and her light skin reminds her friend Sal Cooper of a painful past:

"You know every since I first laid eyes on you I thought you was one of my long-lost relatives. I can't help it, I just kept feeling that you kin to me ..." [...]

Then she explained, "My mother came out the darkest, and so they wouldn't claim her. I don't know who they are. I don't even know what they look like. Mama probably wouldn't even know them now. She think they up in New York somewhere now though, passing. I don't know, but when I first saw you, I had that feeling."

"I couldn't pass," I said. I had to say something. I felt resentful, and a little angry because she was saying those things to me. (*Corregidora* 71-72)<sup>29</sup>

The resonance of this passage for Morrison, who edited *Corregidora*, is clear. In *God Help the Child*, Sweetness, just like Sal, has a grandmother who deserted her child for being too dark-skinned and disappeared over the colour line. Both Sal and Sweetness are still haunted by the impact of their grandmother's actions, with Sal seeing her grandmother in *Corregidora*, and Sweetness conjuring hers in her imagination. Indeed, Morrison was so profoundly moved by the experience of reading Jones's prose that she "shuddered before the awesome power of this young woman," deciding that "no novel about any black woman could ever be the same after this" (Morrison, "Toni Morrison" 109-110).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This is not Jones's only reference to passing. In her short story, "White Rat," she inverts the traditional passing narrative to describe the experiences of a light-skinned man who despite being presented with several opportunities to pass-for-white, refuses to do so. See also Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) which in the light-skinned Vyry is also light-enough to pass for white (15).

<sup>29</sup> In her reading of this extract, Caroline A. Streeter – writing in 2004 – similarly recognizes that "[a]lthough some critics regard the mulatta as an anachronistic figure [...] political and social developments of the post-Civil Rights period [...] warrant new assessments of the mulatta's relevance to contemporary culture" (*Tragic No More* 783).

<sup>30</sup> For more on Morrison and Jones's literary relationship, see Denard (6), and Stephanie Li, *Toni Morrison: A Biography* (23).

Significantly, Jones's work offers a radical retort to William Wells Brown's passing novel *Clotelle; The Colored Heroine* (1867) in which he states that, "the greater portion of the colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man" (Ch. I).<sup>31</sup> In *Corregidora*, Ursula's status as a possible passing figure refutes this claim, and her whiteness is evidence of her great-grandmother and grandmother's rapes at the hands of their slave master. Ursula's light-skinned body thus testifies to the horrors of slavery. Coincidentally, Bennett suggests "the act of passing, in contemporary fiction, has been replaced by allusions and mock re-creations" because – paraphrasing Morrison's final line in *Beloved* – "perhaps the traditional passing narrative is no longer a story we should pass on" (208). The ambivalent rendering of passing, he suggests, reflects,

the tension between the desire to turn away and the need to face bravely those stories that threaten our sanity yet require our attention, stories that are full of pain and yet also hold the promise of working through the pain. ("Toni Morrison" 208)

His description actually better fits Jones's work in which "stories that threaten our sanity," specifically, the "stories" of Ursula's foremother's rape are passed down to future generations (77-8):

"My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they burned everything to play like it didn't never happen." (9)

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as Naylor notes, "[w]hile William Wells Brown was cloning his female slaves in the image of the white cult of true womanhood, Harriet Jacobs was living the life of an enslaved mulatto, and her account of how she retained her dignity under sexual assault is vastly different" to Brown's picture ("Love and Sex" 272).

In the context of white racist erasure of this “herstory” and in the absence of official documentation that attests to their experiences, Ursula’s light-skinned body becomes an instrument for the telling of this tale, a vessel for matrilineal genealogy, and a visible parchment within which this painful history is inscribed (77-8). That Ursula is unable to conceive a child by the end of the novel, suggests, however, Jones’s wish to separate the body (as text) from the testimonial text that Ursula is entrusted to bequeath to future generations. This she can continue to share, as she does with Mutt, through testifying, and thus is able to sustain, in another way, her foremothers’ project of “convert[ing] the female body into a form of documentation,” a living history that survives the fabrications and deletions of master narratives concerning the nature of slavery” (Li “Love and Trauma” (132).<sup>32</sup> Clearly then, the relationship between passing and slavery prevails in post-civil rights literature.

### **Genealogy**

Passing is more than a historical event or a literary genre. Passing is a trope that facilitates a process of revisiting this past, which enables a passing back, beyond, between, on, and through literary and historical lineages that impact our current conceptualisation of race, class, gender, and colour.<sup>33</sup> This project thus repeatedly turns to the idea of ‘genealogy’ as a way of articulating the usefulness of the passing trope to writers who are interested in understanding the relationship between the present and the past. Or in other words, I am interested in the ways

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the novel, see Chapter 2 of Ashraf Rushdy’s *Remembering Generations* (2001) and Joanne Lipson Freed’s “Gendered Narratives of Trauma and Revision in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*” (2011). For a comparison of *Corregidora* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) see Joyce Pettis “‘She Sung Back in Return’: Literary (Re)vision and Transformation in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*” (1990).

<sup>33</sup> For more on black women writers and ancestral lineage, see Venetria K. Patton’s *The Grasp That Reaches Beyond the Grave* (2013) and Cheryl A. Wall’s *Worrying the Line* (2005). Alice Walker’s essays “Looking for Zora,” “Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale” and “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” continue to be seminal texts in this area, as does Morrison’s “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (2008).

black women writers signify on, excavate and reconstruct canonical passing texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by way of exploring the connections between ‘then’ and ‘now’. When I use the word ‘genealogy’ in this project, I therefore use it in a multivalent sense: I use it to describe the relationship of individuals to their ancestors; lineage, descent and heritage; processes of tracing, revisiting and locating; and the relationship between parents and children. Plus, I toy with the theoretical and historical connotations of this term in our understanding of how race is genealogically inscribed and constructed.

Race itself has been reified as biological genealogy through one-drop rules and hypodescent legislation and the passing genre is thus one of racial genealogy and about those who seek to traverse its power. The “one-drop rule” in Southern states decreed that a “single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person black” and this was reinforced by “hypo-descent” rules in which “racially mixed persons are assigned the status of the subordinate group” (F.J. Davis 5).<sup>34</sup> As Davis explains, “[t]his definition [which] emerged from the American South to become the nation’s definition [was] generally accepted by whites and black alike” and “is taken for granted by judges, affirmative action officers, and black protesters as it is by Ku Klux Klansmen” (F.J. Davis 5).<sup>35</sup> As Valerie Smith observes, this genealogical logic underpins “narratives of passing, whether written by African American or by white authors” in that they “presume the African American internalization of the ‘one-drop’ and the related ‘hypo-descent’ rules” (44). For

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<sup>34</sup> This is a slightly sweeping account of the history of one-drop legislation in the United States. For more details, please see Kevin D. Brown’s, “The Rise and Fall of the One-Drop Rule: How the Importance of Color Came to Eclipse Race” (2014) and F. James Davis’s, *Who is Black?* (1991). For a really interesting mediation on “drops of blackness” see Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and its depiction of Liberty Paint’s construction of optic whiteness (162-166, 177-178), also discussed in Mullen’s “Optic White” (74).

<sup>35</sup> In her book *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*, historian Teresa C. Zackodnik recounts a case (*Johnson v. Boon* 1843) in which the judge “instructed the jury to give reputation at least as much weight as they would genealogy” in determining racial status (30). This of course complicates historical narratives about the power of one-drop and hypodescent legislation.

Marcia Alesan Dawkins, this genealogical encoding of race as ‘blood’ helps us to better understand how passing operates as metonymy, for “metonymy makes multiracial people [the whole] black by finding one drop of black blood [the part] that overpowers and spoils white blood” (23).

As a literary theme, passing sits precisely at the nexus between the colour line and an ancestral one, and revisiting the passing genre offers post-civil rights writers to the opportunity to undertake their own forms of genealogy, to retrace, unveil, and uncover a racialised past – however eroded and fragmented this may be – and to figuratively examine the limitations involved in this process. In Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, for instance, Milkman can only retrace his ancestry as far as Sing, who “looked like a white woman,” and who “probably started passing like the rest of ‘em” (288). Bennett rightly argues that this “serves to remind the reader of one of the many ways that families became cut off from their past,” that “[t]he past [...] can never fully be retrieved, and [that] the act of passing for white presents special challenges to those who need the past” (“Toni Morrison” 209). Indeed, Bennett’s claim that, “[p]assing, which is associated with the past, becomes important for understanding subsequent generations” is borne out in Morrison and Jones’s use of the passing genre in *God Help the Child* and *Corregidora* (“Toni Morrison” 210). In fact, Milkman parallels Sweetness and Sal in that each character harkens back to a history of passing (symbolised by the grandmother figure) which is, by its very nature, impossible to fully recover.

This is because, despite the estimates of Walter White and Roi Ottley, “it is impossible to know how many African-Americans actually joined the white race, in over three hundred years of racial interaction, since those individuals carefully erased the traces of their passage” (Mullen 73). Kawash similarly observes that “virtually nothing beyond the anecdotal is known about the magnitude or distribution of actual race passing in the United States at any time” because “the very condition for passing is secrecy” (*Dislocating* 127). Kawash’s observation in 1994 that “[t]hose who have passed or whose ancestors passed from black to white have produced no literature of passing” (73), predates the growth in non-

fictional and biographical accounts at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which confirmed an appetite for recovering ‘real’ histories of passing (which F. James Davis estimates peaked between 1880 and 1925; 56). Bliss Broyard’s reflection on her father, the literary critic and journalist, Anatole Broyard, in *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life - A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (2008), Martha A Sandweiss’s *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line* (2009) and Daniel Sharfstein’s *The Invisible Line: Three American Families and the Secret Journey from Black to White* (2011) are but a few examples of well-known histories and biographies of racial passing. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s essay on Broyard, “The Passing of Anatole Broyard” (1997) and Dawkins’s recent book *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (2012) additionally combine real-life histories of passing while utilising literary theories and readings.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it was the glimmer of a dispatch from across the colour line that made James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) such an exciting publication, for originally, the text was thought to be a genuine memoir [Kawash “(Passing for)” 59].<sup>37</sup>

Despite not attending to race, Michel Foucault uses the very word “genealogy,” as a way of considering processes by which we might attempt to uncover and excavate these fragmented histories. As Thomas Flynn assesses, “[a]ll of Foucault’s major works are histories of a sort,” with his earlier works constituting “archaeologies” and his later ones, “genealogies”; both ideas are useful here (28). His “archaeologies of knowledge,” such as *Madness and Civilisation* (1960) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), are particularly concerned with uncovering the ways that discourse masquerades as a given, as history *a priori*, or the ways that “systems [...] establish statements as events [...] and as things,” (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* 145, also qtd. in Flynn 29). This

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<sup>36</sup> See also, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Passing of Anatole Broyard” (1997).

<sup>37</sup> For more autobiography and passing, see Bennett, “Black by Popular Demand: Contemporary Autobiography and the Passing Theme” (2002). See also Toi Derricotte’s *The Black Notebooks* and Adrian Piper’s *Passing For Black/Passing For White* for contemporary examples of non-fiction about passing.

description befits the ways that a discourse of racial difference has been reified through legislative hypodescent and one-drop rules in the United States.

Foucault's genealogies of power, such as *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84), "move[...] beyond the earlier method in its explicit focus on power and bodies" (Flynn 34), and this model is useful for considering the threat that the passing body poses to these systems. Crucially, Foucault's genealogical method recognises that history is "gray," "entangled," and "confused" and that it resists any conclusive readings (Foucault "Nietzsche" 76). As Greg Dimitriadis very usefully summarises, "[g]enealogy as a method underscores the interpretive nature of any narration of the past" because "the historical past is always and inevitably read through contemporary interests and concerns" (114). Indeed, as Bennett suggests of Morrison's *Jazz*, "[t]ruth, history, and identity are shaped by words and consciousness" ("Toni Morrison" 211). Her character Golden Gray (notice that Morrison and Foucault use the same word - 'Gray') symbolises an "unhealthy love that is situated in the past like a recessive gene" and to whom the "unnatural and sick love" of Joe and Violet Trace "can be [pun intended] traced" (Bennett "Toni Morrison" 211). Although as a passing figure, Golden Gray "does not pass down his genes, he has an effect on the lives of those who came after him" and "the passing narrative, specifically the story of Golden Gray, may determine as much or as perhaps more than do genes" (Bennett "Toni Morrison" 211).

Bearing these contexts in mind, I close each chapter with a reflection on how each author uses the passing theme, much like Morrison, to undertake (and comment on) racial genealogy. I conclude Chapter 1 with a discussion of how Neely uses the metaphor of detection and research to facilitate a search for an authentic and 'true' racial history in *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994). I conclude Chapter 2 with a reflection on how Naylor and West invoke passing to reconstruct a mulatta herstory and an interracial genealogy. And finally, in Chapter 3, I discuss the ways that Morrison and Walker use the passing theme in "Source" and "Recitatif" to reflect on the

difficulties of recovering any kind racial genealogy. I also invite the reader to look out for the genealogical stories that I have spliced between each chapter. These stories, shared by some of the authors I feature here, demonstrate how passing and genealogy are interrelated tropes.

### **Passing and Hauntology**

As Bennett has observed in his more recent book *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (2014), “the passing figure,” alongside “the invisible man, the zoot suit, [and] the lynched corpse” is a ghost that haunts the African American literary tradition symbolising “what it means to be rendered invisible” (18). Therefore another useful way of interpreting the particular poignancy of racial passing as a trope for considering revisititation, remembrance, and history, is to consider it emblematic of Jacques Derrida’s neologism “hauntology,” a term he first coined in *Spectres of Marx* (10, 63). That “hauntology” is a French homonym for “ontology” or “a thinking of Being” (10), that the two words in effect pass for each other is fitting, especially given that Derrida’s interest in “spectrality” is concerned with the same ontological questions of “substance” and “essence” as the passing genre. Moreover, like the passing figure, who occupies a liminal space between black and white, Derrida’s spectres negotiate the space “between all the ‘two’s’ [sic] one likes,” “between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life” (*Spectres* xviii, 13).<sup>38</sup>

For Derrida, hauntology, like passing “interrupts all specularity” and resists being seen. Like genealogy, hauntology has the power to blur the boundaries between past and present, it “desynchronizes [and] recalls us to anachrony” (*Spectres* 6). In his article “Miscegenated Time: The Spectral Body, Race, and Temporality in *Light in August*” (2000), Krister Friday illustrates these

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<sup>38</sup> See Thomas Mical’s “Hauntology, or Spectral Space” (2007) for a fuller account of the ways that “hauntology” and “ontology” disrupt notions linear interpretations of the past and present.

interconnections by suggesting that William Faulkner's passing figure, Joe Christmas, "assumes a [Derridean] spectrality" in his blurring of "the border between the present [...] and everything that can be opposed to it" (Friday 44; Derrida 39). Moreover, Friday argues that miscegenation represents "the very process of historical change and genealogical transmission," a disrupting of lineage, and the notion of inheritance that Foucault hints at (42). "[T]he miscegenated body," then, "becomes a product of spectral history – lost below the level of appearance – that denies recapitulation of its genealogy" (Friday 50).

The study of literary passing can thus be construed as the study of pale-skinned, miscegenated literary ghosts – Chesnutt's Rena, Brown's Isabella and Clotel, and Larsen's Clare – haunt the works I discuss here. Indeed, the passing figure has always occupied a spectral position in the American imagination. Ginsberg argues that the "spectre of race passing" is associated with the threat of "'invisible blackness' [...]" which "threatened the security of white identity on both a societal and an individual level," for "when 'race' is no longer visible, it is no longer intelligible: if 'white' can be 'black,' what is white?" (8).<sup>39</sup> As Susan Gubar notes, Zora Neale Hurston concurs. In her autobiographical reflection on race, "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (1928) she reflects that "[n]o brown spectre pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed" (Hurston "How it Feels" 153; Gubar *Race Changes*, 244). Gubar concludes that "[b]rown specters and dark ghosts haunting the house of the white imagination attest to the artists' sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious efforts to buttress privileges made fragile by the inevitable awareness produced in a democratic society that such entitlements are indefensible" (244), and yet as the texts I include here reveal, the black literary imagination is similarly haunted by the spectre of whiteness. Borrowing the words of Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff, "Passing demands a desire to become

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<sup>39</sup> This phrase is attributed to Joel Williamson. See *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (1980; 98).

invisible. A ghost-life" (qtd. in Gubar 104).<sup>40</sup> And so this project is additionally concerned with ghostly appearances of "whiteness" in each text.

I invite the reader to track the racial hauntings present in each text I discuss. For instance, in Neely's *Blanche White* series, Blanche's rape by a white man, David Lee Palmer, haunts her (*Blanche on the Lam*, 63). This 'miscegenous rape' of a black female domestic worker in the 1980s by a white man in the home of his family has resonances of the rape of black female house slaves by their masters in the master's house, as does Blanche's silence; history suggests the authorities will do little to help her. Interestingly, the absence here is the mulatto offspring of such unions – indeed, Blanche, who never has children of her own, ponders the absence of a child throughout the novels. The Coles's house in West's *The Wedding* is also haunted. In the opening pages, Gram is "snatched out of sleep by the smell of death on the sighing wind coming through the window" of her bedroom which foreshadows the death of Tina, a tragic mulatta character (29). Moreover, Elizabeth Muther argues that in this novel, [t]he house represents the body of death," "a deathly embodiment" of the falseness of Clark and Corinne's marriage, and "contains ghosts" for it is the same house that Clark's father, Isaac, spent his boyhood summers (196-7). West's ghosts, then, help to convey a sense of the past repeating in the present.

In *Linden Hills*, Luther Nedeed, a mortician, locks his wife Willa in his basement morgue and their son dies in her arms. There she sees the ghosts of his foremothers and gathering strength from them, she resurrects and emerges as the abject undead, carrying her son in her arms, pushing Luther into their fire, and causing their house to burn to the ground. And finally, it is memories that haunt the characters in Morrison and Walker's short fiction. In "Source" Irene cannot shake the memory of one of her students, Fania, who is intrigued by narratives of slavery and miscegenation, and in Morrison's "Recitatif", neither Twyla nor

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<sup>40</sup> The quote is taken from Cliff's book *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me To Despise* (1980).

Roberta can break free from the haunting memories of their time at St. Bonny's Home for Children, or the incident with Maggie (a passing figure) in the orchard one Easter.

The notion of the spectral is also a useful analogy for the efforts we must make to see the passing figure in contemporary works. The writers I discuss here deliberately problematize, circumvent and renounce the generic, stereotype-ridden, and politically contentious passing figure, a strategy that makes it harder to trace and detect 'passing' in their work (in many ways the passing figure is passing within the texts I discuss).<sup>41</sup> But even if, as Bennett suggests, we can only really trace "the brief infiltrations and masked appearances of this discomforting, controversial, or unwanted figure" in contemporary literature ("Toni Morrison" 206), to borrow Elaine Ginsberg's phrase, the "spectre of passing" continues to haunt the African-American literary imagination in the post-civil rights era (8).

### **Literary Lineages: Tragic Mulattoes and Abandoned Mammies**

I privilege a reading of black women's writing in this project because the conventions of the passing genre are predominantly shaped by the white and male American literary imaginations and very rarely reflect the experiences of black women without drawing upon racist and sexist stereotypes. In addition to Brown, Chesnutt, Johnson, and Hurst who I focus on in this project, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, George Schuyler, Chester Himes, Philip Roth, Walter White, Walter Mosley, Ralph Ellison, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes all take the racially ambiguous passing-for-white figure as the subject for their work (Bennett, *Passing Figure* 3); but a brief survey of how many black women writers have published novels with plots that pivot around passing reveals surprisingly few names. Until the dawn of the "Mulatto Millennium," Hannah

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<sup>41</sup> For a particularly useful discussion of the relationship between writing, passing, and literary 'evasion,' 'concealment,' and transcendence, see Moynihan, *Passing into the Present* (4).

Craft, Frances E. W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen are the six black women authors since 1860 to write novels that focus on passing.<sup>42</sup>

There are two recurring and stereotypical characters in the genre that speak to the genealogical resonances of passing – the ‘tragic mulatta’ and her ‘abandoned mammy,’ archetypes that both Naylor and West in particular draw upon (see Chapter 2). By way of introduction to these characters, I discuss their literary genealogy and explore the ways that Alice Walker and her daughter Rebecca Walker, as well as Lisa Jones, the daughter of Amiri Baraka and Hettie Jones, all invoke the passing narrative in their biographical reflections on family life by way of confronting these stereotypes.

The passing genre is the narrative home to the ‘tragic mulatta,’ that devastatingly attractive light-skinned, mixed race woman who, torn between two worlds and an overwhelming (and often sexualized) desire to have what is not hers, is fated to a heartbreakingly tragic end. The character is thought to originate in the abolitionist fiction of Lydia Maria Child, namely “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843).<sup>43</sup> As Hortense Spillers notes, even though “[i]n an inventory of American ideas, the thematic of the ‘tragic mulatto/a’ seems to disappear at the end of the nineteenth century,” “certain writers in the United States have pursued this configuration of character well into the twentieth,” and often with little consideration as to why (“Notes” 301). White authored novels of the late-1920s and early-1930s such as Vera Caspary’s *The White Girl* (1929)

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<sup>42</sup> See Berzon’s *Neither White Nor Black* for a survey of all American fiction featuring mulatto characters between 1853 and 1977 (53-81).

<sup>43</sup> For detailed analysis of Child’s work, see Roberts (136-137; 146). Roberts suggests that Childs’ writing is more innovative than typically thought and that “[i]nstead of allowing the Tragic Mulatta to remain a victim, patronized and isolated in her beauty, her whiteness and her suffering, Child’s heroines assimilate into the American middle class and make common cause with other ex-slaves. It is as if Child dismantles the very genre she is often credited with inventing” (Roberts 146). For similarities between the tragic mulatta and the jezebel stereotype, see K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy* (46; also quoted in Pilgrim ‘Tragic Mulatto’).

Geoffrey Barnes' *Dark Lustre* (1932), Evans Wall's lesser known but Pulitzer Prize-nominated *The No Nation Girl* (1929), and Mary Stanley's *Gulf Stream* (1930) all contain a tragic mulatto character (Berzon 63; see also S.Brown 194-5). The film adaptations of these texts, for example, Elia Kazan's *Pinky* (1949), adapted from Cid Rickett Sumner's novel *Quality* (1946), the Broadway and film adaptations of Edna Ferber's novel *Showboat* (1929) and the 1934 and 1959 screen adaptations of Hurst's *Imitation of Life* offer further evidence of this stereotypical image of light-skinned women (Bogle 147-153; Pilgrim "Tragic Mulatto").

Sterling Brown's conclusions that "the whole desire of [the tragic mulatta's] life is to find a white love, and then go down, accompanied by slow music, to a tragic end," and that "[h]er fate is so severe that in some works disclosure of 'the single drop of midnight...' in her veins makes her commit suicide" hold true ("Negro Character" 196). Rena Walden, rejected by her 'white knight' George Tryon, and hounded by the sinister Wain runs away into the woods where she falls, catches a fever and dies. Clare Kendry, married to white businessman John Bellew, 'mysteriously' plummets from the window of a top floor Harlem brownstone after her husband finds out that she has been passing. Several of William Wells Brown's "all-but-white" characters in all three versions of *Clotel*(le) commit suicide after pinning their hopes on white men for manumission.<sup>44</sup> This stereotype is undeniably gendered in its construction.

For both Sterling and Berzon, the tragic mulatta character is "usually a product of the white man's imagination," [emphasis mine] and reflects,

his deepest (usually unspoken) fantasies about the largest marginal group in our society: specifically, his assumption that the mixed blood [sic] yearns to be white and is doomed to unhappiness and despair because of this impossible dream. (Berzon 99)

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<sup>44</sup> For a more complex reading of the tragic mulatto's function in literature, see Fabi *Passing and the Rise of the African American novel* (3). I borrow the phrase "all but white" from her (13). See also Sollors *Neither White Nor Black Yet Both* (220 – 245).

As Spillers suggests, “the mulatto in the text of fiction provides a strategy for naming and celebrating the [white male] phallus” or “[i]n other words, the play and interplay of an open, undisguised sexuality are mapped on the body of the mulatto character, who allows the dominant culture to say without parting its lips that ‘we have willed to sin’” (“Notes” 304). In traditional passing novels, then, the mulatta figure silently testifies to the widespread sexual exploitation of black women by white slaveholders, and in her literary incarnation arguably permits white male writers to both revel in her beauty and form and guiltily expunge, through her poetic death, all traces of this transgression.

Darker-skinned female characters frequently appear in passing novels as the mothers of the tragic mulatto, as ‘abandoned mammies’ who are tragically rejected or disowned by their own children. Langston Hughes’s short story, “Passing” (1956) for instance, takes the form of a letter from a son, who is passing-for-white, to his mother confessing that he “felt like a dog, passing you downtown last night and not speaking to you” after they are forced to ignore each other on the street while he is with his white girlfriend (“Passing” 51; see also Mullen 79). As Judith Berzon observes, “In *The House Behind the Cedars*, both brother and sister must reject their dark-skinned mother [Molly],” and it is “[b]ecause Rena Walden cannot maintain the estrangement of her mother [that] the beautiful mulatto ultimately meets her death” (144). Molly therefore loses Rena not once but twice in *The House Behind the Cedars*, first when Rena passes-for-white, and second when she passes away.

Even though Molly is not white, like the traditional Mammy character she worships at the altar of “whiteness” or as Chesnutt phrases it, “she liked to see the distant glow of the celestial city and to recall the days when she had basked in its radiance” (111).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the reader only ever sees Molly through the invisible, presumably ‘white’ masculine gaze of the narrator, or through the ‘eyes’ of male characters; for example, Judge Straight perceives her as possessing a

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<sup>45</sup> For more on the historical origins of the ‘mammy’ stereotype, see Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985).

“certain pathetic dignity” – a far from flattering portrait of black womanhood (32). Curiously, Molly was once a light-skinned beauty like her daughter, but Chesnutt cannot help but characterize the older Molly as a traditional dark-skinned mammy stating that although “her complexion in her youth was of an ivory tint, [by] the period of this story, time had darkened [it] measurably” (108). Ageist, as well as racist and sexist thinking, then, skew the depiction of women in passing novels.

Perhaps the most memorable ‘abandoned mammy’ of the genre is Delilah in Fannie Hurst *Imitation of Life* (1933), who is recast as Annie in Douglas Sirk’s 1959 film adaptation.<sup>46</sup> As Berzon notes, it is not only the tragic mulatta that suffers for her transgressions; “other characters [can] meet death [...] because of someone else’s crossing of the racial barrier” (45). In Hurst’s novel, devastated by her daughter Peola’s rejection – who, upon deciding to pass-for-white cannot even bring herself to touch her mother – Delilah dies of a broken heart (see Ch. 39-43). In a transference of fate from the tragic mulatta daughter to her mother who is guilty of the ‘sin’ of miscegenation, Hurst’s complication of the traditional mammy stereotype cautions against race-mixing by warning what happens to black women who give birth to ‘white’ children of their own: their child will desert them. Indeed, in Chesnutt’s work, Molly accepts her punishment, concluding that “[s]he must lose her daughter as well as her son, and this would be the penance for her sin” of miscegenation (22). Moreover, as Valerie Smith notes “the figure of the black mother,” “the self-sacrificing maternal body, where conservative racial and gender ideologies are typically lodged in narrative” underpins the political message offered by passing narratives:

Because these works all conflate the light-skinned daughter’s rejection of their own subordinate status with their rejection of their mothers, readers or viewers are manipulated into criticizing rather than supporting these rebellious light-skinned women. (45)

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<sup>46</sup> John Stahl also directed an adaptation of Hurst’s novel the year after its publication in 1934, which as Lori Harrison-Kahan has noted, positions whiteness “as the privileged identity, a positioning that the 1959 adaptation successfully critiques” (19).

In Sirk's adaptation, Annie – played by Juanita Moore – memorably meets the same fate as Delilah. As Karla Holloway explains, the image of Annie's funeral is indelibly etched in black cultural memory:

It was 1959, and a generation of African American girls who accompanied their mothers to movies and drive-ins to see the just released *Imitation of Life* saw their mothers crying. Most had no idea why a film would provoke the great heaving sobs and wet hankies [...] but clearly understood that some mighty experience had moved mothers to tears. (Holloway, *Passed On* 104)

The cultural impact of *Imitation of Life* on African American culture cannot be understated. As Holloway explains, “*Imitation of Life* resonated throughout the African American community” and Annie’s deathbed moment and her funeral service, accompanied by Mahalia Jackson’s rendering of the spiritual ‘Soon Ah Will be Done,’ were to become singularly important in African American film history and in African American households as well” (*Passed On* 104). Similarly, Henry Louis Gates has said that “[n]o film was more important to me as a ‘colored’ child growing up in West Virginia; the funeral scene has to move even the most stoic viewer to tears” (Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, Back Matter). Even though, as Holloway notes, the film “provoked the teary-eyed bonding of a generation of mothers and daughters” who were brought closer by a black mother’s rejection by her ‘white’ daughter (*Passed On* 106), the film seems to underscore a sense of dissonance between Alice Walker and her daughter, the writer Rebecca Walker.<sup>47</sup>

As the ‘darker-skinned’ mother of a light-skinned, mixed-race daughter, it is perhaps no coincidence that in her essay exploring nineteenth-century African American fiction, “If The Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like” (1983), Alice Walker invokes the ‘abandoned mammy’ trope:

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<sup>47</sup> An obvious intertextual reference to *Imitation of Life*, albeit the 1934 version, in the context of this thesis is Toni Morrison’s recasting of Peola as Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). See Chapter 1.

(In the past, in our literature – and in life too – the birth of a “golden” child to a dark mother has been perceived as a cause for special celebration. But was it? So much of the mother was obliterated, so much changed in the child, whose birth as often as not was by her unplanned). (“If the Present” 311)

Walker seems troubled by the birth of her “golden’ child” and the parenthesising of these possibly biographical reflections serves to protect Walker from the fear of ‘obliteration’ that the ‘abandoned mammy’ of the passing genre experiences. Throughout the essay, Walker toys with her own racial positionality in attempt to recognise her daughter’s ‘mulatta’ experiences; for instance she describes herself as ‘mulatto’ or “halfway between light and dark” (“If the Present” 291). Moreover, she is bothered by her previous opinion “that to not [identify as black] is to spit in our black mother’s face,” making room for the possibility that should Rebecca not identify as black, she would not be rejecting Alice (“If the Present” 291).<sup>48</sup>

While Alice Walker’s reference to Delilah/Annie is coded, Rebecca Walker makes a more explicit intertextual reference to *Imitation of Life* on the opening pages of her autobiography *Black, White and Jewish* (2000), in which she mythologises her own birth:

A mulatta baby swaddled and held in loving arms, two brown, two white, in the middle of the segregated South. [...] That makes me the tragic mulatta caught between both worlds like the proverbial deer in the headlights. I am Annie’s near-white little girl who plunges to her death, screaming, “I don’t want to be colored, I don’t want to be like you!” in the film classic *Imitation of Life*. (12-13)

Just as her mother is haunted by the ‘abandoned mammy’ theme, Rebecca Walker, like many other mixed race post-soul writers, battles with the stereotype

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<sup>48</sup> For another excellent invocation of the abandoned mammy trope, see Maya Angelou’s discussion of her son, who is light enough to pass, in *Gather Together in My Name* (16-17).

of the “tragic mulatta.”<sup>49</sup> Combining Peola in Sirk’s film with the suicidal mulatta of popular fiction, she sarcastically describes herself as “Annie’s near white girl,” “caught between both worlds”. This of course, reifies Alice Walker’s fear of being Annie, of being “obliterated” by rejection.<sup>50</sup>

Lisa Jones, daughter of Amiri Baraka and Hettie Jones also summons *Imitation of Life* as a haunting intertext in the opening pages of her autobiography.<sup>51</sup> On the first page of *Bulletproof Diva* (1994), Jones recounts seeing Stahl’s 1934 adaptation in a cinema in London in 1983 when she was 22 years old:

I sit in the back of the dark theatre thrilled because I am about to see, for the first time, a big-screen version of myself and her name will be Peola. But as the film progresses, I notice this Peola isn’t me at all, she a remake of Frankenmulatta, that character from The Octoroon Concubine of Frankenstein, one of Mary Shelley’s lost sequels.

These are funeral rites for the Tragic Mulatto.

[...]

This is a passing novel. Guess who’s passing? You. (1)

By citing *Imitation of Life*, Jones exposes the tragic mulatta as a construct of the white literary imagination, an inauthentic, contrived “Frankenmulatta” that is “not [her] at all”; in other words, as Gary Schwartz observes, the very title of the film suggests that mixed race women are “always a *copy, a phoney, a factory reject, not genuine* and not able to become, a limbo at best” – something Jones recognises immediately (emphasis mine; 113). Even though Jones is drawn to the cinema to bask in the cinematic projection of herself onto the big screen, it is sitting, alone, in the dark gazing at this image, that she realises that Peola’s very

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Anthony Neal uses the phrase ‘post-soul’ to describe those born roughly between 1963 and 1978. Rebecca Walker was born in 1969, Lisa Jones in 1961, Danzy Senna in 1970.

<sup>50</sup> For more on this, see Lori Harrison-Kahan’s “Passing for White, Passing for Jewish: Mixed Race Identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker” (2005).

<sup>51</sup> Lisa Jones coincidentally wrote the script for Oprah Winfrey’s adaptation of West’s *The Wedding* (Sherrard-Johnson, Dorothy West’s *Paradise* 171).

presence paradoxically signifies on the marginalised status of light-skinned women. As bell hooks recalls of her own experiences of seeing the film with her sisters as children, “[w]e cried all night for you [Peola], for the cinema that had no place for you. And like you, we stopped thinking it would one day be different” (*Black Looks* 122-3). In this scene, which additionally signifies on Toni Morrison’s descriptions of Pauline Breedlove’s lonely trips to the movies in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the disconnect between the cinematic sign and how the embodied referent is palpable. Moreover, by addressing the reader directly and forcing them to adopt the position of the passer, Jones dramatically seizes control of a genre which historically renders light-women as passive cyphers, reversing the feelings of ostracism mixed-race women experience when encountering the hegemonic Peola myth, placing herself at the centre of her “book of Tales.”<sup>52</sup>

As Trudier Harris concludes, such stereotypes, “whether raw slander or shoddy attempts at truth, leave little room [...] for realistic individualistic treatment of black women” in literature (*Mammies to Militants* 4). In their contemporary allusions to passing, then, black women writers confront the haunting presence of both the ‘abandoned mammy’ and the ‘tragic mulatta’ and seek to rectify “patently stereotypic misreadings of black women” (*Awkward 1*).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This is an intertextual reference to *Tales* (1967) by Jones’s father – Amiri Baraka (published under the name Leroi Jones).

<sup>53</sup> To describe all white or male authored passing fiction as sexist and racist in such wholesale terms is to oversimplify what is a much more complex situation. See M. Giulia Fabi’s work on *Clotel* in *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (4); Hazel Carby’s rereading of Pauline Hopkins’ *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901-2; 148); and Walker’s criticism of Frances Harper, Emma Dunham Kelly, and Pauline Hopkins in “If the Present” (297- 299) for more on how traditional texts subvert/uphold gendered stereotypes. For more on Kelly, who was a ‘passing novelist’, see Jennifer Harris’s “Black Like?: The Strange Case of Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins” (2006).

## Theoretical [Dis]connections: Intertextuality, Signifying, and Post-Structuralism

### Intertextuality

Clearly, this project adopts intertextual readings as a key methodological and theoretical framework to trace how black women writers allude to the passing genre in order to critique it. As a literary strategy, intertextuality – a term coined by Julia Kristeva to describe the ways that a “text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations” and “is the absorption and transformation of another” – has vast “political potential” (“Word, Dialogue, and Novel” 37; Rushdy *Neo-Slave Narratives* 15).<sup>54</sup> “To read intertextually,” Rushdy argues, “is to discern how a given text creatively alludes to and possibly rewrites a predecessor text, evokes the political dynamic in the field of cultural production, and inscribes into that dialogue its concerns with the social relations in the field of power” (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 14). When black women writers revisit and rewrite a passing genre so tinged with racist and sexist depictions of women, and “inscribe into that dialogue” contemporary concerns “with social relations” they are thus engaging in a politicised intertextual act.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, as my brief discussions of *Corregidora* and *God Help the Child* suggest, the writers I discuss are revising and revisiting the works of black women, too. As Michael Awkward argues, “inspiriting influences” connect black women’s writing and tracing these connections reveals much about how they respond to “a

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<sup>54</sup> Kristeva’s idea is drawn from Bakhtin’s dialogism. For more on African American Literature and Bakhtin, see Dorothy Hale’s article “Bakhtin in African American Literature Theory” (1994) which explores dialogism in the works of Du Bois and Gates.

<sup>55</sup> I am mindful that an additional theoretical framework to consider here would be Linda Hutcheon’s notion of “historiographic metafiction” as explicated in *The Politics of the Postmodern* (1989), although, I prefer Rushdy’s theorization for this chapter because of his attentiveness to African American culture. Moreover, while the writers discuss history, the novels I discuss here are not historical novels.

common sexual and racial oppression” (3).<sup>56</sup> As Barbara Smith notes, “[t]hematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience that they have been obliged to share” (164; qtd in Awkward 3). Indeed, there are great synergies between the authors I discuss. Toni Cade Bambara, for instance, was published while Morrison was editor at Random House and as Hilton Als observes, “[t]he women [Morrison] worked with, [...] became some of her closest friends” (“Ghosts”). Morrison recalls, for example:

“If I made a little extra money on something – writing freelance – I’d send a check to Toni Cade with a note that said, ‘You have won the so-and-so grant,’ and so on. I remember Toni Cade coming to my house with groceries and cooking dinner. I hadn’t asked her.”  
(Als, “Ghosts”)

As Sonia Sanchez reflects on her literary generation, “I think we all looked up and saw that we were writing in different genres, but we were experiencing the same kinds of things, and saying similar kinds of things” (Als, “Ghosts”). And yet, while, “[t]heir books formed a critical core that people began to see as the rebirth of black women’s fiction,” to claim that all black women’s writing of the post-civil rights era is connected by a singular over-arching political concern or aesthetic trait would be oversimplistic and as my readings show, none of the writers I discuss share exactly the same political vision (Als, “Ghosts”).

The discovery of historical intertexts and palimpsests is a recurring motif in several of the novels I explore here (namely *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, *The Wedding*, and *Linden Hills*) reinforcing the theme of recovering genealogy. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., now perhaps best known for his documentary work on

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<sup>56</sup> For more on black women’s writing and intertext, see Karla F.C. Holloway’s *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature* (1992).

African American ancestry recognises the synergies between literature and genealogy for African American writers.<sup>57</sup> He reflects,

Over the course of my career, I have moved from exploring the roots of our literature to exploring the literal roots of our people. Rather than interpreting our lives by deconstructing literary texts, I now more often attempt to reconstruct our past interpreting genealogical and historical documents. But the same impulses are there. (Introduction, *Henry Louis Gates Reader* xii)

These impulses to locate and trace documentation relating to race is a recurring theme, and is an impulse heightened by the fact that histories of racial passing are almost impossible to retrieve.

### **Signifyin(g)/Specifying**

The mode of intertextuality that I explore here is best framed as a process of signifyin(g); as Stephanie Li summarises, “[s]ignifyin(g) is repetition with a difference, a difference encoded through intertextual relationships” (“Black Literary Writers” 49). For Li, “signifyin(g) is about encoding history” and “simultaneously gestures to the past and changes meaning to fit the present,” a definition which perfectly encapsulates the motivations for using the genealogical passing trope (“Black Literary Writers” 50). Gates defines signifying as a “theory of interpretation, arrived at from within the black cultural matrix” that,

is a theory of formal revision; it is tropological; it is often characterized by pastiche; and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures, and their difference. Signification is a theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture; learning how ‘to signify’ is often part of our adolescent education. (“Blackness of Blackness” 685-6)

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<sup>57</sup> As part of a future project, perhaps, I would like to return to Gates’s evolving relationship with race and biology. Even though his writings in the 1980s refute a genetic basis for race (see ‘Race’, *Writing, Difference*) he now champions mitochondrial DNA testing in his television program *Finding Your Roots*, offering science as a way to trace racial genealogy – a paradox I find fascinating.

When writers take the passing genre, “revise” it, and “repeat” the plots, themes and characters of that genre with a “difference” they are signifyin[g] on it. Gates’s discussion of the “talking book” (that is the “double-voiced texts that talk to each other”) and “topological revision” (that is “the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts”) are also particularly useful for considering how the writers I discuss here engage in “a black form of intertextuality” with both traditional passing novels and the work of their contemporaries (*Signifying Monkey* xxv-vi).

Given the topic of this project, it seems apt that Gates appropriates Susan Willis’s metaphor of the ‘mulatto’ to explain the ways that double-voiced, intertextual writing signifies on both black and white novels, describing black texts are ‘mulattoes’ (or ‘mulatas’), with a two-toned heritage” (*Signifying Monkey* xxiii). As Mullen argues, African American literature is littered with “miscegenated texts”; in particular, slave narratives are often the products of an “narrator-amanuensis dyad,” a “collaborative literary production re-enacting textually the actual genetic miscegenation” embodied by the mixed-race figures of the abolitionist movement including Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs (85).

It is worth stressing at this point that I by no means wish to suggest that texts that discuss passing can be neatly divided into those that ‘signify’ and those that are ‘signified on,’ with the former constituting texts by twentieth century black women writers, which are ‘subversive,’ ‘revolutionary,’ anti-racist, anti-sexist and the latter being texts by white and male writers that are ‘sexist,’ and ‘racist’ (although some patterns do emerge here). I recognize that the patterns of intertextuality, genealogy, and signifying at work here undermine such simplistic binaries.

### **Case Study: *Blanche on the Lam* (1992)**

The conventional passing genre notoriously marginalises darker skinned characters and especially women (after all a focus on the light-skinned body is the traditional genre's *raison d'être*). Passing novels are never narrated from the perspective of a darker-skinned character, black characters are rarely central to the plot, and are typically described in ways that uphold stereotypes about African Americans. This is not exclusive to the work of white or male writers. Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing* (1929), for instance is riddled with the peculiar cameos of Irene Redfield's dark-skinned, female, servant Zulena:<sup>58</sup>

Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grapefruit. (79)

Zulena came in bringing more toast. (81)

Zulena stood in the doorway [...] She heard Zulena pass down the hall, down the stairs [...]. (95-99)

"Yes, Zulena, what is it?" she inquired, a trifle tartly, of the servant who had silently materialized in the doorway. (102)

Before her, Zulena gathered up the white fragments. (144)

A fleeting spectre of blackness, Zulena is described as "a small mahogany coloured creature" (79), who "silently materializ[es]" in doorways (102). Other than when she relays messages to Irene, Zulena's voice and perspective on the action of the novel is occluded. It is difficult to discern whether Larsen's characterization of Zulena conveys Irene's class biases or whether they reveal her own; either way, whether deliberately or accidentally, Larsen strategically invokes Zulena at key moments in this passing narrative. For instance, it is Zulena who is there when Irene tells Brian about meeting John Bellew. When Irene says one of the most memorable lines of dialogue, "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove

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<sup>58</sup> Please note that all in-text citations for Nella Larsen's *Passing* refer to the Modern Library edition listed under Larsen, *Passing* [...] in the works-cited list.

of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it," Zulena is there (82). Similarly, it is Zulena and her colleague Sadie (much to Irene's chagrin) that Clare often socialises with when she visits Irene, "spend[ing] her visit in talk and merriment" with the servants downstairs (121). And finally, it is Zulena who is beside Irene when she spots Clare and Brian talking at their Christmas tea party; when Irene drops her tea-cup in horror, Zulena immediately clears it up (144).<sup>59</sup> Even though Zulena will likely know as much about Clare's passing (and Clare's feelings) as any other character in the narrative, we only ever see her via Irene's privileged gaze. Indeed, Larsen's novel does little to undermine Toni Morrison's observation that even though, "black women have sometimes held centre stage in books by blacks and sometimes by whites, [...] they were maids, cooks, housekeepers..." ("Toni Morrison Talks"). Unsurprisingly, Alice Walker concludes "no nineteenth-century black novelist, female or male, wrote novels about [black or brown] women," and that "as late as 1929 [when Larsen's book was published] it was unheard of for a very dark skinned woman to appear in a novel unless it was clear she was to be recognised as a problem or a joke" ("If the Present" 297- 299).

Barbara Neely's debut novel *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) signifies on the [in]visibility of Zulena in *Passing*. Set in contemporary North Carolina, the novel follows the exploits of Neely's protagonist Blanche White as she eludes courthouse officials (where she has just been sentenced for writing bad cheques), tricks her way into a maid's job in the holiday home of Grace Carter Hancock and her husband Everett, and foils their plans for a heinous fraud facilitated by an act of racial passing.

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<sup>59</sup> As Jennifer DeVere Brody observes, the teacup Clare breaks is symbolic, "it was a relic of the Civil War" brought North via the Underground Railroad ("Clare Kendry" 1062). For Brody, Clare's destruction of this symbolic white "relic," carried north by black bodies, is a metaphor for Irene's repression of her heritage, and its cracking foreshadows Clare's death ("Clare Kendry" 1062). Zulena's gathering up of these fragments is thus symbolic of her ability to recover this past.

Like Larsen's Zulena, Blanche passes into and out of spaces of privilege without really being noticed on account of her role as a domestic. Doris Witt identifies that "in keeping with another of the most salient experiences of African American life and enduring tropes of African American literature, Blanche herself shifts continually between the poles of invisibility and visibility" and in doing so, she celebrates and harnesses the power her "outsider within" status (Witt 167; Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 95).<sup>60</sup> In particular, at the suggestion of Cousin Murphy, an eight-year-old Blanche takes the very trait that renders her invisible and powerless (dark skin) and turns it to her advantage by imagining herself as "Night Girl":

Cousin Murphy was responsible for Blanche becoming Night Girl, when [she] found eight-year-old Blanche crying because some kids had teased her about being so black.

"Course they tease you!"

[...]

"You got the night in you [...] it's only them that's got night can become invisible. People what got night in 'em can step into the dark and poof - disappear! Go any old where they want. Do anything. Ride them stars up there [...]"

Cousin Murphy's explanation hadn't stopped kids from calling her ink spot and tar baby. But Aunt Murphy [sic] and Night Girl gave Blanche a sense of herself as special, as wondrous, and as powerful, all because of the part of her so many people despised, a part of her that she'd always known was directly connected to the heart of who she was.

Without even realizing it, she drew on it when she needed to, like at the courthouse. (59-60)

Here, Blanche becomes the passer figure; except rather than vanishing into whiteness, she "step[s] into the dark and poof – disappear[s]" (59).

The passing-for-invisible Blanche is thus a 'signifying' trickster. As Gates explains, word play is a fundamental element of signifying in that it highlights the slippage between signifier and referent (*Signifying Monkey*, 68-70; 78; 106; 194);

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<sup>60</sup> I borrow this phrase from Patricia Hill Collins who discusses Neely's work in her seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990; 11; 95-96)

Blanche White's name – a double signifier of whiteness – does not denote the referent – her dark skinned body. This is particularly significant given Psyche A. Williams-Forson's argument that critics have overlooked the ways in which black women use word play as a mode of signifying. She highlights that "only Lawrence Levine [...] in his notable study of blacks in slavery and freedom extends this gender limited ritual exchange to women's participation" (137). Even though, as Lewis Hyde explains "[a]ll the standard tricksters are male," for Nancie Tolson, Blanche is both "a classic human trickster figure," ("the detective who is not a detective, the investigator who is not an investigator, and the criminologist who has no degree") and one that harkens back to a West African heritage in her resemblance to "Ananse the Spider, who [like Blanche in the courtroom] flees from a doomed sentence by running into a house, climbing the rafters, and hiding in a corner" (Hyde 335; also qtd in Tolson 73-74). In this sense, Blanche matches John Sheehy's conceptualization of "the passing figure as [a] Signifyin(g) trickster [who] breaks the bounds of the text, signifies upon and subverts it" (408).

Blanche is also an expert mask-wearer who "call[s] her employers ma'am and sir to their faces, no matter what" (27), even if she does it with a "shark's tooth smile" or "toothy grin" (13-14). Masking, typically associated with Houston A. Baker's study of 'black masculinity' in *Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance*, is all too often inferred to be a masculinist paradigm.<sup>61</sup> However, as Trudier Harris suggests, black women domestics are perhaps more skilled than most in "[m]askwearing as a mode of survival [which] is as old as slavery in this country," often deriving pleasure "from the power of successful trickery" (*From Mammies* 16-17). Indeed, Blanche views her act in this way, as Neely explains:

Putting on a dumb act was something many black people considered unacceptable, but she sometimes found it a useful place to hide. She also got a lot of secret pleasure from fooling people who assumed they were smarter than she was by virtue of the way she looked and made a living. (*Blanche on the Lam* 16)

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<sup>61</sup> For a very useful consideration of Baker's trope of masking and how it relates to African American detective fiction, see Soitos, *The Blues Detective* (36-7).

As Rosemary Hathaway concludes, “[r]ather than passing as white,” Blanche, “opts to pass as the stereotype of the black woman domestic that her white employers hold” and,

rather than signifyin(g) on notions of what it means to be white, as in the more traditional novel of passing, Blanche signifies on stereotypes about what it means to be black and female, and moreover, what it means to be working class. (325)<sup>62</sup>

Hathaway quite rightly concludes that, Blanche “passes in reverse as the stereotypic black woman domestic” (324). Blanche is thus a “signifying detective,” who engages in “free play [...] with her white employer’s stereotypes about her” and is well aware of “the power and protection afforded by the gap between the “literal and the metaphorical,” between “surface and latent meaning [...] where she chooses to hide out” (323-324); in this sense, for Hathaway, “passing [...] is a form of signifying” in Neely’s text (325).

Blanche uses this talent of going unseen to gather clues, observe her ‘suspects’, and in this particular novel, to deduce that Grace Hancock has replaced her elderly Aunt Emmeline with an imposter who, in front of witnesses, amends Emmeline’s will in favour of the disinherited Grace. Crucially, this fraudster is a passing-for-white figure, a character Neely includes to order to expose the hidden family history or genealogy of the Carter family. The imposter is none other than Emmeline’s long-lost mulatta half-sister, as Archibald, the family lawyer, explains at the end of the novel:

“I’d heard of her...Family gossip...really remarkable resemblance. She would have fooled anyone who knew Emmeline. Anyone.”  
“She’s the daughter of Great-uncle Robert, Cousin Emmeline’s

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<sup>62</sup> Neely does this with such humor. For instance in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, while sitting the Amber Cove Inn bar and recognizing she is the only dark-skinned person there, she “played with the fantasy of falling on one knee and belting out a chorus of ‘Mammy’ to see if any of them fainted” (40).

father. Her mother was their house maid. They say that as a child she looked so much like Aunt Emmeline – who looked exactly like her daddy – that Aunt Clarissa, who was Aunt Emmeline’s mother, made Great Uncle Robert get mother and child out of the county.” (207)

As Rosemary Hathaway explains, “echoing the oft-related dynamic of the white master’s sexual exploitation of his slaves, one of the secrets Blanche sweeps, almost literally, out of this family’s closet is the existence of a mixed-race cousin, the child of Emmeline’s white father and his black housemaid” (207). Neely’s clever foreshadowing of the novel’s denouement draws upon the imagery of ‘racial contamination’ – the court room casts “a murky light down onto a cracked marble floor” (2), and the house she works in has a “murky brown linoleum” (36) symbolising the shadowy and hidden history of miscegenation in the Carter household. Whereas the traditional mulatta symbolizes the ‘sin’ of miscegenation that can be “silenced, only within the precincts of the father’s house” (Spillers “Notes” 308), Neely reclaims the domestic space and permits Blanche to call out the fraudster (although given that Archibald cannot remember whether Emmeline’s half-sister is called “Lucinda” or “Lucille,” the ‘sin’ goes unnamed, the imposter is never caught so the mulatta continues to ‘pass’). There is something haunting and spooky about ‘Lucinda’; the reader is left without knowing her name or true motives. Vanishing back in to the wider world without a trace, she is a prime example of the spectral mulatta in post-civil rights fiction.

It is important to point out that black women writers have been challenging, complicating and revising the passing trope long before the era I study here. For example, even though Nathan Huggins suggests that Nella Larsen “could not wrestle free of the mulatto condition that the main characters in her two novels had been given” (Huggins 236; also qtd. in G. Hutchinson 299), her bizarre characterisation of Zulena notwithstanding, there is strength in recent revisionist claims that, “Larsen used her titular subject matter to blast wide holes

in established convention” (G. Hutchinson 298).<sup>63</sup> For instance, in his biography of Larsen, George Hutchinson contends that even though her death is tragic, “Clare Kendry is not a ‘tragic mulatto’” (299). Unlike Rena Walden, Clare is not “tragically prevented from marrying a white suitor,” and unlike Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man, “Clare undergoes no tragic struggle over a discovery that she is black” (299). As Hutchinson rightly points out, Clare is not even described using the phrase ‘mulatto,’ and Larsen does not use the word once in the book (299). To the cat-like Clare, Hutchinson suggests, “there is nothing tragic about being black [...h]er choices are entirely selfish and epicurean; she does what pleases her” (299). Similarly, Cheryl A. Wall suggests that Larsen’s protagonists “subvert the convention” of the tragic mulatto “consistently” and that “although her death is typical of the tragic mulatto’s fate, the Clare Kendry character breaks the mould in every other respect” (“Passing for What?” 97, 106).

Additionally, Zora Neale Hurston has been noted for her revision of the passing trope. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Criticism* (1988), Gates suggests (fleetingly) that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), “Hurston signifies upon the female novel of passing, an ironic form of fantasy that she inherited from Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset [...] by presenting her protagonist as a mulatta, who eschews the bourgeois life and marries a dark-complexioned migrant worker” (*Signifying Monkey* xxvii-iii). Notwithstanding Gates’s vague but fascinating description of passing “an ironic form of fantasy,” he is quite right. Indeed, Hurston, well aware of the dynamics of colourism (which she explored in her 1925 play, “Color Struck”), creates a ‘mulatto’ character, Janie Crawford who repudiates the privileges associated with light-skin. As Barbara Christian writes, “Janie is not only a mulatta who sees herself as a part of the folk, she is also resilient without the melancholy and tightness that previously marked that image” (*Black Women Novelists* 59). Even though Janie is, in Walker’s words, “light of skin and feathery of hair, as soon as she opens her mouth, we know who

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<sup>63</sup> See Claudia Tate for a list of scholars (Robert Bone, Sterling Brown, Nick Ford, Hugh M. Gloster, Saunders Redding, Amritjit Singh, and Mary Mabel Youman) who read *Passing* as a typical tragic mulatta novel (146n1).

and what she is" ("If the Present" 302). Although Walker's language implies racial essentialism, she argues that Janey's 'black' status is by virtue of her lived experience; she works with, lives with and genuinely identifies with "black black" Americans ("If the Present" 291), even as those around her are "color-struck" ("If the Present" 302). Moreover, Walker celebrates Hurston's creation of "black women characters," who unlike Rena or Molly Walden, are not "viewed...through the eyes of men, black or white" ("If the Present" 301).

Of course, when Hurston borrowed from the passing trope she was not only signifying on passing novels by African American writers, but according to Jane Caputi she was "specifying" on Fannie Hurst, author of the aforementioned passing narrative *Imitation of Life* (1933). Specifying, or "the African American art of name calling" (Caputi 714), is explored in depth by Susan Willis in her study of black women writers. Willis suggests that this 'banter,' a key characteristic in African American oral culture and a "rhetorical trope [that is] subsumed under specifying" (Gates, "Blackness of Blackness" 687), is "held in check, by the larger system of domination" (Willis 31).<sup>64</sup> By this, Willis means, "'specifying' is something you do to a neighbour or fellow camp worker. It's not something you pull on straw boss or 'Ole Massa'" (31). Hurston had a working relationship with Hurst, first as her "personal secretary" and then as "chauffeur and general companion," and in a relationship that somewhat echoes Bea and Delilah's – "the two women shared a home and traveled [sic] together for over a year" (Caputi 704). Caputi argues that even though Hurston was supportive of Hurst's controversial novel [which Sterling Brown described as perpetuating "the old stereotype of the contented Mammy, and the tragic mulatto; and the ancient ideas about the mixture of the races" (qtd. in Caputi 701)], privately she disliked it.

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<sup>64</sup> Laurie Champion argues that both "[s]pecifying and signifying are traditional African American modes of verbal play that allow speakers to communicate indirectly, symbolically, or metaphorically to a targeted audience while simultaneously preventing others from understanding underlying messages" (367). However, Champion contends "[w]hereas signifying traditionally is considered an African American male ritual, specifying is its female counterpart" (367). See also Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America* (1977) for more on signifying.

Caputi makes a compelling case that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* signifies on the plot of *Imitation of Life* and explains that “in some ways Hurston had constructed a story that deliberately challenged, reversed, and responded to some of the racist and sexist themes and characterizations” of Hurst’s novel (706). As Caputi explains, at the start of both texts, Janie and Bea are “soon to be subjected to an arranged marriage,” but after both relationships end Bea and Janie take mirroring, but divergent paths. Bea’s husband dies, but Janie wilfully flees Logan Killicks. Bea “gets quite obsessed with her business,” whereas “Janie is indifferent to the lure of possessions” (706). Both women fall in love with younger men, but while Frank Flake rejects Bea’s advances and marries her daughter, Teacake and Janie “experience great love and pleasure” (706). Moreover, at the end of both novels, even though Janie and Bea are alone, Janie “returns home and is at one with her soul,” whereas Bea gives up her home to the newly-weds and “exiles herself to Europe” (706).

Willis suggests Hurston’s work draws out the subversive potential of specifying in its signifying double-voicedness. For Willis, Hurston’s work, in its critique of Hurst is “analogous to cussing out the master,”

...because her medium is the narrative, rather than the oral language, she can’t [...] do her cussing out in private. Instead, she must do her ‘specifying’ in the form of a book Ole Massa can hold in his hands and read on his very own front porch. (32)<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> There is something of this dynamic of specifying that resonates beyond black authorship. I’m thinking specifically of Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2011) in which a young white journalist, Skeeter, facilitates a form of specifying not dissimilar to Hurston’s by publishing the anonymous (and anonymised) stories of black maids about their employers in Jackson, Mississippi. Even though the employers read Skeeter’s amanuensised book, any response or reaction to the claims made in the text would be tantamount to admitting they are the book’s subjects. This echoes Willis’s description of “specifying” in that the maids in the novel both “do [their] cussing out in private” orally and “do [their] ‘specifying’ in the form of a book Ole Massa can hold in his hands and read on his very own front porch” (Willis 31). The politics of reappropriation here (with Stockett and Skeeter laying claim to the narrativisation of black women’s experiences) and Skeeter’s position as a vehicle for this specifying require further analysis.

Building upon Willis's suggestion that Hurston's prose has the potential "to achieve the subversion of domination inherent in its bold intent" (Willis 32), Caputi argues that Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is therefore "specifying Fannie Hurst" in its mockery of her most-famous novel.

While all the black women writers I discuss here are signifying in a Gatesean sense on traditional passing narratives (by inverting them, revising them and so on), the degree to which they are specifying on passing has, as all good specifying should, gone largely unnoticed and unchecked by critics. That so many well known black women writers have been writing about passing in an era when passing was so vehemently denounced is specifying at its most skilful. This project thus seeks to foreground the mastery of black women writers in processes of intertextual writing and reading, signifying, maskwearing and specifying, especially given the association of these ideas with male critics and writers.

### **Post-structuralism**

Finally, this project draws upon paradigm shifting post-structural criticism that exposed race as a 'fiction,' 'artifice,' and 'construct,' while recognising and articulating the very real effects and experiences of racism that continue to affect black people. For instance, in his introduction to '*Race*', *Writing and Difference* (1985), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes race as "a dangerous trope," noting that "when we speak of 'the white race,' or 'the black race,' 'the Jewish race,' or 'the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors" ("Writing 'Race'" 4), and as Anthony Appiah explains, "we are nowhere near finding referents for [race]. The truth is that there are no races [...]" (Appiah 35).

Indeed, perhaps no genre better unveils race to be "a floating signifier" and yet most worryingly upholds the untruths that Gates warns of, than the conventional passing narrative (Hall 6). Often criticised for reifying essentialist readings of race, passing narratives both temporarily subvert (through the act of

passing-for-white itself) and reinforce (with the threat of the passer's exposure) traditional and bogus readings of racial identity as biologically inherent. It is with irony, then, that Gates himself invokes passing as a metaphor in his critical work, or rather signifies on the passing genre in order to expose race to be a social construct.

Gates suggests that like the traditional passing figure him or herself, the construct of race "pretends to be" something that is not (an objective term of classification), that for centuries, it has masqueraded as "objective" fact and impersonated "genuine" categories of identification when it is in fact, in Hall's words, a "sliding signifier," discursive rather than objective in its meaning and impossible to ground in "scientific, biological, or genetic" terms (Gates "Writing 'Race'" 5; Hall 5-6). Gates's discussion of race as a metaphor is undoubtedly connected to the ways that racial passing is constituted as discourse. Both notions articulate a false connection between signifier and signified, between racial phenotype and essentialised, biological, racial identities. When the passing figure is 'exposed' as an imposter it affirms race (falsely) as concrete, whereas when race itself is 'exposed' as fraudulent, the exact opposite is accomplished. The charade of racial discourse, or as Gates describes it, the "fiction" of race, or the manner in which 'race' itself passes can help us to uncover "the curious dialectic between formal language use and the inscription of metaphorical racial differences" across time and space ("Writing, 'Race'" 6).

As Baz Dreisinger notes, this post-structural criticism "gave rise to new conceptions of racial lines and widespread public dialogue about them" (123), and in 1997, after more than a century of regionally legislated "one-drop" rules for racial categorisation, the United States Government finally recognised race as a fluid concept; in the 2000 U.S. Census, American citizens were permitted to "tick" and lay claim to more than one race or ethnic category for the first time in history (F.J. Davis 197-8; Elam "Passing" 749; Kennedy *Sellout* 25). Although, as Kennedy notes, in Census 2000, despite the fact that Americans could tick one or more of the categories ("white," "Black or African American," "American Indian and Alaska

Native,” “Asian,” “Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander,” and the rather nebulous, “Some Other Race”) almost 98% of Americans still opted to only identify themselves using one tick (*Sellout* 25). Mae Henderson suggests “[m]uch of the renewed attention to the genre of the passing novel has emerged from” this more recent concern with “notions of hybridity, biraciality, and social constructionism as these structure contemporary conceptions of personal and social identity” (Henderson xx-xxi).

However, as Wald notes it was not only these “anti-essentialist critiques of race” and “theoriz[ations] about race, ideology, textuality/performance,” that “created the conditions for ‘passing’ to be seen, by many of us, as a productive site of theoretical and historical exploration,” – it was also “the intensified intellectual atmosphere of post-1968 Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Feminist Studies” movements (“Posts” viii-ix). Given that so many of the post-civil rights writers I discuss here were, at the very least, involved in, and, at best, instrumental in fostering this academic climate, it makes sense that this milieu would be reflected in their creative work (especially, given her theoretical interest in race, the work of Morrison).

### **Case Study: Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998)**

Danzy Senna dramatizes this post-structural turn in her debut novel of passing *Caucasia* (1998), the first-person narrative of Birdie Lee, a light-skinned mixed-race teen who passes for Jewish (with the adopted name Jesse Goldman) with her white ‘W.A.S.P.’ (white Anglo Saxon protestant) mother who is on the run from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Even though this novel is frequently held up as a prime example of millennial passing fiction, the fact that Senna chooses to set this novel in the post-civil rights era is hugely significant in that she offers her reader a narratological link between two seemingly disparate eras in the history of literary passing. Senna frames her novel with allusions to Black Power politics at the beginning, and the rise of post-

modern readings of race towards the end, inviting the reader to place her work in this historical gap.

When Birdie is reunited with her father, Deck (an academic) towards the close of the novel and offers the conventionally climactic confession, “I passed as white, Papa,” her father responds insensitively with a treatise on passing and post-structuralism that hints at work by Henry Louis Gates, Toni Morrison and Judith Butler:

“...baby, there’s no such thing as passing. We’re all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It’s a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That’s just the absurdity of the whole race game.” He was turning professor on me again.

He began to talk about the fact that race was not only a construct but a scientific error along the magnitude of the error that the world was flat. (*From Caucasia* 191)

In this scene, Senna brings a passing-for-white figure associated with the past face-to-face with the contemporary critic who refuses to acknowledge her experience. As Michelle Elam notes, Deck’s “claims about the total unreality of race merely justify his condescending indifference” and her father’s theory that race is a mistaken illusion pre-emptively undermines, as Birdie complains, “‘even the ability to speak’ [...] about her experience” (“Passing” 753). The tension in this scene between Birdie’s lived experience of passing on one hand and the theoretical explaining away of this experience as performative and constructed on the other conveys a conflict between ‘race’ as illusion and racism as real that contemporary writers must also negotiate. Senna’s work reminds us that in the post-civil rights period, historically sandwiched between an era of extant Jim Crow racism and a postmodern era, there is no clear sense of how writers should or could talk about passing. Caught between these two eras symbolically represented by Birdie on one hand, and Deck on the other, black women writers had to find a new method to discuss passing, one that both recognised that its genuine impact, and yet recognised the elusiveness of ‘race’. This helps explain

the ambivalent and indirect ways in which passing is intertextually referenced and invoked in the novels I discuss.

Importantly, as popular as Senna is with scholars, *Caucasia* exercises scepticism in abundance regarding the role of academics in ‘reading’ race and passing. Again, this is another motif I invite the reader to consider as I mention Mattie Harris in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, Daniel Braithwaite in *Linden Hills*, and even the adult literacy teacher, Irene, in “Source.” Deck’s research, framed as intertexts and mapped out on his living room wall (including photographs of historical mixed race and passing figures – including Nella Larsen), is suggestive of an unnerving ‘exhibition’ of race that replicates modes of gazing upon the racially ambiguous body found in the traditional genre. To Birdie, these are real people with real histories, and to her father, they are subjects in an academic experiment, charted on a wall for the purposes of research; taped next to these images of mixed race historical icons, are pictures of his own daughters who have become subjects in his own study (*From Caucasia* 392-3).

Senna’s novel, then, offers us a unique opportunity to reconcile an outmoded passing-for-white figure with the post-modern inclination for reading passing in an abstract way, a way which fails to appreciate the very damaging legacies of passing-for-white on black women in particular. By creating a character who grows up in the era I focus on in this thesis, Senna actually encourages us to read her work as having as much in common with the post-civil rights era as it does with the “mulatto millennium.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Fascinatingly, Senna’s mother, the Irish-American poet Fannie Howe uses the language of passing in an interview about her own collection of non-fiction essays, *The Wedding Dress* (2003) stating that “[w]ith my children I felt I became black; and my interior life is now fully identified with people on another side of history than the one I was raised in. And so there is no way of turning back after that. What you carry physically inside of you can’t be distinguished from what you carry psychically” (Howe and Schwarz 66).



When I see pictures of myself on the backs of books and things [laughs] I always say “why is she so white?” [...] You know what? [...] I’ve been running around all my life saying that “I have no white blood.” Don’t ask me why I take up this stupidness. [...] Then my son calls me up and says “what about that man whose name is Morgan (which is my father’s mother’s maiden name) who is this white man?” And I said “what do you mean? [...] There are no *white men* in my family.” [...] So I call up my sister who remembers everything [...] and sure enough...there was this Reverend Morgan who is a preacher, a white man, who married Carrie, and had ten children. [...] Married. Married. Ten children. I don’t know how I missed it. I erased it. I realised I had invented this fabricated story about no white blood in my family.

(Morrison, “Toni Morrison: Skin Color”)

## Chapter 1 ‘Black is Beautiful’: Making Up, Passing-for-White, and Embodiments of Beauty

It is clear that beauty [...] is to be seen only in women who have an infusion of Caucasian blood.

(Trellie Jeffers, “The Black Black Woman and The Black Middle Class” 39)

Without doubt, the aesthetic beauty of the female passing-for-white figure is a cornerstone of the conventional genre, and as Trellie Jeffers implies, many people believe that the mulatta body is only encoded as beautiful because it denotes traces of genealogical whiteness or “an infusion of Caucasian blood” (39). In this chapter, I examine the ways that Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Barbara Neely signify on the embodied beauty of the mulatta in order to comment on an alternative, genealogically encoded model of black beauty, which harkens to an African past – ‘Black is Beautiful.’

In Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Bambara’s, “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drugs N Goods” (1974) – a critically under-examined short story from her collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1974), which I discuss briefly –<sup>67</sup> and Neely’s sequel to *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994), each author includes a parody of the passing figure (Pecola, Miz Della, and Veronica Tatterson) in order to indict the ways that media, film, advertising, and the beauty industry propagate white ethnocentric beauty standards and cajole black women into purchasing, consuming, and using products that might help them achieve a ‘whiter’ look. Indeed, the theme of ‘making-up’ is a useful link between these three texts. While Bambara and Neely both use the motif of cosmetic make-up as a mask to conceal blackness, Pecola’s fantasies of passing in *The Bluest Eye* can be construed as an imaginary ‘making-up’ of racialised beauty.

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<sup>67</sup> See Frederick M. Burelbach’s article “Naming and a Black Woman’s Aesthetic” (1993) and Brita Lindberg-Seyersted’s “The Color Black: Skin Color as Social, Ethical, and Esthetic sign in Writings by Black American Women” (1992) for brief mentions of this story.

The phrase also connotes the genealogical ‘make-up’ that underpins black and white models of beauty, and signals the gap between embodied and idealized notions of worth that beautification processes seem to ‘make up’ for or bridge. All three texts are concerned with “[h]ow we create hierarchies of worth based on *The Body* as a manifestation of class, wealth, virtue, [and] goodness” (Christian, “Being the Subject” 123), and each author recognizes that the capitalist consumption of ‘white’ products is central to this process, thus using the passing trope to expose constructions of ‘white’ beauty as shaped by intersecting economic, gender, and race politics. In the first section to this chapter, I discuss representations of mulatta beauty in the traditional genre. I then move onto to my analysis of genealogical beauty in each of the three texts, before concluding with a discussion of how Barbara Neely uses the passing and detective genres to participate in a process of genealogical revelation and discovery.

### **“Silken Curls,” “Ivory Complexions,” and “Splendid Forms”: The Beautiful Passing-for-White Figure**

These [...] mulatto women, or quadroons, as they are familiarly known [...] are distinguished for their fascinating beauty. [...A]t negro balls and parties, this class of women usually cut the greatest figure. (William Wells Brown; *Clotel, Or, The President's Daughter* 45)

Bottles of ink, and reams of paper, have been used to portray the “finely-cut and well-moulded features,” the “silken curls,” the “dark and brilliant eyes,” the “splendid forms,” the “fascinating smiles,” and “accomplished manners” of these impassioned and voluptuous daughters of the two races [...]. (William Wells Brown, *Clotel, Or, The Colored Heroine*, “Chapter 1”)

His heart had thrilled at first sight of this tall girl, with the ivory complexion, the rippling brown hair, and the inscrutable eyes [...] she had [...] what seemed to him an eminently kissable mouth. (Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* 50)

Even though both William Wells Brown in *Clotel* (1853) and Charles Chesnutt in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) subject the bodies of their tragic mulattas to narratological punishment, expelling Rena Walden and Clotel (as well as Currer, Althesa, Jane and Ellen) from their narratives, they also revel in their form and beauty. In fact, the near-white or exotic whiteness of Clotel(le) and Rena is paradoxically superior to the ‘true’ whiteness they are exposed as emulating. Brown’s Currer is a “bright mulatto and of prepossessing appearance” (45), Althesa is “scarcely less beautiful than her sister” Clotel who is described as having an “appearance” that “created a deep sensation amongst the crowd,” with,

features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon; her long black wavy hair done up in the neatest manner; her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating one superior to her position. (47)

When taken out of context, one could almost forget that the “crowd” are at a slave auction, rather than a beauty contest, given the ways that Brown revels in the spectacle of Clotel’s attractiveness. Here, light-skin and ‘white’ features are portrayed as the epitome of feminine beauty. In fact, Brown opens his 1867 narrative by writing – very knowingly – into a tradition in which, “bottles of ink, and reams of paper, have been used to portray the ‘finely-cut and well-moulded features,’ the ‘silken curls,’ the ‘dark and brilliant eyes,’ the ‘splendid forms,’ the ‘fascinating smiles,’ and ‘accomplished manners’” of mixed-race women (Ch. 1).

Chesnutt echoes this appreciation of ‘exceptional’ beauty in his depiction of Rena. Not only does Rena’s suitor Tryon find her “ivory complexion,” and “rippling brown hair” thrilling, so too does her brother John. In the very first chapter of *The House Behind the Cedars*, John, who has been passing-for-white in another state, returns to his hometown to find his sister. As he wanders the streets of Patesville, a “strikingly handsome” woman draws his attention (7). He follows her home, noting the contours of her body, the pallor of her skin, and her captivating beauty. The narrator’s description of Rena’s “abundant hair,” which “was neatly plaited and coiled above an ivory column that rose straight from a

pair of gently sloping shoulders" (7), is, as Judith Jackson Fossett argues, evocative of a "specimen of a female aesthetic ideal in the fine arts" (207n9). Specifically, John compares Rena to "Phryne," a courtesan who was a model for Greek artists who wished to capture the charm of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, in fourth century BC (Chesnutt 9; Fossett 207n11). The suggestion that Rena is comparable to Phryne rather than Aphrodite herself foreshadows the passing theme; just as Phryne will only ever imitate Aphrodite's form, Rena will only ever imitate true whiteness. This said, Chesnutt clearly insinuates that her attractiveness is irrecoverably connected to a Eurocentric notion of beauty.

This trend extends to other nineteenth century African American novels. Nancie Caraway similarly observes that "[f]rom the earliest African American literature, readers can find admiring passages praising 'fine' European [locks], 'delicate' features, 'chiselled noses,' and 'silky hair'" (95) of light skinned women; in her essay "If the Present Looks Like the Past," Alice Walker surveys the recurring images of "[pretty] blue eyes," "aquiline noses," "fair" skin, "golden" hair, and "rosebud mouth[s]" in texts such as Frances Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1892), Emma Dunham Kelly's *Megda* (1891) and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900; 297- 299). Barbara Christian reasons that these representations have arisen to accommodate the expectations of a white readership because the nineteenth century novel "legislated that the heroine of a story be beautiful, since physical beauty, at least for a woman, was an indication of her spiritual excellence" (*Black Women Novelists* 22). This was "not just any kind of physical beauty," but "a rather fragile beauty as the norm; qualities of helplessness, chastity, and refinement rather than, say, strength, endurance, and intelligence were touted as the essential characteristics of femininity" (*Black Women Novelists* 22). Moreover, "the nineteenth century heroine not only had to be beautiful physically; she had to be fragile and well-bred as well":

The black woman could not possibly fill these requirements since by definition to be black in color meant the opposite of beauty, and well bred was a term applied only to the upper class. The mulatta, then, according to the literary convention of the nineteenth

century as well as half of the twentieth century, could be the only type of black woman beautiful enough to be a popular heroine and close enough to wealth vis-à-vis her father to be well bred.

[...]

The closest black women could come to [the] ideal [of white beauty], at least physically, would of course have to be mulatta, quadroon, or octoroon. (Christian, *Black Women Novelists* 22)

As Christian makes clear, then, mulatta beauty is symbolic of intersecting genealogies of class and race, shaped by a gendered gaze. Moreover, Alice Walker argues that, “novels of the nineteenth-century [...] abound with white-skinned women characters,” because the predominantly white readerships of these texts could more easily sympathize with them; for a white nineteenth-century audience, Walker suggests, “human feeling” and “humanness” only “came in a white or near white body” (“If the Present” 301). As a result, for the generation of writers I discuss here – who are all too dark-skinned to pass – “models in literature and life have been, for the most part, devastating,” because they are not representative (“If the Present” 311). As a young reader, Toni Morrison, “felt shunted to the sidelines” of literature, and “mourned for ‘the people who in all literature were peripheral – little black girls who were props, background, those people were never center stage, and those people were me’” (Strouse 54 qtd in Rosenberg 436). Mary Helen Washington, reflecting on her college days in the revised introduction to *Black Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds* (1990), writes that until the renaissance in black women’s writing in 1970s, “in the literature I had been taught and in the world I was expected to negotiate, my face did not exist” (4).

Given that the passing genre best captures this aesthetic preference for near-white African American women, black women writers inevitably return to this historical literature in their exploration of contemporary ‘Black is Beautiful’ politics, which rallied against the continued social preference for lighter-skin, straighter hair, and whiter features as found in advertisements, film, and television. As Susannah Walker notes, historically, the black beauty industry “promoted straight or wavy hair and light-complexions as the desirable beauty standard”; skin bleaching creams, make-up, and hair-relaxers were marketed as

products that could achieve these results (9).<sup>68</sup> When Morrison, Bambara and Neely were in all their thirties in the late 1960s and early 1970s, proponents of the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement thus called for a new model of aesthetic stylization which showcased ‘natural’ textured hair and darker skin.

Women reclaimed literature as a space from which they could declare “that black was beautiful,” “encourag[ing] black women to stop wearing makeup and straightening their hair as a way of rejecting [these] commercially promoted ‘white’ beauty standards” (S. Walker 170-1).<sup>69</sup> For example, in her 1966 call for an alternative aesthetic model, activist, actress, and singer Abbey Lincoln suggested that the use of “whitening products” was tantamount to self-maiming:

We are the women whose hair is compulsively fried, whose skin is bleached, whose nose is ‘too big,’ whose mouth is ‘too big and loud,’ whose behind is ‘too big and broad,’ whose feet are ‘too big and flat,’ whose face is ‘too black and shiny,’ and whose suffering and patience is too long and enduring to be believed. (“Who Will Revere the Black Woman?”)

While William Wells Brown lists the desirable physical features of light-skinned women (“finely-cut and well-moulded features,” “silken curls,” “dark and brilliant eyes,” “splendid forms,” “fascinating smiles,” and “accomplished manners”) Lincoln’s blazon reveals how black women feel when compared to these idealised and unattainable models of embodied beauty (“too big,” “too loud,” “too black and shiny”).

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<sup>68</sup> Fascinatingly, Kathy Peiss and Susannah Walker note that skin-bleaching creams were also promoted to white women in 1920s as a way of reversing sun tans which were becoming increasing popular; “some manufacturers played on the assumption that a white woman with a tan feared being mistaken for a light skinned black woman,” and “even as tans became fashionable and tanning creams abounded, white women were advised to use bleaches once summer ended, so as to reaffirm their racial identity” (S. Walker 8; Peiss 150-1).

<sup>69</sup> Morrison, Neely, and Bambara were all born within a decade of each other – Morrison in 1931, Bambara in 1939, and Neely in 1941.

In 1973, Trellie Jeffers also vociferously called for a new way of valuing black beauty; imploring women of colour to “[r]aise your head [...] – but first pull off your wig and stop pressing your hair” (41) and to “teach [others] the deep meaning of ‘Black is Beautiful’” (39).<sup>70</sup> Women poets associated with the Black Arts Movement also turned to writing as a way of promoting new and affirming images of what Jeffers and Walker describe as the “black black woman” (Walker 291; T. Jeffers 37).<sup>71</sup> In her book, *“After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005), Cheryl Clarke observes that “black woman identity reification poems were legion” in the late 1960s and early 1970s (73). Mari Evans’s poem, “I Am a Black Woman” (1970), Nikki Giovanni’s “Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)” (1972), and later Maya Angelou’s, “Phenomenal Woman” (1978), for example, all advocate, promote and celebrate the unique attractiveness of the “black black” woman.<sup>72</sup>

Ironically, the beautiful passing figure as described by Chesnutt and Brown is as naturally and authentically beautiful as the dark-skinned black beauty that Evans, Giovanni and Angelou celebrate; or as Hilton Als phrases it, Brown’s Clotel “would not appear so nearly white and desirable if she did not have more than one drop of mystery and darkness coursing through her veins” (Introduction xx). In other words, it is because Clotel is ‘black’ that she is beautiful.

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<sup>70</sup> Trellie Jeffers is the wife of black cultural nationalist, Lance Jeffers. For more on Jeffers see Harris “Lance Jeffers” (2001) and Maxwell’s excellent study of the surveillance of African American writers and the journal *Black Scholar, F.B. Eyes* (2015) and its accompanying website (see Loonin). These studies are especially interesting given Hoover’s own links to passing (see Maxwell 14-15).

<sup>71</sup> Walker’s essay is, in part, a belated response to Trellie Jeffers article “The Black Black Woman and The Black Middle Class” (1973) from which she quotes at length. For more see Chapter 3.

<sup>72</sup> For more on the responses of black women writers to colourism in non-fiction and fiction, see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (99-106).

## **Parodying Peola and Clotel(ie) in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970)**

In apparent keeping with the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement, Toni Morrison’s debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) offers a “condemnation of the racist culture’s worship of white standards of beauty, particularly as these are force-fed to African Americans through popular images – dolls, billboards, product trademarks, and Hollywood movies” (Caputi 710-11). Her work thus exposes “the effect of standardized Western ideas of physical beauty” on black women (Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 52). In order to communicate this message, Morrison relies upon a “dramatic refashioning of the passing character” in the form of a child, Pecola Breedlove, who prays to God for blue eyes and “through the dark-skinned Pecola, Morrison reconstructs the passing figure as its visual opposite” (207).

Even though “Pecola hardly meets the physical qualifications of light-skin and ‘good’ hair” that the passing figure possesses, “she does possess the key emotional characteristics,” including “a desire for white privilege and an increasing disassociation from the black community” (Bennett “Toni Morrison” 207). Pecola’s fixation on attaining the ultimate metonymic symbol of whiteness, blue eyes, is underpinned by a misguided and tragic belief that to possess and embody whiteness will make her more valued and better respected, particularly by her abusive parents.<sup>73</sup> Malin LaVon Walther observes that Morrison selects the eyes of Pecola as a symbol for her transformation by way of “insist[ing] on the specular construction underlying society’s definitions of beauty” (778). As Bennett summarises, “Pecola, without understanding her fantasies, longs for the good life she believes blue eyes will bring her; if desire could determine race, Pecola would be white” (207). In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison thus shifts “the

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<sup>73</sup> The character of Pecola was inspired a school friend of Morrison’s who, “said she wanted blue eyes”. Morrison recounts, “I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish” (Afterword 167).

dynamics of crossing the color line from the body to the psyche,” and eventually, when a deluded and psychologically tortured Pecola believes her prayers are answered, she transgresses the colour line “through fantasy and imagination” (Bennett “Toni Morrison” 206).

While the passing figure has an investment in and is wholly dependent on their body (which serves as a sort of ‘forged’ or ‘replica’ passport that enables them to cross the colour line), in Morrison’s work, the dark-skinned character’s fantasy of passing insists upon a disassociation between the self and the [black] body, which is disavowed. While the fantasy of passing provides temporary solace for Pecola (who is sexually abused, and made pregnant by her father and neglected by her mother), Morrison warns against the dangerous disassociation between [black] body and mind that it facilitates. In this sense, Morrison signifies on the passing theme to convey a sense of what Elizabeth V. Spelman and Mary Vermillion describe as “somatophobia,” or a “fear of and disdain for the body” (Spelman 126, Vermillion 59). The novel famously ends with Pecola descending into disembodied, uncanny madness, with her ‘blue eyed’ self, talking to her phantom black self, in a mirror (Bennett, *Queer Pleasure* 143). For Walther, “[t]hat the novel is framed by scenes in which Pecola looks at her image in a mirror underlines the inherently specular construction of female beauty” (778).

This fracturing of Pecola, facilitated by a mode of imaginary passing symbolises a genealogical fissure caused by her parents. The inherited genealogical whiteness that Pecola craves represents a displaced anxiety about the corrupted lineage caused by Cholly’s rape and Pecola’s subsequent pregnancy. Again, then, passing is invoked by Morrison, as it is in *God Help the Child*, as a way of communicating to the reader a message about family, genealogy, and legacy, a message about the importance of transmitting, from generation to generation, an authentic and genuine care and love.

## Peola/Pecola

It is a strange paradox, given the scholarly neglect of literary passing in the post-civil rights era, that Morrison's intertextual references to the 1934 film adaptation of *Imitation of Life* are so well-documented and observed by critics. For example, Gary Schwartz notes that her references to the film are persistent and recurrent, "an emblematic and determinant force [...which] thereby lays the idea of passing deep into the foundation of the book's structure" (118). Pecola's name, for instance, parodies the film's passing-for-white character Peola.<sup>74</sup> Jane Caputi suggests that Pecola's mother, Pauline, "has seen *Imitation of Life* [...] for [she] obsessively goes to the movies" and has "obviously [...] named her daughter (somewhat crookedly) after Peola" (711). Her light-skinned classmate, Maureen Peal picks up on this connection:

"My name is Maureen Peal. What's yours?"  
"Pecola."  
"Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?"  
"I don't know. What is that?"  
"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. Claudette Colbert too."  
"Oh." Pecola's voice was no more than a sigh.  
"Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I'm going to see to again. My mother has seen it four times." (*The Bluest Eye* 52)

Even though Maureen, "who visually resembles Hurst's Peola [...] provides the more corporeal link to the traditional passing character," Bennett argues that Morrison has her introduce the intertext to makes sure "that we do not miss her point – that Pecola is a passing figure despite her inability to pass," even if "the ironic allusion to passing remains somewhat buried" ("Toni Morrison" 207). Moreover, as Caputi notes, Pecola's mirror scenes echo Peola's in the film which

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<sup>74</sup> And, she ironically shares the last name of the black beauty pioneer Madam C.J. Walker whose real name is Sarah Breedlove (see also Gubar 21).

she “stands before a mirror and demands of Delilah, ‘Look at me. Am I not white?’” (713).

*Imitation of Life*, as Caputi suggests, “traffics” in the images promoted by Hollywood cinema, the media and American consumer culture which valorise white beauty and which contribute to Pecola’s desire to disassociate from blackness. This text is thus one about a corrupted racial transmission of whiteness through the media. Her family, the Breedloves, who live – rather symbolically – in a former shop front on display to the neighborhood, feel that their ugliness is supported by personified images that “[lean] at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance” (28). The narrator, Claudia, similarly detests that “[a]dults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured” and maims the one she is given for Christmas (14). “Betty Grable smile[s] down” at the girls as they walk past the Dreamland Theatre on their way home from school (53), Mr Henry repeatedly calls Frieda and Claudia “Greta Garbo” and “Ginger Rogers” (10, 58) in an attempt to flatter them, and Pauline Breedlove makes lonely trips to the cinema where she gazes at white women (96).

Crucially, Pecola’s attempts at racial transfiguration are performed through acts of consumption (financial and digestive), when she buys and eats Mary Jane sweets covered with the image of a smiling blond girl with “blue eyes looking at her out from a world of clean comfort,” because “to eat each candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (38). She also drinks milk out of “Frieda’s blue-and-white Shirley Temple Mug” (and a further “three quarts of milk” in secret) in hope of harnessing the transubstantiative properties of this symbolic whiteness (12, 16). As George Yancy suggests, “Pecola’s identity emerges within a context of white racist discourse, mythopoeic constructions, and racist signs and symbols that fundamentally shape

how she sees herself as a subject of a particular kind" ("Foucauldian" 123).<sup>75</sup> Morrison thus invokes the passing trope to draw attention to how vulnerable young women can be adversely affected by consumer culture.

### **Maureen Peal as Beautiful Passing Figure**

Pecola is not the only character in *The Bluest Eye* to signify on the passing figure. Morrison undermines the value society places on white aesthetics by including three problematic light-skinned figures, Maureen Peal (who articulates the 'Peola' connection), Junior, and Soaphead Church. She describes Maureen as a "high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" (47), Junior as "light skinned" with "hair cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool" (68), and Soaphead as "a cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly-brown skin" (132). None of these characters elicit sympathy from the reader: Maureen is pompous and tells Pecola, Claudia and Frieda that they are "ugly black-e-mos," Junior terrorises Pecola when he invites her to his house to play, and Soaphead is a paedophile who prays upon light-skinned girls who come to him for advice.

Critical responses to these characters as incarnations of the anachronistic nineteenth century mulatto/a of the passing genre are mixed. Annamarie Christiansen generously implies that Morrison "revis[es] the stereotype of the tragic mulatto found in nineteenth century American literature [...] distend[ing] the dominant stereotype [...] as she reimagines mixed-race identity, moving beyond the static representations in earlier American literary texts" (74). Carlos Heraldo on the other hand argues that "Morrison's narrative validates the earlier African American portrayal of miscegenated characters as threatening to the 'black' community and perpetuates the problematic presentation of miscegenation throughout U.S. literature" (84). Even though for Christiansen,

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<sup>75</sup> See Yancy's chapter on *The Bluest Eye* for his (Foucauldian) genealogical reading of "whiteness as a façade of universality" in Morrison's novel (137).

characters such as Soaphead Church “only pass as tragic mulattoes” (77), and “in [Morrison’s] hands, such a figure of despair evolves into one of hope and change” (95), William Jefferson, in an independently published book on Morrison argues that *The Bluest Eye* reflects a “phobic relationship to race mixing” (98), and that Soaphead Church “is a particularly virulent image of a mixed-race person” (99). Moreover, Jefferson argues that in Pecola, Morrison “has created a character that crystallizes all of the anxieties the mulatto character historically expressed in literature and racial discourse” (92), and “pulls” the “stereotypical mulatto [from the] nineteenth and early twentieth century [...] into the post-Civil Rights Era [sic]” (95-96). I would suggest that rather than consciously upholding negative stereotypes of the mulatto/a, Morrison includes these characters merely to sever the connection between “beauty” and “virtue” that underpins the colourist discrimination experienced by the young girls in the novel (*Bluest Eye* 95). We can see this most clearly in her characterization of Maureen Peal.

Given the broader themes of her novel, it goes without saying that unlike Brown and Chesnutt, Morrison markedly resists the objectification of Maureen’s body and countenance when explaining why Maureen is such a “dream child” (47). In the traditional genre, even light-skinned girls (children) are described in ways that make clear their sexual promise and allure. For example, Chesnutt describes the teenage Rena as “evidently at the period when the angles of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence” (7) and Brown explains that a twelve-year-old Clotelle “grew every day more beautiful,” and was “more than usually well-developed,” so much so that “her harsh old mistress began to view her with a jealous eye” (Ch. XVII).

Instead, she parodies their lengthy and reverential descriptions of light-skinned women by describing Maureen Peal from the perspective of a dark-skinned child (Claudia), rather than through the androcentric, ethnocentric, sexualised gaze of Chesnutt and Brown’s omniscient narrators. Claudia’s alternative portrait of the light-skinned figure reveals, in its naïve envy, what Maureen’s whiteness truly denotes – privilege and wealth, not “beauty” or

"virtue":

Fluffy sweaters the color of lemon drops tucked into skirts with pleats so orderly they astounded us. Brightly colored knee socks with white borders, a brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur, and a matching muff. There was a hint of spring in her slow green eyes. Something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk.

[...]

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and her eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria – they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches, shaming our jelly-stained bread with egg-salad sandwiches cut into four dainty squares, pink frosted cupcakes, sticks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples. She even bought and liked white milk. (48)

In many ways, Maureen Peal, represents the most obvious allusion to the conventional passing figure in the text in that she is universally and unquestioningly admired and valued by those around her. Certainly, through Claudia's focalization, Morrison offers yet another indictment of white beauty standards. As Carlos Hiraldo observes, "Maureen embodies the fantasies many African Americans have about mitigating the oppression directed against them by acquiring lighter skin and straighter hair" (82). For Claudia, he continues, "this standard of beauty held by African Americans is a form of self-genocide, which is embodied in the "lynch ropes" of Maureen['s hair]" (82).

However, by focalizing the narrative through Claudia, Morrison also draws attention to the privilege that light-skin affords, undermining the centrality of beauty and the body in the conventional passing narrative. Rather than describing her 'exquisite' hair texture and skin colour at length, Claudia relishes the description of the comfort and luxury that Maureen's "fluffy sweaters," "velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur," and "matching muff" denote. Rather than describing her "bright complexion" or "bright eyes" (phrases common in the

traditional genre), she notes her “brightly coloured socks,” and even though we know the tone of her skin (“high-yellow”), the length of her hair (“long” and light-brown), and the colour of her eyes (which are incidentally, “green” and not “blue” as Pecola covets), these features are described in figurative and abstract ways. Her “slow green eyes” resemble spring, her complexion is reminiscent of “summer,” and there is an “autumn ripeness” in her walk; Maureen Peal is a girl for all seasons.<sup>76</sup> This description of Maureen is, still, every bit as saccharin as those found in the conventional genre; her packed-lunches are decadent and sickly sweet. While wearing jumpers the colour of “lemon drops,” Maureen consumes “pink frosted cupcakes,” tempting and mouth-wateringly “dark apples,” “egg-salad sandwiches,” and “celery and carrot sticks.” And so by focalising the description of Maureen Peel from the perspective of a child, Morrison casts the passing figure in a new light that distinguishes the attractiveness of privilege from that of beauty.

Whereas in the traditional genre, Pecola’s experiences would have been occluded or seen as completely irrelevant to the plot, in *The Bluest Eye*, it is Maureen we know little about. In this extract and indeed, throughout the novel Morrison uses Maureen Peal to tell us more about Pecola’s experience; Morrison deflects the attention and admiration that Maureen receives to shed light on the circumstances surrounding Pecola’s abjection, encouraging juxtapositions between the two children throughout the text. So for instance, while Claudia’s mother chastises Pecola for drinking three quarts of milk (16), Maureen buys and enjoys “white milk” at school (48). Whereas Pecola’s life is characterised by chaos and disorder, the “orderly pleats” in Maureen’s skirt, her “fastidious lunches,” and sandwiches “cut into four dainty squares” are metaphors for the sense of structure and order her mother presumably provides at home. Unlike Maureen

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<sup>76</sup> The omission of winter is telling. Rebecca Hope Ferguson suggests that, “as Claudia sees it, Maureen pushes into their world as a “disrupter” of seasons, endowed with the best elements of the easy ones (spring, summer, early autumn), but [is] unacquainted with the meaning of winter, its ordeals, and the powerful stirrings which the McTeer sisters experience at the end of that trying season” (34).

who “enchants the entire school,” is encouraged by her teachers, “never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria” (48), Pecola is “ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (34). She is “the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk,” is bullied by her classmates who call her “black-e-mo,” and her teachers “tried never to glance at her” (34).

Morrison seeks to develop the association between Maureen’s pride and Pecola’s shame by playing with names and naming. For example, when describing the ways that Pecola is bullied at school, she writes that “she knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, ‘Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove’” which “never fails to get *peals* of laughter from those in earshot and mock anger from the accused” (emphasis mine; 34). By choosing to describe the laughter at Pecola’s expense as reverberating in “peals,” Morrison associates Pecola’s mistreatment with Maureen’s privilege. This is not the only time that Morrison uses Maureen’s surname to foreshadow feelings of shame. The banquet following the funeral of Cholly Breedlove’s Aunt Jimmy is described as “a peal of joy” (111). Of course the joy does not last and hours later, Cholly is humiliated and rendered impotent when white racists menacingly interrupt his first sexual encounter with Darlene (115-6). The ‘miscegenated’ symbol of Maureen Peal is very subtly, as her “lynch rope” hair suggests, implied to be a symbol of white, patriarchal dominance exercised through the threat of sexual violence.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, before Pecola purchases the Mary Jane sweets at Yacobowski’s shop and feels “the shame well[ing] up again” (38), a “peal of anticipation unsettles her stomach” (36). Not only does Morrison’s word choice serve to undermine the joy that the treats bring Pecola, but the use of the word “peal” associates the Maureen with the white Mary Jane image on the sweets before she is formally introduced as a character. Additionally, Maureen’s last name is used to signpost the reader to the themes of the passing novel. “Peal” connotes not only

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<sup>77</sup> See bell hooks’s discussion of ‘whiteness as terror’ in *Black Looks* (176-177).

the ‘appeal’ she embodies, but is a homonym for “peel” or the outside of a fruit reminding the reader of the ways that a colourist society values what is on the outside – “beauty,” rather than what is on the inside – “virtue,” drawing attention to the difference between the two. By contrast, Pecola’s last name is tragically ironic; her family do not ‘breed love,’ they stifle it and the death of Pecola’s unborn baby, the result of an incestuous rape, is a sorrowful reminder of Cholly’s perverted and depraved attempt to “breed” with and “love” his own daughter (128). Again, then, Morrison uses the passing theme as a way to critique the idea that beauty and virtue are necessarily or inevitably imbued in genealogical whiteness.

### ***The Bluest Eye* as a Revision of *Clotel/le***

Although the reverence of Maureen certainly echoes that of the conventional passing figure, in many ways she is the complete opposite of Brown’s *Clotel/Clotelle*. Critics have yet to identify that Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* additionally revises this canonical text. In traditional narratives it is the light-skinned child-passing figure that attracts abuse and rejection, whereas in *The Bluest Eye*, it is the dark-skinned Pecola not Maureen who attracts the worst imaginable abuse. In both the 1853 and 1867 versions of *Clotel/le*, the light-skinned heroine is forced to darken her skin and cut her hair in order to make herself appear less white and therefore less beguiling to white men in the abusive home of her mistress; this is in contrast to Pecola’s fantasy of passing in which she seeks to be whiter and more precious in order to escape the abusive home of her parents and attentions of her father. In the 1867 novel, the light-skinned child, Clotelle - daughter of Isabella and her “owner” Henry Linwood – is “kicked about by Mrs. Miller,” the mother of Linwood’s wife. Notably, the abuse centres on the destruction of Clotelle’s ‘white beauty’:

The child was white. What should be done to make it look like other negroes, was the question which Mrs. Miller asked herself.  
[...]

"Take this little nigger and cut her hair close to her head," said the mistress to Jane, as the latter answered the bell.

Clotelle screamed, as she felt the scissors grating over her head, and saw those curls that her mother thought so much of falling upon the floor.

[...]

"Gins to look like nigger, now," said Dinah, with her mouth upon a grin. (*Clotelle; Or, The Colored Heroine*, Ch. XIII)

In an effort to "make it look like other negroes" (note the dehumanising use of the article "it"), Mrs. Miller orders Jane to cut off Clotelle's luscious hair and put her out to work in the garden to darken her skin; as the unsympathetic Dinah grins, "'Gins to look like nigger, now'" (Ch. 13).<sup>78</sup> In the 1853 version, Mrs. French (representative of that woman in the far south who in Brown's words "regards every quadroon servant as a rival" for her husband's affections) orders Clotel to cut her hair, and "she was soon seen with her hair cut as short as any of the full-blooded negroes in the dwelling" (119). And it is Mary, Clotel's child, who is "put out to work without either bonnet or handkerchief upon her head" by Dinah (126); "in less than a fortnight [her] fair complexion had disappeared, and she was but little whiter than any other mulatto children running about the yard (127). In this sense, *The Bluest Eye* dramatically revises the representation of light-skinned children in the traditional genre who, in contrast to Maureen, who is "as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care" (47), are typically targets for abuse.

### Concluding Thoughts

To summarise then, both Maureen and Pecola are meant to parody the light-skinned child featured in the traditional passing genre. By revising the ways that Clotel(le) and Peola are depicted, Morrison complicates the notion of aesthetic beauty and invites us to consider broader questions about worth and value

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<sup>78</sup> There is much more to be said of the parallels between Dinah, Pauline Breedlove, and Delilah as mammy figures associated with the passing figure, something I would love to return to in a future project.

especially as this is communicated to children. Morrison's focus on the capitalist commodification and consumption of whiteness certainly chimes with black cultural nationalist calls to resist purchasing relaxers and lightening creams. And yet there is an irony in the way that Morrison's own black image was used in the marketing of her novel, seemingly inviting the reader to buy into this movement. Indeed, Hilton Als reads the paratextual information accompanying the original publication of *The Bluest Eye* as very much in keeping with the 'Black is Beautiful' zeitgeist:

Holt, Rinehart & Winston published 'The Bluest Eye' in 1970, with a picture of Morrison lying on her side against a white backdrop, her hair cut in an Afro. Taken at the moment when fashion met the counterculture – when black was coopted as Beautiful and soul-food recipes ran in fashion magazines next to images of Black Panther wives tying their heads up in bright fabric – the picture was the visual equivalent of the book, black, female, individualistic. ("Ghosts")

Indeed the image, which I have affixed to my office wall and that was also used in advertisements for the novel, is iconic. Morrison, looking directly to camera, adorned by a resplendently coiffed afro, and sporting a black polo-neck could well be a member of the Black Panther Party. The advertisement for the book contains an extract of John Leonard's review in the *New York Times*, which could easily be mistaken for black power rhetoric:

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is an inquiry into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country. The beauty in this case is black; the wasting is done by a cultural engine that seems to have been designed specifically to murder possibility; the 'bluest eye' refers to the blue eyes of the blond American myth, by which standards the black-skinned and brown-eyed always measure as inadequate. (*New York Times*, "Book Ads")

As the *New York Times* editorial team reflect when republishing this review, "John Leonard's vivid prose puts a sublime buzz in your head," and "Morrison's no nonsense gaze further suggested a writer to be reckoned with" ("Book Ads").

Although Morrison's politics regarding black beauty chime with those of black power advocates, she actually invokes passing in *The Bluest Eye* as a direct challenge to the timeliness of the "Black is Beautiful" mantra rather than to applaud its arrival. As Justine Jenny Baillie observes, "her concern [is] that a particular period in African American history might be forgotten in the impulse to celebrate black consciousness and 'the age of 'Black is Beautiful'" (44). Morrison herself explains that she was skeptical of "the very positive, racially uplifting rhetoric" associated with the "powerful, aggressive [and] revolutionary" works by black men in the 1960s; when the author heard phrases such as 'you are my queen' and "Black is Beautiful" she thought, "wait a minute. They are gonna [sic] skip over something. No one's going to remember that it wasn't always beautiful. No-one's going to remember how hurtful a certain kind of intermeshing racism is" ("Toni Morrison Talks"). "The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties" Morrison explains, "made me think about the necessity for the claim. [...]. Why did it need wide public articulation to exist?" ("Afterword" 167-68). Without doubt, *The Bluest Eye* undercuts any arguments that a discussion of passing and the arrival of black power politics were mutually exclusive. As Baillie notes, even though Morrison chooses to set her novel in "1940s Ohio rather than the positively charged atmosphere of her contemporary world," "[t]he work is all the same, very much influenced by the political agenda of the Black Power era" (43-44). However, Morrison's scepticism of the movement, which she shares with Alice Walker (see Chapter 3) stands in stark contrast to Bambara and Neely's celebration of black cultural nationalism and their caustic references to passing as a way of heralding a 'Black is Beautiful' era.

### **"Fooling Nobody But Herself": The Pitiful Passing Figure in Toni Cade Bambara's "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods" (1974)**

For Bambara, described by fellow writer Pearl Cleage as possessing, "such absolute beauty, humor, confidence and all-around-New-York-City, perfect-afroed cool," to include a passing-for-white figure in one of her short stories might seem incongruent (Holmes and Wall xiv). But rather than perpetuating and reinforcing

the standards of white beauty that the passing figure exudes, in “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drugs N Goods” (1974), Bambara parodies the attractiveness of the traditional passing figure through her character Miz Della – who works on a cosmetics counter:

Miz Della in Cosmetics, a sister who’s been passing for years but fooling nobody but herself, she always lollygagging over to Tobacco talking about are there any new samples of those silver-tipped cigars for women. Piper don’t even squander energy to bump her off any more. She mostly just ain’t even there. At first he would get mad when she used to act hinkty and had these white men picking her up at the store. Then he got sorrowful about it all, saying she was a pitiful person. (Bambara, “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drugs ‘n’ Goods” 195)

Like the principal character in the conventional genre, Della is light-skinned and capable of passing-for-white. There is certainly a sense that she is particularly attractive; for example, the narrator of the short story, Candy, insists that Della has a series of suitors who pick her up from work (125). However, rather than possessing the unaffected “torturing loveliness” of Nella Larsen’s Clare Kendry in *Passing* (1929), or a “singularly pretty face” like Rena Walden in Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Bambara’s Miz Della is a specialist in the artifice of beauty – she works on the cosmetics counter, powdering her face (207) and offering advice to white customers on beauty “masks” (202). Described by Candy as, “a sister who’s been passing for years but fooling nobody but herself,” Della peddles in the aesthetics of white beauty – unsuccessfully.

Issues of beauty and desirability have been confounded by a perceived preference among black men for lighter-skinned women, something Bambara flips on its head. F. James Davis suggests, a “Black male preference for light-colored mulatto women who met Caucasian standards of beauty” is linked to slavery, associated with access to mulatta privilege, and “continued long after” emancipation (39). In Abbey Lincoln’s view:

White female rejects and social misfits are flagrantly flaunted in our faces as the ultimate in feminine pulchritude. Our women are encouraged by our own men to strive to look and act as much like the white female image as possible, and only those who approach that ‘goal’ in physical appearance and social behavior are acceptable. At best, we are made to feel that we are poor imitations and excuses for white women. (Lincoln “Who Will Revere”)

Lincoln implicates black men in the broader narrative in which white women are valorized. Drawing upon the language of passing, she suggests that it is black men who “encourage” black women to “look and act as much like the white female image as possible,” while reinforcing the genre’s insistence upon the inevitable failure of black women to successfully embody whiteness; black women are only ever “made to feel” like “poor imitations for white women.” Michele Wallace agrees and writes in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, “[t]he growing phenomenon in the late sixties of black men marrying and dating white women only served to reinforce the black woman’s sense of shame” (123).<sup>79</sup>

The opposite is true in Bambara’s short story. Miz Della is no longer flavour of the month and is described as “pitiful” by the handsome Tobacco counter assistant, Piper (195). She may possess the lightness that William Wells Brown commemorates, but Piper, “don’t even squander energy to bump her off any more,” has “wiped her off the map,” and “ain’t heard the news she’s been born” (195). Whereas in the conventional genre, Miz Della would have been the focal point of the narrative, in Bambara’s story she is peripheral to the plot or to borrow Candy’s phrase, “mostly just ain’t even there” (195). Rather than replicating what Hilton Als describes as the “pornographic gaze” of the traditional passing genre which allows the light-skinned female body to be objectified by both the male characters and the reader, Bambara refuses to include a detailed description of Della, who Candy “ignores” (Als xiv; Bambara 191). Unlike the

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<sup>79</sup> For more on contemporary responses to interracial relationships between black men and white women from African Americans see, Mehlinger et al., “A sister debates a brother on THAT BLACK MAN-WHITE WOMAN THING” in *Ebony* 1970.

reams of prose commemorating the beauty of the traditional passing figure, no time is spent detailing the colour of Della's eyes, the shade of her skin, or the contours of her body.

Instead, black (narrative) perspectives and beauty aesthetics are celebrated and privileged. Rather than offering an omniscient, "raceless" (and presumably white narrator) as Larsen and Chesnutt do, "Christmas Eve at Johnson's" is narrated (in first person dialect) by Candy, an African American girl who works as a cleaner in the drug store and helps in the haberdashery department. As Morrison observes in *Playing in The Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), blackness is often marked as "other" in canonical American literature and as Richard Dyer and Peggy McIntosh note, whiteness and white privilege are posited as invisible and normative (*White* 9; McIntosh 12). While the conventional passing plot revolves around this paradigm of racial [in]visibility by seeking to expose 'hidden blackness,' Bambara reverses this trend. As Brita Lindberg-Seyersted similarly observes, "nothing is made of [Candy's] skin color" and "[t]here are in fact strikingly few such references" to blackness "in Bambara's two collections of stories, *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, as well as her novel *The Salt Eaters*" (65). Instead, in her story, Candy 'marks' the white characters as different and other; for example, when troublesome shoppers "Ethel" and "Fur Coat" visit the store, the reader is told what they are wearing, how they behave, and what they say, but the colour of their skin is not mentioned once. We presume they are African American because unlike the "old white ladies" they tease, and the "real white folks - the blond, crew cut chemist and a pimply-face kid for the stock-room," and Miz Della, they are not identified as white (or wanting to pass-for-white) by the narrator (199).

It is not just the attractiveness of light-skinned women that is undermined, but that of the white male suitor. As well as depicting light-skinned women as desirable, passing narratives often suggest that white men are the objects of these women's affections. In many ways the passing trope mirrors the marrying up trope of nineteenth century melodrama and romance. For example, Rena

Walden, not only passes-for-white, but under the tutelage of Mrs Newberry, is instructed on “the etiquette of the annual ball” she attends with George Tryon (42). Tryon, a “white knight” who wins a jousting competition and names Rena, “The Queen of Love and Beauty” (39), falls hopelessly in love with her. Despite her position in life, Rena “build[s] upon a foundation of innate taste and intelligence” in order to acquire “the self-possession which comes from a knowledge of correct standards of deportment” (43). Larsen’s Clare Kendry, daughter of alcoholic janitor Bob Kendry, and living with her white aunts for whom she works as a maid, passes-for-white, elopes with wealthy white businessman John Bellew, and instantaneously improves her class standing. As she reflects to Irene, “[m]oney’s awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think [...] it’s even worth the price” of passing (36). Like Clare and Rena, Miz Della has white love interests and in Bambara’s story is dating the “blond, crew cut chemist” Hubert.

Rather than her relationship with a white man being envied by black women in the story, however, the opposite is the case. Despite William Wells Brown’s assertion that, “colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man,” Candy is frightened of white men (*Clotelle* Ch. I). The African-American shop workers give Hubert the nickname “Nazi Youth” on account of his blond hair and for Candy to even look at him conjures the most horrific images of racism:

Every time I look at him I hear Hitler barking out over the loudspeaker urging the youth to measure up and take over the world. And I can see these stark-eyed gray kids in short pants and suspenders doing jump-ups and scissor kicks and turning they mamas in to the Gestapo for listening to the radio. Chemist looks like he grew up like that, eating knockwurst and beating on Jews, rounding up gypsies, saying Sieg Heil and shit. [...] I could smell the gas, I could see the flaming cross too. Nazi Youth and then some. (201)

Even though Hubert clearly is not a racist (he is, after all, dating Miz Della and he works in a Black-owned drug store) in Candy’s mind he is the personification of white supremacy and rouses an overwhelming sense of terror; indeed, “the

association of whiteness with terror,” and “the representation of whiteness as terror” is, as mentioned, vividly captured in *The Bluest Eye* as well (*Black Looks* 176-177). When Candy looks at Hubert she hears Hitler’s voice, smells the gas chambers and remembers the cross-burning Ku Klux Klan. In this instance, the white body is to be feared, not revered.

Additionally, Bambara flips the traditional genre’s demonization of black men. In Chesnutt’s *Cedars*, Wain and Frank are less-desirable partners for Rena than Tryon – asexual and platonic at best and sexually threatening at worst. Rena fails to muster any passion for her “best friend” Frank, who she realises on her death bed “loved me best of them all” (203), and is pestered by the sexually aggressive “mulatter” Wain (160). Both men are described in ways that are suggestive of dominant pseudo-scientific readings of race as biological and inherent. For instance, the concealment of that “strange mulatter man” Wain’s true nature is evident in his “half-closed eyelids that Rena did not see” (160). Wain’s evil temperament is implied to be linked to his biology in some way, as the narrator suggests that, “upon a more hostile inspection, there would have been some features of his ostensibly good natured face – the shifty eye, the full and slightly drooping lower lip – which might have given a student of physiognomy food for reflection” (146). Wain’s uncontrollable desire for Rena’s ‘light’ body associates him with the black brute stereotype and thus actually serves to make Rena appear ‘whiter’ in the reader’s imagination, aligning her with the white woman at the centre of the black brute’s sexual obsessions.<sup>80</sup>

Even though Chesnutt’s Frank – a hugely sympathetic character whose devotion to Rena is unwavering – has “dark-brown” skin, Chesnutt is sure to use this same language of physiognomy to convince the reader that he is of decent character; the reader is assured that Frank has “a well-shaped head, an expressive forehead, and features indicative of kindness, intelligence, humor and

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<sup>80</sup> For more information on the “brute” stereotype, see Bogle (10-18) and Pilgrim “The Brute Caricature.”

imagination” (28). These problematic descriptions of darker-skinned characters are rife in the genre; we need only recall Chesnutt’s descriptions of “excited negroes” with “their white teeth and eyeballs glistening” (31), Larsen’s, “small mahogany-colored creature Zulena” in *Passing* (184), or Fannie Hurst’s flagrant allusion to the infamous mammy caricature of Aunt Jemima through Delilah in *Imitation of Life* (1933) to remember that in various passing narratives darker skinned characters are represented in ways that ultimately reinforce rather than undermine racist stereotypes of African Americans as subhuman and subservient.

In Bambara’s narrative however, masculine black beauty is celebrated. In her depiction of Piper, Bambara toys with the gendered and racialised gaze found in the traditional narrative. Rather than objectifying the light-skinned female body, here a handsome black man is the subject of the black woman’s gaze and even the conservative owner of the drug store, Mrs. Johnson, cannot help but be captured by his beauty:

She’s always got one eye on Piper. Tries to make it seem like she don’t trust him at the cash register. [...] But we all know why she watches Piper, same reasons we all do. Cause Piper is so fine you just can’t help yourself. Tall and built up, blue-black and smooth, got the nerve to have dimples, and wear this splayed-out push-broom mustache he’s always raking in with three fingers. Got a big butt too that makes you wanna hug the customer that asks for the cartons Piper keeps behind him, two shelfs down. Mercy. And when it’s slow, or when Mrs. J comes bustling over for the count, Piper steps from behind the counter and shows his self. You get to see the whole Piper from the shiny boots to the glistening fro and every inch of him fine. Enough to make you holler. (195)

Repeatedly described as “fine” by Candy throughout the story, Piper embodies the antithesis of the light-skinned aesthetic celebrated in traditional passing novels and epitomises the ‘Black is Beautiful’ aesthetic popular at the time. He is dark-skinned and because of this (rather than in spite of it) he is exceptionally attractive (or as Candy puts it, he is “enough to make you holler”). Piper’s “built-up” and muscular body is gorgeous, not intimidating or threatening as the black brute stereotypes dictates; his skin is the darkest shade of “blue-black” and his

body is smooth and tactile. Smartly dressed, well groomed and sporting a “glistening fro,” he is the personification of the phrase the tall, dark and handsome. And most importantly, he has a strong sense of pride, “cause George Lee Piper love him some George Lee Piper” (190).<sup>81</sup> In this sense, Bambara’s work chimes with Nikki Giovanni’s poem “Beautiful Black Men” (1968), in which she celebrates “those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight/ black men/ with they afros.”<sup>82</sup>

In this short story, which ends with Candy embracing a cultural link to Africa by finding out about Kwanzaa from the studious pan-African drug counter worker, Obatale (who she previously dismisses as “Ali Baba”), black is undeniably beautiful. As Lindberg-Seyersted notes, this is reflective of Bambara’s “fiction as a whole,” in which the author “lovingly presents a world where black implicitly is ‘beautiful’ – if anything, dark skin would be the more beautiful because more authentic” (66). The narrative perspectives of those previously marginalised in passing novels are incorporated, the “pornographic” and gendered gaze of the genre is inverted, black anti-racist aesthetics replace Brown’s and Chesnutt’s Eurocentric images of Western classical art, and even though Bambara makes a point of including a passing-for-white figure, her centrality, worth and importance are undermined. Miz Della’s genealogical whiteness is exposed as artificial,

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<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, in the documentary *Black is... Black Ain't*, while Angela Davis acknowledges the potency of ‘Black is Beautiful’ “a slogan that indicated political struggle,” she also questions the underlying patriarchy that motivated it. She says: “when we said ‘Black is Beautiful’ in the late sixties, that meant the black man is beautiful.” This is reflective of a “tendency [...] to want to constantly rehabilitate the black man as patriarch, and I have problems with positing that as the goal of the community” (*Black is Black Ain't*).

<sup>82</sup> The poem originally from *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment* (1968) was also featured in an August 1972 Special Edition of *Ebony* dedicated to “The Black Male” alongside Carolyn M. Rodgers’s “For Our Fathers” and Gwendolyn Brooks’s “Boys. Black. a preachment.” Coincidentally, given the content of Bambara’s short story, the poem “Beautiful Black Men” (48) sits next to a scotch advertisement for Pipers (which happens to be the last name of Bambara’s character). The advert features a picture of white men in white lab coats (as we imagine Hubert) and the slogan “100 Pipers. It's made proudly. Drink it that way” (*Ebony* 1972).

unattractive, and unappealing and even though the reference to her is fleeting, it is hugely significant and proves that black women writers reclaim and redefine beauty not only in spite of, but through the reappropriation of the passing trope.

### **Beauty, Privilege, and Colourism in Barbara Neely's *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994)**

From one drug store to another; it is while staring at "Stuart's Pharmacy and Old Tyme Ice Cream Parlour," on a street in Amber Cove village that Blanche White accidentally elbows an unsuspecting Veronica Tatterson knocking her "paper bag" out of her arms so that "it hit the ground and burst" (19). "Blanche had thought that the woman" (who has "sandy blond hair and old ivory skin") "was white," until she sees the products that have spilled out onto the pavement: "Rebirth Conditioner and Relaxer, the Straight and Swinging Permanent Renewal Kit, and the large can of EverHold hair spray" are all "black products" that help 'tame' afro-hair into the "silken curls" of a Clotel or a Rena Walden (19). When Blanche takes a closer look, she realises that "some of [Veronica's] lack of colour was due to skilfully applied makeup that made her face a shade or two lighter than her arms," and realises that her "kind of wavy and shoulder-length, kink-free hair many little black girls would kill their Barbie dolls for," is far from the natural beauty revered in the passing genre (19). Such is the look of horror on Veronica's face in this episode, "Blanche wondered if she might actually be trying to pass for white" (19); and Veronica is so mortified at the prospect that, "someone she didn't know now knew she used chemicals to give her hair that white-girl look," that she "looked as though Blanche had caught her farting at the dinner table" (19-20). In witnessing Veronica's shopping, Blanche exposes the 'artifice' of her whiteness, undermines the 'authenticity' of her blackness, and it seems apt that the very same 'paper bag' that has historically been used to exclude darker-

skinned African Americans, like Blanche, “bursts” and breaks on the sidewalk below.<sup>83</sup>

In this, her second novel *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994), which is set in the fictional elite African American holiday resort of “Amber Cove” in Maine, Neely invokes the ‘could be passing’ figure of Veronica Tatterson in order to help frame her alternative ‘Black is Beautiful’ politics, to highlight persisting colourism among the African American middle classes, and to reveal that these beauty ideals are irrecoverably intertwined with class consciousness and economic status. However, as my discussion suggests, by invoking the historical genre of passing, Neely inadvertently reinscribes essentialist readings of race which dampen an otherwise spirited celebration of black beauty.

### **The Passing Figure as Foil**

Like Bambara, Neely invokes a parody of the beautiful passing figure in order to promote an alternative, genealogically black model of beauty, and Veronica Tatterson primarily functions as a foil to Blanche’s ‘Black is Beautiful’ persona. Veronica’s ‘could be passing’ status is, for Blanche, reflective of her colorist beliefs, a presumption borne out later in the novel when Veronica attempts to sabotage the relationship between Durant and Tina, because they “come from different backgrounds” and “have different, er, ah, manners, ways of being in the world” (182). Veronica’s beauty regimen and treatment of her own body functions as synecdoche in Naylor’s world; in other words, Veronica does not like her dark skin (the part), therefore she disapproves of everybody with dark-skin (the whole). Even though Veronica is not a central character, she is constantly on Blanche’s mind. Several times, Neely uses variations of the phrase, “Blanche thought about

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<sup>83</sup> The notion of brown paper bag tests has become somewhat of a truism but Audrey Elisa Kerr’s excellent book *The Brown Paper Bag Principle* (2006) chronicles both the history of the phrase and its rumoured practice. See also her article, “The Paper Bag Principle” (2005).

Veronica" (63, 68, 95); Blanche daydreams about disclosing Veronica's embarrassing drug store purchases to others (68), and when she discovers intimate secrets relating to the Tatterson family, she "fantasized using what she knew against Veronica in some way" (199). Blanche eventually settles for embarrassing her in front of others, giving her signifying trademark "shark's tooth smile" and remarking, "I love your hair, Veronica! Just this morning I was telling Tina how natural your hair looks," causing Veronica to stare venomously at Blanche, and storm away (197). Veronica, with her "old ivory skin" is a genealogical "throwback" (as the Crowleys describe her) to the passing figure and thus constitutes an embodied haunting, a rememory, a return to the passing figure in the post-civil rights era (emphasis mine 78, 19).

While Patricia Hill Collins suggests that, "[w]ithin the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (*Black Feminist Thought* 98), Neely reverses this logic (even as she reinforces the binary). In other words, it is always against Veronica's 'mulatta' form that Neely invites us to appreciate the dark-skinned, heavy set, 'black' beauty of her two principal protagonists, Blanche and Tina (Veronica's prospective daughter in law).

Tina, for instance, is purposely introduced in relation to Veronica – as her prospective daughter-in-law who is forced to compete for the affection of Veronica's son, Durant. Tina is the very embodiment of the 'Black is Beautiful' aesthetic and represents an embodied link to an African ancestral past:

Her face was the twin of the face on a bronze head of an African woman Blanche had seen in the Afro-American History Museum. This woman was deep black with a rosy luminescence that didn't look like makeup. Even from a distance, Blanche could see that her eyes were meant to break hearts. Her face could have been the model for a profile on an African coin. Her full features were perfectly balanced in a mobile, expressive face. She was a big woman, too, not fat, but muscular and an inch or two taller than

the young man. Dreadlocks hung to her shoulders. (*Talented Tenth* 67)

Here, Neely inverts the descriptions of white beauty typical of the passing genre. Rather than harkening to Grecian busts (as Chesnutt does with his characterisation of Rena), Neely describes Tina as a Nubian goddess, the “twin” of an African “bronze head” Blanche sees in a museum. If her mother-in-law, Veronica, is a “throwback” to the passing figure, Tina genealogically harkens back to a rich, African history of black beauty associated with black cultural nationalism. Strong and muscular, Tina embodies the very “warrior woman” that Mattie Harris, an academic who owns a cottage in Amber Cove, celebrates in her work; in fact, Mattie describes her as “Tina the Magnificent” (67). Her skin is not “ivory” like Rena’s, but “deep black” and luminescent. Gone are the silken curls of Rena and Clotel(le), replaced by Tina’s “nappy” dreadlocks. Moreover, unlike Veronica (and Miz Della) who plaster their faces in make-up, Tina looks ‘natural,’ and rather than buying into notions of white beauty, Tina, with a face that “could have been the model for a profile on an African coin,” is an icon of an alternative currency denoting the value of black beauty. Indeed, just as Morrison’s photograph helped to sell *The Bluest Eye* as a piece of authentically black literature, Tina ‘sells’ an alternative vision of beauty to Blanche’s adopted daughter, Taifa, and her friend, Deidre (T. Jeffers 39-40). Tina’s description of her dreadlocks, for example, almost reads as a ‘Black is Beautiful’ commercial: “[i]t does everything we’ve always wanted our hair to do. It doesn’t shrink in the rain, it can be worn up or down, it blows in the wind, moves when I move” (*Talented Tenth* 151).

Blanche is similarly representative of a ‘Black is Beautiful’ philosophy and in a reversal of the passing genre’s focus the light-skinned figure, Blanche’s dark and sumptuous body is not only the subject of the reader’s gaze but her own admiring glances:

The size sixteen shorts slipped easily over her hips. Blanche gathered the excess material at her waist and admired the contrast between her deep black skin and the nearly colorless cloth. She

turned and looked over her shoulder at her substantial behind. A comfortable fit. (1)

While *Blanche on the Lam* opens with a scene of our protagonist being belittled and undermined by a white judge in a courthouse, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* opens with a celebration of Blanche's form. She is unapologetically curvaceous, yet slender (her clothes are loose fitting), and the lightness of her clothes accentuates the blackness of her skin.

Just as hair texture and skin tone are interrelated and tangible motifs of 'white femininity' in the passing genre, in keeping with the 'Black is Beautiful' credo, Neely attempts to resignify these motifs to proffer an alternative image of 'black femininity.' For example, soliciting a comparison to Veronica, Neely offers lengthy descriptions of Blanche's skin care and hair care regimen, celebrating products which affirm her 'authentic' blackness. While her nemesis seeks white "Rebirth" by "Relaxer," Blanche shampoos with "African Formula Black Shampoo and Conditioner" (59). In another scene, the reader sees Blanche, "wip[ing] the condensation from the medicine cabinet mirror and [standing] naked before it, oiling, then cornrowing her damp hair, enjoying its soft woolly texture," all the while thinking about "Veronica and her hair products" (63). While water is anathema to straightened and relaxed styles like Veronica's [in Ayana D. Bird and Lori L. Tharps's words, "within the culture of Black hair, water is the enduring enemy" (160)] because Blanche's hair is 'natural,' she (like Tina) can embrace water. In fact she enjoys the feeling of water over her body and hair, worships "Mother Water," encourages other characters to "wash away" any feelings of hurt and anguish, and is frequently bathing. For example, after a confrontation between Tina and Veronica, Blanche encourages Tina to have "a nice shower [to] get the last of that bitch off your body" (183). Blanche's nakedness, her sensual intimacy with her own body, and her appreciation of its shapes and textures reflects Neely's 'Black is Beautiful' message:

I have to be just as true to my womanness as I am to my blackness... I realized that there is no conflict there, because my

womanness is the womanness of a black person. I can honor both [...] by operating with personal integrity. (Carroll 180; also qtd in Mickle 76)

Clearly then, Neely invokes the passing figure in her sophomore novel as a way of reinforcing, reaffirming, and endorsing a model of black beauty, for which Blanche and Tina are brand ambassadors. To borrow from Doris Witt, if in *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), “Neely uses Blanche’s body to critique white female models of beauty,” in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1992) “she begins waging a campaign to affirm the desirability of dark skin, natural hair, and large size” (178), a beauty which is seemingly only authenticated via a genealogical link to an ancestral African past.

### **Testifying to Colourism**

Neely also invokes the passing trope a part of a broader conversation about the impact of colourism. Both Tina and Blanche are united by their personal experiences of intra-racial prejudice, the effect this had on their self-esteem, especially during their formative years, and their fantasies about passing and physical transformations. While Neely passes into blackness as Night Girl (see Introduction), a young Tina sought to pass out of blackness; echoing Morrison's Pecola, she tells Blanche, “I can remember praying every night that if I could just have long hair, I'd be good for the rest of my life” (151). Tina's words resonate and these fantasies of passing abound in African American literature. Writing in 1975, Mary Helen argues that, “[i]n almost every novel or autobiography written by a black women, there is at least one incident in which the dark-skinned girl wishes to be either white or light-skinned with good hair” (*Black-Eyed Susans* xv).

For example, In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Maya Angelou remembers her mother making a dress for her which she knew would make her look “like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world” (4). She fantasises about her friends who would “be

surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten" (4). Her "light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them," because, Maya fantasises, "I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 4-6). Similarly, in Sapphire's *Push* (1996), Claireece Precious Jones writes a fantasy of herself in which she would "get light" and be "treated right and loved by boyz" (*Precious* 113-114).

This trope was repeated more recently when in a headline-making speech at the 2014 Essence Magazine Black Women in Hollywood Luncheon, actress and director Lupita Nyong'o declared that she wanted to "take this opportunity to talk about beauty. Black Beauty. Dark beauty." As Nyong'o, who is the current face of Lancôme cosmetics and who has graced the covers of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, held her award for 'Best Breakthrough Performance' in *12 Years a Slave* (2013) in her hands, she described how as a child she "put on the TV and only saw pale skin," was "teased and taunted about [her] night-shaded skin," and prayed to God for white features. As Ruth Rosenberg notes, Afro-American female-authored autobiographies are full of "devastating passages" about this feeling of not being beautiful enough because of the shade one's skin; "[n]othing" she writes, is "more damaging to a dark-skinned girl than [...] valorization of what she could never be" (439). As Patricia Hill Collins reflects, "African American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty – standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another" (*Black Feminist Thought* 98). These visions of beauty are, Collins reminds us, not simply unfortunate, but "hegemonic" and "controlling," "taken for granted" and "virtually impossible to escape" (*Black Feminist Thought* 98).

In more recent years, the willingness to confront colourism through such testimony has garnered momentum, best evidenced in the recent landmark documentary *Dark Girls* (2012). *Dark Girls* constitutes a series of intimate

interviews with African American women who remember and share their experiences of interracial racism. We, the viewer, bear witness to these testimonies both aurally – as we hear their stories – and literally, as we watch filmic images of darker-skinned women explaining the ways that they have been made to feel ugly, unwanted and unimportant because of the shade of their skin. We are called upon to witness their blackness and affirm their presence. Women from around the world are invited to participate in this process of healing via the documentary's website by filming and uploading their own narratives of colourism. As Kimberly Jade Norwood, author of *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of Postracial America* concludes, “conversation is the only way to get past this place of color-coded existences [...] “we have to start talking” (“Colorism and Blackthink™” 172). As Cathy Caruth suggests, “[t]he history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness can only take place through the listening of another” (11; see also Laub 57).

Similarly, in Alice Walker’s “If the Present,” the author remembers a friend “who was asked by the light-skinned girls who shared one end of our college dormitory to move somewhere else, because she was so dark,” as well as her own experience of “being literally pushed off the sidewalk outside the Dom in New York, by young black men who wanted to speak to the white women I was with” (292-3). She also recounts the story of “Doreena”, “a brilliant, elegant, and very very black girl” who, resembling Tina, was “rejected by a very light-skinned young man” because “his parents said she was too dark and would not look right in their cream coloured family” (293). The passing trope thus facilitates black women’s testimony about the trauma of colourism. As Sara Ahmed contends, “[r]esistance to passing for white [can be] enacted through the very proximity of speaking to each other about the pain of passing” and “can become the basis for a transformative and collective politics” (104).

As Blanche listens to Tina’s memories, then, she “could lip-sync it. She saw a chorus of black skinned women, their mouths all-moving to the words of this experience” of wanting to be white[r] (130). The image Neely paints has echoes of

Michael Awkward's observation that post-civil rights writing by "Afro-American women writers suggests the almost life-sustaining urgency felt by black females to 'sing a black girl's song'" (2). This phrase, lifted from Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), in which Shange's woman in brown, "cries out for accurate, revelatory representations of Afro-American women's lives" chimes with the scene Neely constructs (Awkward 2). Shange writes:

somebody/anybody  
sing a black girl's song  
bring her out  
to know herself  
[...]  
her infinite beauty (*for colored girls* 18; Awkward 2)

And so *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* joins this rich tradition of "somebody/anybody sing[ing] a black girl's song"; after all, as Blanche ruminates "[m]aybe we don't get nowhere on this color business 'cause nobody's willing to say it out loud" (128), and as her author, Neely states, "talking back" is a form of honoring black women, and knowing oneself (Carroll 180; also qtd in Mickle 76).

### **Beauty and Privilege**

Finally, then, Neely invokes the charming and prepossessing passing figure of the conventional genre to comment on the relationship between constructions of [white] beauty and status in African American culture. Neely implies that the beauty regimens deployed by Veronica in order to 'look white' (or, rather, look light enough to pass-for-white) are key to succeeding in America, socially and economically – a sentiment many critics share. Caraway reflects,

The need to look white and wear 'straight hair' forces an aesthetic assimilationism upon black women: to get jobs their 'Blackness' has to be played down, the African-inspired braids and dreads being too threatening to the white world. (95)

Similarly, Rooks notes,

Advertisements for skin lighteners and hair straighteners marketed by white companies suggest to blacks that only through changing physical features will persons of African descent be afforded class mobility within African American communities and social acceptance by dominant culture. (26)

The beauty regimes of the “Miz Dellas” and “Veronicas” of this chapter are for Neely expressions of their class status.<sup>84</sup>

By locating a passing figure like Veronica in *Amber Cove*, Neely reinforces her message that possessing light skin is an essential part of belonging to this community. In fact, Neely describes the resort as a spatial metaphor for light-skinned mulatta body; its very name connotes the passing figure’s golden skin, and symbolises the yonic embrace Brown and Chesnutt revere in their conventional fiction. The metaphor does not stop there. Like Veronica’s body, *Amber Cove* is a site of privilege cultivated by the consumption of “whitening” beauty products. As Blanche’s best friend Ardell reads from an article about the resort’s history:<sup>85</sup>

“Amber Cove was built in 1898 by Josiah Coghill, a black tycoon who made his fortune on Coghill’s Skin Lightening Crème, Coghill’s Silky Straight, a lye-based hair straightener for black men, and related products.” (*Talented Tenth* 5-6)

Coghill, somewhat resembles George E. Johnson, the founder of *Johnson’s Products* whose greatest successes came in the 1960s and 1970s in Neely’s

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<sup>84</sup> See Susannah Walker (9), Tiffany Gill (1), and Hill and Rabig (18) for more on hair straightening and beauty as an expression of uplift among black middle women, a reading which complicates Neely’s description of hair-straightening.

<sup>85</sup> In the novel, Ardell’s mother, Miz Maxine “was light enough to pass for white,” but, “she was also the first and for the most part of Blanche’s life, the only light-skinned person who talked openly about why some light-skinned people looked down on blacker folks and the privileges that light-skinned people enjoyed because of their skin color” (*Talented Tenth* 129).

lifetime (see Gill 124; S. Walker, 8).<sup>86</sup> Neely's focus on Coghill's commodification of 'white' beauty (and the associated capitalist, economic, and financial implications of this) is curious. Even though the early pioneers in the black beauty industry were women (Madame C.J. Walker, the first female self-made millionaire,<sup>87</sup> Annie Turnbo Malone, and Sara Spencer Washington all made fortunes selling products and cosmetics to women in the early-twentieth century), and Neely's work tends to focus on black women's beauty values, Amber Cove's genealogical 'lightness' can be traced back to a black man.

For Neely, 'The Talented Tenth' a group to which Veronica and the Amber Coveites belong (as the title of her book suggests), represent the very 'zenith' at which race, colour, privilege, and beauty converge. This phrase, taken from (the light-skinned) sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal essay of the same name (1903), pertains to a philosophy of racial uplift, which suggests that the very top strata of black society (indeed of any society) 'ought' to set the bar and standard by which the entire race should be judged:

The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people...The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. (Neely, "Epigraph", *Talented Tenth*; Du Bois "The Talented Tenth" 131)<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See also Lindsey Feitz's excellent essay, "Creating a Multicultural Soul: Avon, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Race in the 1970s" which discusses how Johnson's success was tempered by the growth of Avon (129-30). For an account of the beauty industry's influence on black men, see Graham's discussion of his rhinoplasty (4).

<sup>87</sup> There is something fascinating, as Noliwe M. Rooks implies, about Walker's own stereotyped image as a "mammy" figure, "[s]he was a poor, dark-skinned, large-boned African American woman who, until beginning to market hair-care products, had worked as a laundress," an image Walker attempted to 'recode' in her advertising (50).

<sup>88</sup> See also "Of the Training of Black Men" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (55-68).

It is important to note that in an economic, philosophical, and sociological context, Du Bois's words carry more nuance than Neely's simple definition of, "that old DuBois [sic] thing about the light-brights being the natural leaders of their darker brethren"; in fact, Du Bois does not mention skin tone in the essay and focuses instead on the importance of higher education (*Talented Tenth* 65).<sup>89</sup> As Darylanne K. English writes, "[s]teeped in bourgeois social sensibilities but also in progressive politics, Du Bois's Talented Tenth model was neither simply elitist nor predicated simply on the lightness of skin" (790). For English, Blanche (if not Neely) "misremembers and misapplies the term" in her description of Amber Coveites (790).

This said, as Trudier Harris summarises, "[t]he idea of uplift, that is, blacks of talent and education helping each other, is strongly tied to pigmentocracy," because "many of the persons who were well educated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were indeed lighter skinned" and it for this reason they "fit into what W.E.B. Du Bois described as 'The Talented Tenth'" ("Pigmentocracy").<sup>90</sup> As historian Howard Bodenhorn observes, this is a legacy of slavery; "[t]he privileges shown [to] light-skinned, mixed-race slaves on the plantation carried over into freedom. It was these same advantaged former slaves who emerged as leaders of the African American community in the antebellum and post-bellum eras" (66). For Harris this "seemingly altruistic proposal" of racial uplift thus inevitably "had class and colour as its basis" and "[b]y the turn of the twentieth century," (when Josiah Coghill founded Amber Cove):

there were several pockets of lighter-skinned, middle class blacks throughout the United States [...] where blacks of lighter hue ensured that they married similar persons and became 'lighter and lighter every generation'. They watched carefully over the

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<sup>89</sup> African American scholars and theorists, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornell West advocate and advance the notion of a "Talented Tenth" (see *The Future of the Race*).

<sup>90</sup> Shirley Tate defines "pigmentocracy" as a society in which "status, life chances and very often freedom were based on skin colour and that skin colour itself was also a matter of official record and surveillance" ("Black Beauty" 318n3).

educations of their offspring, vacationed together, and ensured that their kin met the ‘right’ kinds of black folks when considering marriage. They could interact with the great unwashed black masses, could indeed help lift them up [...], but they were a breed apart. (“Pigmentocracy”)

This certainly matches Neely’s description of Amber Cove. Veronica Tatterson is determined that her son Durant will not marry Tina because of her darker skin and Stuart relays to Blanche that his own mother, who was “about [Blanche’s] complexion, maybe darker,” “never really fit in with my father’s family, or most of the folks at Amber Cove” despite her manners and education because she was “just too dark for them” (177-8). The lasting impact of Du Bois’s phrase in the popular imagination is clear, as Linda, a peripheral character, describes the residents of Amber Cove, they are “[a]s hincty a bunch of Talented Tenth as you’d ever want to see” and “ain’t these just the people he had in mind to run black America and teach morals to all the poor really dark darkies. I know these Negroes think they’re the chosen ones!” (65). By juxtaposing the black elite with the passing figure, Neely undermines their racial authenticity, their commitment to the race, and challenges the ideology of racial uplift that Du Bois proposed.

Veronica Tatterson, Neely’s second incarnation of the passing figure following *Blanche on the Lam*, serves a hugely symbolic and structural purpose in the text. Her effect on Blanche reveals much about the haunting and spectral presence of the traditional passing figure in contemporary literature. She serves a synecdochic and metaphoric function, personifying colourism and class prejudice of Amber Cove and representing a corrupt “Talented Tenth” who discriminate against those with darker skin, and yet, without Veronica to prop it up, Neely’s construction of a black beauty aesthetic might fall flat. That Neely finds herself “still among the ‘Talented Tenth’” as late as 1994 suggests to English that Blanche is somewhat of an anachronistic character who “embodies a black past” (790). Her confrontations with Veronica, then, re-enact an historical drama (as well as personal one) in which Blanche must confront the ghosts of passing and colourism.

## A Return to a Essentialism

Despite the many triumphs of Neely's prose (specifically her privileging of Blanche's experiences and narrative viewpoint), Blanche subscribes to the very same notions of essentialism that underpin both the passing genre and reify the colour line, something that emerges through Neely's use of indirect discourse to convey Blanche's personal thoughts and reflections. After bumping into Veronica in Amber Cove for the first time, Blanche "tried to imagine having that choice [to pass-for-white] and taking it":

She could imagine herself a hundred shades lighter with her facial features sharpened up; but she couldn't make the leap to wanting to step out of the talk, walk, music, food and feeling of being black that the white world so often imitated but never really understood. She realised how small a part her complexion played in what it meant to her to be black. (*Talented Tenth* 20)

Despite Blanche's recognition of "how small a part her complexion played in what it meant to her to be black," she still suggests that black culture is inimitable and can somehow be authenticated. For example, Blanche describes herself as, "the only guest [at Amber Cove] with any true colour" (40); she reiterates the spiritual connection between "her African heritage [and] the heavy dose of melanin in her body" (60); and she indulges racist stereotypes; for example she describes white women in the media as "assless blue-eyed, blond anorexics who are supposed to be the last word in beauty" (131). To borrow from Kenneth Warren, Neely's work fits into a oeuvre of African American novels which "present race as being more than skin deep even as they attempt to strike a blow against Jim Crow by insisting that any difference between black and white people is merely superficial" (40).<sup>91</sup>

Just as culture, skin colour, hair and even teeth are key motifs of 'authentic' whiteness in the passing genre, they are appropriated as symbols of

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<sup>91</sup> See also Warren's Podcast with Gondek in which he uses the example of a passing narrative (Schyuler's *White Like Me*) to make some of his central arguments about the historicisation of African American literature.

'authentic' blackness in Blanche's world. For instance, as she watches the Amber Cove residents dance at their summer ball, Blanche's observations indulge essentialist readings of race:

They reminded her of pastel colors. Beautiful and serene, but with none of the fire of the red-and-purple-loving black people she knew. There was nothing in the way these people moved on the dance floor that said their people invented rhythm. There was no swing in their walk, none of the shoulder, hip or hand language that spoke volumes among black people. Was having your juices watered the price of living and working outside the black community [...]? Their teeth were all wrong, too – too straight, too white, too real. There were no bad feet among them. No runover shoes, no small runs on the inside of the leg of the pantyhose, no marriage of color and style for the sheer purpose of expressing personality. No hint of molasses in their collards, cornbread, sweet potatoes, fried chicken, grits, or any other staples of the black diet as she knew it. As far as she could see, the things, beside color, that made a person black were either missing or were ghosts of their former selves. It was sad. (58)

For post-structuralist critics, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "rhythm," "swing," and taste are bogus and essentialising notions of blackness.<sup>92</sup> In this sense, Neely uses race as a trope used to link the concept of "racial character" to "all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity and so forth" (Gates, "Writing, 'Race'" 5). Neely even goes so far as to suggest that you can tell how black somebody is by their teeth, which is eerily evocative of late nineteenth and early twentieth century biological readings of race achieved through dental examination (Hoberman, *Black and Blue* 110).

Moreover, as this passage suggests, while characters in white-authored passing narratives are 'haunted' by the spectre of 'invisible blackness' (see

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<sup>92</sup> Reflecting on the "sepia toned" palette of her novel *Beloved* (1987), Morrison reflects that "black people in general were very attracted to very bright-colored clothing" because they were denied the luxury of colourful clothing in slavery (Morrison, "The Art of Fiction" 84). For her, "color is a signifying mark" (84). See also Zora Neale Hurston's description of adornment and stylization in "Characteristics of Black Negro Expression" (1934).

Introduction), in the Blanche series, blackness is rich and colourful, and can only ever be “watered” down and diluted by a ‘ghostly’ whiteness. Indeed, there are pale-skinned ghosts galore in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. Suicidal Hank is repeatedly described as a “haint” (51-54, 230); Stu, Blanche’s love interest apparently drowns himself at sea (his body is never recovered and his ‘death’ remains a mystery); the recently murdered Faith Brown’s secrets haunt the residents of Amber Cove, and we can almost imagine the long-dead Josiah Coghill himself presiding over events.

Neely therefore does little to challenge the idea that race is embodied in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, and her scrutiny of Veronica for traces of hidden blackness replicates the essentialising gaze of the traditional passing genre. Blanche’s reading of racial stylization *qua* racial essence is in keeping with black cultural nationalism (something I return to in Chapter 3), but her insistence on the ultimate legibility of authentic ‘race’ echoes the traditional passing genre. As Doris Witt notes, Neely’s protagonist “equates straightened hair with a desire to emulate whiteness” (181); and her own natural hair as “a way to show a visible connection to [her] African Ancestors and Blacks throughout the diaspora” (Bird and Tharps 51). For Veronica to relax her hair is thus interpreted by Blanche as a renouncing of her genealogical connections to her black ancestors (a criticism levied at the passing figure). While in her first novel the trope of Night Girl and Blanche’s shifting from visible to [in]visible toy with theoretical ideas about how black women’s bodies are perceived by the dominant culture (see Introduction), *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* is much more concerned with how Blanche sees the world. As Doris Witt notes, “Neely presents Blanche as constantly interpreting the meaning of a wide range of physical traits and practices, including skin tone, hairstyle, body shape, fashion choices, speech patterns, eating habits, and reproductive decisions” as “a decoding of contemporary United States body politics, as inflected by sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, class, age, and disability” (166). In any case, by only viewing race as genealogically encoded and embodied, Blanche ends up propagating the very same politics she seeks to resist and emulating the very genre she is supposedly signifying on.

## Concluding Thoughts: Discovering Genealogies

To conclude this chapter, I want to reflect on the way that Neely permits Blanche, through the detective genre, to discover a ‘true’ racial genealogy. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Neely’s debut novel *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), hinges upon the ‘discovery and exposure’ of a passing-for-white figure who is fraudulently posing as Aunt Emmeline. The exposure of Emmeline’s mulatta half-sister thus reveals the hidden black genealogy of the Carter family. While Neely’s signifying detective is in so many ways transgressive, the discovery of the ‘true’ racial identity of the mulatta, in *Blanche on the Lam* seems to imitate rather than subvert the conventional genre.

Uncovering and revealing genealogies indicative of a ‘racial truth’ continues to be a key concern in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* and represents another narratological link to the passing genre. The murder mystery at the heart of the novel – ‘who killed Faith Brown?’ – centres around Faith’s determination to research and uncover evidence that undermines the legitimacy of the ‘Talented Tenth.’ In order to recover the evidence Faith has amassed, Blanche teams up with an elderly academic, Mattie Harris, to discover clues. Mattie is “a slim, white-haired, high yellow woman with a mass of gray curls” (15), she loves Pearl Cleage (she thinks “*Deal with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot*” [sic] is “...damned good [...]Black feminist work!” (25)], and is revered by visitors to Amber Cove (including Tina) who feel that their lives have been changed by her seminal piece of feminist criticism *Woman as Warrior*.

Blanche and Mattie’s search leads them a dossier of evidence – or intertexts – including newspaper clippings, letters, certificates, and a book (164), which implicate a number of Amber Coveites in illicit and ‘unseemly’ acts. Of all the evidence they discover, it is a letter, addressed to Veronica, that interests me the most. Veronica, has written to the African American Heritage and History Society in order to find out more about her own genealogy and family tree and the letter she receives in return affirms Blanche’s tenuous notions of racial

authenticity. Research reveals a history of ‘Uncle Tomism’ in Veronica’s family. Her great grandfather Moses, a slave, betrayed his brother Cyrano who was planning a revolt by telling their master. “While Cyrano and his collaborators are reported to have been skinned alive and left to die in the slaves’ quarters as a lesson to other such plotters,” Veronica’s grandfather “Moses was rewarded for his loyalty by being given his freedom and safe passage to Nova Scotia” (163). Her privilege, then, is irrecoverably connected to a betrayal of black people, to the murder of slaves, and to obsequiousness and attachment to white racists. The letter confirms the ‘deblacking’ of Veronica Tatterson and as Darylanne K. English concludes, in these scenes “Blanche is doing the same thing that the dead Faith Brown had been doing: digging up and remembering an ugly, neither whole nor wholly accurate, version of an African-American past” (790).

As English notes, all the characters Blanche encounters at Amber Cove, “all seem determined to fail her tests of racial authenticity,” even “Mattie ultimately does not measure up to Blanche’s standards for raced and gendered authenticity” as Blanche discovers “not only [was] she married to a white man, another academic, but [...] has a son, born as the result of her years earlier affair with a black man, whom she refuses to acknowledge publicly” (English 788). Neely’s second novel, then, much like her first, is as English suggests, somewhat of “a single stubborn, racially inflected mystery surrounding families and their genealogies, both literal and literary” (774). Moreover she rightly argues,

Barbara Neely [...] is writing a series of detective novels that explore the nature, indeed the very possibility of black community at a time when the idea of unified blackness has been discredited. It may be at least in part because of Neely’s seemingly anachronistic, and even possibly reactionary, preoccupation with reforging black identity that her novels have remained largely outside current academic discourse. (English 786)

While English suggests that race itself, like “authentic blackness” is “a receding mystery, the ever-detected but never found” and which “invites use of the

detective form” (774), Neely always uncovers the racial truth in ways that harken back to the very same passing narratives she signifies on.

Indeed, it is difficult see how Neely’s “miscegenation” of the detective and passing genres could lead to anything other than a conventional crescendo in which the “racial truth” is revealed.<sup>93</sup> For instance, Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) similarly revolves around passing; femme fatale Daphne Monet is actually Ruby Green, an African American woman passing-for-white.<sup>94</sup> Additionally Patricia Jones’s *Passing* (1999) combines an examination of the legacy of racial passing and incorporates elements of mystery writing (Reddy 86). The association between the two genres is historical; both Steven Soitos and Hazel Carby trace the mixing of the genres to Pauline Hopkins novel *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901-2; Carby 147 and Soitos 60-84). Nella Larsen’s *Passing* incorporates elements of the murder mystery genre in its *Finale* (did Irene push Clare?). This extends beyond an American context; in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of The Yellow Face” (1893), for example, Sherlock Holmes uncovers a black girl passing as a white man in an early tale of gender and race passing. An early Alfred Hitchcock suspense thriller *Murder!* (1930) involves a passing-for-white twist among a touring theatrical troupe, as does Basil Dearden’s crime drama, *Sapphire* (1959) in which detectives attempt to find the relatives of a murdered music student whose body is found on Hampstead Heath.

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<sup>93</sup> Genre theory often alludes to ‘contamination’ and ‘mixing’ in ways that are fascinating given the topic of this thesis. See Todorov’s “The Origin of Genre” and Derrida’s “The Law of Genre” (1980) for examples. Todorov speaks of “transgressions” and “violations” of generic classifications, noting that the “norm” of generic form “becomes visible – owing only to its transgressions,” much like the passing figure (14). Derrida hypotheses about the “mixing” of genres, “intermixing,” “impurity,” “monstrosity,” and “essential purity” (57) which taken out of context reads as a treatise on ‘miscegenation.’

<sup>94</sup> For a very useful reading of *Devil in a Blue Dress* in the context of community, notions of authentic blackness, and class, please see Nicole King’s “‘You Think Like You White’ Questioning Race and Racial Community through the Lens of Middle Class Desire(s)” (2002).

In conclusion, while Neely's signifying use of the passing trope to rebuke white beauty standards is no doubt radical, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* ultimately reinforces, reinscribes, and reifies the same essentialist notions as its hereditary texts, such as *Clotel* and *The House Behind the Cedars*. This said, Neely's reference to passing as a way of unpacking of the relationship between embodiment, light skin, beauty, worth, value, and privilege within the black 'community' places her among a collection of contemporary post-civil rights writers who do the same. In my next chapter, I examine two such texts, Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) and Dorothy West's *The Wedding* (1995), which invoke the passing theme in order to question the prevailing association between lightness, whiteness, and privilege.

My grandmother had a child with whites. No one ever spoke about Maggie as being white. It didn't exist because it was obviously a child of rape, you know, and some people would not talk about this. She married a white dentist in Tennessee. [...] And Maggie died young. She died very young. So I think you get this disconnect from people because they are ashamed. And I don't think they should be.

(Gloria Naylor, qtd. in Drieling 269)

## **Chapter 2 ‘Selling Out’: Passing, Privilege, and Descent**

‘Pure’ whiteness has actual value, like legal tender, while the white-skinned African-American is like a counterfeit bill that is passed into circulation, but may be withdrawn at any point if discovered to be bogus. The inherited whiteness is a kind of capital, which may yield the dividend of freedom.

[...]

Property, including color capital [...] may pass through women [...] but women themselves do not control it or determine its value.

(Harryette Mullen, “Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness” 80-81)

In this chapter I discuss the ways that Gloria Naylor and Dorothy West signify on the conventional passing genre’s theme of [hypo]descent and inheritance in order to comment on the continued relationship between colour and privilege among the black middle classes. Harryette Mullen suggests that passing evolved out of a slave system in which the raced body denoted various forms of capital. Pure whiteness, she suggests, has actual value that the “counterfeit” off-white body of the passer does not. Moreover, hypodescent rules mean that the inherited genealogical whiteness that is passed through the female body never belongs to her. That African American women and their mixed-race children cannot lay claim to this inherited whiteness (and the “actual value” that comes with it) is a central theme in traditional passing narratives such as Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). West and Naylor dramatically rewrite these narratives in order to redress these genealogical denials, absences, and fissures in the African American ‘community’.

### **Colour, Class, and Capital in Exclusive Black Communities**

Establishing a sense of community, such as Neely’s Amber Cove, has always been

key to sustaining the relationship between colour, class, and capital. As F. James Davis explains, middle-class, elite “societies, and other organizations that excluded all but the very light mulattoes who could meet certain physical standards of lightness [...] became crucial in keeping the gates to upper-class status in the urban Negro communities” (39). The role of these ‘clubs’ (especially in the South) cannot be underestimated. As Womack reflects, “in Atlanta, New Orleans and Washington D.C.,” in particular, there were “a flurry of social clubs created by lighter Blacks who excluded their brown-skinned brethren” (80). Caraway argues that the notorious “blue-vein” and “paper-bag” skin colour tests used by “bourgeois Black social clubs” in the early twentieth century “instituted hierarchies of ‘whiteness as rightness,’” and “conjoined color-consciousness with class privilege” (Caraway 95).

Indeed, it is not surprising that Neely chose the (fictional) Amber Cove for her novel exploring privilege among these sets. Exclusive black vacation destinations such as Oak Bluffs, Martha’s Vineyard; Sag Harbor, Long Island; Highland Beach, Maryland; and Idlewild, Michigan offered opportunities for the black elite to “reinforce networks of influence and distance themselves from the working classes” (J. Moore 69; Graham 153). If Neely’s novel represents an ‘outsider’s’ perspective on such a location, then Dorothy West’s *The Wedding* (1995) – one of two novels I discuss in this chapter – offers an ‘insider’s’ account. While West described her family as part of Boston’s “‘genteel poor,’” or as the daughter of West’s cousin Helene Johnson phrased it, “shabby gentility,” Sally Ann Ferguson writes that West’s father Isaac, a former slave turned entrepreneur, “provided his gifted daughter with a privileged, bourgeois upbringing” (Sherrard-Johnson 53; S. Ferguson 871). The Wests owned a four-storey townhouse on Brookline Avenue in Boston (the same city Blanche calls ‘home’ in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*) and a beach house at Oak Bluffs, which was “the best-known resort among the black elite” (Sherrard-Johnson 53; Graham 153).

In fact both Neely’s “Amber Cove” and West’s fictionalised setting of “The Oval” in *The Wedding* are based on Oak Bluff and all three towns share similar

histories.<sup>95</sup> For instance, West's family were among first to own a home at Oak Bluff and host black summer visitors there because of 'whites-only' policies at local inns (Graham 154).<sup>96</sup> Similarly, Neely's Amber Cove Inn "was built after [its founder] Coghill was refused admittance to a wealthy white resort on Cape Cod," and Coghill is exactly the sort of character who might have sold the Wests their home, for he "built spacious cottages on the Mansion's extensive grounds and sold them to friends and business associates, thereby creating his own exclusive summer resort" (*Talented Tenth* 5). In the early days of Coghill's Inn, "guests [...] had to be related to or recommended by one of the Amber Cove cottage owners" (5). Indeed, it is only thanks to the Crowley's invite that Blanche visits the resort and even then it "wasn't a place she'd choose to visit if the choice were hers to make" (3). As Carol, who "passes for money" in Neely's novel, reflects, "[m]ost of the people here wouldn't acknowledge my existence if I wasn't connected to Hank. No poor unknown daughter of South Carolina sharecroppers could achieve real insider status at dear old Amber Cove" (31-32). Carol explains that she enacts her own form of cultural passing, reflecting "[y]ou learn the moves" of the black elite and Blanche agrees because she too "had learned the manners, dress and forks of the rich from serving their dinners and cleaning their silver (32).

Despite her fluency in elite manners and customs, Blanche had "already discovered she couldn't pass for white, even in her imagination and she'd be around the well-to-do long enough to know that there weren't enough expensive clothes in the world to help her pass for money" (32), a strategy West's character Lute McNeil adopts. Like Amber Cove, West's setting of The Oval similarly thrives under a nepotistic system in which owners of the cottages only rent "to a family with the right credentials, who valiantly lived up to all expectations" – until of course, Addie Bannister takes the Talented Tenth's commitment to uplift a little too literally, much to her neighbour's chagrin. As her last-name suggests she

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<sup>95</sup> See Bernard W. Bell for his reading of Amber Cove as Oak Bluffs in *The Contemporary African American Novel* (372).

<sup>96</sup> For a really useful history of Martha's Vineyard as a black holiday destination, see Chapter 8 of Graham's, *Our Kind of People* (151-181).

inadvertently helps the interloping parvenu Lute McNeil climb into this elite crowd by “let[ting] down the class bars and unlock[ing] her door to someone nobody knew but everybody knew about” (*The Wedding* 5).

Even though Neely’s novel testifies to the continued (if futile) efforts of the black elite to sustain the relationship between colour, class, and capital in the early 1990s, F. James Davis implies that “[b]y the mid-1970s” in the wake of the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement, “the devaluation of the prestige of light color had influenced [...] the class structure of the black community significantly” and “rather than facilitat[ing] upward mobility,” he argues that, “[b]eing light seemed to retard [it] at various levels in the black class structure” (75). This is true of Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1985) – the second novel I discuss in this chapter – in which skin colour is less central in the neighbourhood’s hierarchy than it is in Neely and West’s worlds.<sup>97</sup> While Naylor acknowledges that colourist attitudes prevail in some households in Linden Hills, the most powerful residents in the community are not necessarily the lightest. Like *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* and *The Wedding*, Naylor’s novel features the black elite, but her focus is at home, rather than away. Linden Hills is an exclusive black residential community, established by the Nedeed family, where homes can only be bequeathed to children or sold to another black family (7). Just as in Amber Cove in which “the Inn continues to be owned by members of the Coghill family” and where “[m]ost of the cottages are also still owned by descendants of the original owners,” the Nededs still own the same house and many of the homes in the neighbourhood have been in the same family for generations (*Talented Tenth* 5; *Linden Hills* 19).

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<sup>97</sup> *Linden Hills* (1985) has been critically eclipsed by Naylor’s better-known debut, the American Book Award winning novel (and HARPO productions mini-series) *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and by her later novel *Mama Day* (1988). It’s important to note that *Mama Day* similarly examines the effects of colourism on light-skinned women. As Reger explains, in *Mama Day*, “Naylor again inverts and revises a literary tradition: In contrast to the conventional tragic-mulatta narrative in which the black blood served to ostracise the protagonist, for Cocoa, it is her ‘white blood’ that turns her into an outsider” (243).

Even though class is the central concern in both *The Wedding* and *Linden Hills*, the passing trope plays a fundamental role in West and Naylor's characterisation of the African American elite. I argue that West makes reference to passing as a way of tracing and reclaiming the white ancestry or genealogy of black middle classes that is ironically responsible for their position at the top of a 'black' hierarchy. *The Wedding* chronicles the history of the light-skinned Coles family who in seeking to maintain the relationship between status and skin-tone, precariously straddle the colour line. They deny desire for those with darker skin, fear passing across the colour line and disappearing into whiteness, and one false step either way will jeopardise their elite status. The novel takes its title from the ceremony about to take place between the fairest Coles daughter Shelby (who is capable of passing-for-white) and Meade, a white jazz musician – a rite of passage her family fear will become a rite of passing. Shelby's decision to marry across the colour line thus marks an ironic return to the very same culture of 'miscegenation' responsible for their social influence within the black community and West contextualises Shelby and Meade's union by invoking the traditional passing genre's rich history of interracial relationships.

There are multiple instances of temporary passing in West's novel. Rachel, who is dark-skinned, passes 'by-proxy' with Clark, who is light-skinned – they are taken as a 'mixed couple' when they dine out (96). Shelby remembers accidentally passing-for-white after getting lost in the woods as a child. Despite the police and local community being alerted that an African American child wearing her exact outfit was missing, because of her light skin, nobody recognises her. When she is eventually returned home, the chief of police thinks Shelby's white great-grandmother 'Gram' is black and concludes when he hears her accent that she "sounded like the coloured maids who swarmed through town on their Thursdays off," and "if she hadn't sounded so coloured she would have sounded white" (77). When Shelby asks Gram "Are you colored too?" she only replies "I'm your gram" thus occupying a racially liminal space in Shelby's imagination (80). In this sense,

Gram passes as a light-skinned black woman who is capable of passing-for-white or, in other words, passes-for-black-passing-for-white.<sup>98</sup>

While West's novel, set in 1953, nostalgically celebrates the black elite, Gloria Naylor, much like Barbara Neely, invokes passing in order to attack what bell hooks describes as a "nonprogressive black elite" who "stand ready to ascend to the heights of class privilege by any means necessary" led by "a corrupt talented tenth" (*Where We Stand* 98). However, unlike Neely, Naylor is much less concerned with issues of beauty and physical desirability. Instead 'whiteness' is much more clearly configured as a cultural, material desire that discursively shapes the body, not as something that *is* essentially embodied; and, I argue, the passing figure is reimagined as a person who aspires to access white privilege, regardless of the shade of their skin and texture of their hair. By extending and shifting the discourse of passing from a physical and embodied one to a cultural and economic one, Naylor's polemical text cautions against 'cultural whiteness' and the dangers of African Americans 'selling out.'

In this chapter, drawing upon readings of two canonical passing texts - Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* – I examine Dorothy West and Gloria Naylor's representation of colourism as a hierarchy based on more than just aesthetic appearances, physical desires, and embodiments of beauty, and as a form of discrimination that has a vested interest in maintaining class and economic privilege. First, I discuss Naylor's contemporary reworking of the passing-for-white trope into a mode of cultural passing in which middle class African Americans 'sell out,' 'act white' and assimilate across the colour line in order to attain prestige and power. Signifying on Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*, Naylor reworks the traditional passing narrative to indict black

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<sup>98</sup> For excellent readings of the curious failure of passing to translate to the screen in Oprah Winfrey's made-for-TV adaptation of West's novel starring Halle Berry, see Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's chapter "Two Weddings" in *Dorothy West's Paradise: A Biography of Class and Color* (2012: 167-184) and Caroline A. Streeter's chapter "The Wedding's Black/White Women in Prime Time" in *Tragic No More: Mixed Race Women and the Nexus of Sex and Celebrity* (2012: 23- 38).

capitalism. Second, picking up on my discussion in Chapter 1, I continue to address how whiteness operates and functions as cultural and symbolic capital, but this time as something that ghosts the transmission of monetary wealth in American society from generation to generation, a genealogical process evocatively captured in Johnson and Chesnutt's novels in their haunting representations of absent white fathers. I discuss how Dorothy West signifies on this theme by reconstructing the interracial family, and affirming the white father's place in black elite culture. Sadly, many of the faults of the passing narrative's white father are revised and reinscribed in her depiction of the black father, Lute. Third, I discuss Naylor's revision of the 'tragic mulatta' and 'abandoned mammy' characters of the traditional genre in *Linden Hills* through the characters of Laurel Dumont and Willa Nedeed. In her revision of these two generic characters, Naylor comments on intersecting dynamics of colour, class, and gender. And finally, to conclude, I reflect on Willa's recuperation of a mulatta 'herstory' that reveals the sexist foundations of Nedeed's black capitalist patriarchy.

### **"I have sold my [soul] for a mess of pottage": Selling Out in *Linden Hills* (1985)**

I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man's success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means "money."

(James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man*, 91)

...and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.

(James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man*, 100)

“...You know my grandmother called it selling the mirror in your soul. [...] I guess she meant giving up that part of you that lets you know who you are. [...] ‘These people have lost that, Willie. They’ve lost touch with what it is to be them. Because there’s not a damned thing inside anymore to let them know. And if that’s what a degree or a five-syllable job title is going to cost you, then you don’t want it, believe me Willie. I’m probably not much better than the rest of Linden Hills. I haven’t gone all the way, but I’ve sold myself for a pair of clean socks and a chicken dinner.”

(Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* 59)

Perhaps James Weldon Johnson best articulates the relationship between passing and notions of ‘selling out’ in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) when he concludes with the confession that he “sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage” in deciding to pass-for-white and “make a white man’s success: ‘money’” (91). The trajectory towards this “white man’s success” is an upwards one and the Ex-Colored Man’s ‘snakes and ladders’ picaresque journey between what Robert Stepto describes as a symbolic north (which represents “relative opportunity”) and a symbolic South (which represents “maximum oppression”) is articulated in terms of social as well as geographic ascent and descent framed by his quest for wealth, opportunity and prestige (Stepto 167; also qtd. in Pavlic 18-22). While Johnson complicates this trope by depicting his narrator’s days in an almost ‘sub-Southern’ Florida rolling Cuban cigars and learning Spanish, and outlining his time with his millionaire friend in Europe, his first adult trip to the ‘oppressive’ South is ruined when his only belongings are stolen and as the extract above explains, by the close of the novel he literally ‘buys into’ the symbolic potential of the North by putting “all he had in New York real estate”:

I took equity in a piece of property on which stood a rickety old tenement-house. [...] in something like six months I disposed of my equity for more than double my investment. From that time on I devoted myself to the study of New York real estate, and watched for opportunities to make similar investments. In spite of two or three speculations which did not turn out well, I have been remarkably successful. To-day I am the owner and part-owner of several flat-

houses. I have changed my place of employment four times since returning to New York, and each change has been a decided advancement. Concerning the position which I now hold, I shall say nothing except that it pays extremely well. (92)

The Ex-Coloured Man does not simply ‘sellout,’ but by purchasing property, he quite literally buys up and into whiteness. As Cheryl Harris observes, passing has “a certain economic logic” and it is widely accepted “that being white automatically ensure[s] higher economic returns in the short term, as well as greater economic, political, and social security in the long run” (1713).<sup>99</sup> The Ex-Coloured Man revels in the language of capitalism here – how quickly he disposed of his “equity,” how he “double[d] his investments,” the risks of “speculation,” and his rapid scaling of the corporate hierarchy. “What an interesting and absorbing game is money making!” he exclaims, reflecting on how he “derived a great deal of pleasure” in the process (92).

A “narrative of [economic and geographic] ascent” this may be, but a story of ‘uplift’ it is not (Stepto 67). By passing-for-white, the Ex-Colored Man forfeits his opportunity to contribute to “a vision of racial solidarity uniting black elites, with the masses” that characterises the black uplift movement (Gaines 3). Despite his wealth and “advancement,” besides “great race men” such as Booker T. Washington the Ex-Coloured Man feels “small and selfish”; by succeeding as he has under the cloak of whiteness, he will only ever be an “ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money” rather than an black man who is “making history and a race” (99). Afterall, he uses “racial passing [as] an exit strategy” to avoid “the stigma associated with [...] group membership” (Starkey “In Defense” 19); the Ex-Coloured Man’s final decision to pass-for-white is in response to the “shame, unbearable shame” he experiences after witnessing a lynching and “being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals” (90). As W.

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<sup>99</sup> Cheryl Harris also reflects on the relationship between passing and women’s employment (1710-1713). See also Mary Condé’s “Passing in the Fiction of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen” (1994) for her reflection on passing and women’s work lives.

Lawrence Hogue notes, “Johnson [...] does not criticize the ex-coloured man for achieving freedom and comfort through assimilating, through acquiring the values and the American dream of the dominant white society,” “for doing well financially and living the secure and comfortable life he has so desired,” or even for passing; instead, “Johnson criticizes the ex-coloured man for the way he achieves the dream, for abandoning the race’s struggle for equality” (86). Therefore Johnson complicates the notion of economic ascent by comparing it to racial uplift; the Ex-Colored Man may have achieved the former, but can never participate in the latter. Even if Johnson is not explicitly indicting a culture of passing, he is suggesting that “passing” and “uplift” are mutually exclusive processes; one cannot benefit one’s “race” by choosing to abandon it.

As Randall Kennedy rightly observes, “[t]he spectre of the ‘sellout’ haunts the African American Imagination” (*Sellout* 3) and the presence of the Ex-Colored Man is felt in Gloria Naylor’s second novel, *Linden Hills* (1985).<sup>100</sup> In this dark and gothic 1980s reworking of Dante’s *Inferno* as a tale of black suburban intrigue, greed, and excess, Naylor signifies on the tropes of white success and social ascent in Johnson’s passing narrative to explore the politics of ‘selling out’ by ‘acting white’ (I will return to these ideas shortly). Set in the days running up to Christmas, the narrative follows two teenage friends, “White Willie” and Lester Tilson (who signify on Dante and Virgil respectively), as they work their way down the neighbourhood hill undertaking handy work for residents before completing their graft in the home of the demonic patriarch Luther Nedeed. The eight streets of Linden Hills (plus Luther’s home) roughly map onto nine of Dante’s ten circles of hell, and as Lester guides Willie down into each street or “crescent,” they encounter characters who are in limbo, and are guilty of lust, gluttony, avarice, anger, suicide, and fraud (Ward 69).<sup>101</sup> Around Luther’s home is a frozen moat, which resembles the frozen lake in *Inferno*, and “at the center is Satan himself,” Luther Nedeed, “who

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<sup>100</sup> For a contemporary parody of black middle class professionals, see Wernette’s “Successful Black Guy Meme.”

<sup>101</sup> Ward notes that Naylor omits “the vestibule of the neutrals, Dante’s Circle One, and places her neutrals on First Crescent Drive” (69n5).

constitutes Circle Ten" (Ward 69). While most critics celebrate Naylor's phenomenal use of intertext (John Noell Moore, Valerie Traub, James Robert Saunders, Peter Erickson, Christine Berg, Margaret Homans, Catherine C. Ward, Eva Miklódy, Keith Sandiford and Rachel Falconer have all analysed Naylor's masterful use of references to The Bible, Shakespeare, Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Virgil's *Aeneid*, the gothic genre, D.H. Lawrence, as well as Dante's *Inferno*), none have focussed on how Naylor additionally signifies on the conventional passing genre.

Naylor's katabanic narrative signifies on Johnson's passing tale of ascent and uplift by inverting its narrative geography, because "up means down in the hills" (*Linden Hills* 39).<sup>102</sup> In *Linden Hills*, a town built upon a slope with the home of its "evil" owner Nedeed at its very base and the least affluent residents at its zenith, the higher one climbs the ladder of "white success," the further down the hill they go, plummeting both literally and metaphorically into the depths of hellish greed and avarice or as Mel Watkins bluntly puts it in his *New York Times* review of the novel, in Naylor's world, "blacks who aspire to the white world and material success are pawns of the Devil and will experience the torments of hell." Indeed, Catherine Ward notes that "Luther's house number is 999" and in a letter Naylor wrote to her, "Naylor says that she gave this house this number because in Linden Hills, where up is down, 999 'is really 666, the sign of the beast'" (69n6).

Moreover, Naylor replaces Johnson's New York property investor with Nedeed, a racially nebulous, cultural passer, a black capitalist 'sellout' and property magnate who makes "a white man's success" by selling a vision of Black Power to the residents of *Linden Hills* while acting "against the interests of blacks as a whole" (Kennedy *Sellout* 4). At the risk of oversimplifying a very complex economic ideology, black capitalism, which has historical roots in the ideas of public intellectuals including Martin Delany and Booker T. Washington, can be defined as those ideas that advocate "the accumulation of capital by individual Black

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<sup>102</sup> For more on Gloria Naylor, hell, and katabasis, see Chapter 6 of Rachel Falconer's book, *Hell in Contemporary Literature* (2005). Also, see Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) for a similar inversion of 'top' and 'Bottom,' replete with its own inferno.

entrepreneurs” and which promote “strategies designed to maintain Black control over the Black consumer market” (Marable 139). Particularly popular in the 1970s and 1980s when Naylor was writing, as Hill and Rabig observe, despite a “renewed interest in Black economic development evident in the era of Black power, the moment also invited a wide and varied range of critique” (31). Earl Ofari Hutchinson decries Black capitalism as “part of a thorough Black exercise in self-delusion,” activist James Boggs argued that, “[c]apitalism, regardless of its colour, is a system of exploitation of one set of people by another set of people,” and Black Panther Party member Bobby Seale described “Black capitalists” as “exploiters and oppressors” (all qtd in Hill and Rabig 31).<sup>103</sup>

This is something Luther knows too well. Even though his forefathers initially conceptualised their ‘community’ as an “ebony jewel” in the heart of white America (16), or in Luke Bouvier’s words “*the black space par excellence, or at least the realization of [their] vision of what a black space should be*” (140), Luther knows that “[s]omething had gone terribly wrong with Linden Hills” (16). Although the community “had finally crystallized into that jewel” that his forefathers envisaged, Luther “wore it more like a weighted stone around his neck” (16). He realises deep down that his ancestors “looked at the earth, the sea, and the sky [...] and mistook those who were owned by it as the owners” and as a result, “Linden Hills wasn’t black; it was successful” and “the shining surface of their careers, brass railings, and cars hurt his eyes because it only reflected the bright nothing that was inside of him” (16-17). As Bouvier argues, “his dream of a successful, pure black space has now turned out to undermine the absolute ‘blackness’ of Linden Hills” (144). Instead, “‘black’ and ‘white’ as a signifying pair are deferred and displaced onto each other,” thus “subvert[ing] any possibility of a pure ‘black’ or ‘white’ by undermining the crucial internal/external opposition” (144). In other words, Linden Hills, which should be a space of Black Power is really a replica of white power which in itself is a forceful construction with discursive rather than essential origins. Linden Hills is thus what Baudrillard might describe as a copy without a legitimate “original,” a

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<sup>103</sup> And this is notwithstanding E. Franklin Frazier’s seminal and fiery indictment of the black middle classes in *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957).

“simulacrum,” a geographic “desert of the real,” a racial “truth that hides the fact that there is none”; Naylor’s post-structuralist Foucauldian metaphor thus excavates and uncovers the capitalist underpinnings of American racial discourse (Baudrillard 1). Even though Luther realises that his ancestors’ vision of blackness triumph only mimics and emulates (perhaps like the passing figure him or herself) ‘white’ models of success rather than resisting them, he desperately clings on to their vision, reminding us that even after the peak years of passing, there are many other ways through which one can “sell their birthright” for “a mess of pottage.”

In shifting the essentialising discourse of the racialised body onto the culture the Nededs cultivate, Naylor offers insight into the ways that power is inscribed and encoded. In Nedeed’s apocalyptic vision of America’s future, whiteness transcends the body and engulfs all it touches:

[They] saw where [...] the future of America [...] was heading. It was going to be white: white money backing wars for white power because the very earth was white – look at it – white gold, white silver, white coal running white railroads and steamships, white oil fuelling white automotives...Yes, the very sky would be white. (8)

The Nededs see whiteness in all forms of concrete privilege and power – and whiteness is made manifest in the economy, the war, and the sky; even the very earth itself and the minerals that enrich it are all ‘white.’ Following Marx, Luke Bouvier usefully conceptualises this desire for wealth as “commodity fetishism” – a process by which commodities (such as the silver, coal, railroads, and steamships) “take on a ‘phantom objectivity’” and “appear as an essential object with an inherent, natural value, strictly following only the rationality of the market and revealing no trace of its fundamental nature as a relation between people” (143). So while the traditional passing genre offers essentialist readings of the racialised body, Naylor transfers this essentialising discourse to commodities. These commodities (rather than the passing-for-white body) carry the burden of racial objectification, and are perceived by the Nededs to carry inherent meaning, which is only ever socially constituted and constructed.

In numerous ways, the Nedeads' financial dealings mimic and replicate the very mode of white capitalist patriarchal oppression they seek to undermine and in this sense, their model of achieving success echoes the passing-for-white act, which both subverts and reifies systems of racial classification. Bouvier argues that, "in attempting simply to reverse the poles of the black/white binary opposition by valorizing 'black' instead of 'white,' the Nedeads remain within the same problematic as the white racists they are supposedly defying" (142). The Nedeads, therefore, "continue to naturalize and essentialize the rhetorical fiction of race" (142), and crucially, despite their ambition to establish "a true Black Power that would spread beyond the Nedeads" (*Linden Hills* 11), "Linden Hills has [...] reached the point where what is 'black' is really only a thickly disguised, displaced, deferred 'white'" (Bouvier 146). Masquerading as black capitalists with a vested interest in the African American community, the Nedeads are wolves in sheep's clothing, agents of white supremacy passing as Black Power proponents.

Much like the system of slavery that secured white superiority in the United States, the model of black capitalism that the Nedeads promote relies upon the marginalisation and oppression of black women. As Barbara Christian writes, "[a]ll of the Nedeed men clearly grasp the fact that the subordination of the female to the male is an essential element in becoming a powerful people in America" ("Naylor's Geography" 122).<sup>104</sup> Unsurprisingly, one of the many rumours circulating about the Nedeed fortune, is one suggesting that Luther's forefather "actually sold his octoroon wife and six children for the money that he used to come North and obtain the hilly land" of Linden Hills (2), and he additionally profited from "financ[ing] gunrunners to the Confederacy" (6). Luther then, despite his darker skin, actually echoes one of the key figures of the traditional passing-for-white

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<sup>104</sup> For more on the ways that Naylor makes it clear that black capitalism is associated with the mistreatment of black women, see Maxwell and Xavier's discussion about Roxanne and Penthouse Magazine (114-116). See also Alice Walker's short story "Porn" for more on the topic of sexual objectification that Naylor addresses in *Linden Hills*.

novel – the white slave master. By having a dark-skinned slaveholder sell his light-skinned Octoroon wife and children to cement his power, Naylor inverts the traditional genre in which the white slave-owner (for example Henry Linwood in *Clotel*) does the same to make sure his position among the white Southern elite remains intact. Naylor therefore suggests that racial identity is not defined by skin colour, but is culturally defined by an individual's relationship to the capitalist system of slavery. Even though the Neddeeds founded Linden Hills as a “black wad of spit in the eye of white America”; by endorsing capitalism at cost of enslaving others they are no different from the white slave-owners in the traditional narrative.

If in the traditional passing narrative, as Mullen explains, “the white-skinned African American becomes white through a process of silencing and suppression, by denying, ‘forgetting,’ ignoring, or erasing evidence of African ancestry,” the Neddeeds become “blacker” by suppressing, denying, forgetting and so on, their light-skinned genealogy (72).<sup>105</sup> Bouvier suggests that the Neddeeds “crush and commodify beyond recognition any elements of the ‘dangerous’ black heritage” in their family genealogy,

such as the word “Tupelo” which, as the name of the city where Nedeed sold his wife and children and later took his new bride into a new slavery finds itself appropriated as the name for Neddeeds’ exploitative realty agency and for the most exclusive section of Linden Hills. (145)

However, it is crucial to point out that this “dangerous black heritage” is actually white and their “crushing of these connections” is an act of repression that inverts the typical passing-for-white trope (in which phenotypically black ancestors are denied), even as the “Neddeeds increasingly imitate the repressive technique of the exploiting white racists they are supposedly defying” (Bouvier 145).

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<sup>105</sup> Ahmed complicates this reading and notes that passing, at least in a theoretical sense, “is not becoming” and that “[i]n assuming the image of an-other one does not become the other” (96). Instead, “passing [...] makes a difference: the subject does not stay the same through passing” (96).

The process of capitalist acquisition in Naylor's text thus mirrors the process of racial passing, or as she phrases it, it "strip[s] the skin, sex, and soul of any who offered themselves at its alter" (17). Two characters who best represent this contentious notion of "de-racialisation" (or as Kimberly Jade Norwood describes it "de-blackening"), desexualisation, and dehumanisation that characterise the process of 'selling out' are Luther Nedeed and the peripheral character Maxwell Smyth. If Linden Hills represents a figurative capitalist chasm into which black people "disappear," then Luther and Maxwell are the magicians responsible for these vanishing acts. Notwithstanding Luther's own internment of his wife and son in the old mortuary beneath his house, both Maxwell and Luther possess an almost magical ability to manipulate the ways that others perceive their race and appearance.

Luther is descended from a man who possesses a mystical ability to alter his phenotype (Luther I has "protruding eyes [that] could change color at will"; 3), but his own prestidigitation is more materialist in its execution: it is his ability to cloak whiteness in a rhetoric of "black capitalism." This is something he learns from his grandfather who peddled a vision of Linden Hills to a generation for whom slavery was still in living memory:

They were calling their children to watch a wizard: Come look listen and perhaps you will learn how to turn the memory of our iron chains into gold chains. The cotton fields that broke your grandparents backs can cover yours in gabardine. See the road to salvation can be walked in leather shoes and sung about in linen choir robes. Nedeed almost smiled at their simplicity. Yes, they would invest their past and apprentice their children to the future of Linden Hills, forgetting that a magician's supreme art is not in transformation but in making things disappear. (*Linden Hills* 12)

Luther's ancestor is a "wizard," or rather a charlatan, who promises a miracle – to magically transform the shackles of slavery and the memories of cotton fields into tokens of wealth, and vanquish any memories of subjugation. The fact that those who buy into this vision remain materially bound to the very system they seek to escape is skilfully hidden by Nedeed. Their "iron chains" of oppression will be

transformed into the “gold chains” of capitalism; they will wear rich choir robes, but these will be woven from the same cotton picked by their ancestors; and the “road to salvation” will be trod in the finest footwear, even though “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (“Matthew” 19:24). If Luther is a “wizard,” or sorcerer even, then Maxwell would be the most fitting of ‘apprentices’ (indeed, given the Nedeed’s link to slaveholding, it is most significant that Maxwell’s colleagues describe him as a slave-driver; 106). Both men’s supreme art is in “in making [race] disappear” (12) – their quest is to make racial memory, racial history or racial identity, vanish.

Maxwell, a chardonnay-drinking, stingray-driving, ‘jive-talking,’ trickster does not live in Linden Hills and is an ambitious “executive in a white owned corporation” – General Motors. His position at the top of the corporate hierarchy is thus more traditionally conveyed to the reader through the metaphor of ascent – he occupies an office in a high-rise block. Maxwell, residing as he does in a company outside of the fictional realm of Linden Hills that the reader recognises thus serves as a frightening reminder that despite the vanquishing of Nedeed at the close of the narrative, men like Luther prevail across America (and indeed the world).<sup>106</sup> For the best illusionists (and passing figures alike), misdirection and distraction are key wiles and despite the fact that he is obviously African American, Maxwell uses “psychological sleight-of-hand [...] to make his blackness disappear” (102). Naylor invokes the language of ‘acting white’ when she writes that Maxwell “would have found the comments that he was trying to be white totally bizarre” (105-6). For him, “[b]eing white was the furthest thing from his mind, since he spent every waking moment trying to be no color at all” (106). However, as Homans notes, “[w]hat he does not realize is that, in the world of corporate America, the absence of color is whiteness, because neutrality is impossible where hierarchical thinking prevails” (166).

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<sup>106</sup> Catherine Ward writes that Maxwell lives in upper Linden Hills on Third Crescent Drive, but actually this is where his friend Xavier lives (184).

For him, “[t]he trick was now to juggle other feats that would continually minimize his [blackness] to nothing more than a nervous tic,” and his success, perfection, and precision “kept them all wondering how it was done, so there was little time to think about who was doing it” (103). Like Gates’s signifying monkey, Maxwell’s skill lies in word play. By highlighting the spelling of his ordinary sounding last name ‘Smith’ as ‘Smyth,’ Maxwell fools others into forgetting his blackness. He used this trick at school and still revels in the memory of his white teacher’s puzzlement when he corrects her spelling of his name:

Maxwell Smyth learned to drag that moment out by not aiding the clumsy attempts as they grappled with reordering their ingrained expectations of his name and his being. He relished the feelings of power and control as his blackness momentarily diminished in front of their faces – an ordinary name had turned into the extraordinary and taken its owner with it in the transformation. (Naylor 103)

Maxwell’s reliance on “dragging” out the moment here can read as a mode of Derridean slippage in which Maxwell facilitates his own racial disembodiment by calling attention to the constructed nature of the signifier (“his name”) and its arbitrary relationship to the signified (“his being”). As people around him “grapple to reorder their ingrained expectations” of this relationship, race itself (the discourse that has historically bound racialised signifier and signified in the American imagination) disintegrates. The “transformation” is complete: he is no longer black.

Like Neely, Naylor has an interest in the relationship between signifier, signified, and referent, or between naming and the body, and her invocation of the passing dynamic to experiment with this in *Linden Hills* bears some similarities to Morrison’s strategies in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Indeed, Shirley Anne Williams notes that, “Naylor revoices motifs and devices from the recent fiction of Toni Morrison [...] often with remarkable effectiveness” (10). As discussed in Chapter 1, the name of Morrison’s principal character, Pecola Breedlove, signifies on Peola in *Imitation of Life* as well as Madam C.J. Walker whose real name is Sarah Breedlove (see also Gubar 21). Morrison places a “c” in the middle of “Peola” to signify Mrs.

Breedlove's corruption of the name, and as Gary Schwartz notes, "[t]he name with the 'c' has some suggestion of Latin *peccatum* (mistake, fault, error)," signifying the 'wrongness' of Pecola's blackness in a racist scale of colour (123; see also Yancy 131). Naylor similarly enjoys these signifying practices, claiming that with, "a lot of [names] I am playing with words," for example, "Luther Nedeed is spelled backwards is Luther de Eden. He is the devil" (Drieling 267). Additionally, Luther's first name sounds like Lucifer, and he is in fact "Needed" by the residents of Linden Hills, confirming Mel Watkins's analysis. Bouvier observes that Willie's last name, Mason (which means a person who lays stone in buildings), is ironic in that it "defers and displaces its binary opposite, for Willie eventually helps to *destroy*" rather than reinforce "the bases of Linden Hills" (147; see also "Mason"). The character Xavier can be read as "Saviour," Willa and Willie's names echo each other as the dual protagonists of the novel, and so on.

Naylor's choice of a name with an 'X' in the middle of it for Maxwell is connotative of Johnson's Ex Colored Man who similarly abdicates his claim to blackness; after all, as Gubar points out, "to be ex-colored is to be Xed out or cancelled: The X in ex-colored marks the burial spot of the excoriated, the excommunicated living dead who can be reanimated only by returning to color" (105). Naylor also places a 'Y' in the middle of his last name, raising the question as to Maxwell's motives. The episode with Maxwell's teacher also draws upon one of Morrison's key motifs – the metonymic blue eye.<sup>107</sup> While Pecola wishes for blue eyes in order to be seen by adults like Mr. Yacobowski in the General Store who "does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see," Maxwell "remembered the slate-blue eyes of his first grade teacher" that "focused him into existence" when he corrects her on the spelling of his name and "[w]hether it was impatience, embarrassment, or amusement" Maxwell is delighted that "it was still recognition" (103).

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<sup>107</sup> See Awkward for a discussion of how Gloria Naylor signifies on *The Bluest Eye* in her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (97-135). See also Edward Guerrero's "Tracking 'The Look' in the Novels of Toni Morrison" (1990) for more on the vision motif.

Although Tim Engles is sceptical of the ‘success’ of Maxwell’s signifying skills and argues “while Maxwell prefers to think that he can separate himself from the black race and become ‘no color at all,’ the very extremity of his actions is a direct, moment-to-moment acknowledgment of the fact that to others [...] he nevertheless ‘is black’” (671), Naylor reinforces the link between Maxwell and whiteness through more word play. For example, when Lester and Willie encounter Maxwell while working in Xavier Donnell’s house, Lester tells Maxwell, “I don’t know how they taught you to spell progress in the school you went to, but on the streets you spell it W-H-I-T-E”; the typography on the page mirrors the way that Maxwell spells out his own name (“S-M-Y-T-H”) to his teacher where he went to school (103). Earlier on in the narrative, Nedeed suggests that “progress” is spelled “in white capital letters” (11), and the five letters of Smyth’s name map onto the “five-syllable job title” that Grandma Tilson warns is only attainable via the selling of the soul and the stripping of black skin (59).

Willie, on the other hand, is more like Pecola; he is socially invisible. But rather than being overlooked by white people, in Naylor’s text, he goes unseen in the eyes the black elite. The scene in which Willie and Lester meet Maxwell, for example, resembles the Yacobowski scene in *The Bluest Eye*:

He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. [...] Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover.

[...]

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness. (*The Bluest Eye* 36)

Willie watched Maxwell’s face and had the strange feeling that this man’s words weren’t really meant to reach across the kitchen toward them. His eyes seemed to stop at the green tiles on the floor in front of their feet. Why, it was the same feeling that you got talking to some white people. He suddenly felt very invisible to this tall, impeccable man and needed to hear his own voice to prove that he was in the kitchen.

“No, poverty just seems to lead to more poverty if you’re black,” Willie said loudly and stared directly at Maxwell.

Willie saw his linty pea jacket, frayed jeans, and cheap shoes materialize in Maxwell's eyes as they made their way slowly down his body. (*Linden Hills* 113)

Just as Yacobowski fails to actually "see" Pecola Breedlove when she is purchasing her Mary Jane sweets, Willie gets "the same feeling" talking to Maxwell "that you got talking to some white people" and "suddenly felt very invisible to this tall impeccable man and needed to hear his own voice to prove he was in the kitchen" (113). Barbara Neely invokes a similar description in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* when Tina explains how she felt so invisible at (ironically enough) Brown University "she'd sometimes pinched herself to make sure she was still in the physical world" (93). Both Naylor and Morrison draw attention to 'gaps' here. The space "between retina and object [and] between vision and view" to draw attention to the processes by which black bodies are rendered invisible. Like the Ex-Coloured Man, Maxwell can only ever see as far as the "green," a slang term for cash, for his "eyes seemed to stop at the green tiles on the floor in front of their feet."<sup>108</sup> Signifying on Du Bois's double-consciousness paradigm which posits the white gaze as the oppositional one, Naylor describes the way Willie literally sees himself "through the eyes of others," except this time, that dualistic gaze is black and privileged (Du Bois, *Souls* 2). Through Maxwell's eyes, Willie sees himself worth *less* (as well as worthless). While Maxwell wears "a silk scarf," with "gold fringe," a tweed jacket and "wool pants" in the cool winter air (102), Willie's clothes reflect his lack of income; he has a "linty" jacket, "frayed" jeans, and "cheap shoes" (113). While Willie is in many ways powerless like Pecola, he astutely recognises structures of power throughout the novel for what they are (note how he "stared directly at Maxwell" despite Maxwell's reluctance to "see" him), and he powerfully articulates his resistance.

Randall Kennedy, Trellie Jeffers, and Adrienne Harrison all note that linguistic dexterity has long been cited as evidence of 'selling out' in the black

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<sup>108</sup> Margaret Homans reads the colour green in *Linden Hills* as "recalling the green pastorals in Virgil, and in Dante where the ancient poets live" (158).

community, as enabling members of the black middle class to be amenable to whites and when necessary, ‘black enough’ for African Americans (Kennedy *Sellout* 9; T. Jeffers 37, Harrison 60). Naylor draws upon this notion in her portrayal of Maxwell as a double-voiced trickster who speaks in two tongues, an “androgynous” and ambivalent figure like Gates’s Esu-Elegbara who is “the master of language and Signification, the (semantic) liar who speaks only (rhetorical) truth” (Sheehy 408; see also Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 29).<sup>109</sup> When he greets his friend Xavier, he says “[n]o sweat, mon ami?” and “[w]hat’s shakin,” “engag[ing] in French and ghetto dialect, the two pet passions he reserved for close friends” (106). The performance of this verbal legerdemain by a character who is so abhorrent implies that Naylor shares Trellie Jeffers’s suspicions of “black middle class hipsters and pimps who master the lingo of the ghetto as they master their Shakespeare” and “now have the password of both worlds – that of the black working class and that of the white-black middle class” (37). This focus on code-switching echoes Marcia Dawkins’s conceptualisation of passing through “passwords,” or descriptions “of rhetorical intersections where tropes and identifications meet texts, personalities, social situations, categories, and hierarchies” (xi).

If, as philosopher Elizabeth Spelman suggests in her book *Inessential Woman*, that racialised discourse surrounding black men and women must be embraced as an embodied one, Naylor deblacks Luther and Maxwell by describing their somatophobic alienation from their own black bodies, as well as those of women. Spelman recognises that black men and women are typically represented with “images of their lives as determined by basic bodily functions (sex, reproduction, appetite, secretions, and excretions) and as given over to attending the bodily functions of others (feeding, washing, cleaning, doing the ‘dirty work’)” (127). How an author might choose to communicate this, without reinforcing the racial stereotypes that legitimise such treatment of black bodies, is a matter of skill. For example, Alice Walker celebrates Hurston’s characterisation of Janie in *Their*

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<sup>109</sup> See Chapter 1 of Gates’s *Signifying Monkey* for his study of Esu-Elegbara (3-43). See also Susan Fraiman’s critique of Gates’s gendered reading of Esu (and indeed, of signifying itself) in her book *Cool Men and The Second Sex* (2003; 106 -113).

*Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as possessing hands which, “though genetically ‘light’ are brown from the labor she shares with other blacks” in contrast to the delicate and white hands of the conventional literary ‘mulatta’ (“If the Present” 302). Naylor and Neely choose less delicate and subtle means to convey the ways that African Americans either are ‘in touch’ with their bodies or estranged from them and incorporate markedly visceral (and in Naylor’s prose, graphic) descriptions of the black body.

Unlike Barbara Neely’s Blanche, who is curiously shown on the toilet, in the shower and thinking about sex, both Luther and Maxwell, with their eccentric attention to detail, hate all bodily functions. While Neely includes a scene at the very beginning of *Blanche on the Lam* where Blanche, “ease[s] her bowels with as little noise as possible,” in the courthouse toilet with “a dingy skylight,” “a cracked marble floor,” and a “mottled basin” (2), Maxwell’s toilet habits “could have taken place on the seat of a theater or concert hall, with absolutely no clues to tip off even the nearest party about his true nature” (105). Resembling Morrison’s ‘mulatto’ Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye*, who “abhorred flesh on flesh,” who was “overwhelmed” by [b]ody odor” and who finds “all the natural excretions and protections the body was capable of” disquieting (131-2), Maxwell controls his excretions, and “through a careful selection of solids and liquids he was able to control not only the moment but the exact nature of the matter that had to bring him daily to [his] blue and white tiled [bath]room” (105). When his colleagues tease him by saying “Ya know Smyth acts like his --- don’t smell” it is, Naylor suggests because Maxwell’s “didn’t” (106).

Maxwell’s obsessive control extends to all areas of his life and is all enacted through an exacting control over the body; in his precision and carefulness, he personifies what Manning Marable (building upon the work of Max Weber and others) describes as the “rational character of capitalism” (138). Maxwell waits “exactly three seconds” before exiting his car when visiting Xavier (102), he “trains” himself to survive on three hours sleep per night, and he is “[a]lways immaculate and controlled” (103). For him, “sanity lies in consistency” and Maxwell retains his

“mental health by exercising the same type of control over every aspect of his being” (104). In his “carefully appointed duplex,” because he could not control the weather, he contrives “an elaborate series of humidifiers and thermostats [which] enabled him to determine the exact conditions under which he would eat, sleep, or sit” (104). This hyper-regulation of the body mimics the consciousness of the passing act in which the passer suspects that every move is subject to scrutiny.

Additionally, both Luther and Maxwell display an ambivalence towards sex. Like Morrison’s Soaphead Church, Maxwell is averse to sex. He finds “the erratic rhythms and temperatures that normally accompany sex a problem, [...] he rarely slept with a woman” (105), and “didn’t consider it a great deprivation because before he was even thirty, an erection had become almost as difficult to achieve as an orgasm” (104). Luther appears similarly repulsed by Willa and more interested in the objectified bodies on his mortuary table. Willa Nedeed similarly “accepted without complaint [her and Luther’s] separate bedrooms,” his “total absence at night after she conceived,” “his shrinking away” (149), “the fact that she spent all those nights alone” (279), and the way he would “[e]nter and leave her body with the same quiet precision that she saw when he balanced his accounts, read his newspaper, or dissected his steak” (14). Similarly Luther’s attention to detail in his work as a mortician is scientific in its precision. One evening, when Willa follows him, she finds him in his “white lab coat” with “tubes and needles,” “a technician” exploring with a “lingering...carefulness” (175).

Tim Engles suggests that Maxwell does not undertake his regulating habits “with the conscious understanding that society conceives of him as ‘black,’ and therefore he should do whatever he can to overcome such a perception”; instead “these extreme efforts are simply forms of self-improvement that will hasten his movement up the corporate hierarchy” (670). However, as Christian observes, “Maxwell Smyth becomes totally artificial. Everything – his diet, his clothes, the temperature in his house, sexuality – is regulated so as to eliminate any funk” (which I think Christian intends as a musical pun; “Naylor’s Geography” 116). Of course, Christian’s description also draws a parallel to the fact that Maxwell is

enslaved – these are the very same elements of individual freedom that slave masters sought to control in their chattel. Despite his financial success then, Maxwell is no freer than his enslaved ancestors.

Naylor's assessment of black capitalism in *Linden Hills* thus seemingly chimes with bell hooks's warning in *Black Looks* (1992), where she laments that “[s]ince so many black folks have succumbed to the post-1960s notion that material success is more important than personal integrity, struggles for black self-determination that emphasize decolonization, loving blackness, have had little impact”; she argues “[a]s long as black folks are taught that the only way we can gain any degree of economic self-sufficiency or be materially privileged is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, then there will always be a crisis in black identity” (18). However, like Touré I exercise suspicion at any intimation that economic success must necessarily come at the cost of integrity (racial or otherwise). Even though hooks argues that “[o]ne of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience” (*Black Looks* 19), Touré argues that “[t]o suggest that underclass Blackness is authentic and middle-class is not is self-destructive thinking” because “it suggests that Blackness requires us to stay poor in order for it to survive and it dies as more of us become economically successful”; thus rejecting “the idea that the ‘hood is the center of Blackness” and “that Blackness is somehow lost the further you go up the class ladder” (154).

By selecting impoverished Willie, an oral poet from the Putney Wayne Projects, as the ‘heart and soul’ of the novel, Naylor certainly seems to conceive of blackness as “a hierarchy of authenticity [...] with levels based on proximity to the ghetto experience, as if that were the sun around which Blackness revolves” (Touré 154). As Sherley Anne Williams writes in her review of the novel, “[o]ne of the implicit messages of *Linden Hills* [...] is that the only real black is a poor black” (11) and Naylor's novel, much like Neely's, does little to “revise the literary image of the black bourgeoisie [who are] just as trifling now as they were said to have been 60

years ago" (14).<sup>110</sup> Indeed, in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, Tina's function as an 'authentic' vision of black beauty is underscored by the fact that she is "from North Philly" and grew up "in the projects" (*Talented Tenth* 93).

This said, Naylor's shifting of an essentialising discourse from the body to culture complicates any readings of her work as advocating any inherent class or race identities, as does her crafting of Willie as a signifying passing figure. If Lester Tilson is the reader's Virgilian guide in Naylor's didactic morality tale, Willie is the moral compass. Like Neely's Blanche White and Morrison's Pecola Breedlove, Willie is "not capable of physically passing-for-white" but is a character who parodies the traditional passing figure and who symbolically, but never literally, adopts the position of whiteness (Bennett 206). His signifying nickname ('white') denotes his dark skin tone, for "Willie K. Mason was so black that the kids said [...] if Willie got any darker, he'd just have to turn white" (*Linden Hills* 24). While Lester, who has a "milky-yellow tone in his skin," bears a closer physical resemblance to the conventional passing figure, it is Willie, who lives outside of Linden Hills, who enacts a revised mode of passing in the novel. Like Blanche, he is able to infiltrate and pass into spaces associated with 'white' privilege on account of his position as manual worker; by undertaking odd jobs during the holidays he gains exclusive spatial access to whiteness without, ironically, receiving any of the associated economic or social privileges. Coincidentally, Catherine Ward describes Willie as "passing through Linden Hills" (183), as does Naylor's character Daniel Braithwaite (*Linden Hills* 265). As Bouvier notes his "nickname appears as a figure of linguistic disjunction, blocking any essential, natural conception of names, because it suspends its 'normal' referential function and points back toward itself as language with the power of constructing or instituting difference, rather than simply reporting an essential pre-existing difference" (147).

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<sup>110</sup> Toni Morrison also speaks about class and black authenticity - see Morrison, "Toni Morrison: Classicism in the Community."

While Willie, an intelligent, insightful, outsider to the community may be aware of the irony of his own position, this self-awareness is lost among Linden Hills residents who in their pursuit of status and wealth are each (according to Mel Watkins's logic) enacting a mode of passing of their own by assimilating into white culture. In this sense, *Linden Hills* presents itself as a novel about cultural, rather than embodied passing, a text about acquiring whiteness through social acts rather than through phenotype, and the accompanying processes of erasure and "repression" that facilitate this. The failure of the Nedeed's vision undermines the notion that an economically self-sufficient 'black community' can exist, as Kennedy suggests, even "[i]f there is going to exist an imagined community known as Black America, there must also exist some point at which a citizen of Black America can be rightly charged with having done something that betrays that policy" (*Sellout* 9). The Nededs are both the architects of this myth of the 'black community' and its betrayers.

#### **Passing as Assimilation, Repression, Erasure, Emulation, 'Selling Out', 'Acting White'**

To conclude this section, I want to briefly consider the ways that passing-for-white maps on to the interlocking and mutually-evocative processes of assimilation, repression, erasure, selling out, and acting white which are at play in Naylor's work and which circulate more generally in discussions of race in the post-civil rights era. Even though *Linden Hills* is not a conventional passing narrative, it echoes "the literature of passing, particularly within in the African-American tradition," which Mullen suggests offers "a startlingly accurate model of assimilation as 'passing': assimilation as the production of whiteness" (73). Christine Berg shares this assessment, suggesting that, "Naylor's inferno shows the consequences of African Americans' choices to betray their heritage and teaches Willie to avoid subscribing to materialistic standards of success, especially for the sake of assimilation" (12).

In *Linden Hills*, Naylor's message certainly seems to be that rather than vanishing over the colour line by passing, the desire to assimilate erases black bodies. Aspirational African Americans from all around the country flock to Linden Hills with the ambition to "move down or even marry down the hill towards Tupelo Drive and Luther Nedeed" (16) until they become "devoured by their own drives" and "disappeared" (17-18). The disappearance of these cultural passers, these assimilationists, into the abyss of "white success" is altogether more sinister than the vanishing acts of Clare Kendry or John Walden. As Barbara Christian writes, the residents of Linden Hills "must erase essential parts of themselves if they are to stay in this jewel neighbourhood" ("Naylor's Geography" 116).

Just as Johnson's Ex-Colored Man does not pass-for-white by imitating whiteness, choosing instead to pass passively by "neither disclaim[ing] the black race nor [the] the white race [letting] the world take me for what it would" (90), Naylor similarly describes the cultural passing in her text as a gradual and passive process of disclamation, renunciation and disavowal of a black cultural genealogy. For Tim Engles, Naylor encodes "whiteness [...] as repression rather than imitation" and "does not employ whiteness as a motif to suggest black people's imitation of white people and their values so much as their bleaching-out, via suppression or denial, the various aspects of themselves" (669), or a "downplaying [...] of their own blackness by suppressing its supposed cultural markers" (663, 666). Margaret Homans similarly suggests that "the process of moving down in Nedeed's world drains blacks of their color" (166), and Teresa Goddu argues that "Naylor focuses on a community of soulless people who, in climbing the corporate ladder toward a brighter monetary future, become disconnected from their cultural past" (215).

For Randall Kennedy, Alexander Weheliye, Robert Bone, and Judith Berzon, 'passing-for-white,' 'acting white,' and 'selling out' are mutually evocative and interlinked concepts, even if they do not denote exactly the same thing. In an African American context, the "disparaging term," sellout, "refers to blacks who knowingly or with gross negligence act against the interest of blacks as a whole" and the term implies that for a 'sellout' money and individualist interests, such as

Nedeed's for example, are prioritised above the social, cultural and economic interests of the black 'majority' (Kennedy *Sellout* 4). Kennedy argues that among African Americans, "allegations of selling out are [...] triggered by a wide range of actions – marrying a white person, passing, "acting white," "speaking white," "thinking white," describing oneself as "multiracial," living in a white neighbourhood, serving as a police officer or a prosecutor, working as an attorney for an elite law firm, opposing affirming action" (*Sellout* 9). For Kennedy, both "acting white" and "passing-for-white" serve as triggers for the accusation of "selling out," and thus these three ideas are metonymically related – passing-for-white and acting white are ways of selling out.

Alexander Weheliye suggests that contemporary debates about "'acting white'" [...] recast the passing narrative found in texts such as Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, or James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," even if,

in contrast to passing [they] do not rest on biology or phenotype but on the mastery of cultural and linguistic codes associated with racial, class, and gender identities, especially forms of whiteness associated with monetary and cultural capital. (221-222)

In Weheliye's understanding, "acting white" echoes the contemporary passing dynamic that Bennett identifies in that "biology and phenotype" are ignored in favour of "fantasy and imagination" ("Toni Morrison" 208). Similarly, Robert Bone suggests that black middle class assimilationism (or "acting white") "is a kind of psychological 'passing' at the fantasy level" (1; also qtd. in Berzon 162). Likewise, Judith Berzon reads acting white and assimilationism as an alternative or parallel means of passing that achieves the same ends, writing that "the American dream of upward mobility" traditionally achieved through the passing act "can be sought through another form of identification with white America," by joining a "bourgeois

class among the Negro group, a class that imitates the values, standards and life-style of the white middle class" (Berzon 162).<sup>111</sup>

Of course, the notion that anybody can "act white" is a problematic one. First deployed in a theoretical context by sociologist and educationalist John Ogbu in his study of black underachievement, the term refers to the strategy used by African Americans for achieving success in white dominated institutions – such as schools (Ogbu 161). Ogbu conflates "acting" white with "assimilation" and "the emulation of whites," which he claims involves a "disassociation from their black peers, from black cultural identity," a preference for "white norms and values, clearly in conflict with those of blacks," and a repudiation of "their black peers, black identity, and black cultural frames of reference" (Ogbu 162-3). Kevin Michael Foster interprets (and indeed, problematizes) Ogbu's notion of 'acting white' as a form of "cultural passing" (376) and of course, there are many overlaps with the traditional embodied act of passing – particularly in terms of the disassociation from black peers. Arguably, "acting white," 'performing,' and 'imitating whiteness' are part of the passing-act. For example, in *The House Behind the Cedars*, under the tutelage of Mrs Newberry, Rena is trained in "the etiquette of the annual ball" that she will attend with George Tryon.

I am reluctant to say that any one of these models of cultural assimilation, repression, erasure, emulation, 'selling out,' or 'acting white' are more potent than another in Naylor's work, for they clearly operate in symbiosis, metonymically passing for each other in discourses about racial identity. Nonetheless, it is by

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<sup>111</sup> See Bourdieu for a discussion of symbolic capital (285). Given my interest in pedagogy, I found John Diamond and Amanda Lewis's discussion of whiteness as symbolic capital in *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* useful. They contend that in schools "whiteness itself serves as a form of symbolic capital" (53). Amanda Lewis's *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities* also considers how this plays out in educational spaces, noting that "racial categorization or skin colour" is "one form of symbolic capital" and considers the ways that both white skin and black skin can function as such (178). This is worth reading alongside the scenes in *Linden Hills* where Willie and Lester revisit their school grounds (44-45).

drawing upon these multivalent expressions of the passing trope that Naylor warns her reader that ownership and possession not only serve to distance her characters from their African American roots, but compromise the souls, dampen the spirit and perpetuate and replicate the same racism, patriarchy and greed that catalysed the enslavement of African Americans little over a century before.

### **Hypodescent, ‘Miscegenation,’ and Disinheritance in Dorothy West’s *The Wedding* (1995)**

In traditional passing narratives the interracial family is always fractured; hypodescent legislation makes it impossible for the family unit to be legitimately established, the white father typically abandons his illegitimate and light-skinned child, and ultimately leaves his ‘black’ mistress heartbroken and penniless. Brown’s Clotelle, Clotel, and Althesa; Chesnutt’s John and Rena Walden; and Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man all have absent and disinheriting white fathers who, unable to commit to their black mothers through marriage, ultimately fail to provide for their children – emotionally or financially – and prompt their journeys across the colour line. In both this section and the next, I discuss the ways that West and Naylor signify on the conventional genre by recreating the interplay between the three characters of the disinheriting and absent white father, the abandoned ‘mammy,’ and ‘the tragic mulatto.’ In this section, I focus on West’s attempts to reconstruct the conventionally fractured interracial family in *The Wedding* (1995).

#### **Conventional Passing Narratives**

The ghostly presence of the disinheriting white father can be traced in both Chesnutt and Johnson’s passing novels. In *The House Behind the Cedars* John and Rena are left without an inheritance when their nameless father dies suddenly before his will can be drawn up by his friend Judge Straight. When the Judge suggests to “distant relatives who had inherited his friend’s large estate” that Molly and her children are entitled to any inheritance, they “take offense,” and consider

the idea “in shocking bad taste” and “an insult to his cousin’s memory” (116). As Peggy Pascoe observes in her history of interracial relationships in America, “[w]omen in [Molly’s] situation were at the mercy of legally legitimate relatives, who might accuse them of exerting undue influence over the wills of men who tried to leave them money or property” (26). When another relative tells the judge, “with flashing eyes,” that “the woman and her children had already robbed the estate of enough; that it was a pity the little niggers were not slaves—that they would have added measurably to the value of the property,” Chesnutt reminds us that in his post-reconstruction narrative, the legislative norms that govern the relationship between Molly Walden and her common-law husband originate in slavery; to be black is not to possess but to be possessed. Moreover, by giving voice to race hatred through uncanny speaking eyes, he reminds us that that racial distinction is always governed by ocular readings of race rather than legitimately articulated reason.<sup>112</sup> John, Rena, and Molly are left with nothing.

Thus, the descent trope that Naylor invokes in *Linden Hills* is both spatial and symbolic; both West and Naylor invoke passing to critique a controversial history of hypodescent and inheritance that underpins African American class hierarchies and social status. As Gayle Wald notes, one-drop rules “codified in the late nineteenth century, particularly in the years following Reconstruction [...] designated as ‘black’ any person seen as possessing even a single ‘drop’ of ‘black blood,’ as determined by ancestry extending back (in theory, at least) an indeterminate number of generations” (*Crossing the Line* 11). Despite a considerable number of interracial encounters between white men and black women – many forced, some not – historically, in the United States, hypodescent legislation ensured that it was racially subjugated status that was inherited from the

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<sup>112</sup> The potency of ocular readings of race and the dominance of the idea that race can be read visually despite evidence to the contrary is astounding. Kevin D. Brown notes that until 1960, “appearance provided the most important evidence of race,” and when “enumerators [...] went out to people’s homes to fill out the census forms,” they “were responsible for determining a person’s race based on their visual acuity” (45, 79).

black mother and minimized what could be claimed or inherited from white father. Indeed, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. cites research suggesting that the average African American has 19% to 29% European admixture and yet these same individuals cannot lay claim to whiteness as capital ("Exactly How Black" 2-3). As Harryette Mullen concludes, whiteness "may pass through women [...] but women themselves do not control it or determine its value" (81).

Thus, in what Katherine Clay Bassard describes as the "sleight-of-hand whereby black children are depaternalised and the rape of black women decriminalised," the slave South deployed legislation as a way to "construct[...] the condition of slavery itself as predicated on black female bodies" (90). Therefore, as Elaine Ginsberg explains, "[t]he children born of these [interracial] encounters inherited the abject status of the mother even as, through successive generations, a visible, albeit culturally inauthentic, 'whiteness' was reproduced from 'black' female bodies" (5). So although Kevin D. Brown notes that many mixed race children in the urban areas of Charleston, South Carolina; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Mobile, Alabama were "fathered by wealthy white males" who "often recognized and supported their mixed race offspring" (49), many black women and their children were, as Johnson and Chesnutt explore in depth, disinherited by white men.<sup>113</sup>

The 'justness' of hypodescent is of paramount concern to Chesnutt. Judge Straight, as his last name suggests, is the narrative's moral compass. Equitable, rational, and unbiased, his careful deliberation of the Waldens' plight necessitates both his and the reader's reassessment of race law. When the judge cannot hide "some disapproval" of how John's father's estate is being discussed, "the settlement of the estate was placed in hands other than his" and years later, it is this same man who counsels a young, precocious, and ambitious John Walden on

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<sup>113</sup> Interestingly, Chesnutt's white paternal grandfather was a slaveholder and his grandmother, a free person of colour, was "often taken for 'white'" (Wald, *Crossing the Line* 11). He "maintained that he belonged to a separate category of 'mixed blood' citizens distinct from what he called 'true Negroes'" and struggled to identify with the "binary logic of the one-drop rule" (Wald 11). Chesnutt's insistence on an alternative model of racial classification thus reveals his own essentialist readings of race.

the matter of passing-for-white in order to train as a lawyer; this said as an arbiter of the same laws responsible for his oppression, John is able to obtain a sense of agency that Rena, as a woman, is unable to. Valerie Smith thus rightly,

locate[s] passing within the discourse of intersectionality because although it is generally motivated by class considerations (people pass primarily in order to partake of the wider opportunities available to those in power) and constructed in racial terms (people describe the passing person as wanting to be white, not wanting to be rich), its consequences are distributed differentially on the basis of gender (women in narrative are more likely to be punished for passing than are men). (43)

Wald highlights that in the scenes with the Judge, “[t]he question under discussion is what constitutes ‘proof’ of race: the visible ‘evidence’ of John’s complexion [...] or the ‘customs of North Carolina’” and notes that, “[b]y illustrating how Judge Straight’s definition prevails in categorizing John, Chesnutt reveals how the will of the state (as embodied in the judge) ultimately trumps the ‘proof’ of the visible body” (*Crossing the Line* 11). However, as William L. Andrews makes clear, “John’s position on the passing issue is undergirded [...] by the traditional American belief that individual rights supersede societal customs” and “seems to be sanctioned by the principles of the Declaration of Independence, which Walden’s ideas echo” (162). “Nor,” Andrews contends, “should it be overlooked that Judge Straight, the executor and trustee of justice in Patesville, supports Walden’s methods of exercising his rights” and it is through the Judge’s “endorsement” that “Chesnutt bolsters Walden’s conviction that passing for white is a justifiable means of securing the rights and opportunities which are inherently his when not abridged by a social fiction” (162). Judge Straight appears to be the literary exception, not the rule. Chesnutt’s depiction of him stands in stark contrast to the way that Barbara Neely expresses scepticism of the law almost a century later in her *Blanche White* detective series in which spaces of legislative and political power are scrutinized.

It is not simply the ‘one-drop’ rule that ensures Molly’s disinheritance, but the legislation against mixed-marriages which serves to protect the economic

privilege of white men. Pascoe notes that, “laws against interracial marriage didn’t prevent masters from having sex with slave women or having mixed-race children,” but “[r]ather, they prevented masters from turning slaves they slept with into respectable wives who might claim freedom, demand citizenship rights, or inherit family property, and so undermine the foundations of racialised slavery” (27). “Marriage was,” writes Pascoe, “so strongly associated with whiteness, freedom, property, and propriety that interracial marriage threatened slavery in a way that interracial sex did not” (27).

The passing genre is unsurprisingly reactionary in the warnings it offers about marrying across the colour line. For instance, in *Clotel* (1867), Brown writes that, “[a]lthough Isabella had been assured by Henry that she should be free and that he would always consider her as his wife, she nevertheless felt she ought to be married and acknowledged by him [b]ut this was an impossibility under the State laws” (“Chapter X”). Besides, “related as he was to one of the first families in Virginia” (“Chapter X”), Linwood is, to borrow from Ann DuCille, “cast as a class-conscious cad who would not have dared to marry a woman of so low an origin, even had the laws been favourable” (28). Even though Mullen notes that “the institution of marriage, which customarily merged a woman’s identity with that of her husband, could serve as a practical vehicle for passing women who married white men” (79), those mixed marriages that do take place in traditional passing narratives are doomed to fail – sometimes because a husband or wife discovers the ‘true’ identity of their spouse, but often despite this. For instance, not only is the seemingly genuine love between the Ex-Colored Man’s parents ill-fated, but when he dares to marry across the colour line his wife perishes in childbirth a few years later leaving him to devote his life to his children, determined never to marry again (99). Similarly, John’s decision to take Rena away with him to pass for white is in part because he needs her help to raise his children who have been left motherless following the death of his white wife (18). The message is clear: while men may profit from the passing act, but for women ‘miscegenation’ never prospers.

Not only are successful interracial unions between white men and black women deemed impossible in the traditional passing genre, but white fathers are frequently unable (or unwilling) to commit to the children of these illicit unions. Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* describes his father as "an absolute blank" save for metonymic symbols of wealth and affluence (his shiny shoes, his "gold chain," "gold watch," and "the ten dollar gold piece," that he offers his son as a necklace) that he recalls from the visits his father made to him in infancy (2). "Father, father," the narrator repeats, is a "word which had been to me a source of doubt and perplexity" (15). The *Ex-Colored Man* later discovers that his father, "an impetuous young man home from college," romanced his family's "sewing girl" (his mother); when his father is "about to be married to a young lady of another great Southern family," his mother is left heartbroken and is forced to leave their home in Georgia and head North (17). Even though the *Ex-Colored Man*'s father maintains contact with his mother across the years, when word is sent of her impending death he fails to respond leaving his son destitute and without means save for his "ten-dollar gold piece" necklace (2). His father thus fails to provide for him financially, but leaves him with a painful symbolic reminder of both his affluence and absence. The *Ex-Coloured Man*'s sardonic regret that, "more than once I have wished that some other way had been found of attaching it to me besides putting a hole through it," emphasises the irony of this hollow gesture. Given the association his father reinforces between money and whiteness (by paying his infant son to shine his shoes and bring him his slippers), it is not surprising that the *Ex-Colored Man* describes money as "a white man's success," and eventually makes his fortune in New York real estate while passing-for-white (91).

Brown's *Clotel* (1853) epitomizes this trope by casting President Thomas Jefferson as the disinheriting father to Clotel and Althesa. It has since been confirmed (through DNA evidence; F.J. Davis 189) that Jefferson did indeed have a

family with his slave Sally Hemings and had descendants who passed.<sup>114</sup> As Kennedy notes:

Several of the children that Thomas Jefferson sired by his slave Sally Hemings eventually passed for white. Beverly and Harriet Hemings transformed themselves into whites in the early 1820s, shedding their African-American racial identities at the same time that they fled slavery at Monticello. (*Sellout* 151)

Brown's decision to select the ultimate patriarch – a founding father – in his tale of passing carries broader symbolic meaning about the ways that white men have disinherited and disenfranchised African Americans who have legitimate claims to freedom, independence and protection under the law.

In Brown's 1867 version of *Clotel*, the paradox of the absent father is resolved in the closing chapters (Ch. XXXIV: "Clotelle Meets Her Father" and XXXV: "The Father's Resolve"), when Clotelle is serendipitously reunited with her father at a hotel in Lake Leman, Geneva. In a Gothic twist to what was an already happy ending, Jerome and Clotelle hear "shrieks" and cries of "She's dead! I killed her!" from a "sick", "crazy" and "deranged" "maniac" next door as a storm thunders outside. The mysterious voice wails, "[s]he was my child! my [sic] own daughter. I loved her, and yet I did not protect her". This man turns out to be none other than Clotelle's own father, Henry Linwood, who guilt-ridden over his failure as a parent descends into madness. As the clock strikes ten, they find him in a feverish and desperate state: "[s]tretched upon a mattress, with both hands tightly bound to the bedstead," "a pitiful sight," "dishevelled," "unshaved," "pale," "emaciated" and with a "wildness" in his eyes. Just as Clotelle was tortured at the hands of her mistress in an attempt to eradicate and mute her beauty and light-skin, here, Linwood is tortured by his own conscience to the point where physically, he, too, is beyond recognition. Of course, Linwood is supposed to personify the damaging spiritual effects of slavery upon white men and his reunion with his daughter is a

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<sup>114</sup> See Key and Peele's "Ancestry.com" sketch for a very funny take on the significance of this.

plot device that compels him to recognize that as a slave owner, he must emancipate the men and women on his plantation. Clotelle's forgiveness of her father and their saccharin "happily ever after," where Clotelle, her white father, and the dark-skinned former slave, Jerome take up residence "[i]n a beautiful little villa [...f]or more than three weeks," and spend their time "visiting the birth place of Rousseau, and the former abodes of Byron, Gibbon, Voltaire, De Stael, Shelley and other literary characters" is exceptionally unusual for the genre. Typically, the white father is conspicuously absent.

### **Reconstructing the Interracial Family in *The Wedding***

West signifies on this trope by attempting to genealogically reconstruct the fractured interracial family of the traditional passing genre. As Cheryl A. Wall observes, "[t]he impulse to represent the past by reconstructing family genealogies" is a recurring theme in black women's writing and this statement certainly applies to West's work (*Worrying the Line* 5). One of the novel's paratexts is a detailed family tree delineating the ancestry of the prestigious Coles family of the Oval and crucially, listed on the top lines are two white slaveholders – Old Sir and Colonel Lance Shelby.<sup>115</sup> Before the novel has even started, West makes clear that her text offers a romanticised vision of the light-skinned African American family who proudly (rather than ashamedly) lay claim to their slaveholding patriarchs.

Old Sir, Shelby's great, great, great, grandfather on her father's side, takes one of his slaves, Ebony Woman as his common law wife and they have a child together, Butternut Woman. Old Sir is reminiscent of Henry Linwood who, in *Clotelle*, purchases Isabella at auction, and then hires her "a beautiful cottage [...] furnishe[s] it, and place[s] his mistress there" where she gives birth to their child (Chapter X). When Big Sir's first wife dies, "no willing woman of his own kind persuaded his eye like the slave girl his bought in a bundle of blacks," and in a

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<sup>115</sup> I, of course, use the word 'paratext' in keeping with Genette's work in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997).

reversal of roles, as he tests “her arm for its soundness” he finds “himself enslaved by her softness” (117). At the end of the war, he “keep[s] his concubine in a style beyond anything she had been accustomed to,” and “ha[s] a house built for her before he even count[s] the cost of putting his own house together again for the son who was heir to it” (117-118). Unlike the light-skinned Isabella in *Clotelle*, Old Sir’s paramour, ebony woman is the very epitome of black beauty. Her “chiselled” features do not connote whiteness, but refinement befitting “a queen’s face on a coin,” (reminiscent of Tina’s face on an African coin in Neely’s *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*). She is “every man’s dream of a woman” (118). Although West does not recount a marriage between Old Sir and ebony woman [sic],<sup>116</sup> and the latter carries a sense of ‘sin’ much like Molly Walden which implies a marriage never took place, West describes their daughter as their “legitimate child” (118) and the handwritten scrawl on the Coles family tree reads: “Old Sir marries Ebony Woman” thus reinstating and restoring a sense of legitimacy to the interracial family of the passing genre.

In a fascinating twist on the conventional passing narrative, Old Sir crosses the colour line (much like Gram’s does years later) to live with ebony woman in her house, rather than in his big house. Moreover, when she passes away and after he and his daughter, “carted her off to the place in colored town where the colored folks dug holes for their dead,” he “laid himself down on the ebony woman’s grave” and lay there three days and three nights until he died (121). His words at ebony woman’s funeral symbolically represent a passing of the colour line enacted in spirit and not only in body. He reads:

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee:  
for withest thou goest, I will go: and where thou lodgest, I will lodge:  
thy people shall be my people and thy God my God: where thou  
diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: Lord do so to me, and more  
also, if out but death part thee and me. (120)

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<sup>116</sup> West does not capitalise “ebony woman” in her prose, so I refrain from doing so here.

This biblical intertext, a reading from Ruth 1:16-17, is hugely significant in underpinning West's own dynastic narrative in *The Wedding*. Ruth was not Hebrew by birth (she was from Moab), but by (interfaith) marriage to the son of Naomi, an Israelite. After the death of her husband, she spoke these words to her mother-in-law as a pledge to follow her home to Bethlehem and embrace the Israelite faith. The story of Ruth, who becomes the great grandmother of King David, parallels that of Old Sir who in repeating Ruth's words and invoking her 'miscegenous' vow, confirms his position in the Coles dynasty. Old Sir's passing away becomes a symbolic form of passing the colour line that cannot be reversed or undone by any racist laws or customs, and Ruth's declaration serves as a intertextual affirmation of white genealogy in the African American Coles family, as well as an endorsement of Shelby's interracial marriage to Meade.

West controversially casts Old Sir – the exploitative plantation owner – and Ebony Woman – the victimised enslaved woman – in roles that are far removed from those found in historical slave narratives such as Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and the neo-slave narratives of her contemporaries such Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1974) which all give (appropriate) attention to the history of sexual exploitation that so often characterised these unions (see Introduction). In this way, West's description of interracial relationships has more in common with those of the passing genre. In Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, for instance, the relationship between Molly and her 'husband' is not characterized by coercion. Instead "[s]he worshipped the ground upon which lord walked, was humbly grateful for his protection, and quite as faithful as the forbidden marriage vow could possibly have made her" (110). Similarly, the Ex-Colored Man's mother "loved" and "worshiped" his father, and she "died firmly believing that he loved her more than any other woman in the world" (19). Again, their relationship is implied to be romantic and meaningful, if illicit. And so West, like Chesnutt and Brown, indulges the notion that white men could and did fall in love with black women.

In order to convey the importance of the matrilineal line in *The Wedding*, West signifies on the ‘abandoned mammy’ character. Both Gram and Melisse can be read as revisions of Delilah from Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*. While in Hurst’s novel Delilah stands alone in the Pullman family home as a sole black figure, Gram, the frail, pale, elderly white matriarch of the Coles family is the sole white occupant of their residence. Whereas Delilah accepts her subordinate position as Bea’s cook and refuses her offer to become her business partner, Melisse, an ex-slave of the Xanadu plantation, becomes a successful self-employed black cook. And while Delilah is left devastated by Peola’s decision to pass-for-white, Gram actually prays that her light-skinned granddaughter Shelby will “live like white” (30), and Melisse encourages her black son to transgress the colour line in other ways – he proposes to a white woman (Gram’s daughter Josephine), and pursues “white folks’ schooling” (39), breaking racial barriers as the “first Negro president of his college” (48).

Fascinatingly, both Gram and her daughter Josephine at various points occupy the position of the passing-for-white figure, even though they are both white. First, when Gram’s daughter Josephine decides to marry Hannibal, Josephine – like the passing figure – must cross the colour line and initially Gram – like the abandoned mammy – must cover for her decision with a web of lies (44-45). Josephine and then Gram both recreate the mythologized train journey north associated with African American migration narratives (43, 45).<sup>117</sup> Signifying a second time on Ruth’s biblical story, West rewrites the tale as one in which a mother-in-law (instead of a daughter-in-law) honours a miscegenous marriage vow and leaves her beloved South (Moab) to start a new life in the North (Israel). As Elizabeth Muther notes, “Gram goes north, and her going tropes on the mythic, migratory journeys northward made by innumerable African Americans across the decades”; “[t]rains on the north-south axis,” she explains, “are a destiny for black culture, from the underground railroad to Plessy v. Ferguson – and this train ride, Gram’s journey north, is mythic in proportions” (204). She continues, “Gram is not black, but she is becoming so. [...] Gram leaves and crosses a line, enters a story

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<sup>117</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “Who Set You Flowin?” *The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995) remains the landmark text on this topic.

that cannot be understood by her own culture. She passes without passing. She enters black culture as her kin become black" (204). Muther's self-refuting concept of "passing without passing" communicates Bennett's idea of the "passing theme" in which passing does not have to literally enacted, but merely alluded to. More specifically, Gram passes symbolically (by recreating the train journey as a rite of passage), by proxy (on account of Josephine) because her survival as the impoverished daughter of a former slaveholder – and the survival of her ancestors, is dependent on her decision.<sup>118</sup>

In many ways, then, West's novel sentimentally corrects and adjusts the passing genre's historical narrative of doomed interracial romance as one that blossoms and prevails. The determination shown by Old Sir on Clark's side of the family and Gram on Corinne's to commit to their black families (even if Gram does this begrudgingly) offers a sentimental revision of the traditional passing narrative in which blackness is disowned at all costs. Perhaps no scene is more befitting this assessment than the closing of the novel when Gram fully embraces (rather than merely tolerates) the 'darker' members of her family. Haunted by her own daughter Josephine's decision to marry across the colour line, Gram is devastated when her great-grandchild Liz marries a darker man, Lincoln, lamenting "[w]hy didn't you let his darkness die with him?" (54). Liz and Lincoln's baby girl, Laurie, becomes a manifestation of the ghostly brownness that Hurston and Gubar identify ("How it Feels" 153; Gubar 244). Too abject to name, Gram can only refer to Laurie as "that child," that "dark child," and is made "dizzy" by the thought of "the intimacies, the indignities" of the family's interracial past, refusing to so much as even touch the child (52-3).

However, by the close of the novel, after witnessing Tina's death, Gram "turned to her great-granddaughter [...], extended her hands" and takes Laurie in

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<sup>118</sup> West additionally rewrites the abandoned mammy theme in her short story "Mammy" (1940) - see S.L. Jones (128). She also includes two passing characters in her first novel, *The Living is Easy* (1946) - The Duchess and Robert Jones.

her arms (240). She realises that while “[s]he could not change the past or do much about the present [...] she could spend the little time she had left on earth making things a bit better for the future” (240). The final line of the novel, “Liz put her arm on Gram’s shoulder and they turned away and walked back into the house,” leaves the reader with an especially optimistic image of the interracial family (240). And so in her interracial family saga, by signifying on the passing narrative, Dorothy West reconstructs the interracial family unit that so rarely remains intact other passing novels.

As Susan Kenney rather romantically summarises in her review of West’s novel, “racial intermingling” drives the plot of *The Wedding*, “one admixture after another tumbling forward to the present,” resisting a,

journey forward towards ‘true’ white, or backward toward ‘real’ black, but down many roads, along which the seeds planted so many generations ago have engendered a family tree of many colors – copper, ebony, butternut, golden, bronze, brown, tan, rose-pink and more. (“Shades of Difference”)

It is here, however, that the romanticised depiction of the interracial family ends.<sup>119</sup> The sub-plot of the novel, the ‘invasion’ of The Oval by the malevolent Lute, who has three white wives and three ‘mulatta’ children, offers a reactionary depiction of the interracial family that hinges upon sexist stereotypes of African American men as brutes who mistreat white women. The death of Tina, a tragic mulatta figure, might facilitate the Coles’s happy ending, but her passing confirms that for dark-skinned black men like Lute (like the dark-skinned ‘abandoned mammy’) ‘miscegenation’ never prospers.

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<sup>119</sup> It is important to note that Ann Rayson and others have observed that it is difficult to assess the ending of West’s novel because reportedly, there are two versions resulting from Henry Louis Gates’s involvement in the novel’s publication (“Sexuality, Color, and Class” 224).

## The Menacing Black Father

“Father, father,” that was the word which had been to me a source of doubt and perplexity ever since the interview with my mother on the subject. How often I wondered about my father, who he was, what he was like, whether alive or dead, and, above all, why she would not tell me about him.

(James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 15)

In both *Linden Hills* and *The Wedding*, the disinheriting white fathers of ‘tragic mulatto’ children are absent and are instead replaced by black patriarchs, Lute and Luther, who have light-skinned children. This is a hugely significant choice given both the widespread stigmatisation of black fathers in the post-civil rights era, stereotypes of the black brute, and the fact that the black father plays no role at all in traditional passing narratives.<sup>120</sup> The now infamous “Moynihan Report” (1965), published within the writers’ living memory notoriously casts the black father as ‘absent.’ Daniel Moynihan suggests that slavery irrecoverably damaged the black family and that black men in particular were alienated from their roles as fathers and authority figures, that black families had become matriarchal, and the absence of black men in them would “severely retard the progress of the group as a whole and impose a crushing burden on the Negro male...” (qtd. in Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* 13).

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<sup>120</sup> There are some exceptions. Chesnutt’s Wain is a father of several children. John Walden and the Ex-Colored Man are both the fathers of “white” children, although they pass-for-white and are not read by other characters as black fathers. Katherine Clay Bassard writes that both Harriet Wilson and the central character of Frado in *Our Nig*, are mixed race children with a black father and white mother (83, 89). Obviously Nella Larsen’s Helga Crane (like Larsen) has a black father too. On the whole though, passing figures typically have white fathers. See also my discussion in Chapter Three of Bob Kendry’s racial identification. See Ronda C. Henry Anthony’s, *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women’s Bodies* for an interesting analysis of the absent father trope in Baraka Obama’s *Dreams of my Father* (Chapter 5).

The ‘pathology’ of the absent black father also dominates historical narratives of slavery in the pre-civil rights era. For instance, Stanley Elkins notoriously writes:

For the Negro child, in particular, the plantation offered no really satisfactory father-image other than the master. The “real” father was virtually without authority over his child, since discipline, parental responsibility, and control of rewards and punishments all rested in other hands. (Elkins 130, also qtd. in Wallace 17)

Not only is the black father declared socially impotent, but is himself emasculated at the hands of the plantation owner.

Contrary to this stereotype, Lute McNeil’s sole goal in life, as a ‘single father,’ is to provide a sense of legitimacy for his daughters. His affection and commitment to Tina, Barby, and Muffin appears to be exceptionally tender early in the novel. For example, West memorably uses the feminine image of hair-brushing to convey the intimacy of the bond between Lute and his girls as his attempts to substitute their mothers. As bell hooks reflects on her own experiences of having her hair combed by female relatives, “we are comforted by the parting hands that comb and braid, comforted by the intimacy and bliss” (382); but in *The Wedding*, it is Lute’s hands that part, comb, and braid as Barby “settles between his knees” and “hands[s] up the comb and brush” (12). For all Lute’s girls, this routine strengthens their connection to their father who “brush[es] better than anybody” (12).

However, even though Lute is a constant presence in the lives of his daughters, he is a character that does little to disrupt dominant stereotypes about black male sexuality and masculinity. Both Lute and his ‘namesake’ Luther Nedeed, are overbearing and imperious fathers who have a devastating influence on their light-skinned children. In *Linden Hills*, Luther rejects his light-skinned son and locks him in a basement until he perishes (20), and in *The Wedding*, Lute accidentally kills his light-skinned daughter Tina in an automobile accident in his determination to have her all to himself (238). In keeping with the traditional genre, then, both Naylor and West include the tragic demise of two ‘mulatto’ children, Tina and

Luther Jr., whose deaths are undeniably a result of their ill-fated parentage and color. In their version of the passing narrative, instead of the tragic mulatto struggling to find their place in the world as a result of their disinheritance by white fathers, the tragic mulatta dies directly as a result of the actions of their selfish and imprudent black fathers. In this sense, neither Naylor nor West truly upset Moynihan's narrative of black fathers as incompetent, nor do they undermine the tragic mulatto myth.<sup>121</sup>

In his obsession with Shelby and violations of white women's bodies, Lute epitomises the same black brute stereotype that Chesnutt indulges in his characterisation of Wain in *The House Behind the Cedars*. As Martha Hodes explains in her fascinating book *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century South* (1997), "white anxiety about sex between white women and black men," typically expressed through fears of the black brute typically means that "[a] history of sex between white women and black men in the nineteenth-century American South is also the history of a powerful category of illicit sex" (1-2). While West could have depicted Lute's relationships with white women in way that subverted these stereotypes, offering an alternative and recuperative history of these illicit encounters, instead she replicates them.

His brutalising treatment of his white ex-wives only reinforces long-held assumptions about the nature of interracial relationships between black men and white women. He beats and verbally abuses each of his spouses, treating Tina's mother "like a servant [...] mocking her polack ways, never saying two words to her that did not have their roots in obscenity," forcing her to leave her home and her child (19-20). When Lute discovers that Barby's mother, his first wife, left their child with "an ugly, colored woman," a "big, fat greasy sight," he decides to "kick the mother bitch out to sell what was worth nothing to him, to starve when it was

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<sup>121</sup> Importantly, Barbara Christian suggests that by drawing attention to Luther's "precarious position" in *Linden Hills*, "Naylor shows the inaccuracy of such terms as matriarch or patriarch as they apply to Afro-Americans," even though I use the terms here ("Naylor's Geography" 110).

worth nothing to anyone, and to die slowly and lingeringly" (*The Wedding* 22-23). As Michele Wallace argues in *Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), "Black men often could not separate their interest in white women from their hostility toward black women," and his horrendous description of the "ugly, colored woman" who takes care of Barby attests to this (Wallace 10). Moreover, it is after Lute beats Tina's mother Della in graphic scenes in which, beast-like, he "snarls" at her," "stuck his jaw in her face," "veins in his neck bulging," while "sweat dripped from his nose," that Tina runs from the house, only to be caught in the crossfire. Della is little better; she "snarled at [Lute] like a cornered dog that had been kicked once too often," and calls him "nigger" after which he delivers "a brutal open-handed slap across her face" (234-5). As in Larsen's narrative, then, in which the injurious utterance of the word "nigger" seems to eject Clare from the household space and send her plummeting to her death (Sullivan 382-383), Della's utterance of this same epithet, which not only derides her husband but her mixed race child, sends Tina fleeing the house and eventually out into the street where she meets her death.<sup>122</sup>

Unsurprisingly, critics are scathing of West's reactionary and essentialising depiction of Lute. As Elizabeth Muther argues, "the white racist imaginary is in Lute seated in the black body, and as his "viciously angry love turns repeatedly to violence, [he] enacts a role historically scripted for him as a sexual terrorist" (Muther 200). And as Rayson suggests, Lute is cast as "[t]he archetypal black male predator" and "[t]he dark sexual predator" ("Sexuality, Color, and Class" 222). Cherene Sherrard-Johnson notes, "[t]he novel's portrayal of Lute's contempt for the girls' three different mothers and his indiscriminate sexual appetite prompts readers to view his relationship with his daughters as disturbing and deviant" (177). For example, while Lute's appropriation of a bonding ritual usually performed between a (black) mother and her child – hair brushing - marks a radical subversion of gender norms, these scenes also betray some of his more controlling tendencies.

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<sup>122</sup> Sullivan argues "Clare's fall is a vanishing act, a sort of now-you-see-her-now-you-don't, where the signifier *Nig* seems literally to make Clare's body disappear" (382).

For example, when he brushes Barby's hair, he is literally straightening her out, "smoothing out the waves, brushing away from [her] face whatever stray locks were forming curls on her forehead" (12), and plaits her hair "weaving it into two tight braids" (resembling Maureen Peal's lynch rope hair) which symbolise a sense of being bound and restricted (13). Additionally, when Lute kisses his favourite daughter Tina, he is "impaling the love on that lifted face," kissing her "so hard that her teeth caught in the flesh of her lip, and a little trickle of blood filled her throat with nausea" (18). He then "catch[es] her in a bear hug that took her breath away"; Tina "gasped from the pain of it" and her "ribs felt crushed" (19).

This mixture of romantic and violent imagery is highly suggestive. The penetrating language of Lute's "impaling" and "hard" "love" and kisses" is suggestive of a much more unsettling motivation. The carnal references to Tina's "flesh" and "lips" combined with the clichéd romantic phrase "took her breath away" corrupt the innocence of their embrace, and the physical injury he causes her - the nausea, the cut to her lip, and the crushed ribs - foreshadow the danger he poses to Tina on the pages to come, namely the crushing of her body against the body of his automobile. As Johnson notes, "[i]n the novel Lute's dangerous love for his daughters is unnaturally proprietary and oppressive" and "Tina's uncanny resemblance to Shelby makes his attempt at parenting even more suspect" (177). Although if, as hooks suggests, "braids and plaits [...] are symbols of our innocence, our youth, our childhood," Lute's styling of his daughters' hair reveals a desire to protect rather than contravene their youthful innocence ("From *Black is a Woman's Colour*" 382).

Additionally, like the passing figure's father, Lute disinherits his children, although this time the disinheritance is not merely financial, but social. As Robert Miller and Stephen McNamee explain, inheritance can come in several forms including "the inheritance of cultural capital," generally defined as "proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes, outlooks, predispositions, and practices, including linguistic styles, aesthetic preferences and styles of interaction" (2). While Naylor's Luther is "Luther Nedeed 'the fifth'" descended from a long line

of patriarchs whose births are anticipated with such astronomic precision and planning that Luther is able to trace “the dates and times of penetrations, conceptions, and births for every Nedeed in Linden Hills” (19), Lute fails to leave any real legacy to his light-skinned children because Lute is himself illegitimate. For West then, a traceable genealogy is an essential part of belonging to the upper classes.

While he has access to economic capital, his lack of cultural capital prohibits his ascension into the black upper-middle classes; he leaves his children without any claims to the Ovalite society they grow attached to. While West emphasizes and celebrates the Coles family dynasty by including a family tree at the front of her book, Lute, a “Johnny-come-latel[y], whose antecedents were suspect,” is unable to geographically locate his mother, and is unsure of his father’s identity:

McNeil was a borrowed name, borrowed by his mother from the man who was his father, or who she supposed was his father. For she was rough and ready, and nothing surprised her more than getting knocked up with a baby. She named him Luther after her father, who had thrown her out of his house for her wantonness, which made her rather proud of him for his stern stand on righteousness. She farmed her baby out to friends, who farmed him out to friends of theirs, until finally he ended up in a state ward, his mother’s whereabouts unknown. (*The Wedding* 11)

As Elizabeth Muther observes, inadvertently echoing the very same description Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man uses to describe his own father, “Lute’s own story of origin is a blank” (199). Just as the word ‘father’ is a floating signifier for the Ex-Colored Man (much like the construct of race itself), here, the signifier of paternity, the surname which denotes Lute’s absent father, is similarly without a referent. Lute’s mother is “promiscuous,” “wanton[]” and ill-educated (she is surprised at getting pregnant). As Rayson suggests, Lute acts out “an incestuous drive” with his wives based on his experiences with his mother (“Sexuality, Color, and Class” 222). His first wife reminds him of his own mother and “made him remember that he had no memories of mother love” (22). Like Lute’s mother, she is nameless, promiscuous, and libidinous, “a baby-faced tramp” (21), and when he evicts her, he

hopes she dies “unknown and unwept in the way he hoped God had punished his mother” (*The Wedding* 22-23). While the Coles family dynasty rests upon Grams’s allegiance to Josephine even after she crosses the colour line to marry Hannibal, Lute’s grandfather throws his mother out of the family home. Because his own claims to family are “supposed,” “unknown,” and spurious, Lute becomes fixated with establishing “legitimate paternity” for his children (19). He insists on marrying every woman he gets pregnant because “he wanted no child that was his to be born a bastard” (21) and exhibits “some deep-rooted compulsion to father children who knew their father” (23). West’s repetition of “father” (first as verb and as noun) reveals Lute’s obsession with the shame of illegitimacy and echoes Johnson’s repetition of the very same word in the epigraph to this section. So in her depiction of Lute as a man haunted by his issues as a child, West does little to disrupt the emasculating “picture [that] is drawn for us over and over again [...] of a man who is a child” (Wallace 19).

West’s stereotypical depiction of Lute extends to the way she penalises him as a class interloper who must be put in his place; like the passing figure (and like Gates’s signifying Esu), Lute is a transgressor of racial borders. His name is a homonym for the musical instrument also known as a ‘lyre’ created by the Greek God of transitions and boundaries, Hermes, to charm his brother Apollo; like this mythological counterpart, McNeil is also a charmer, a tester of boundaries.<sup>123</sup> In many ways, we can read Lute as a class passer, a parvenu much like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby. As West states in conversation with Deborah E. McDowell about the writers who most inspired her generation, “[i]f we were influenced by anyone, it was F. Scott Fitzgerald” and *The Great Gatsby* was published when she was eighteen years old (“Conversations” 273).<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> For a useful introduction to Hermes, see Morford and Lenardon’s *Classical Mythology* (189 – 200). While lutes and lyres are different instruments, lutes are considered by many to be a type of lyre, and Lute’s name alludes to a stringed instrument.

<sup>124</sup> For more on class passing, see Gwendolyn Audrey Foster’s book *Class Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (2005).

Like Gatsby, Lute is “Mr Nobody from Nowhere” (103), a description Tom Buchanan famously levels at his rival before sneering that before you know it, “they’ll [...] have intermarriage between black and white,” which is exactly what Lute, with three marriages to white women behind him, is seemingly renowned for. Indeed, both *The Wedding* and *The Great Gatsby* climax in the exposure of male protagonists (or antagonists) as ‘frauds,’ parvenus, interlopers who have lied their way into the upper levels of American society and both novels also crescendo in the deaths of innocent bystanders (in *Gatsby* - Myrtle Wilson, and in *The Wedding* - Tina), both by automobile – a symbol which Meredith Goldsmith describes as “the (literal) vehicle of class privilege,” that “simultaneously figures class mobility” and which, in both texts, leads to “the identification [or exposure] of a parvenu by his car” (462). Fascinatingly, as Goldsmith also notes, Fitzgerald alludes to miscegenation and the mulatto body in the scenes surrounding Myrtle Wilson’s death. It is “a pale well-dressed negro,” who declares it was a “yellow” car that he witnessed in the accident (*The Great Gatsby* 111).<sup>125</sup>

While Fitzgerald’s characterization of Tom undermines Clare Kendry’s claims in Larsen’s *Passing* that “background” is less of an issue with “white people than it is with us” (159), West certainly gives the impression that to “just drop down on people from nowhere and expect them to receive you with open arms” is a more of a problem for the middle-class residents of the Oval than elsewhere (*Passing* 159). While his wife Della gives him “tempting glimpses of upper-class life among whites,” and Lute hopes that “with Shelby he could share the same existence, only openly, with his daughters a part of it” (235), his entrée into upper-class living is denied by the Ovalites. Like Gatsby, Lute has the cash, but not the social currency to affirm his place in upper-class society. For instance, even though he rents a summer cottage on the Oval [which, it is later revealed, he does with his wife’s money (225)] “with

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<sup>125</sup> See also Ralph Ellison’s reflection on these scenes in “The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His Audience” (1978). For fantastic articles on the similarities between *The Great Gatsby* and Larsen’s *Passing*, see Charles Lewis’s “Babbled Slander where the Paler Shades Dwell” (2007) and Sinead Moynihan’s “Beautiful White Girlhood: Daisy Buchanan in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” (2014).

all his cash and all his credit, he couldn't buy [Addie's] dollhouse for Tina," because "[t]he God almighty Coleses would see to that with a quiet word to the bluenose Boston lawyer who handled her meager affairs" (25). West explains that in The Oval,

a fixed income alone guaranteed nothing: the fact that Lute's bankroll continued to increase did not increase his popularity with the older Ovalites who were the guardians of the past and the fierce protectors of the present. That his children were endearing was no saving grace for the other summer residents – unless his reputation for misadventures was full of holes, which they doubted. And indeed their misgivings were to be borne out. (*The Wedding* 220)<sup>126</sup>

As a tragic mulatta, Tina can find no house to call her own - not the dollhouse, not Addie's summer cottage, and not the home of "next-door's mother," where she is issued with a final rejection before she is knocked down and killed. As Valerie Sweeney Prince argues, "[b]y 1940, a lexicon emerged in African American literature that formed the basis of a vocabulary about home" and this vocabulary implies the metaphor of the house and home as "womb" (3). When Della's words expel Tina from Lute's house, and when next door's mother snaps, these women – one her white birth mother, the other her black "other mother" - obliterate their daughter's claim to any maternal home. Belonging nowhere, like the traditional tragic mulatto, and cast out of the metaphorical womb, Tina perishes. The Oval, guarded by conservative forces that wish to preserve the past and protect the present, leave Lute, with no genealogical past he wishes to share, very little possibility of joining their ranks. His reputation and lack of standing mean that he will never become part of their community and will never secure happiness for him or his family. So, while West's novel permits a reconstruction of the upper-class interracial family, working class interracial unions are doomed to failure.

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<sup>126</sup> It strikes me as a compelling parallel that it is while he was holidaying on Martha's Vineyard in 1982, that Anatole Broyard was discovered to be passing for white by an investment banker, Richard Grand-Jean, to whom Broyard had let his 'Winter' home in Connecticut for the summer ("The Passing of Anatole Broyard" 180).

West therefore not only reinforces (I think inadvertently) notions of racial essentialism in the form of the black brute, but conflates these with essentialist class notions that reinforce and legitimise the superiority of light-skinned African Americans over others and thus reinforces colourism. As Bourdieu notes, “[a]ristocracies” (and I should add here, even black ones), “are essentialist” with their “‘being’, defined by their fidelity to a lineage, an estate, a race, a past, a fatherland or a tradition” (15 -16). There is no place for the self-made man in this novel and just as the traditional passing novel “signals the inescapable class implications of crossing [racial] boundaries,” so too does West’s (V. Smith, “Reading the Intersection” 57).<sup>127</sup> Even though Naylor’s tale suggests that there is little more to the black elite than avarice, greed and the dogged pursuit of wealth, West romanticizes the middle classes to which she belongs by drawing attention to the moral (rather than economic) code that unites them. In *The Wedding*, West’s revision of the passing figure’s disinheriting father offers a very conservative message about the power of inherited status and the diminishing value of economic wealth in the late-twentieth century. With Lute, she reminds her reader that one simply cannot buy status.

That West’s text is littered with such antiquated references to passing, class, colour, and sexuality is paradoxically reflective of the era in which it was written. Even though it is one of the most contemporary texts that I discuss in this project, it is thought that West started work on *The Wedding* “before the 1930s” (Rayson “Sexuality, Color, and Class” 224). West is perhaps the most compelling of all the writers I include here because her career bridges and spans the historiographical gap that I identify in this thesis. Born in 1907 and passing away in 1998 only three years after *The Wedding* was published, West has been described as “the last surviving member of the Harlem Renaissance” (Rayson 219), and lauded by Hilary Clinton as “a national treasure” (Streitfeld “From Renaissance”). Dorothy West was Helene Johnson’s cousin, travelled to Russia with Langston Hughes, and was a

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<sup>127</sup> This is particularly incongruent given the romantic depiction of Bart Judson, the black father figure in West’s first novel, *The Living is Easy* (1945), a character who is based on her own dark-skinned father.

contemporary of Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston; in fact she came joint second with Hurston in a short story competition in the journal *Opportunity* (Fergusson 870). West wrote only two novels, published almost fifty years apart. *The Living is Easy* was first published in 1948 (and republished in the 1980s) and *The Wedding*, edited by West's friend Jackie Onassis, was published in 1995 (Rayson, "Sexuality, Color, and Class" 219). As Mary Helen Washington explains, "West's writing career links the Harlem Renaissance with the social realism of the thirties and forties and popular fiction of the eighties and nineties" (Washington Preface xv).

Even though Barnes places both *Linden Hills* and *The Wedding* amid a group of texts by African American women writers that "undertak[e] critical examinations of the Black middle class," such as "Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo...*" (103), she also notes that "West's address to and revision of the motifs of the mulatta protagonist, the middle class, the marriage plot, and family lineage place her novels within the distinct literary lineage of Larsen and Fauset" (Barnes 103). For Barnes, "West's references to passing are akin to Harlem Renaissance writers" (102), and her use of the "trends-of-the-period" suggests a closer affinity of her novels to those of the Harlem Renaissance than to those that are more contemporaneous" (107). Certainly, as Mary Helen Washington notes, "[t]he tradition of writing about black life from the point of view of the privileged narrator or character goes back to the nineteenth century" in passing novels "like William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), whose light-skinned, aristocratic characters were examples of racial propriety" (Preface xiii). This is somewhat fascinating given West's resistance to being associated with this style of writing. As Cynthia Davis and Verner D. Mitchell suggest, "[c]ritics have expressed disbelief and not a little annoyance at the fact that West attributes so little literary influence to the African American tradition" and "despite Deborah McDowell's best efforts in a 1987 interview to connect West with Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen, West dismisses Hurston, and claims she never read anything by Fauset and Larsen" (110). At best, as Ann Rayson suggests, "West's language and situations are constructed with an uneven mix of early

twentieth century concerns about passing, miscegenation, and the color line among blacks" (219). West's voice is thus an intriguingly anachronous one, speaking out of a literary tradition that has long passed, to a contemporary 1990s audience, through a novel set in the midst of the Civil Rights movement.

Despite her sympathies towards interracial relations, "she still imbues blackness with sexual power, lightness with coldness, and thus appears to buy into the old dichotomies of slavery and the color line found in nineteenth-century white fiction" (Rayson "Sexuality, Color, and Class" 220). So, as Ann Rayson rightly notes, "[a]lthough *The Wedding* [...] a novel of social criticism directed towards the black bourgeoisie, the author, notwithstanding, participates in this essentialism of sex and race," and "West's essentialism regarding color throughout the text belies her final message" (220). While my overall argument is that black women writers are invoking passing in response to social and political developments in the 1960s and 1970s, I must concede that West is the exception. In fact, the black power zeitgeist was responsible for the delay of her second novel. As Ferguson suggests, "[w]hen the black power movement of the mid 1960s erupted, West stopped working on the book [...] fearing its middle-class themes would be unfairly criticised" (Ferguson 1987; 195). West herself notes that *The Wedding* coincided with "the Black Revolution, when many blacks believed that middle-class blacks were Uncle Toms. I feared, then, what the reviewers would say" (McDowell 1987: 279). This said, she was keen to speak to the pressing Civil Rights movement and as Charlene Sherrard-Johnson notes, *The Wedding* is set in 1953, a year before the desegregation of public schools, in the middle of the Civil Rights movement, a fact that makes her support of mixed-marriages ahead of its time.

Attempting to assess how transgressive West's reappropriation of passing actually is, is very difficult. For Sharon Lynette Jones, "West truly functions as a closet revolutionary, for while on the surface her work and her life seem to reflect the black bourgeoisie, her novels, short stories, and essays reflect a proletarian stance" (119). For Mary Helen Washington "West is a writer who both reflects and critiques the attitudes and ideals of the black bourgeoisie" (Preface xii). I am

particularly fond of Rayson's rather poetic acceptance of *The Wedding* as "a period piece and West [a]s a survivor of that period" ("Sexuality, Color, and Class" 224).<sup>128</sup>

### 'The Tragic Mulatta' and 'Abandoned Mammy' in *Linden Hills* (1985)

- Daddy doesn't like me.  
She leaped up from the cot, but the memory seared through her  
mind before she could shut it out.  
- Don't be foolish, your father loves you.  
- He doesn't play with me. He doesn't talk to me.  
[...]  
Why don't I look like Daddy?

(Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* 92-93)

In this section, I turn to the ways that Gloria Naylor revises the 'tragic mulatta' and 'abandoned mammy' characters of the traditional genre. By doing this, Naylor signifies on the theme of hypodescent that disinherited Molly Walden and additionally recuperates a mulatta genealogy for her character, Luther Nedeed Jr. (Sinclair). First, it is important to note that Naylor creates an alternative world in which descent, inheritance, and legacy revolves around black men, not black women, instituting a form of a black patrilineage that undermines long-held stereotypes about the social impotency of the black patriarch. Envisaging Linden Hills as a "beautiful black wad of spit right in the eye of white America," the Nedeed family first buy land that white land owners thought to be worthless and then sell that land "practically for air to the blacks who were shacking there" on "a thousand-year-and-a-day lease - provided only that they passed their property onto their children," or "if they wanted to sell it, they had to sell it to another black family or the rights would revert back to the Nedeed family" (7). Given that, as Cheryl Harris writes, "[i]t was solely through being white that property could be acquired and secured under law," and that whiteness itself constitutes, "a highly valued and exclusive form of property" (1724), the Nedeed family's investment in black property and

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<sup>128</sup> For more on West's literary legacy, see Streitfeld's articles and Dalsgard's, "Alive and Well and Living on the Island of Martha's Vineyard" (1993).

black capitalism has the potential to be subversive. Moreover, Luther's determination to create the perfect heir in his son is particularly significant if, as Mary Pattillo-McCoy writes, "in the 1980s" it became harder for African Americans to "pass on one's privileged class status" and "improve the position of one's children," with 60% of white Americans compared to only 36% of African Americans compared to 60% from upper-white collar backgrounds being able to maintain the occupational status of their parents during this era (21). In fact, "[d]ownward mobility – across generations and within one's lifetime – was also more prevalent among African Americans" in the post-civil rights era (Pattillo-McCoy 21). The idea that the Nededs create a community that guarantees a lasting legacy for black people ostensibly reads as a glorious insult to the system of hypodescent that historically disinherited African Americans.

However, this system is deeply flawed in that it simply replaces one system of patrilineage with another. Just as Molly and Isabella were disinherited through the sexist and racist institution of marriage in the antebellum and reconstruction South, in *Linden Hills*, Laurel Dumont and Willa Nedeed are disinherited in 1980s America. Harryette Mullen argues of the traditional genre that, "the black woman remains in last place within the color/economic hierarchy," and,

this woman furthest from whiteness [...] is therefore imagined as being also the furthest from all the advantages that whiteness has to offer in a racist-sexist hierarchy of privilege and oppression, in which the privilege of whites and males is based upon and unattainable without the exploitation and oppression of blacks and females. (73)

Naylor invokes the passing theme to remind her reader that this continues to be the case, although this time, black men – rather than white men - are guilty of disenfranchising black women.

### **Laurel Dumont**

Laurel Dumont's Southern grandmother, Roberta Johnson perhaps most obviously resembles the traditional "mammy" character in *Linden Hills*; other than Grandma Tilson, she is the oldest black female character in the book, and her grandchild turns to her unconditionally and expectantly for nurture and care. Like the 'abandoned mammy' of the passing genre, Roberta loses Laurel twice: first when she departs for Berkeley University and returns "a stranger" (227), and again when, while Roberta is taking a nap, Laurel changes into her swimsuit and commits suicide by diving head first into her empty swimming pool having received an eviction notice from Luther Nedeed, who rather than helping her, watches events unfold from the shadows.<sup>129</sup>

If Roberta resembles the abandoned mammy, Laurel, then, evokes the tragic mulatto. In many ways she resembles Larsen's Clare Kendry; just as Clare Kendry's marriage comes undone one snowy Christmas evening in the closing scenes of Larsen's *Passing*, so too does Laurel's, and just as Clare lays motionless in the snow below after plummeting to her death from the top floor of a Harlem townhouse, so too does Laurel. For Naylor, the whiteness of the snow is symbolic:

You know, when it starts to snow, she just loses it because it's going to be a white Christmas. Normally it means a perfect Christmas, but for her it meant her demise because she was depressed (Naylor, qtd. in Drieling, 267).

Even though Laurel (who has coffee-skin and is nicknamed "brown sugar" by her father) is not light enough to pass-for-white (217), she passes into this symbolic whiteness, joining Linden Hills's disappeared populace. In both Larsen and Naylor's

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<sup>129</sup> For a fascinating close-reading of the exchange between Laurel and Luther, see Sandiford (200-1). It is poignant that Laurel dies in the same 'space' as that other mythical passing figure, Jay Gatsby, who is discovered floating in his swimming pool (129).

text then, whiteness symbolically connotes death, a chasm, a space into which Clare and Laurel's "black" bodies disappear.

Laurel epitomises Trellie Jeffers's description of "the professional black black woman" as a "blacksinned Peola" (39). If the decade before the publication of *Linden Hills* was as Barbara Christian suggests, "a time when the goal of women was often portrayed as 'making it' in the system" ("Naylor's Geography" 121), then Laurel personifies this drive with her outstanding professional accomplishments and ambitions; she dreams of becoming an Olympic swimmer, attends the best college, heads up a whole division at IBM (240) and appears on the front page of the *New York Times* business section (228). However, like Jeffers's "blacksinned Peola," Laurel is "victimized psychologically by [the] black middle class racism" she faces in Linden Hills, "suffers from an alienation of self," and is "a cultural freak drifting between two worlds and belonging to neither" (T. Jeffers 39).

These two worlds for Laurel are Roberta's rural, southern home and her northern marital home in Linden Hills.<sup>130</sup> Despite a desperate search, Laurel cannot find home in Georgia with her Grandmother (as Roberta explains "this aint your home, child"; 231) and she does not feel at home in Linden Hills either despite spending money building a swimming pool and creating a music room to accommodate her two greatest loves "music and water" (218; 233). Catherine C. Ward considers these passions to be evidence of Laurel's "natural and physical impulses" (185); certainly in *Linden Hills* water is just one symbol associated with the 'mirrored soul' that "lets you know who you are" (59). For example, it is water in which Willa sees her reflection at the close of the novel, that she drinks, and thus becomes revitalised (268), and during her childhood trips to Georgia, Laurel is

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<sup>130</sup> There are vague echoes of Naylor in the character of Laurel. In an interview with Ethel Morgan Smith, Naylor reflects on not being "from the South" but "very much influenced by the South" and making visits to her grandmother (1433). When the interviewer asks whether this presented any conflict for her, Naylor replies, "No. I always had two ways of looking at things" (1433).

literally swimming in soul, comfortable with who she is. Like Neely's Blanche, Laurel feels nourished by water.

However, Laurel's love of music and swimming are socially and racially encoded in ways that complicate this simple reading; Naylor writes about these hobbies in ways that align Laurel with the transgressive and 'torn' mulatta of the conventional genre. For example, despite Laurel's aptitude and enthusiasm for swimming, in the United States, the swimming pool is a space of white privilege and her determination to swim seemingly suggests her determination to transgress the colour line. As Jeff Wiltse and George Lipsitz have noted "America's swimming pools have a long, sad, racist history," and "[s]wimming pools have long been contested spaces where Americans express social prejudices that otherwise remain publicly unspoken" ("America's"; see also Lipsitz 26).<sup>131</sup> Laurel does not just enjoy swimming, willing to step into this symbolically contested space to pursue her passion, but she wants to compete in a sport that is so white-dominated that when in 2015 three black women - Simone Manuel, Lia Neal, and Natalie Hinds - finished in the first, second and third place at a recent NCAA Championship event they broke records and grabbed headlines (Nelson). In fact, Laurel was dreaming of competing at the Olympics long before Alia Atkinson, who became the first black woman ever to win a world swimming title in 2014 was even born (Adewumni). So if the swimming pool is read as a space of 'whiteness' today, it definitely would have been in the 1960s when Laurel was a child and in the 1980s when Naylor's novel was published.

Laurel's desire to cut her hair in order to further her swimming career could be interpreted as symptomatic of her racial alienation. In a reversal of the scenes in *Clotelle* (1867) when the house slave Dinah cuts Clotelle's hair to make her look 'less white' ("Chapter XIII"; see also *Clotel* 119), Laurel tells Roberta that she wants to cut her "thick, wavy hair," her "crowning glory," to improve her competitive

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<sup>131</sup> See also Wiltse's book, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (2007) and his coverage of a racist pool party incident in Texas in June 2015 in his Washington Post article.

swimming time (220-222). Roberta, resembling Dinah, exclaims in response, “I oughta cut your throat” and even as Laurel explains that her braids are “too bulky to fit under a cap,” and are “added surface friction,” she is devastated that “no one understands” (222). The discussion of Laurel’s hair in light of her desire to swim has resonances for black women who, Ayana Bird and Lori Tharps suggest, “can still remember the bittersweet pull of a swimming pool or lake in the heat of summer,” who “wanted to jump in with the rest of the kids but were afraid of how their mother might react if she saw that the one perfect hairstyle had been destroyed – not to mention the horrid thought of having to sit through another session of pulling and tugging the kinks out” (160-1). While it is tempting to read Laurel’s expression of a desire to shed that most ‘black’ of signifiers – her afro hair - as a moment of racial repression, Naylor is more likely commenting on the ways that Laurel’s passions and interests resist neat categorisation as black or white, and how she struggles to ‘fit into’ in a society structured around this binary.

Laurel’s taste in music is similarly encoded as white, for she prefers the works of Rachmaninoff, Beethoven, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky to the blues which she describes as “[a]ll that moaning about Jim Crow, unpaid bills, and being hungry” (236). If, as Sherley Anne Williams suggests, music in literature can be evocative of “the black masses” and serves as a “reminder[] of the slave past” (9), then Laurel’s misunderstanding of black music somewhat mitigates her claims to black cultural heritage. Again, however, I would complicate this reading by suggesting that it is not the music itself that Naylor is drawing attention to here, but its ‘frequencies’ (to borrow from Ellison’s *Invisible Man*) to which Laurel is not attuned (Ellison 469). While Roberta has a nuanced ear for music and can hear similarities between Gustav Mahler (whose name she cannot pronounce) and “Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday; or even Muddy Waters” who are “starting from the same place,” Laurel arrogantly replies that “[t]hey’re worlds apart” (235). The irony is, of course, that while Laurel dismisses Bessie and Billie as “[w]omen who got their identities through a crop of worthless men they let drag them down,” and whose lyrics have “nothing to do with me or what I’m going through” (236); she fails to recognise that her own identity has been shaped in a similar way and ruined through her own

marriage to a worthless man. Laurel is entirely unable to see, hear and make these connections despite Roberta's signposting; in this sense Roberta Johnson, much like the mythologised guitarist Robert Johnson that Naylor is alluding to, stands at Laurel's crossroads; she is the nexus at the dyad of North and South, home and alienation, white and black, even though it is Laurel's husband who has made a pact with devilish Luther Nedeed.

Laurel's love of classical music also represents an intertextual link to Johnson's Ex-Coloured Man; he plays "Beethoven and Chopin" for his rich millionaire friend in Europe (54), "a Chopin waltz" for his father "with all the feeling that was in [him]" (16), and is introduced to his future wife because she says "his playing of Chopin is exquisite" (93). Similarly, as a child, Laurel listens to Chopin's Fifteenth Prelude on loop. This particular piece of music, commonly referred to as the 'Raindrop Prelude,' has long been interpreted as "an imitation" of "the sound of raindrops" (Dayan 6). According to Chopin's mistress, the French novelist George Sand, he wrote the piece after dreaming that he "saw himself drowned in a lake; heavy, frozen water drops [...] falling on his chest," when in actual fact, he was "hearing raindrops falling on the roof" while taking a nap (Szulc 212). Sand also described the piece as "bleakly melancholy [...] and apt to cast into the soul a dreadful dejection" (qtd. In Peter Dayan 8).<sup>132</sup> Naylor's allusion to this story is hugely symbolic. As a child, Laurel aptly listens to the Prelude when it rains and in her adult life, not only is Laurel's "soul" "cast [...] into a dreadful dejection," but Naylor invokes Chopin's "frozen water drops" in the image of snow which "really starts to come down heavily" as Luther knocks on her door (242). This time, it is Roberta, not Chopin, who is sleeping. Moreover, the story of the 'Raindrop Prelude,' like Laurel's, is one of delusion; Chopin confuses his dream world and his reality, and this sense of confusion is for critics of black capitalism, characteristic of the black middle classes. Rather than 'drowning' in a lake, however, Laurel dives into the empty pool. Chopin's "Raindrop Prelude" then, symbolically captures Laurel's

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<sup>132</sup> See Dayan's chapter, "Translating the Raindrop" in *Music Writing Literature, from Sand Via Debussy to Derrida* for an enlightening theoretical analysis and account of the 'Raindrop Prelude.'

two loves – music and water - and evocatively and hauntingly captures the tragedy of her death.

Despite Laurel's affinity with the tragic mulatta, when her husband divorces her and she loses her right to live in Linden Hills, she additionally resembles Chesnutt's Molly. Laurel's husband belongs to "one of the oldest and finest families in Tupelo Drive," but when he files for divorce, because "there are no children to inherit the lease," her home "reverts back to the original owners: [...] the Neddeeds" leaving her devastated (244). While Molly's sin is having illegitimate children outside of marriage who are then disinherited on account of their race, in Naylor's contemporary update, Laurel is disinherited for not having children within the institution of marriage. While Molly is denied the opportunity to become a "good wife," Laurel is chastised for not fulfilling her domestic obligations by putting her career first. Laurel, like Molly, represents a threat to her wealthy husband's legitimacy and dynasty, and just like Molly she is disinherited under a system that preserves and protects male privilege, except this time, it is black men who ensure she is entitled to nothing, not white patriarchs. In both the original model of hypodescent critiqued in *The House Behind the Cedars* and the alternative system of patrilineage the Neddeeds advocate, black women continue to be disinherited and denied the opportunity to share in the economic privilege and success of their male peers.

### **Willa Nedeed**

Like Isabella and Clotelle who are rejected by Henry Linwood, Willa along with her light-skinned child are rejected by Luther Nedeed. Moreover, just as the 'abandoned mammy' character Molly loses Rena who dies tragically at the novel's close, Willa loses Luther Jr. who dies in her arms (92). In an unusual twist on the conventional narrative however, rather than rejecting his son and children because of any traces of 'black blood,' Luther disowns and disinherits his son because he reveals traces of 'whiteness'; or as Gubar reflects, "[h]ere the legitimate but shockingly light-skinned baby born into a black family is as despised as the dark

child in slave times" (235). When Luther decides to deviate from "the pattern of his fathers [who each] married a pale-skinned woman," marrying Willa, "a dull, brown shadow" instead, he is amazed when she gives him "a white son" (19). Luther is so horrified that his son, "went unnamed and avoided for the first five years of his life" (18). To punish Willa for having a child he cannot believe is his, Luther decides to reopen the morgue beneath his house, "dragged two small cots down the twelve concrete steps," and locks them both away so Willa can "stay down here with her bastard and think about what she'd done" (20). Luther's claims to race loyalty and authenticity are so strong that when he "looked at this whiteness" of his son he "saw the destruction of five generations" (18) and as Luke Bouvier writes, Nedeed "scapegoats his wife for [this] insurgent whiteness [...] hoping to eliminate it by burying it with her and her son in a desperate, forceful reaffirming gesture of fetishism" that supports his 'black' vision (Bouvier 146). This bears similarity to Stuart's experiences in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. He recalls that his father "was very disappointed I didn't inherit Mother's [dark] coloring. It was as if he felt less black" (179).

There is an echo between Luther's reaction to the birth of his only child and W.E.B. Du Bois's writing on the death of his first child in "Of the Passing of the First Child" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) – an intertext Naylor makes repeated reference to throughout her novel. As Karla F.C. Holloway notes, "[d]espite the anguished and deeply personal tone" of Du Bois's mourning narrative, "the issue in that chapter was as much a public black story," as any other in *Souls* "selecting as he did a vocabulary to describe his son's death and dying that [...] was fully vested in the symbolic and racialised language of this nation's history of slavery and liberation" (*Passed On* 5). Specifically, Du Bois uses the imagery of the colour line and passing in his recollection of this tragic event. For instance, the news of his child's birth is brought in through his window by "a bit of yellow paper that fluttered into my room one brown October morning" [emphasis mine; "On the Passing" 127]. The similarities between "On the Passing" and *Linden Hills* are haunting. As Du Bois wonders how his wife is following the birth of his son, he repeats the phrase "Wife and child? Wife and child" which is, of course, the same

pair, locked in Nedeed's basement morgue, haunting Naylor's text. Du Bois's child, like Luther Jr. looks white; he has "olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, his eyes of mingled blue and brown" (*Souls* 128). And like Luther, Du Bois finds himself questioning the validity and legitimacy of his son's features:

Why was his hair tinted with gold? An evil omen was golden hair in my life. Why had not the brown of his eyes crushed out and killed the blue? –for brown were his father's eyes, and his father's father's. And thus in the Land of the Color-line I saw, as it fell across my baby, the shadow of the Veil. (*Souls of Black Folk* 128)

It goes without saying that unlike the fictional Luther, Du Bois immediately recognises that his own experiences of 'race' affect his perception of his son, that his child cannot escape "the shadow of the Veil." This said, like Nedeed, Du Bois cannot help but see his child as the product of a patrilineal line. He searches for "his father's eyes, and his father's father's" eyes just as Nedeed presumably searches for the "same squat bowlegs, the same protruding eyes and puffed lips" that his father, and his father's father possessed (18).<sup>133</sup> And finally, Du Bois's description of the grief-stricken mother when his son passes away - "the world's most piteous thing – a childless mother" who writhes "in the chamber of death" - could be a description of Willa herself, grieving for her son in the Nedeed mortuary ("On the Passing" 129). Although Holloway means no double-entendre when she writes, "Du Bois wrote of his son's passing as 'liberation,'" there is a symbolic link between the light-skinned body that passes away and that which passes-for-white (*Passed On* 5). In fact, both Judith Butler and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have hinted that "passing carries the double meaning of crossing the color line and crossing over into death: passing as a kind of passing on" (Butler "Passing, Queering" 136; Gates, *Figures* 202).

While Luther Jr. does bear evidence of the patrilineal phenotype of the Nededs (the "squat bowlegs," "protruding eyes," and "puffed lips") Luther finds

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<sup>133</sup> Lute similarly ponders the phenotype and paternity of Barby, "coldly prepar[ing], though he had no plan, to kill both mother and child if the child showed no trace of being colored" (*The Wedding* 21).

these traits accompanied by “a ghostly presence that mocked everything his fathers had built” (18). Of course, the “ghostly presence” of whiteness that Luther attempts to exorcise is not simply a ‘white’ one, but a maternal one, for Luther Jr. is light-skinned because he “looked like [his] grandmother. And the mother before that. And the mother before that” (*Linden Hills* 93). As Christian summarises, Luther Jr., “harkens back to his maternal ancestors, as the too-long submerged blood of the Nedeed women finally manifests itself,” and rather than “recognize...his own mother’s face in his son’s features,” or accept that “his father’s genes could be superseded by his mothers,” “Luther convinces himself that his wife has been unfaithful” (“Naylor’s Geography” 115). Goddu concurs suggesting that “the boy’s whiteness undermines years of patrilineal transmission,” and thus “represents the rupture that begins the process of revisioning Luther’s patriarchal myth” (216). If as Hortense Spillers suggests, “the mulatto in the text of fiction provides a strategy for naming and celebrating the phallus” (“Notes” 304), this explains why for Luther, his son signifies the white phallocentric power that the “ebony jewel” of *Linden Hills* was meant to undermine, not his own alternative vision of “black” manhood. Naylor thus revisits the “phallogocentric anxieties about paternity that intersect with anxieties about racial identity” in passing novels by black and white authors, such as Johnson’s *Autobiography*, in which “his children, themselves unaware of their African-American heritage, are the badge of his own successful passing” and his “patriarchal authority as a white father is stabilized by the erasure of his own black mother as well as by the death of the white woman he marries” (Mullen 79).<sup>134</sup> Naylor’s description of Willa proves that while “color capital [...] may pass through women” as they give birth to the lighter-skinned children, “women themselves do not control it or determine its value” (Mullen 81).

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<sup>134</sup> See also Kate Chopin’s *Desiree’s Baby* and Larsen’s *Passing*, in which characters are plagued by “a morbid anxiety surrounding the possible reproduction of a child too dark to be white” (Mullen 79). I return to this in the Conclusion of this thesis.

## Concluding Thoughts: Recovering Genealogies

To conclude this chapter, I reflect on the Naylor's use of the passing trope to recuperate a mulatta genealogy and 'herstory' that exposes the misogynist underpinnings of Luther Nedeed's economic power. While trapped in Luther's mortuary, Willa uncovers evidence - including a Bible and a photo-album – belonging to previous generations of light-skinned Nedeed women, who have all been rejected by both their husbands and sons. Willa's discovery echoes the scene in Johnson's *Autobiography* in which the Ex-Coloured Man finds, "a big, gilt-bound, illustrated copy of the Bible," atop which lies "a photograph album" containing "an inexhaustible supply of pictures" (10-11). The Ex- Coloured Man "looked at these pictures" so intently "that [he] knew the story of each one without having to read the subject" (11), and similarly, Willa learns the stories of the Nedeed women through her study and consideration of the items she discovers. Unlike Willa, however, he is fascinated with the Bible's history of Hebrew patriarchs including "King David" and "Samson," while Willa uses the photographs to reconstruct and trace a mulatta genealogy for her dead son, and a reclaim a matrilineal link for herself.

Each former Nedeed wife that Willa reads about conjures various incarnations of the passing-for-white character. As Paula Gallant Eckhard notes, "Willa's actions suggest that Naylor recognises the importance of female genealogy" (803). Moreover, by allowing the reader, with Willa, to recover the lost personal testimonies of the passing-for-white figure, Naylor redresses the stereotypes about the central figure of the genre. First, Willa discovers the Bible and bridal veil of Luwana Packerville (Luther I's wife), a woman who alludes to the passing figure in slave narratives such as *Clotel*. Her Bible is dated "1837," the same year Luther was rumoured to have gone "away for a while and returned with an octoroon wife [Luwana]," who was definitely not the same Octoroon wife (and mother of his six children) that he had originally sold in Tupelo, Mississippi to fund his trip North (2-4). Much like Isabella in Brown's *Clotel*, Luwana is a slave who pins her hopes of manumission on the prospect of marriage, but Luther refuses to free her. The

Nedeed dynasty, then, is forged from a relationship between a black man who owns his enslaved wife, a reality Luwana eventually awakens to:

Luther told me today that I have no rights to my son. He owns the child as he owns me. He grew terribly enraged when I ventured a mild protest, and showed me the papers that were signed over to his agent in Tupelo. Foolish creature that I am, I thought my sale to him was only a formality. I thought in the name of decency my husband would have destroyed the evidence of my cursed bondage. But he keeps those documents securely locked away. O Blessed Saviour, can it be that I have only exchanged one master for another? Can it be that the innocent scribblings I sought only to hide from a husband's amused contempt are now the diary of a slave? (117)

Luwana "thought her marriage would set her free, and it should have, it should have," but she soon realises that she has "only exchanged one master for another" (117). Naylor, signifying a second time on *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), reappropriates and resignifies the "amused contempt" and pity in Du Bois's paradigm of double consciousness - which characterises the white gaze - to capture the misogynist gaze of the husband who looks upon her writing and herstory with a similar degree of patronisation (*The Souls of Black Folk* 2). Indeed, Luwana's story, however brief, is evidence of Naylor's use of the neo-slave narrative style, and Willa's recovery of this herstory is a metafictional representation of the broader recuperation of the black women's history taking place in the 1970s and 1980s. Elizabeth Beaulieu argues, "[i]t has become the project of black writers who choose to author neo-slave narratives to reinscribe history from the point of view of the black woman, more specifically the nineteenth century enslaved mother" and this is clearly a strategy Naylor adopts (xv). In an affirmation of his patriarchal power, Luther disrupts the hypodescent "law [which] decrees that a child must follow the condition of its mother," but only by deciding to manumit his son, not his wife. Rather than truly undercutting the power of the tie that traditionally unites mother and child he replaces it with a system in which men own women, leaving Luwana to reconcile the fact "that [she is] now to be owned by her own son" (119). As Eckhard argues, "[w]hereas the institution of slavery gravely imperilled the mother-child relationship, the Nedeed patriarchy propagates similar disruptions across

generations” (808); and as Christian rightly summarises, “[a]t the very core of the patriarchal myth [...] is the idea that the son must duplicate the father, and that he must be separated from the mother” (115).

Second, Willa discovers the cookbooks of Evelyn Creton Nedeed (wife of Luther III), in order to revise the myth of the “beautiful” passing-for-white figure (see also Chapter 1). Evelyn, failing to transform her husband’s behaviour through conjuring recipes, attempts to transform herself through a beauty regimen on her hair and skin. At first, Willa believes that this regimen is designed to enhance her whiteness, imagining the Nedeed women as “cream and ivory” and “incredibly beautiful,” feeling “stung” because as a darker-skinned woman “she could never hope to compete with skin that demanded beige powder and peach rouge” (150). However, when rereading the recipes further, Willa realises that Evelyn is including “raw umber” and “henna” in her face cream which would turn her face browner, not whiter. While the passing-for-white figure attempts to enhance their whiteness, Evelyn tries to change the colour of her skin and the texture of her hair to appear darker in the mistaken belief that Luther neglects her because she is pale. Willa realises with a silent laughter, “for all those nights she went to sleep, her face coated with bleaching cream [...] she dreamed of being Evelyn Creton in the same canopied bed that Evelyn Creton dreamed of being her” (151). Much like the tragic mulatto of the conventional genre, Evelyn meets a tragic end and commits suicide by binging and starving herself to death, quite literally consumed with loneliness.

And finally, Willa discovers the photo album of Priscilla McGuire Nedeed (Luther’s mother) who is the politically active light-skinned “race woman” that Neely parodies in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. Willa imagines that Priscilla was “the first at the polls for the national elections in 1920,” “believed Darwin was a fool, and that Ida B. Wells should be canonized,” and “ran for president of the local Association of Colored Women three years in a row – and won” (208). Willa notices, however, that in the annual family portraits included in Priscilla’s album, “as [Willa’s husband and Priscilla’s son Luther] grew” he casts “a faint shade across Priscilla McGuire’s body” (208):

It had started at her lap and then slowly crawled up across her stomach, chest and neck. What began as a slight, grey film was now deepening into a veil. She squinted in the light. It was just another illusion; the woman wasn't fading the photographs [...]

The woman was not disappearing [...] the only thing growing in these pictures was her absence. (208-9)

Her face was gone. [...] Priscilla McGuire ended at the neck – and without her features, she was only a flattened outline pressed beneath cellophane. The narrow chin, upturned nose, and deep fiery eyes were a beige blur between the shadows cast by the two grown men on each side of her. The entire face, the size of a large thumbprint, had been removed. This had been done on purpose. There was no way this wasn't done on purpose. Cleaning fluid. Bleach. A drop of hot grease, over and over, page after page, the smeared hole gaped out into the dim light. The sight of it sickened her as she kept slamming through the album, feeling her empty stomach heave. [...] She came to the last photograph. And scrawled across the empty hole in lilac-colored ink was the word me. (249)

Slowly but surely, Priscilla, like Evelyn and Luwana before her, disappears until, like Laurel Dumont, she is rendered faceless by her own hand. In this extract, Naylor offers yet another intertextual reference to Du Bois's "Veil," which casts a shadow over Priscilla as it did Du Bois's child. Given that, as Teresa Goddu argues, while in the mortuary Willa "recovers a history which deconstructs the myth of marriage, a myth which creates women as ghostly absences and naturalises their namelessness" (Goddu 223), it is clear that Naylor resignifies the veil so that it takes on a gendered meaning connoting the wedding veil of marriage. Indeed, by shrouding her dead son in Luwana's antique lace wedding veil, Willa, her self a "dull brown shadow" eclipsed by her husband, offers in her son material evidence of the experiences of women "beneath the veil." In this sense, Naylor's work resembles Neely's in its suspicion of marriage. Throughout the series of books, Blanche resists opportunities to be married, and Neely makes even makes a reference to Johnson's "pottage" in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* when Mattie says "young black women today have bought a mess of pottage with all this romanticism and need to find a soul mate in order to make a marriage" (28). It would seem, therefore that marriage is thus constituted as a form of passing, of selling out, of abandoning some kind of authentic womanhood.

As Eckard notes, “[s]uch effacement and erasure notwithstanding, the foremothers Willa locate[s] - Luwana Packerville, Evelyn Creton, and Priscilla McGuire – compose an important female trinity” (803). Indeed, in a dramatic resurgence from beyond the grave, the spectral forms of Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla, who have been “reduced to a single sign – the pale skinned bride” (Goddu 216) unite with Willa as a fellow bride of “Nedeed” to mourn Luther, Jr.:

The ring of pale women wrapped in lace bridal veils danced around the cot in her dream and gently threw flowers on the stale blanket. They faded quickly as she opened her eyes but their chant still echoed in the space between her sleeping and waking breath: Mourn our son. Mourn our son. (91)

This image is suggestive of more than the “pale” skin of these women. Instead, this light ethereal ring signifies a whiteness associated with the institution of marriage that is both gendered and racialised in meaning; with their skin, their bridal lace, and their ghostliness, Naylor conjures an image of women betrayed, denied, and obliterated by marriage. In *Linden Hills*, then, whiteness is not a static signifier alluding to race, or character, or economic aspiration; it is a shifting one.

In fact, all of the evidence Willa uncovers serves to indict the institution of marriage: Luwana’s Bible containing notes about marrying Luther I and her wedding veil, Evelyn Creton’s cookbooks, and Priscilla McGuire’s scrapbook containing her engagement announcement and wedding photos all describe the institution of marriage as beyond drudgery, as alienating (much like it was for Lute’s wives). None of the Nedeed spouses are ever permitted to fully lay claim to the role of wife or mother. Luwana is owned by her son and is relieved of her traditional domestic duties by a housekeeper (119) and so though enslaved, Luwana endures no labor. Evelyn ostensibly devotes herself to cooking and providing for her family, but actually “eats herself to death” (190); indeed Eckhard argues that “Evelyn’s gorging and purging of self suggests not only complete effacement of the maternal, but also

an inversion of the life giving functions and sustenance provided by the mother's body" (804).

So when Willa emerges from the mortuary - the very image of the zombie bride - holding her dead son, draped in an antique wedding veil, with "hair tangled and matted, her sunken cheeks streaked with dirt," and "a wrinkled dress [...] caked [...] with dried perspiration, the sagging pantyhose torn at the knees and spotted with urine" (298-9), it is compelling that the very first thing she does is clean her kitchen.<sup>135</sup> A most abject embodiment of domesticity, this bedraggled wife proceeds to "methodically attack[] all the grease and dirt" in the kitchen, load the dishwasher and mop the floor (298). While Goddu suggests that, "Naylor fails to free Willa from a system which defines her as an absence: Willa might escape the basement but she never leaves the house" (226), I would suggest that just as Blanche reclaims the domestic space as one in which she can disrupt patriarchy and colourism, so too does Willa. To borrow from another example, if Morrison's character Beloved is, according to Sharon Patricia Holland, especially "jolting to the American psyche – a BLACK FEMALE [sic] 'ghost' with agency to possess and to destroy both house and sense of home," surely the zombie bride Willa's maniacal cleaning marks a subversive repossession of house and home and the eventual fire she sparks marks its destruction (2). And so, to borrow from Derrida, for Naylor "to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of justice" (Derrida, *Spectres* xviii).

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<sup>135</sup> See Richard Dyer's chapter "White Death" for more on "whiteness as death" (204-223). Although Elizabeth Bronfen discusses "whiteness" and "femininity" as it relates to passing in *Imitation of Life* in her book *Home in Hollywood*, she only hints at the how passing relates to 'death' in *Over Her Death Body* [see her discussion of Gabriel von Max's painting "Der Anatom" (1869; 4- 10), and Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book" (1869)]. Certainly, more work needs to be undertaken to explore the relationship between whiteness, femininity and the aesthetics of death, and *Linden Hills* seems to be a very interesting place to start, not only because of Willa's position as the 'living dead' in her husband's basement, but because Luther is, of course, a mortician.

The ‘white’ ring these women form around Willa replaces the wedding rings that previously united them. For instance, Luwana writes about a “pale metal” wedding ring that Luther gives her (now owned by Willa) which is “barely visible against [her] skin” and “in the full sunlight, it is as if [she] wear[s] no ring” (118). As Willa reads this account, her own position in this web of Nedeed oppression starts to become “painfully clear” (118). She realises that “she couldn’t see her [own red gold] wedding ring [...] in the shadow that her body cast on her hand” (118). As Goddu notes “Willa’s red gold wedding band, which matches the color of her dark skin as Luwana Nedeed’s platinum ring does her lighter skin, completes this disappearance,” or dare I say passing, of women into the institution of marriage and “[a]s her ring becomes indistinguishable from her finger, marriage is naturalised and the individual Willa Prescott is replaced by a mythic Mrs. Nedeed” (Goddu 229n18).

Despite her darker skin, in this same scene, Willa now occupies the same space of oppression previously reserved for the tragic mulatto and she hears her son’s maternal foremothers in a liminal “space between her sleeping and waking breath” (91). As these women circle around Willa, enclosing her in their ‘light’ and drawing her under their spiritual protection, the image Naylor offers is similar to that in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* in which Blanche imagines a chorus of dark-skinned women testifying to the effects of colourism and sexism (see Chapter 1). Indeed, to return to Michael Awkward’s reading of the chorus in Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls*, the verse he quotes continues:

sing her song of life  
she’s been dead so long  
closed in silence so long  
she doesn’t know the sound  
of her own voice  
her infinite beauty...  
sing her sighs  
sing the song of her possibilities  
sing a righteous gospel  
the making of a melody  
let her be born

let her be born  
& handled warmly (Awkward 2; Shange *for colored girls* 18)

Even though she is dark skinned, it is through reading about the experiences of these light-skinned women, that Willa is “[re]born & handled warmly.” She rediscovers herself, reclaims and reconstructs her own power and meaning, and learns that control over her body within the domestic sphere can be a form of agency. “Staring at the gaping hole that was once Priscilla McGuire, she reached her hand up and began touch her own face” and begins to trace her features, “she closed her eyes and used both hands, trying to form a mirror between her fingers, the darkness, and memory” and “[n]o doubt remained – she was there” (268).<sup>136</sup>

The herstory Willa uncovers (and the methods she uses to uncover it), contrast greatly with the detached and objective methods used by Linden Hills academic and history professor, Daniel Braithwaite who occupies the residence in closest proximity to Nedeed himself at the bottom of the hill (252). When Willie and Lester visit his house after discovering Laurel’s body, Lester is stunned by the “leather-and-gold bindings, loose dusty spines, [...] manila folders and newspapers” in his vast library (254). Braithwaite’s collection “reads like a Who’s Who in American History,” and his collection on African American history is particularly impressive. He has “[t]he entire set of the Federal Works Project’s slave narratives,” “every *Crisis* in existence, [...] *Journal of Negro Education*, *Journal of Negro History*, *Black Enterprise* – all of them,” as well as books by great black men which (incidentally) chronicle the ascent of the black capitalism including, “Booker T. Washington’s *The Negro in Business*, Carter G. Woodson’s *The Negro Professional and the Community*” and “Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie*” (254-255). To emphasise Braithwaite and Nedeed’s status as members of the “Talented Tenth,” Braithwaite also owns “a signed first edition” of “Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro*” that Du Bois autographed at a Nedeed dinner party (254-255). Braithwaite is particularly

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<sup>136</sup> See Margaret Homans’s essay for a fascinating comparison between Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *Linden Hills*, which offers a gendered reading of the mirror motif in Naylor’s work (168-9).

renowned for his multi-volume history of the Linden Hills community which is based on his “exclusive access to all of [the Nedeed] family records: survey reports, official papers from the Tupelo Realty Corporation, even the original bills of sale that date back to 1829” and “Luther has assured [him] they will be [his] exclusively for as long as [he] live[s]” (259). He is, in fact, much like Mattie Harris in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* – in that he ostensibly cherishes black history through research.

Lester and Willie are sceptical of Braithwaite’s methods of chronicling black history. Even though Braithwaite dismisses Lester’s claims that “since all your work about Linden Hills comes from the records and information that the Nededs have given you, no matter how objective you try to be, you’re still only getting one side of the story – their side,” he argues that he uses a range of sources and observations before he “come[s] up with the whole story, the real story if you will” (263). The relationship between Luther and Braithwaite nonetheless cements a male ‘ownership’ and narrativisation of history (263). When Willie, who has from the novel’s beginning been attuned to his namesake Willa, asks Braithwaite “[t]hen you know everything about the Nededs [...] I mean the wives and children and all? You’ve got their lives all in your books” (259), Braithwaite deflects the question, which is apt given that he has not seen the materials that Willa discovers in the basement.<sup>137</sup>

Braithwaite’s highly praised and “objective” history of *Linden Hills*, then, is riddled with gaps and holes, which only Willa’s readings of women’s texts can bridge; as Eckard argues, “[t]he diary-like entries in a family Bible, a collection of recipes, and an album of family photographs contrast with the scriptocentrism

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<sup>137</sup> Interestingly, Bouvier also suggests that “Willie in a certain sense appears on the borderline between masculine and feminine,” worries his poetry is “queer” and “makes him look like a ‘sissy,’” and “lies about having wrapped up his own presents because it looks ‘like something a woman would do.’” He also fears he is “turning into a woman” when thinking about Willa” (Bouvier 147). Homans similarly reads Willie as feminine, suggesting that when he unbolts the cellar door moments before Willa reaches it, “[t]he rigid barrier of sexual opposition, to recall Irigaray’s terms, has been restored as a permeable hymen, a collaboration between a woman and a womanly man” (171).

associated with patriarchal history” that Braithwaite values (Eckard 808). While Braithwaite claims that his historical tomes are “photographs [...] taken with extreme care and immeasurably accuracy,” Evelyn’s album offers powerful visual testimony to the absenting of black women from hegemonic historical narratives. Indeed, as Cheryl A. Wall highlights in her book *Worrying the Line*, in black women’s writing, “genealogies are woven together out of individual and collective memory, encoded in stories, songs, recipes, rituals, photographs, and writing” (5), and Willa’s counter history, presented as it is – an italicised palimpsest that interrupts the chronology of the narrative – invites us to consider reading between the lines. As Derrida observes, we should be willing to “speak always of the spectre, to speak to the spectre, to speak with it, therefore especially to make or let a spirit speak” which Willa does (*Spectres* 11). Braithwaite on the other hand, cannot. Indeed, Derrida says that this “seems even more difficult for a reader, an expert, a professor, an interpreter, [...] a ‘scholar’” to do, for “intellectuals [and] scholars] believe that looking is sufficient” (*Spectres* 11). Derrida’s metaphor of the invisible spectre escaping the hegemonic gaze sounds much like the ghostly passing figure who similarly evades detection from those who “believe that looking is sufficient.” In *Linden Hills*, this mode of superficial looking is flawed – for nobody can see Willa’s absence, abject as it is, only Willie, who is attuned to her plight, can hear her spectral and haunting screams throughout the novel.

Perhaps Luwana Packerville’s Bible best symbolises the process of reading between the gaps that Naylor advocates. Luwana’s Bible constitutes a palimpsest narrative within Willa’s, a text within a text, an intertext; she writes her own narrative on the “gold-edged tissue paper that separated one book of the Bible from another” (*Linden Hills* 117). Adapting the term from Gerard Genette who found the metaphor of palimpsests useful in his theorizing of parody, Ashraf Rushdy notes that “a palimpsest,” which is “either a parchment on which the original writing can be erased to provide space for a second writing or a manuscript on which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing,” serves as “fruitful metaphor for the intricate ways that contemporary lives and life stories are inscribed on parchments through which the slave past always shows”

(*Remembering Generations* 8). He argues that “palimpsest narratives” commonly produced in the 1970s,

address the social problems, political issues, and cultural concerns of their moment of production by generation of a narrative in which an African American subject who lives in the [post civil rights era] is forced to adopt a bitemporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the past. (5)

So while Luwana’s text is a palimpsest narrative that compares her antebellum plight to the patriarchal texts of the Bible, Naylor’s novel uses Luwana’s text to draw parallels between the capitalist 1980s and America’s history of slavery. For Sandiford, Luwana’s “manner of writing and defining a space for her reflections is especially remarkable,”

Interleaved as they were between the books of the Bible, these thoughts occupy a series of interstitial spaces, constituting themselves as intertexts. As such, they open up spaces for an ‘other’ voice, a female voice to speak to, dispute with, render inclusive, and continue that most patriarchal of Judeo-Christian texts. (Sandiford 204)

In this sense, Luwana’s interstitial narrative, which sits in the gaps of Braithwaite’s conventional histories, “accomplish a critical textual transformation, an act [Roland] Barthes describes as ‘an impetus to perpetuate the plural nature of writing...a desire to continue works that appear to have been continued or finished’” (Sandiford 205). Willa, “[a]s a practitioner of intertextual processes, [...] authorises her own distinctive voice in ways that show her enveloping consciousness about the imperatives for a female writer in her condition” (Sandiford 208).

Luwana not only writes for herself, but to herself (for example “My Dearest Luwana,” “Fondly, Luwana”) and eventually on and through herself, covering her body in tattoos as a corporeal testament to her silencing. In Luwana’s final letter, she describes that for every morning and evening that she has not spoken to her husband and son, she “carves a line on her chest [or] stomach” to keep count, and

rubs the line “with black ink until the bleeding stops” (124). As Luwana is about to make her next mark, her writing stops and “there was no record of what happened to Luwana Packerville on the morning she made her six hundred and sixty-sixth” tally – which numerologically of course, suggests her consumption to the will of the demonic and devilish Lu[cif]er Nedeed (125). Sandiford reads Luwana’s tattooing as suggestive of “stripes of self-flagellation, inflicted out of Luwana’s victimised feelings of self-division and guilt” (204), but Goddu’s reading of the body as text is particularly useful in considering how Willa’s body symbolises in a broader sense the ways that that racialised bodies have been historically inscribed. She writes:

Like Willie, who creates poetry out of his body, Willa’s foremothers use their bodies as a place to mark their own history; however unlike Willie, these women use their bodies not as the source of their spoken stories, but as memorials to their silence. Luwana remains silent, turning her body into a painful poem. Paradoxically, she can only claim her presence through self-mutilation. (224)

Luwana’s body thus evidences the ways that women’s experiences and bodies have been “affected, altered, tattooed by historical circumstance” (Bailey qtd in Holland 32). Complicating a Foucauldian reading of the body as “the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas),” Holland suggests that “some bodies are ‘constant’ in that they are ‘tattooed by historical circumstance’ again and again” (32). These “[b]odies are still marked by sex and/ or pigmentation – so they are not subjected to discourse so much as discourse is constructed around certain bodies so that others may survive, thrive, and evolve” (32). As Eckard notes, Willa’s etchings “perversely mirror [Helene] Cixous’s assertion that women must write through their bodies” (Eckart 803: see Cixous “Laugh of the Medusa”).<sup>138</sup> It is a form of what Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey describe as “dermographia,” or “skin writing” (15). The word “is a medical term that means writing on, or marking the skin” which is what Willa does, but Ahmed and Stacy use the term “to suggest that skin is itself also an effect of such marking” (15). Naylor’s genealogical text thus

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<sup>138</sup> Fascinatingly, in this essay, Cixous appropriates the experiences of black women to represent the experiences of all women – another racial synecdoche at play, writing “we are black and we are beautiful” (163).

successfully uncovers and “expose[s] a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Foucault “Nietzsche” 83).

And so Willa is a counter-historian excavating textual evidence that, paradoxically, materially substantiates the erasure of Nedeed women and recovers the genealogy of the Nedeed mulattas. In fact, the process of recovery that Willa enacts bears startling similarities to Foucault’s concept of genealogy. He suggests that genealogy “operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments and documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” - much like Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla’s bible, cookbook, and photo album (76). Like Willa in the mortuary the process of genealogy “await[s]” an “emergence,” “excavat[e]s the depths” and “allow[s] time for these elements to escape from a labyrinth where no truth had ever detained them” (80). Moreover, unlike Braithwaite who holds onto the “official” Nedeed family documents, Foucault warns that, “we should not be deceived into thinking that this heritage is an acquisition, a possession that grows and solidifies” and that we should read it as “an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor [Luther] from within or from underneath [via Willa]” (“Nietzsche” 82). Moreover, Foucault’s writing maps neatly onto the theme of [hypo]descent that permeates Naylor’s text and the passing narrative genre, specifically in understanding the role of Luther Jr. to the narrative. He writes that “[d]escent attaches itself to the body” and “inscribes itself [...] in the debilitated and prostrate bodies of those whose ancestors committed errors [...] and the bodies of their children [who] will suffer” (82). In this sense, Luther Jr.’s prostrate body – like those of other tragic mulattas such as Clotel and Clare - becomes the site for the sins of his father(s).<sup>139</sup> It is no coincidence that Willa unofficially names her son Sinclair, as it is with his demise that the Nedeed ‘sins’ are ‘cleared’. And so “[t]he ghost story Naylor tells eulogizes” not only the maligned historical mulatta, but “all the rejected children haunting the conscience of the nation” (Gubar 236).

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<sup>139</sup> For a useful Foucauldian reading of space and the body *Linden Hills*, see Chapter 6 of Frances L. Restuccia’s *Melancholics in Love: Representing Women’s Depression and Domestic Abuse* (2000).

The passing trope then, thus facilitates this genealogical process in uncovering the centrality of misogyny to the black capitalist project that is Linden Hills. Christian explains, “as Willa Prescott Nedeed relives the herstory so carefully exhumed from the Nedeed’s official records, we realize how the experiences of women are a serious threat to the men’s kingdom,” and “[b]y emphasising the Nedeed women’s ignorance of their own herstory, Naylor shows how the repression of women’s herstory is necessary to the maintenance of patriarchy, and why it is that History is so exclusively male” (“Naylor’s Geography” 116). Despite his active role as a constructor of historical texts, Braithwaite invokes the matrilineal line as a way of ‘washing his hands’ of community responsibility and legitimising his inert and passive engagement with those around him. For instance, when Willie asks him why he did nothing to help Laurel he replies “[s]he was the daughter of someone. The wife of someone. And even the granddaughter of someone right there in the house with her” (256). But Naylor compares Willa’s reclamation of the matrilineal line with political agency. As Sandiford concludes, “[i]n reading the texts of Luwana, Evelyn and Priscilla from her subterranean locus of exile, [Willa] reads (writes) the text of her own life within the flawed structure of Nedeed patriarchy” (207). As Goddu argues, if the rest of Linden Hills are suffering from a sense of black cultural amnesia, “[t]hrough Willa, [...] Naylor outlines a recuperative vision of history, a vision that opposes the willed cultural amnesia of Linden Hills” (215). And just as Laurel cannot survive unless she recognises the connections between her own life and the blues of Billie and Bessie, “Willa cannot proceed forward until she recognises the continuity between her mothers-in-law’s “sad, twisted, lives” and her own.

To conclude, both Dorothy West and Gloria Naylor, despite their very different perspectives on colour and class, invoke passing as a way of retracing a heritage and recuperating a lost ‘genealogy’. West’s novel invites the reader to consider the politics, passions, and history of interracial love in what Susan Kenney describes as “genealogical forays into the past that chronicle the rise of both the maternal and paternal ancestors of Clark and Corinne” (*Shades of Difference*). By

revisiting the interracial origins of the Coles family, West legitimises the union between Shelby (an African American woman) and Meade (a white man) at a time when mixed-marriages were frowned upon. Indeed, Randall Kennedy notes that “attempt[ing] to compile a list of novels, stories, or plays in which interracial romance or marriage is portrayed in a positive light, and whose characters are explicitly perceived as colored, makes for an instructive exercise,” and “the rarity of such writings underlines the degree to which miscegenation and its representations have been discouraged” (*Interracial Intimacies* 138). Among the “tiny procession” of post-civil rights African American novels Kennedy observes which, “approvingly depict[] interracial love stories” during slavery [such as including Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* (1979), Charles Johnson’s *The Oxherding Tale* (1982)] and in contemporary times [such as Frank Yerby’s *Speak Now* (1969), Sandra Kitt’s *The Color of Love* (1995), and *Close Encounters* (2000), Eric Jerome Dickey’s *Milk in my Coffee* (1998); Ann Allen Shockley *Loving Her* (1974; which features a lesbian interracial relationship)], Kennedy notes West’s novel (*Interracial Intimacies* 138-140).<sup>140</sup> The flashbacks that West includes to each member of the Coles and Shelby families reconstruct the typically fractured interracial family tree. “In *The Wedding*,” as Muther helpfully summarises, “analepsis becomes genealogy,” and,

West’s narrator often moves precipitously into the lives of Shelby’s forebears, both maternal and paternal, into parts of her story that are in some cases beyond the horizon of memory. The narrator is historian, naming and reclaiming the characters whose love has created the novel’s converging lineages. (Muther 195)

In Naylor’s text, on the other hand, palimpsest and intertext “become genealogy,” enabling Willa to understand both her connection to the mulatta Nedeed women who have preceded her and to upset her position within the broader patriarchal system that oppresses her. It is just such a shame that, as Eckhard notes, “Willa’s efforts at revisioning her own life and restoring the maternal ‘herstories’ of her predecessors yield short-lived results” (807) and as Teresa Goddu points out, the

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<sup>140</sup> Kennedy provides a really useful survey of novels, plays, films and books that depict interracial relationships in Chapter 3 of *Interracial Intimacies* (2004).

inferno that Willa precipitates in the closing pages of the novel means that “[f]emale history literally goes up in smoke at the end of this book” (226).

Ironically, much of what I've learned about color I've learned because I have a mixed-race child. Because she is lighter-skinned, straighter haired than I, her life – in this racist colorist society – is infinitely easier. And so I understand the subtle programming I, my mother, and my grandmother before me fell victim to. Escape the pain, the ridicule, escape the jokes, the lack of attention, respect, dates, even a job, in any way you can. And if you can't escape, help your children to escape. Don't let them suffer as you have done. And yet, what have we been escaping to? Freedom used to be the only answer to that question. But for some of our parents, it is as if freedom and whiteness were the same destination, and that presents a problem for any person of color who does not wish to disappear.

(Alice Walker, "If the Present" 291)

## Chapter 3 Searching for Blackness: Passing and Racial Authenticity

What is blackness? Is it a state of mind, a philosophy, a value system, an all-encompassing belief [...]?

(Adrienne Harrison, “Color, Class, and Consciousness” 58)

What is a people that props itself up on the color of its skin?

(Trellie Jeffers, “The Black Black Woman” 37)

### Critiquing Authentic Blackness

I opened Chapter 1 of this thesis with a quote from an article by Trellie Jeffers about the effects of colourism upon darker-skinned black women, an article I have referred to throughout; I’d like to begin this final chapter by discussing a riposte to her article. Six months after Jeffers’s article was printed, *Black Scholar* published a rejoinder written by a light-skinned black woman graduate student, Adrienne M. Harrison which critiques Jeffers’s reification of the same colourist, essentialist and embodied notions of race that not only figure predominantly in the literary passing genre, but which fundamentally underpin patriarchal hegemony, impede black female solidarity, and hinder political action and cooperation in the black community. In her article “Color, Class and Consciousness,” Harrison recognises Jeffers’s “bitterness” and “pain” but only because she, as “a lighter member of the same race” has “suffered the same racist degradation at the hands of my darker sisters and brothers” (57). Even though Jeffers claims that “Black is Beautiful” is an “ideological change that has nothing to do with skin colour, eye colour and hair texture,” Harrison ponders why then, if blackness “a state of mind, a philosophy, an all-encompassing belief” that Jeffers and other black power advocates would proffer a movement based on a “scale of noses and skin color,” hair style, and “black blood of character” (59). While Jeffers implicitly condemns ‘interracialism’ in her article (or “the presence of a white sensibility in the body of a black woman”),

Harrison will not “separate any segment from [her] soul” (59). Harrison is right to observe these elements of Jeffers’s article. Jeffers also invokes the essentialist discourse of passing-for-white in her impassioned plea against colourism, deploying the language of biological race found in the conventional genre (“trace[s] of white blood”). Moreover, like Neely and Naylor, she associates whiteness with death; “[t]he presence of a white sensibility in the body of a black woman is the guillotine that beheads character, moral stamina, goals and purpose of black people” and she fears that “the black race in this country is destined for extinction” (41). When we read Jeffers’s and Harrison’s work side-by-side it is clear not only that colourism finds expression as class conflict – as West and Naylor observe, but that colourism is as damaging to the self-esteem of light-skinned black women as it is to darker-skinned women, and thus impedes solidarity between women of color and threatens feminist politics.

Of all the difficult issues posed by the Jeffers/Harrison debate, one of the most resonant is Jeffers’s question “[w]hat is a people that props itself up on the color of its skin?” or in other words, how does colourism, BlackThink™ particularly, affect the political momentum of African Americans in the post-civil rights era? What are the implications of colourism for solidarity between black women of different shades, and for that matter, a sense of black kinship in general? Years later, one of Trellie Jeffers’s former high-school pupils, Alice Walker, would reflect on her teacher’s work in her essay “If The Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like,” which I also discussed in the Introduction to this project.<sup>141</sup> “For many years,” Walker writes, “I pondered Jeffers’s statement, then turned to black literature, because it is so very instructive, to see whether it had support” (295). In her own non-fiction writing, Walker, “[b]uilding on Trellie Jeffers’s exposure of the ‘dirty little secret’ of colorism in African American life [...] makes clear how colourism stigmatizes dark-skinned Black women and denigrates the

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<sup>141</sup> Walker thanks Jeffers, Mrs Brown and Mr Robertson from high school in her acknowledgements to *The Alice Walker Collection*: “Their simple belief in doing their jobs properly, and with concern for my welfare after I left their instruction was activism at its very best.”

light-skinned female preventing solidarity between the two" (Caraway 46). As F. James Davis recalls, "the intense focus on blackness" in the post-civil rights era, "often put lighter persons on the defensive" and "[i]n the 1960s, lighter persons in general often felt they had to prove their loyalty to the black community, and some complained of discrimination from other blacks" (F.J. Davis 74; paraphrasing Williamson 190). Walker asserts that "[l]ight and white-skinned black women will lose their only link to rebellion against white America if they cut themselves off from the black black woman" and "black women will lose the full meaning of their history in America (as well as the humor, love, and support of good sisters) if they see light and white black women only as extensions of white and black male oppression" (Caraway 96). This notion of 'black kinship' is a theme that Walker and others examine, just as Jeffers does, through the use of the passing theme.

In this chapter, using the Jeffers/Harrison debate as a backdrop for my discussion and with extended reference to Nella Larsen's seminal novella *Passing* (1929), I examine the ways that Alice Walker and Toni Morrison respond to this debate in their short stories "Source" and "Recitatif".<sup>142</sup> Specifically, I am interested in the ways each author invokes passing as a way of undermining the notion that race can ever be traced, read, or located, and to describe irrecoverable genealogies that seriously undermine the tenets of post-civil rights identity politics.

First, I wish to establish that Walker and Morrison are indeed, signifying on Nella Larsen's seminal novella, *Passing* in their short fiction. Second, I contend that they borrow from Larsen's use of narrative occlusion in order to convey the illegibility of race. Third, I explore the resonances of textual passing in each piece of work, paying particular attention to the ways that the passing body is evoked through the use of grammar and punctuation. And finally, bookending this project, I return to issues of style, beauty, and passing, but focus on how Walker and Larsen, unlike Neely and Bambara destabilise the body as a signifier of authentic race.

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<sup>142</sup> See Rushdy, *Remembering Generations* for a discussion of how Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* similarly critiques and resists notions of authentic blackness proffered by the Black Power movement (56).

## Rewriting Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) in Alice Walker's "Source" (1982) and Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" (1983)

Ships that pass in the night, and speak to each other in passing,  
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;  
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak to one another,  
Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.  
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Tales of a Wayside Inn, 'The  
Theologian's Tale; Elizabeth' Part IV" 267)

It is the great American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow that we have to thank for the idiom "ships that pass in the night" and perhaps there is no better description of the fleeting and ambivalent friendships between the central women characters in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929); Alice Walker's "Source" (1982) and Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" (1983) than this nostalgic and poignant conceit.<sup>143</sup> Larsen's Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield are childhood acquaintances who grow up together in Chicago and after years of estrangement, re-encounter each other by chance one steamy afternoon while passing-for white on the rooftop tea-room of the Drayton Hotel, and then again two years later in Harlem, New York.<sup>144</sup> Anastasia and Irene in "Source" are old college friends who meet up in San Francisco and then again years later in a bar in Anchorage, Alaska, where Anastasia – who is African American by parentage – is self-identifying as white; and Morrison's racially enigmatic characters, Twyla and Roberta, first meet each other aged eight at "St Bonny's Home for Children" in New Jersey and reencounter each other on four separate occasions during their adulthood when they reminisce about their youth and wonder about the fate of Maggie, a mute-deaf kitchen woman at their children's home, whose racial identity they misremember.

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<sup>143</sup> This simile, coined in his collection "Tales of a Wayside Inn" (1873) is commonly used to describe "transitory acquaintances" (Ayto 311) or to refer to "individuals who are rarely in the same place at the same time" (Ammer 401). For more on Longfellow, see Gioia (64).

<sup>144</sup> The setting of Larsen's novel is inspired by Carl Van Vechten's stay at the Drake Hotel in Chicago in 1928 following the death of his sister-in-law, Fannie (G. Hutchinson 270).

Like Larsen, Morrison and Walker refuse to reproduce the conventional passing-for-white figure in their prose. Rather than replicating the conventional passing-for-white plot, Larsen - inspired by Walter White's novel, *Flight* - reverses the genre's traditional narrative trajectory and features a plot in which a character attempts to pass back over the colour line and 'back to black' (G. Hutchinson 207). Indeed, as Gayle Wald notes, "Passing's representation of Clare's desire for racial 'homecoming' – rather than her desire to pass – [is] a primary source of narrative strife and dissonance," and that this distinguishes Larsen's text from earlier works (*Crossing The Line* 47); and Jon Woodson goes as far to suggest that "Clare Kendry's name deciphers as 'declare kin'" (117).

In Walker's "Source," Anastasia certainly resembles the traditional passing figure, and yet she undermines the very notion of passing by refusing to subscribe to the notion of race as 'real' or 'fixed' in a post-civil rights, 'post-integration' era. To borrow from Harryette Mullen, "[r]ather than 'passing for' white," she "actually become[s] white or function[s] as white, which amounts to the same thing when [her] participation in the normal activities of mainstream American is enabled by the perception that [she is] white" (77). Walker's embrace of an ontological whiteness, that can be passed through and out of at will, thus does away with any definitive notions of race as objective, as something tangible that can be emulated, eclipsed, or repressed.

And in what Morrison has famously described as an "experiment in the remov[ing] of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (*Playing in the Dark*), "Recitatif" offers the reader three potential passing-for-white figures; Twyla, Roberta and Maggie could all potentially be 'white.' Morrison skilfully "restructures the drama of ambiguity" that we see in the traditional genre, "so that it involves the reader in the impulse to fix racial meaning and to know the racial status of its characters" (Bennett, *Toni Morrison* 211).

Morrison and Walker also borrow from Larsen's representations of hesitant and reluctant conversations about passing-for-white. Their characters are "ships

that pass in the night and speak to each other [about] passing,” even against a post-civil rights backdrop, albeit it in a deeply equivocal way. As Larsen’s Irene Redfield reflects, “It’s funny about ‘passing’. We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it” (82), and this ambivalence is reflected in the dialogue of the characters. While sipping tea at The Drayton, Irene is intrigued by the “hazardous business of ‘passing’” that Clare partakes in but out of courtesy cannot bring herself to directly ask about it (30). Walker’s Irene is similarly in two minds about Anastasia’s ‘passing’ and the author uses a combination of direct and indirect speech to reflect this. For instance, while drinking cocktails in the closing scenes of the story, she sarcastically tells Anastasia that “passing-for-white is so-so-colorful” when “really” she meant, “that it was passé” (157). And in various scenes in “Recitatif,” Roberta and Twyla argue about the racial identity of Maggie, the cook at their children’s home who Roberta thinks is a “poor old black lady” much to Twyla’s bemusement (“Black?” she puzzles, “Maggie wasn’t black”; 169). Just as Morrison’s text splits the reader’s opinion over whether it is Twyla or Roberta who is black, Maggie too becomes a contested and discursive space of racial ambivalence. Like the operatic style of recitative that inspired the title of Morrison’s story – when a character pauses to explain and discuss the action for their audience – so too do these women break from the action of their ordinary lives to consider the bearing of passing-for-white on their friendships, politics and identities.<sup>145</sup>

Lastly, unlike the authors of conventional passing narratives, Larsen, Walker and Morrison refuse to grant their readers any comprehensive sense of conclusion, resolution or assurance about the fate of their ‘interlopers.’ Even though Clare’s ‘true’ racial identity is exposed to John in the “Finale” of Larsen’s novella, the ambiguities surrounding her relationships with the Redfields are never made clear and the mystery surrounding her untimely and tragic demise leaves us with more

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<sup>145</sup> For more on operatic recitatives, see Benjamin (87); Goldstein-Shirley (84-85); Harris “Watchers Watching Watchers” (118n12); Ashford (91).

questions than answers. In “Source,” the enigmatic Anastasia is like the lost Russian Princess from whom she takes her name, or perhaps more like Anna Anderson the princess’s famous counterfeit – it is near impossible to prove or disprove her claims about who she is and the puzzle of her racial identity is unsolvable; and of course, we never find out “what the hell happened to Maggie” in “Recitatif” nor are the racial identities of any of the other characters revealed (172). Walker and Morrison’s ambivalent representations of passing through their development of characterisation, dialogue and plot are thus clearly inspired by Larsen.

Indeed, the influence of Larsen on contemporary black women writers generally speaking, who are so often called upon to introduce and praise new editions of Larsen’s work, cannot be understated. Endorsing the Anchor Books edition, Walker enthuses, “Quicksand and Passing are novels I will never forget. They open up a whole world of experience and struggle that seemed to me, when I first read them years ago, absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable” (*Passing*, back matter). In her introduction to the Modern Library Classics Edition, Ntozake Shange describes Larsen’s text as an “exquisitely written” piece, in which she “offers characters so honest and desperate to be whole that we cannot help but champion their humanity” (“Introduction” xvi). And Maya Angelou describes the Anchor collection as being “like finding lost money with no name on it. One can enjoy it with delight and share it without guilt” (Front Matter).<sup>146</sup>

Even though these three works have never before been compared in a published article or book, it is clear that Morrison and Walker signify on *Passing* and take inspiration from the ways that Larsen rewrites and reframes the conventional passing narrative to critique contemporary identity politics. As Valerie Rohy reflects, novels such as Johnson’s *Autobiography* and Larsen’s *Passing* “clearly engaged with issues of race, community, and what we would now call identity politics” and yet

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<sup>146</sup> Toi Derricotte also pays homage to the relevance of Larsen’s novella in her poem, “Passing” from her 1997 collection *Tender*, in which she describes her own experience of passing as a college student while discussing Larsen’s novel in class.

"have to varying degrees been read as denouncing imposture and defending 'original' or 'true' identity" (226). Decades later, as Nicole King observes, "within the context of the post-civil rights 1980s," when "Source" and "Recitatif" were published, "a stable 'black' identity said to issue from a unified community is paradoxically both asserted and questioned," a climate befitting a revisit of Larsen's novella (211).

Indeed, Morrison and Walker's reappropriation of the passing genre is, as with the other texts featured in this thesis, very much grounded in a contemporary social, cultural, and political context; specifically, they invoke passing as a way of destabilising monolithic notions of race and kinship that underpin the identity politics of their era. While for Bambara, Neely and Jeffers the 'Black is Beautiful' movement and Black nationalism are liberating discourses, for Walker and Morrison (like Adrienne Harrison) these movements (along with particular expressions of feminism) paradoxically represent a return to the very same essentialist notions of race, gender, and belonging that underpin the passing-for-white genre. The political calls in this era for the unilateral solidarity of all 'women,' 'black women,' and 'people of color' without any consideration of the intersections between these socially contingent categories are deeply troubling. These movements advocate a politics of visibility and biology, which while reappropriated for 'liberal' ends still prescribe, 'read' and 'place' individuals based on their appearance and phenotype. Given this context, Morrison and Walker's use of the passing trope – infamous for its own invocation of essentialist rhetoric and sexist stereotypes – to convey the limitations of contemporary identity politics constitutes a fascinating twist on the traditional genre. By drawing attention to an essentialist literary genre of a bygone era and undermining it through ambivalence, Morrison and Walker expose and deconstruct new forms of biological essentialism in contemporary America.

I frame my analysis of "Source" and "Recitatif" by scrutinizing or 'parsing' some of the literary mechanisms that Larsen uses to occlude our view and complicate our readings of racialised bodies and their relationships - socially,

physically, biologically, and diegetically - to other characters and to us as readers. These are the use of narrative perspective; punctuation and syntax; and descriptions of the stylized body. Given that in its broadest sense, the verb ‘to parse’ means “to examine or analyse minutely” (“Parse,” *OED*), the appeal of this strategy in a thesis that works so intensively with close-reading is obvious (and of course, I am making a pun in this chapter - ‘parsing’ is a homonym for ‘passing’ and so these words, in effect, pass for each other). But the more technical and linguistic implications of the word are not lost here. To parse also means “to describe a word syntactically” or “to describe the syntactic role of [a word] in a sentence or phrase” and so we might consider the positioning of the passing body amid a broader syntax or discourse of race and the ways that the body can be read, located, made sense of, or placed or misread, disconnected and lost via the very syntax and prose of a literary text. As Martin Gliserman explains, “the body laces into the language of narrative,” “evidences itself in the language that is the literary text,” is “embedded into the syntax of a sentence,” and “pervades narrative fiction” (ix). In this chapter, I argue that Morrison and Walker (and for that matter Larsen) deliberately ‘lose’ and misplace the narrative body through their use of the passing theme and craft illegible and incomprehensible passing bodies at a time when the discourse of racial visibility and solidarity is at its most audible and iconic.

It is perhaps no surprise that Morrison and Walker signify on Larsen’s novel to critique identity politics (and the role of racial genealogy in this) given that *Passing* is in many ways a novel with a similar ambition. As Gabrielle McIntire observes, some of the novel’s central questions are “[W]hat happens in 1920s Harlem when one’s skin color does not announce a clearly decipherable racial genealogy?” “[h]ow does one know how to belong to a ‘race’ when race itself is inordinately prone to the mutable semiotics of skin and the prejudices of its [...] readers?” and “[h]ow does ‘race’ bind communities and ban its outlaws” (778). Clare’s presence in the text, as Kawash suggests, brings these questions into acute focus, for she “interrupts the mutual recognition and obligation of community, and thus calls into question the stability of identity and obligation of community insofar as they would serve as the basis for political life” (*Dislocating* 168).

Larsen's protagonist, Irene Redfield is a politically active member of the fictionalised "Negro Welfare League," which as Cheryl Wall notes, is an "amalgam of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the Urban League" and in the course of the novel, she helps to organize the annual Negro Welfare League Dance, which is likely inspired by the NAACP Ball, an annual Harlem social event ("Passing for What?" 127). However, even though Irene is, as Mae Henderson suggests, "identified as the 'race woman' by virtue of her discourse on 'race uplift'" (xliv), in the course of the novel, her radical politics are exposed as superficial and actually rather conservative. For instance, even though Irene's public persona is politicised, in the privacy of her own home, she forbids Brian to discuss politics with their children; after Brian answers his son's question about lynching, she asserts "you're not to talk to them about the race problem. I just won't have it" (163).

Additionally, Irene's perception of Clare's passing act is tinged with latent xenophobia and she sees her friend not simply as a "race traitor," but ultimately un-American. Clare is characterised as "foreign," she writes on "Italian" paper, her handwriting is "alien" (3), she has "a voice remotely suggesting England" (19), her husband is a businessman who "turned up from South America with untold gold" (34), and they enjoy "long absence[s] in European cities" (46). Clare, is therefore not just passing-for-white, but passing-for-American. Irene remembers how as children Clare showed "no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire" (5) and of course, the word "allegiance" has patriotic connotations (as in the 'pledge of allegiance to the flag'). Irene believes that unlike Clare, she is a naturalised American citizen:

She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted. Not because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys. (169)

The way that Larsen combines pastoral imagery (the land) and modernist metaphors for progress (the buildings) in this short excerpt lends itself to a reading

of American myth and symbol in her work.<sup>147</sup> Both Clare and Irene are figures of ascent in the national landscape. The “rising towers” represent Clare, or to quote our narrator, “a hundred Clare Kendrys,” social passers and dreamers who are emerging in their droves during this time of economic prosperity, immigration, migration and ‘easy living’ that characterised the ‘roaring twenties.’<sup>148</sup> Like the architecture Larsen evokes, Clare’s identity is constructed, fabricated, and artificial. Her social ascendency is based on a lie and in this American pastoral landscape, Clare does not fit in. By contrast, Irene’s growth is organic, gradual, and “rooted” in the American “soil.” She is, to use her own words, “an American” and naturalised by virtue of her acceptance of her place in society. For Clare to pass-back-to black would be to reclaim her American identity, which Irene feels is unjust. Clare represents a threatening future and a modernist changing landscape. To Irene, she is an impatient parvenu; her social ascendency is achieved through deceptive means and a quick acquisition of wealth through her marriage to John. Indeed, Jennifer DeVere Brody observes that “Clare is not a member of the rising Black bourgeoisie nor was she ever a member of the aspiring middle-classes,” instead, “[s]he rose rapidly, readily ‘passed’ and in doing so surpassed Irene in terms of class and material wealth” experiencing a “Gatsbyesque ascendance” (“Clare Kendry” 1056).

Indeed, for Anthony Dawahare, the money Clare symbolises is central to Larsen’s prose, which is attentive to the ways in which “the money economy” influences “racial identification,” recognises that “lighter skin embod[ies] higher value,” and appreciates that the golden skin of the passing figure is set at a premium (32-33). He notes, for example, that Clare, who is “the most fetishistic form of black identity - the passer-for white” (32), has a body Larsen describes as “exquisite,” “golden,” “shining,” and “glistening” (Larsen 113), a voice which sounds like a bell “of a precious metal” (Larsen 19), and is a fetishistic symbol for capitalist

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<sup>147</sup> For a seminal reading of myth and symbol in American literature, see Henry Nash Smith.

<sup>148</sup> For more on this era, see Mackrell’s *Flappers* (2013), Lucy Moore *Anything Goes* (2015), and Goldberg’s *Discontented American* (1999).

opulence who connotes Fitzgerald's Daisy Buchanan – "the 'golden girl' with a 'voice full of money'" (Fitzgerald 96; Dawahare 33-4). "The association of whiteness with money in its golden incarnation," he continues, draws attention to the commodification of whiteness inherent in the passing act, after all "as a light-skinned mulatta, [Clare] can opt out of the black working class by passing for white" (34).

While Larsen's novella is radical in its alignment of 'blackness' and Americanness, Irene's conflation of Clare's passing act with the xenophobic attitudes of the 1920s is problematic. Ironically it is Clare who embodies the meritocratic tenets of self-creation espoused by American patriots; she is a self-made and self-created woman who defies race and class barriers (if she had not passed as white, Clare would have been working as her aunts' maid). Yet it is self-made Clare who perishes. In *Beyond Ethnicity* (1987) Werner Sollors identifies that there is a "paradoxical co-existence of the cult of the upstart as 'self-made man' and the permanent racial identification and moral passer as 'impostor'" (qtd. In Pfeiffer *Race Passing* 5).<sup>149</sup> We can read Larsen's characterisation of Irene, then, as an expression of American political hypocrisy.

The conversation Irene has with Hugh Wentworth as they watch Clare dancing from a box at the Negro Welfare League Ball similarly betrays her superficial political ethics and it soon becomes clear that her politics are based on little more than appearances. As Brody phrases it, "Irene consistently aligns herself with conservative and bourgeois elements in American society" ("Clare Kendry" 1055). Irene's survey of the "young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, [and] golden women" at the ball reveals a glaring omission - black women (114-115). Larsen reminds the reader that at this exclusive social event, which according to Irene "anybody who can pay a dollar" can attend, lighter-skinned women are clearly favoured (106).

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<sup>149</sup> See also Pfeiffer's article "Individualism, Success, and American Identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" (1996).

Moreover, despite their fondness for each other, both Hugh and Irene take issue with “miscegenation.” As they watch Clare dance with a dark-skinned man, Ralph Hazleton, Hugh’s derogatory declaration that his own white wife would never “be twirled about by some Ethiopian” betrays his latent racism towards dark skinned men (115). Similarly, Irene’s claims that dark skinned black men stir “a kind of emotional excitement,” because they are “something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you” and at the “opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty” is problematic especially given that Irene’s husband is “dark” (117). We cannot help but wonder why Clare’s choice of dance partner should matter to a [white] man who himself spends so much time in [black] Harlem. Clare too finds it “rather curious” that “a man like that” should go to “a Negro Dance” (104). Irene tells her that “[t]his [...] was the year 1927 in the city of New York, and hundreds of white people of Hugh Wentworth’s type came to affairs in Harlem [...] to see Negroes” and “to gaze on these great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes” (104).<sup>150</sup> As Wall rightly attests, “Wentworth’s questions” about Clare in these scenes “suggest an impulse to put Clare in her place” (129) and he seems to project his own anxiety about his relationship to the black community by questioning Clare’s, and displaces his jealousy of black men by undermining Ralph.

As Hugh attempts to tease from Irene whether Clare is passing-for-white, Irene – truly embracing the position Clare has put her in as a gate-keeper of racial ‘knowledge’ – advances a problematic and essentialist claim that there are ways of reading race which she “can’t explain” because they are not “definite” or “tangible” (117-8). This said, it is against this distinctly political backdrop of the ball that Hugh and Irene eliminate two possible ways that race can be claimed, identified or deduced which possibly pique Morrison and Walker’s interest in this novella:

“Oh, Hugh! [...] What do you think? Is she?”  
[...]

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<sup>150</sup> See Trudier Harris’s “Watchers Watching Watchers” for an exploration of the politics of ‘gazing’ and passing.

"Damned if I know! I'll be as sure as anything that I've learned the trick. And then in the next minute I'll find out I couldn't pick some of 'em if my life dependent on it."

"Well, don't let that worry you. Nobody can know by looking."

"Not by looking, eh? Meaning?"

"I'm afraid I can't explain. Not clearly. There are ways. But they're not definite or tangible."

"Feeling of kinship or something like that?"

"Good heavens, no! Nobody has that, except for their in-laws."

"Right again! [...]." (Passing 117-8)

The first bogus means of identifying race is "by looking"; as Irene explains with reference to a friend of hers, one cannot tell whether somebody is black based on the way they speak, or how they look (118). The second is via some vague, ontological "feeling of kinship" or belonging, which is, ironically, something Clare is desperately seeking and fails to find among Irene and the black community in Harlem. "Good heavens, no!" laughs Irene, when Hugh asks whether it is possible to feel some sense of 'black' affinity, "nobody has that." As Kawash observes, here "[r]ace becomes a difference that cannot be described, located, seen, or distinguished in any 'definite or tangible' way" (*Dislocating* 155). So, Larsen asks – just as Trellie Jeffers and Adrienne Harrison ponder over half a decade later, if embodied race is spurious, and if kinship is tenuous, if we cannot base our politics on how we look or who we look like, where does this leave us? If women scrutinise their sisters for signs of "allegiance" as Irene does to Clare through the novel, where does this leave women? "What is a people that props itself up on the color of its skin?" These are issues that Morrison and Walker respond to their retellings of Larsen's tale.

More than fifty years after Larsen questions the politics of her central characters, these same ideas – 'looking' black and 'feeling' black – reemerge in the rhetoric associated with Black Power organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Like Larsen before them, Morrison and Walker signify on the passing theme to undermine the claims their characters make not to 'white' culture, but to black culture. Despite the undeniable allure and usefulness of this discourse for African Americans, Jill Matus

points out that for Toni Morrison, “self-affirming assertions such as ‘Black is Beautiful’ were in the 1960s and 1970s, [...] too simple to redress the complex and long-prepared effects of valuations based on colour,” and Morrison herself has commented, “nobody was going to tell me that it had been that easy. That all I needed was a slogan: ‘Black is Beautiful’” (Matus 37).

### [Mis]reading race: Narrative occlusion in *Passing* and *Recitatif*

By including illegible passing bodies in their fiction, both Larsen and Morrison suggest the ability to visually ‘read’ race is bogus and deny our ability to ‘claim’ blackness on behalf of any of their characters. In Larsen’s novel, Irene cannot ‘read’ Clare and in the oft-quoted opening scenes, the letter Irene receives from Clare is a metonymic symbol for Clare herself, “mysterious,” “alien,” “illegible,” “sly,” “foreign,” and “furtive” (3). As Mae Henderson explains, “the reader’s introduction to both Irene and Clare is framed by the act of reading and being read” and “just as Clare becomes the text that Irene must learn to decipher, so Irene, in turn, becomes the text to be deciphered by the reader” (xl ix). Certainly, Larsen’s use of a third-person subjective narrative perspective makes it difficult for us to gauge both women with any sense of accuracy or consistency. Larsen focalises the tale through the unreliable perspective of Irene, and as George Hutchinson notes, by “filter[ing] the narrator’s perceptions of Clare through the clouded perspective of Irene Redfield,” Clare remains “a mystery” (294). Deborah McDowell reminds us that, “most of the narrative’s events are filtered, significantly, in retrospect and necessarily blurred” and that Irene is the “classic unreliable narrator, confused and deluded about herself, her motivations, and much that she experiences” (Introduction xxiv).

Morrison signifies on Larsen’s depiction of ‘reading’ passing women and borrows from the way that Larsen invites the reader to “fill in” the gaps and lacunae” of *Passing* by requiring us to “reconstitut[e] the miscegenous text/body” (Henderson I-li). By withholding the racial identities of her key characters, we

become implicated in the process of attempting to read their ‘ambiguous’ bodies. Morrison describes Twyla and Roberta as “[a] black girl and a white girl” (165), who look “like salt and pepper” (158), but “as a lark”, never divulges which is which (Morrison, “The Art of Fiction”). She does, however, bait her reader with clues throughout the story which expose our determination to read, locate and ‘place’ the race of those we encounter as well as the utter futility of this pursuit. For instance Morrison includes prejudicial statements, for example, “they never washed their hair and they smelled funny” (156), which trigger and expose the reader’s own stereotypes about both African Americans and poor whites. She makes reference to signifiers of class to draw attention to the ways that our readings of race are affected by socio-economic factors; for instance Roberta has a Chinese chauffeur who drives her to the supermarket in a limousine (165), lives in Annadale, “a neighbourhood full of doctors and IBM executives” (164), and has two servants (much like Irene Redfield). Morrison also offers clues about phenotype such as discussions about hair texture (162). She alludes to famous figures with ambiguous identities, such as Jimi Hendrix (a multi-racial guitarist famous for his trans-racial appeal) and St. Bonaventure (a theologian who people had difficulty attributing works to).<sup>151</sup> Morrison picks names for characters linked to both Twyla and Roberta that connote black culture - Roberta shares a name with Fisk University, a predominantly African American college, and Twyla’s husband shares a name with the African American boxer Ken Norton.<sup>152</sup> As Trudier Harris humorously reflects, in “Recitatif” we are relegated to “racial stereotyping hell and we keep trying to wiggle our way out of it without rejecting what we have come to know” (“Watchers” 112). Morrison reflects in an interview with the *Paris Review* that she is intrigued by the ways that Faulkner uses similar techniques in *Absolom! Absolom!* (1936):

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<sup>151</sup> A quick Google search reveals a St Bonaventure, and a Pseudo-Bonaventure, to whom the former’s work has been misattributed. I am uncertain, however, as to whether Morrison was aware of this.

<sup>152</sup> For more information on Fisk, see Harris (111) and Abel (476). For more information on Morrison’s reference to Hendrix see Abel (474). Even though in her *Paris Review* interview, Morrison says “I use class codes, but no racial codes” the reference to Fisk has been read as racial (“The Art of Fiction” 75)

Faulkner [...] spends the entire book tracing race and you can't find it. No one can see it, even the character who is black can't see it. I did this lecture for my students that took me forever, which was tracking all the moments of withheld, partial, or disinformation, when a racial fact or clue comes out but doesn't quite arrive. I wanted to chart it. I listed its appearance, disguise, and disappearance on every page – I mean every phrase! Everything, and I delivered this thing to my class. They all fell asleep! But I was fascinated technically. Do you know how hard it is to withhold that kind of information but hinting, pointing all of the time? And that to reveal it in order to say that is not the point anyway? It is technically just astonishing. As a reader you have been forced to hunt for a drop of black blood that means everything and nothing. [...] you are hunting this black thing that is nowhere to be found and yet makes all the difference. (Morrison, "The Art of Fiction" 74)

Faulkner's interest in the traceability of race, which Morrison shares, and the way he executes this is without doubt linked to her "experiment" in "Recitatif," in which she plays with race "[b]y trying to alter language, simply to free it up, not to repress it or confine it, but to open it up. Tease it. Blast its racist straitjacket" (Morrison, "The Art of Fiction" 74).<sup>153</sup>

The passing dynamic in Morrison's work therefore is, as Bennett notes, metafictional in the way it implicates us as futile 'gatekeepers' of racial knowledge ("Toni Morrison" 211-13). As Harris states, "we enter the story like eager detectives, for we believe that our received tradition of knowledge about racial markers will allow us to uncover what Twyla and Morrison are so intent upon hiding" (111). We are, as Harris describes us, "Watchers Watching Watchers"; much like the Harlemites at Larsen's Negro Welfare League ball, we are invited to voyeuristically "read" Twyla and Roberta's bodies, as Twyla and Roberta attempt to read

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<sup>153</sup> Speaking at a conference on Faulkner and Women in 1985, Morrison said, "there was for me not only an academic interest in Faulkner, but in a very, very personal way, in a very personal way as a reader, William Faulkner had an enormous effect on me, an enormous effect" (Morrison, "Faulkner and Women" 25). She wrote her dissertation on him.

Maggie's.<sup>154</sup> Early in the story, Twyla introduces Maggie as “old and sandy-colored” (158), but in later years is shocked when Roberta refers to her as an “old black lady” (169). Twyla later reflects, “I was puzzled by her telling me Maggie was black. When I thought about it I actually couldn’t be certain. She wasn’t pitch-black, I knew, or I would have remembered that” (170). The riddle of Maggie’s identity, like the puzzle of Twyla and Roberta’s, is never and can never be solved because, to return to Gliserman’s question, in “*Recitatif*,” the body cannot be seen in order to be read.

Morrison’s technique of withholding information in the narrative, while masterfully and memorably executed in “*Recitatif*,” is not unique; Larsen uses similar techniques. As Hutchinson notes, “[r]iffing brilliantly on the nature of passing in the novel’s exposition, [Larsen] withholds any mention of race or color until well into Chapter 2” (295). He continues that, “[u]p to this point, one has had no way of knowing that Irene is black” and that “the greater irony is that neither Irene nor the reader suspects that the other woman is a Negro [...] our knowledge is blocked” (295). (Walker also withholds the details of Anastasia’s racial identity until the descriptions of the meeting with “Source”). Moreover, by offering only Twyla’s recitative, Morrison ensures that Roberta, like Clare Kendry, remains cut off from the reader.

We might also compare Maggie, Twyla and Roberta to Larsen’s Bob Kendry, Clare’s father, whose racial identity is never disclosed to the reader and is only ever hinted at. Just as critics such as Ann Rayson and David Shirley Goldstein have fallen into the trap of actually trying to ‘decode’ the race of Twyla and Roberta (and Elizabeth Abel confesses she actually wrote to Morrison requesting more information on the girls’ identities),<sup>155</sup> so too have critics made assumptions about

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<sup>154</sup> Coincidentally, Hilton Als describes Morrison’s “light-brown eyes” as “the eyes of a watcher – and of someone who is used to being watched” (“*Ghosts*”).

<sup>155</sup> For Abel’s description of writing to Morrison see Abel (476). See also Goldstein-Shirley, “Race/[Gender]: Toni Morrison’s ‘*Recitatif*’” (1999) and Rayson, “Decoding for Race: Toni Morrison’s ‘*Recitatif*’ and Being White, Teaching Black” (1996).

Bob's racial background when actually, Larsen only ever baits the reader with clues. We are told that Bob has a "pasty white" face (144) and that his white aunts "didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced – ruined, they called it – a Negro girl" because "they could excuse the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tar-brush" (34). This certainly legitimates Anthony Dawahare's reading of Bob as white in his article on Larsen (34).

But we are also told Bob "had been a son of their brother's on the left hand. A wild oat" (32), "had been in college" with Irene's father's group of friends, but had fallen from grace and now worked as a janitor (24). Despite these intimations being just that – hints, clues and insinuations much like those used by Morrison - George Hutchinson assumes that Bob is an "illegitimate mulatto janitor" (296) and repeats this unsubstantiated claim in his analysis of *Passing* [for example, he says "[Clare's] father was the illegitimate son of a white man" (302)]. Moritz Bannert notes that while Larsen "makes clear that her father has a very light complexion and thus might have been able to pass" she adds the caveat, that this only makes sense "if he was considered to be black" (12). After pondering whether there is a chance Bob Kendry could be white, Bannert sides with Hutchinson and suggests that because he went to college with some of the black men in Irene's father's circle that he could not have been white because "these black men would not have been able to go to a white man's college" (12). But should Bob's college background necessarily reveal his 'race'? Is it not possible that Irene's black father attended a predominantly white university and met Bob Kendry, a white student there? Afterall Clare and Irene grew up in Chicago and the University of Chicago boasts an impressive record on racial integration. Deva Woodley reports that, "[f]rom its founding, the University of Chicago was unique among the nation's top universities in its willingness to allow students of color and women to pursue advanced studies" and that "between 1870 and 1940, 45 African American students were granted PhDs, more than at any other institution in the nation." In the first decade of the 20th century alone, "nine African Americans earned undergraduate degrees, while

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five more earned graduate degrees.” Despite this speculation, Larsen’s description of Clare as having “exotic,” “negro eyes,” but also “eyes which her grandmother and later her mother *and* father had given her” (38; emphasis mine) is the closest that Larsen comes to declaring both of her parents are black and even then there is room for misinterpretation. Therefore, despite the outing of Clare’s ‘race’ at the ending of her novel, Larsen resists the notion that her racial genealogy can be convincingly or conclusively exposed, traced, or revealed.

It is not just Clare who has an ancestry that is difficult to trace; in “Recitatif,” Twyla and Roberta also have ‘passing’ parents which undermines the notion that race can be claimed through family connections. The reader discovers nothing of the girls’ fathers and Morrison omits references to skin colour when describing their mothers. All we really read is that Twyla’s mother, Mary, is wearing “ugly green slacks,” a “fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them,” and Roberta’s mother has “the biggest cross I’d ever seen” on her chest and holds a Bible in “the crook of her arm” (160). Both women’s arms are restricted by objects, which metonymically represent their displaced attention as parents. Mary’s shabby fur coat symbolises her pitiful pursuit of the high-life and her ripped and empty pockets signify the financial toll of her partying. Roberta’s mother’s heart and arms are blocked by symbols of religion, suggesting her faith prevents her from reaching out and holding her daughter. Just as Bob in *Passing* never stopped drinking, Mary never stopped dancing and Roberta’s mother never got well (167). These parents are beyond help and passing out-of-sight, out-of-time and out-of-reach. Bob thus joins Maggie (and Twyla and Roberta’s mothers) as a passing figure whose body is only ever “presented indirectly through memories that are partially lost, distorted, or made ambiguous in the telling” (“Passing Figure” 211-13). Narrative occlusion, then, is the first of several ways that the writers signify on the passing genre in order to draw attention to the fragmentary nature of race and relationships based on racial identity. By obscuring our readings of racialised bodies and shrouding the racial lineage of their passing figures in mystery, both *Passing* and “Recitatif” present skin colour and the kinship based on it as tentative, illusory and impossible to lay ‘claim’ to with any degree of confidence.

## **Reading the “American Grammar of Race”: Punctuation and Syntax in *Passing*, “Source,” and “Recitatif”**

A second way that the writers draw attention to the processes involved in reading race is through the use of the visual markers of punctuation to problematize and signify on the need to read and locate the racialised body. Just as skin colour, hair texture and eye colour have historically guided our readings of the racialised body, and segregatory language has marked the colour line, punctuation gives shape to and demarcates our readings of racial syntax. The notion that American racial discourse has its own grammar, punctuation, syntax and vocabulary that affects the ways we read people is not new. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” published a few years after “Source” and “Recitatif” in 1987, Hortense Spillers “defines an American grammar, a system of talking about ethnicity grounded in the experience of stolen Africans, where the trauma enacted against the black female body and the subsequent degendering of the black female subject become the point of reference for modern conceptions of whiteness and femaleness” (Benjamin 91). As Shanna Greene Benjamin observes, “Spiller’s essay [...] claims key, strategic territory in black feminist studies because it connects slavery, black women’s bodies, and syntax to describe how race and gender are woven into the very systems that structure communication” (91). If the American grammar of race is “the system of words and imagery that dictates how race has traditionally been constructed in literature” (Benjamin 91), Spillers suggests that we must attempt “to break apart, to rupture violently the laws of American behaviour that make [the] syntax” of oppression possible and aim to introduce a more appropriate “semantic field” (“Mama’s Baby” 226) that resists the stereotypical labelling of black women as “Peaches,” “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire,” “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” and “Granny” (“Mama’s Baby” 203); and of course, we can add “mammy,” “jezebel,” and the “tragic mulatto” to this list.

More recently, Eduardo Bonilla Silva suggests that, “there is something akin to a grammar – a racial grammar if you will – that structures cognition, vision, and even feelings on all sorts of racial matters” (173). Even though Silva uses “grammar”

as a theoretical metaphor to expose the normalisation of “standards of white supremacy as the standards for all sorts of social events and transactions” (188n2), like Spillers (and for that matter Gliserman) he connects language, syntax, grammar and discourse to the way we see and read racialised bodies. He claims that “racial grammar influences vision, emotion, and our sense of aesthetics in addition to the way we talk about and frame racial matter” (188n2).

As Timothy B. Powell argues the “white logos” of American literature has been undercut by black Americans “‘signifying,’ or playing upon the meanings of the traditional (white) understanding of the Word” (46). Larsen, Morrison and Walker all use black punctuation to “undercut” and destabilize the white logos of the page in order to make our reading of each text more playful and dynamic. They harness the power that punctuation has to draw our eyes to the gaps, omissions and spaces in literary master narratives about race (such as the passing narrative); to trace and expose the processes of silencing in white and/or male authored writing; and to enact an ambivalent and signifying mode of double talk that both engages with the traditional passing genre and undermines it. Morrison, Walker and Larsen draw our attention to the ways that the racialised body (and the language used to construct it) is framed grammatically through the use of three modes of punctuation – the parenthesis, ellipses and footnotes. These three items are used to facilitate a slippage and passing of language that makes the body and the social connections it makes to other bodies elusive and vague, reinforcing the theme of passing in their works and undercutting the ability to ‘read race.’

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...For I am lonely, so lonely... cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life....You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of....it's like an ache, a pain that never ceases....” Sheets upon thin sheets of it. And ending finally with, “and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now

perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago.... (*Passing*, 7-8)

Larsen's famous use of ellipses (both the dotted variety and em dash) and aposiopesis (or trailing off into silence) are central to the way she characterises her passing-for-white figure, Clare Kendry. When the narrator focuses on Irene's thoughts and conversations about Clare, Larsen leaves the aforementioned "gaps" and "lacunae" that Henderson identifies. For instance, Irene ponders "how deliberately [Clare] had — " (7) and edits Clare's letter (above). Of course, an obvious connotation of Larsen's use of ellipses in the extract above is an erotic one. As Jennifer DeVere Brody explains, the ellipsis "labors to contradictory ends. It marks a strategic deletion that produces not only deleterious effects (lack), but also, and simultaneously, affective desire (excess)" (*Punctuation* 71). For Brody, ellipses connote an insatiable need and they "mark a desire, whose meaning can never be fulfilled but must always be filled" (77). And so the deep sense of ambivalence that Irene expresses about passing ("It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it"; 82) is emblematised in the punctuation used by Larsen. It is worth noting that even though Brody's study of ellipses is grounded in her expertise in African American fiction, nowhere in her book on punctuation does the author note the resemblance between the ellipsis and the passing-for-white figure. When we close read her characterisation of the ellipsis, we see striking comparisons with characters like Clare Kendry and with the processes at play in contemporary black women's appropriations of passing. For example, Brody notes that, "the ellipsis is ambivalent, enigmatic, paradoxical," "can be read as signifyin(g)" (*Punctuation* 76), and "like the blackness of blackness, both 'is and aint'" (*Punctuation* 73).

Moreover, ellipses, much like the narrative techniques I explore in this chapter, also actively implicate the reader in the text. Brody reminds us that ellipses, like the plots of *Passing* and "Recitatif," "invite the reader to enter the dialogue" (80), and "we can imagine the ellipsis set out like bait waiting to be consumed, literally leading us down into the narrator's den as well as into the depth of the text"

(81).<sup>156</sup> We might read the ellipsis itself as a series of “black (w)holes” that Houston A. Baker observes in the writings of African American men, such as Richard Wright, which both constitutes a space “where the trickster [in this case the passing figure] has [her] ludic, deconstructive being” (Baker 151), and from which she must be retrieved if ever we are to hear her version of events. In Larsen’s work, the ellipsis stands in place of the passing figure herself and symbolises Clare’s elusiveness, absence and ambiguity, her playfulness and friskiness, as well as her silencing and marginalisation. It both characterises the passing figure’s resistance to being read, placed in context and paradoxically marks her absence on the page.

( )

I used to dream a lot and almost always the orchard was there. Two acres, four maybe, of these little apple trees, Hundreds of them. Empty and crooked like beggar women when I first came to St Bonny's but fat with flowers when I left. I don't know why I dreamt about that orchard so much. Nothing really happened there. Nothing all that important I mean. Just the big girls dancing. Roberta and me watching. Maggie fell down there once. The kitchen woman with legs like parentheses. And the big girls laughed at her. We should have helped her up. [...] I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember the legs like parenthesis and how she rocked when she walked (“Recitatif” 158).

Morrison’s description of Maggie as a woman with legs like parentheses is apt given that she quite literally frames and brackets Twyla and Roberta’s memories of St. Bonny’s. Visually, the blank parenthesis of Maggie’s legs connotes the passing-for-white figure him/herself (who Maggie, with her indeterminable race is paralleled with); the round white space in the centre connotes the white mass of her body and this symbolic whiteness is made conspicuous and visible only when juxtaposed with the blackness of the brackets on the ‘blank’ page. This mirrors the way that the literary passing figure (be this Clare, Irene or even Rena Walden) risks exposure

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<sup>156</sup> Brody’s argument that “[t]he ellipsis seems more stylized than racialised – as a performance of (material) type, although its blackness cannot be elided” (*Punctuation* 83) is pertinent given the section on racial stylization in this chapter.

when viewed alongside black bodies. In this sense, Maggie's legs draw attention to the visual constructedness of the passing-for-white body and the processes by which whiteness is made visible.

Maggie's legs also hint at the discursive and narratological constructedness of race. Parentheses denote "an explanation or aside" and when we read her legs in this way, we see that Maggie constitutes the very recitative that inspires the title of Morrison's short story ("recitative, n"). If Maggie does personify "an explanation or aside," what is she meant to explain and convey? Shanna Greene Benjamin suggests "Maggie symbolises the silent truth imbedded within the parenthetical narratives of America's racialised history":

If the relationship between Twyla and Roberta is structured according to an American racial grammar – a grammar that pits white against black in a racialised binary – then the inclusion of parentheses offers a syntactical occasion to pause and consider how the interstitial narrative within the parentheses correlates to the "master" narrative surrounding it. (99)

Certainly, when read in this way, Maggie blurs the colour line not simply because she is able to pass-for-white, but because her legs recognise the racial binary that underpins America's racial grammar (noted through the pairing and mirroring of the brackets and the mirroring of Twyla and Roberta as black and white), and yet still suggest a liminal and interstitial space where this binary can be challenged. This chimes with Hortense Spillers's definition of "the 'interstitial'" as "those punctualities (in a linked sequence of events) that go unmarked so that the mythic view remains undisturbed" ("Introduction" 14). Moreover, Spillers's suggestion that "mulatto/a" (in this case Maggie) is a general "cultural signifier [...] for the interstitial, for the slippage of meaning from one lightpost to another" seems particularly apt ("Introduction" 28).

The passing figure of Maggie not only destabilises monolithic constructions of race, but complicates readings of kinship too. In their arguments, Twyla and Roberta cannot refer to Maggie to support their racist worldviews, but they cannot

look to her for any reassuring sense of sisterhood or motherhood either, however tempted they may be to do so. Maggie is symbolic of an inability to claim '[w]holeness' through female kinship – indeed, as the story progresses, her legs, described metonymically, become one of the "only" things Twyla remembers about Maggie as a entire person. Maggie is not a woman Twyla and Roberta stood in solidarity with, but one they literally topple - while Twyla remembers that Maggie "fell down" in the orchard at St Bonny's once (158), Roberta later says that Maggie was "pushed down" by the big girls and that Twyla and Roberta had both "kicked her" when she was down (169). When Twyla and Roberta look to their 'recitative' Maggie, they not only fail to find a reliable signifier for race, but they fail to take pride in the way they treat other women.

While David Goldstein Shirley suggests that Maggie's legs, combined with her muteness "connote a passive, marginalised victim, [and] a cipher" because "the bow legs conjure the image of zero itself" (82), Benjamin suggests that, "the labia-like typeface outlining parenthetical parameters creates a wholly woman-centered space for Twyla and Roberta to come to terms with the reality of their lives as motherless mothers" (99).<sup>157</sup> If we scrutinise the parenthesis in more detail and consider the bracket as a mathematical signifier for "multiplication" or bear in mind the visual and oral similarities between the word 'parent' and 'parenthesis' as a departure point for discussion here, it is clear that Benjamin's yonic reading of the parentheses has potential. Maggie is often interpreted as a symbolic or surrogate mother to Twyla (see Abel 495, Benjamin 90). Given that the 'en' in the word 'parenthesis' means 'in', and 'thesis' means 'to put or to place,' we can read Maggie as a 'parent' 'in place' of Twyla's (or as a woman who, like Clare Kendry is eventually put in her place).<sup>158</sup> Based in the kitchen at the children's home, Maggie as surrogate mother quite literally provides the girls with sustenance during their

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<sup>157</sup> Abel argues that the girls perceive Maggie as their own "unresponsive, rejecting mothers and therefore wanted to harm her" (495); Benjamin describes her as an "archetypal mother" (90).

<sup>158</sup> The words 'parent' and 'parenthesis' do not share a root signifier but then neither do Twyla and Roberta.

time in the orphanage and sustains them symbolically in adulthood as ‘food for thought,’ as a shared memory. Maggie becomes “a site” (see Harris “Watchers” 112) onto which Twyla projects her own anger about her own abandoning mother who “danced all night” while the State took care of her daughter. She recalls:

Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use. Rocking, dancing, swaying, as she walked. And when the gar girls pushed her down, and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn’t scream, couldn’t—just like me—and I was glad about it. (170)

Maggie’s unresponsiveness echoes Twyla’s own mother’s failure to hear and speak to her own daughter and her mobility, the rhythm in her walk, brings Twyla’s mother’s dancing to mind, (perhaps it is more than a coincidence that the ‘thesis’ part of the word ‘parenthesis’ additionally and traditionally means ‘setting down of the foot,’ ‘a stressed note in music’).<sup>159</sup> Moreover, Twyla conflates her memories of Maggie falling in the orchard with her memories of her own mother coming to visit and claims “I think it was the day before Maggie fell down that we found out our mothers were coming to visit us on the same Sunday” (59).

In this sense, Morrison combines the passing narrative trope, which delights in the ambiguous, the liminal, the fragmented identity of the passing-for-white figure, with the signifying power of the parenthesis to create a character who might best be described as a “rememory” of the traumas experienced by Twyla and Roberta at St. Bonny’s (the separation from their mothers, their exposure to racist ideas and so on). Ashraf Rushdy’s definition of “rememory,” a term Morrison first uses in her novel *Beloved* (1987), as “that conceptual device for understanding the sometimes direct, sometimes arbitrary relationship between what happened sometime and what is happening now” (*Remembering Generations* 7), which conveys a “mimetic quality, a rememesis” a narrative sense of “folding back on

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<sup>159</sup> Maggie bears similarity to Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. She echoes Pauline physically because of her disability; Pauline has “a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked” (86).

itself” (304) works well here because Maggie is remembered by Twyla in order to contextualise her ongoing relationship with Roberta. Rushdy argues that in Morrison’s works “memory is always situated within a context of rememory. In *Sula* the context of rememory is that of female friends, in *Song of Solomon* of familial relations, in *Beloved* of a subjugated culture of slaves” and in “Recitatif” this context is racialised kinship (“Rememory” 304).

Morrison uses the same register of *déjà vu*, remembering and dreamscapes in “Recitatif” as she does in her other works to imply that the passing character of Maggie is a traumatic memory. As Rushdy notes “[i]n *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia intones, ‘We remembered...We remembered...Or maybe we didn’t remember; we just knew’ [...] Or, more tellingly, in *Song of Solomon*, as Milkman walks the street he ‘remembered something. Or believed he remembered something. Maybe he’d dreamed it and it was the dream he remembered’” (Rushdy, “Rememory” 304; *The Bluest Eye* 150; *Song of Solomon* 77). In “Recitatif,” Morrison uses the word ‘remember’ no less than eighteen times and often in short spaces of time. For instance when Twyla tries to discuss Maggie with Roberta and states, “I don’t remember a hell of a lot from those days [...] Remember Maggie? [...] You remember [...] Remember how scared we were?” and Roberta replies “Wait a minute. I don’t remember any of that” (166). Similarly Twyla “dreams of the orchard” where Maggie was terrorised. Even though her memories of the orchard mirror her coming of age and sexual awakening - the apple trees were “empty and crooked like beggar women when [she] first came to St Bonny’s but [were] fat with flowers when [she] left” - the first image of the “crooked beggar women” haunts the story and stands as a hollow reminder of her symbolic mother. Morrison draws attention to Twyla’s inability to remember Maggie by having her try to remember so frequently and as a parenthetical character, Maggie is not simply an ambivalent symbol for race and kinship, but as an emblem of apophysis – Twyla’s determination to remember her only serves to remind us of her absence.

And so, Morrison’s characterisation of Maggie as a passing character with legs like parenthesis draws attention to the constructedness of her race, the

difficulties Twyla experiences in claiming her as a symbolic mother figure, and the limitations of kinship. If we, like Roberta, read Maggie as black, Maggie is a character who represents countless black women who form an essential part of America's racial grammar as Spillers has observed, but who we can only glimpse by reading between the lines (or between the parentheses in this case).<sup>160</sup> As Benjamin suggests, Morrison writes "in the tradition of connecting America's racial discourse to systems of linguistic composition" (91) and "'Recitatif' challenges the adequacy of America's grammar of race [...] by inserting a parenthetical element, a person really, who challenges the supposedly superfluous quality of the parenthesis itself" (91). With Maggie, "[t]he kitchen woman with legs like parentheses" (158), Morrison complicates the popular Foucauldian reading of the body as a "surface" for "inscription" because the very bones of Maggie's body become the very substance of language itself (see Butler, "Foucault..." 603). As the space between Maggie's legs suggests, Twyla and Roberta fall short of being able to completely reconstitute one of the most significant women in their lives; Twyla cannot accurately recall Maggie's race or the incident in the orchard when she fell, but rather than reading this 'gap' as 'lack,' Greene's reading of Maggie as a space that symbolises both the limitations and potential for female connectedness offers a more optimistic picture than we might think.

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Finally, I would like to consider the effect of Alice Walker's use of the literary footnote in "Source." In this story, intertextual references, rather than narrative perspective, are more central to the way that Walker conveys the theme of [mis]reading the body. Walker alludes to passing narratives throughout the text as a meta-fictional device, a way of drawing our attention to the influence these stories have over the ways we [mis]read and [mis]interpret each other. For instance, neither Irene or Anastasia can discuss Anastasia's racial identity without reference to canonical passing-for-white novels. While Anastasia rejects the accusation that

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<sup>160</sup> See also Hortense Spillers's "Interstices," which while focused on black female sexuality, also addresses "lexical gaps" and narrative voice ("Interstices" 156).

she is “passing-for-white,” she can only do so with reference to “Imitation of Life,” “that other tacky movie...Pinky,” “a Jessie Fauset or a Nella Larsen novel,” and the “Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man” (157). Similarly, as Irene listens to Anastasia’s “story” she cannot help but think of a slave narrative that she read with one of her students, the “walnut coloured” woman Fania, – Hiram Mattison’s *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon, a Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1861).<sup>161</sup> Here, Walker adopts a similar strategy as she does in her essay “If the Present looks Like the Past, What Will the Future Look Like” and offers a symbolic footnote to Mattison’s book which draws our attention away from Anastasia’s story, away from the action of the plot, and into a separate space, a ‘recitative’ where we are invited to consider and ‘re-read’ passing.

Like the ellipsis and the parenthesis, the footnote engages the reader in a more active interpretation of the narrative. As Shari Benstock observes, footnotes, “negotiate, clarifying hidden assumptions, pointing out referential pre-texts, insisting that the author engage readers in the critical process” (204). Walker’s decision to footnote this particular text, which Anthony G. Barthelemy reminds us “is not, strictly speaking, a narrative” but Picquet’s “first-person replies to questions posed by the Reverend Hiram Mattison, who it appears transcribed her responses” reminds us that passing narratives are so often framed for us by white and male authors (xxxii).<sup>162</sup> In highlighting this, Walker invites us to bear witness to Anastasia’s testimony in a new way, a way that breaks free from the master-narrative of passing which is typically framed via the male gaze. After scouring her internalised library of passing-for-white narratives without finding a successful match for Anastasia, Irene is forced to recognise that by comparing the lives of light-skinned women she knows to the literary representations of them in a male-authored sexist genre, she becomes implicated in the very system of colourism she despises. Irene learns that light-skinned women also fight to resist literary

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<sup>161</sup> The character of Fania haunts Irene in “Source” in much the same way that Maggie haunts Twyla.

<sup>162</sup> For more on Picquet, see Foreman “Who’s Your Mama” (512 – 518).

stereotypes and that the light-skinned body has been frequently misread and misinterpreted as akin to the ‘passing’ character. Try as she might to read light-skinned women against the context of literary passing, Irene comes to understand that Anastasia is unlike any other character in the genre. While stories about passing will always be a footnote in the lives of women of colour, in Walker’s revision of *Passing* they no longer constitute the master(’s) narrative. By using the passing narrative as intertext then, conveyed via the grammatical device of the dialogic footnote, Walker asks some bold questions about our inevitable mapping of racialised bodies against dominant cultural narratives, which in a post-civil rights era have only limited application and relevance, and “disrupts our reading – that is, our creating – of a coherent, totalizing fictive narrative” of historical passing and the mulatta (Hutcheon 85).

Like the ellipsis and parenthesis, there is a similarity between the footnote, the passing-for-white figure, and the ambivalent rendering of passing in these contemporary works. For instance, Shari Benstock’s characterisation of the footnote as “a critical appendage that bears an uneasy relation to its parent” certainly sounds like the traditional passing figure (204). Moreover, in his oft-quoted reflection on the footnote, modernist critic Hugh Kenner suggests that “the man who composes a footnote, and sends it to the printer along with his text, has discovered among the devices of printed language something analogous with counterpoint: a way of speaking in two voices at once, or of ballasting or modifying or even bombarding with exceptions his own discourse without interrupting it” (Kenner 40). Notwithstanding Kenner’s gendered reading of the (white) author here, there is a signifying quality to the footnote, “a way of speaking in two voices of once.” Perhaps, more crucially, the power the footnote has in allowing the author of a text to “ballast” his own discourse “without interrupting it” echoes the argument I make here about contemporary black women writers and the passing genre – that they invoke it begrudgingly and write about it ambivalently, but are nonetheless, writing about passing in the late-twentieth century. Indeed, footnotes, as Hutcheon observes, are “central to historiographic practice, to the writing of the

doubled practice, to the writing of the doubled narrative of the past in the present” (85), and is thus a key strategy that Walker uses for invoking a genealogy of passing.

For Benstock, footnotes, like ellipses, can reflect “genuine ambivalence – toward the text, toward the speaker in the texts, and toward the audience” (204), and ambivalence certainly describes the relations not only between the characters in the texts here, but between Morrison, Walker, Larsen and the literary genre they signify on. Walker’s ambivalence towards “stories about passing” is perhaps best seen in the way she simultaneously acknowledges and resists Larsen’s ur-text. For instance, Walker names one of her characters Irene, both stories open with Irene reflecting on a letter (or letters) received from her lost friend, both sets of friends have a drink together in an establishment overlooking a magnificent American site of natural beauty (Lake Michigan in *Passing* and Mt. McKinley – now known as Denali – in “Source”); at Dave Freeland’s party in *Passing*, Irene drinks Scotch (with ginger ale; 174), and in the closing scenes of “Source” Irene drinks “Irish whiskey”). In *Passing*, Irene goes to the rooftop of the Drayton to escape the “sizzling” world below (12), but in the bar in “Source,” Irene “long[s] for sun” and “for fireplaces” (278). Both texts lend themselves to queer re-readings because these friends share intimate and erotic moments - Clare “drop[s] a kiss” on Irene’s “dark curls” and “bare shoulder” (96), and in “Source,” “Anastasia reached over and caressed Irene’s cheek,” then “very deliberately gave her a kiss, pressing her lips firmly against the warm, jasmine-smelling brown skin” (285).<sup>163</sup> Walker repeats the famous “Down, down down” line from the closing scenes of *Passing* throughout her tale (mainly

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<sup>163</sup> For queer readings of Larsen’s work, see Judith Butler, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge” (1993); David L. Blackmore, “That Unreasonable Restless Feeling” (1992); and Deborah E. McDowell’s Introduction to *Quicksand and Passing*. Note, Larsen’s blinkered narrative style signifies on the ‘pornographic’ narrative gaze in Brown’s *Clotel* and Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*, dramatically queering the passing trope by reframing the narrative as one about women - women gazing at women, thinking about women, reading women. Moreover, Eve Sedgwick’s theorising of queerness as “the open mesh of possibility, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s [identity] aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” is particularly useful to consider here (9). See also Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line* (2000).

through the character of Source who, the narrator points out, uses “triple qualifiers” frequently; 151), but most noticeably in the final scenes of the story when Anastasia is “receding, receding, receding,” passing out of sight and sound like Clare Kendry before coming back into focus (178). It is with irony, then, that Walker sets this story about our inability to anchor our readings of race and kinship in any fixed way in a city called “Anchorage,” while these two friends stare out of the window from a bar that “boasts a perfect view of Mt. McKinley,” but which is on that day, absent and occluded by cloud (155).

In these passing texts, Walker refines the footnote and draws upon intertext to convey how colourism pervades the lives of Irene and Anastasia, Larsen implements the ellipsis to help characterise the passing-for-white figure, and with the haunting figure of Maggie, Morrison perfects the parenthesis to draw attention to the limitations of female solidarity. Punctuation enables each writer to draw attention to space between the diegetic and mimetic, the signifier and referent, and represents a playful experiment with black signifiers on the white page. To negotiate punctuation such as the ellipsis, the parenthesis, and the footnote, the reader must adapt a multivalent approach to reading which fractures and fissures any sense of a “monolithic identity” or master narrative. We are forced to read between the (colour) lines and read both that which has been omitted and marginalised alongside the normative and hegemonic. While such meta-fictional strategies are often hailed as post-modern, Larsen’s pioneering use of narrative occlusion and punctuation corroborates Mae Henderson assessment that “Larsen’s narrative would seem to be best understood in terms of a contemporary (post) modernist perspective, both in the performance of its narrative strategies and structure as well as in the philosophical assumptions grounding its notions of personal and textual identity” (I). Rather than looking to the mulatto millennium for post-modern passing narratives, perhaps we ought to re-read three of the most canonical black women writers of the twentieth century.

## **Wigs, Warpaint, and Kathleen Cleaver: Fashioning the Body in *Passing* and “Source”**

In this section, I wish to (re)turn to the body, the subject of Chapter 1. In particular, I want to consider the ways that Walker undermines readings of authentic race through descriptions of the racial stylization of the passing figure. By stylization I mean the ‘creation’ and performance of racialised beauty through the use of clothing, make-up, hair-styling and other means. This is a technique that Larsen skilfully and subtly deploys in *Passing*, and which Walker develops in her short fiction decades later in order to expose race as a performance.

Larsen uses references to fashion and dress as a way of exploring the themes of the authenticity and nationalism of her passing figure, Clare Kendry. For example, she evokes the colours of the American flag, the ‘Stars and Stripes’ in Clare’s clothing to characterise her as disloyal traitor to her American community (in Irene’s eyes, that is). Irene recollects Clare as “a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together,” cloth purchased with money stolen from her father (4). The whiteness of Clare’s skin, the red of the dress fabric and blue colour of the sofa represent a disjointed composition of the American flag, which is corrupted by the shabbiness of the settee, the illicitness of the textile (which Clare has stolen), and our knowledge that the whiteness Clare’s skin represents is compromised by her ‘black’ heritage. Indeed, throughout *Passing*, Larsen offers not only detailed descriptions of Clare’s physical features (her hair colour, eye colour, skin tone and so on), but lavish and indulgent descriptions of Clare’s dress and style. Larsen’s biographer George Hutchinson concludes that “a woman’s ability to dress herself in garments of her own choosing would always signify, in Larsen’s fiction, her freedom and personal agency” and suggests that Larsen’s interest in style is linked to her experiences observing her (white) mother, Mary, working at home as a dressmaker (40).<sup>164</sup> The author subsequently

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<sup>164</sup> Additionally, George Hutchinson notes that “[w]hen customers came to the Larsen home, they probably assumed that the ‘colored girl’ was a servant or apprentice rather than the white dressmaker’s daughter” (41). This association

developed a keen interest in style and fabric, “had an unusual appreciation for textiles and fashion” and “Larsen’s novels not only lavish attention on the details of women’s dress and other fabrics, but even describe features of landscape in terms of fabric textures” (41). Like Larsen, Clare Kendry “works as an assistant to a dressmaker when she is young, and begins sewing her own dresses in her early teens” (41). George Hutchinson concludes that “Larsen’s love of fabric and what could be done with it, the comforts it afforded, derived from her youth, when her mother, from whom she would be separated by the color line for most of her life, taught her to cut, fit and sew” (41). The construction of style and fabrication are thus central to Larsen’s exploration of passing-for-white, and symbolic of Clare’s willingness to racially self-fashion.

Walker similarly draws attention to the importance of dress and style in her characterization of her passing figure, Anastasia Greene, although this time in a way that comments on neo-liberal discourses that emphasise racial agency and posit race as a choice. There are, it should be noted, great similarities between the stylish characters of Clare and Anastasia (whose last name is the same colour as the dress Clare wears when Irene reencounters her; 13); both are characterised as the more carefree, extrovert and outgoing of their friendship sets, and both ‘opt into’ and ‘out of’ race at will. Naming is hugely symbolic here. Not only does Walker align her Irene with Larsen’s character of the same name, thus making the comparison between Clare and Anastasia implicit, but Anastasia’s name, which means “reborn” or “resurrected” is fitting given her penchant for reinvention (“Anastasia”).

While, for Larsen, Clare’s dress figuratively symbolises her cultural agency, for Walker, Anastasia much more actively manipulates her dress as part of her racial transformations – she dresses therefore she is. For instance, Irene remembers Anastasia transforming from a “wide-eyed” and “blushing” “Southern Innocent” into a “New York SuperVamp” with “tall boots,” “slickly bobbed

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Larsen makes between this ‘invisible passing’ within her home and the process of dress-making permeates her writing.

blackened hair, heavily made up eyes (brown and black make-up, a rather Egyptian effect), against skin that by contrast seemed to have been dusted with rice powder, and, in fact, had been" (139). Walker (like Larsen and Morrison) offers her reader confounding clues about Anastasia's racial identity. Before the reader is subtly informed that she has African American parentage, the recurring motif for passing, face powder, suggests her pale appearance is not to be trusted (we might think of Miz Della in Bambara's short story who powders her face and Mary in "Recitatif" who smells of Lady Esther dusting powder). Anastasia then undergoes a second change "to a sort of Faye Dunaway, whom she – with her peculiar little smile – somewhat resembled" (139). Here, we have no reason to assume that Anastasia is anything other than white – her resemblance to a white actress, the description of her appearance as a "little English schoolboy look," and her "lightened" and "cropped" hair (139) all allude to a distinctly European aesthetic.

The playfulness of Anastasia's catalogue of "looks" takes a sinister turn when Irene meets her in San Francisco. This time "gone was the vamp, the English schoolboy"; now she is sporting "clogs," "a long granny dress of an old-fashioned print and sleazy texture, with a purple velvet cape," and "[t]he kinkiness of her hair was now encouraged, and formed an aura around her beige, unpowdered face"; she "is beaded and feathered to a delightfully pleasant extreme" and wears a "small silver spoon" round her neck (140). Even though Irene has always known of Anastasia's fondness for experimenting with her appearance, identity and style, and the more 'natural' look she is sporting seems in keeping with the 'Black is Beautiful' ethos, Irene is surprised and disturbed to discover that her friend now sees herself as without race and without ego. She has joined a cult headed up by a man who goes by the name of Source, who preaches that, "nobody's anything," "[t]hat color is an illusion," and "that the universe is unchangeable" (151-153). The 'lack of attention' Anastasia pays to her clothing mirrors her disinterest in appearances – which are as meaningless as the spoon around her neck, although paradoxically in order to convey that nobody's anything, she still has to adopt a "look" in keeping with Source's followers (it would seem that everybody is something). Walker thus uses the passing trope in "Source" to expose neo-liberal colourblind ideologies as

simply another way of ‘fashioning’ race. Colourblindness, defined simply by sociologist Woody Doane as “the claim that race no longer ‘matters’ in American society” (15), became increasingly popular in the decade that both Walker and Morrison’s short stories were published. Janice Peck observes that “the iteration of colorblind ideology found fertile ground in the 1980s as Ronald Reagan and the New Right backlash politics that buoyed him south to ‘realign the electorate along racial, rather than class lines’” (86). Moreover, she notes that “the 1980s witnessed the rise of hugely popular black TV stars” such as Oprah Winfrey, “whose appeal was hailed as proof they transcend race, and whose success could be framed as an argument against the existence of structural racial discrimination” (90). Peck quotes from an 1987 Oprah interview in which the media mogul describes race in a way that is reminiscent of Source. She says, “[r]ace is not an issue. It has never been an issue with me” (Richman 58 qtd in Peck 85). For Irene, who is reminiscent of Walker’s hero Trellie Jeffers – a committed teacher of adult-learners with a strong sense of political motivation, an unfaltering commitment to the black community, and a huge investment in ‘being black’ – Anastasia’s claim that ‘race is not an issue’ upsets her worldview.

Crucially, Irene does not just pass-for-white or pass-through whiteness in the story, she passes-for-black(er), and it is via Anastasia’s stylization of ‘blackness’ that Walker exposes it as performative and constructed. In order to convey this, Walker invokes (and deconstructs) perhaps one of the most iconic figures of Black Power and Black beauty in the 1960s, Kathleen Cleaver of the Black Panther Party (BPP).<sup>165</sup> In conversation with Margo Jefferson in a New York Public Library event in 2005, Walker mentioned Cleaver in order to undermine Black cultural nationalist philosophies:

I remember in the Black Power phase of the movement there was this insistence that you had to be just black, and they were saying things like that about someone who looked like Kathleen Cleaver, just really very, very light-skinned people had to be as if they had just

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<sup>165</sup> For an absolutely fascinating insight into the ways that Cleaver herself was commodified as an emblem of black beauty, see Higgins.

come completely from Benin. [laughter] And this is *absurd*. (Walker, "Alice Walker and Margo Jefferson" 253)

Indeed, in "Source" Walker uses a fictionalised version of Cleaver to make her point. When Anastasia takes Irene to meet the sinister misogynist and racist cult leader Source, he describes the first time he met Anastasia and says she "looked exactly like Kathleen Cleaver," "dressed all completely in black," with "hair like an angry, wild, animal bush," but with "skin pale pale pale, like that one. Militant you see?" (151). Source's description of Anastasia (and Cleaver's) hair as "angry," "wild," and "animal" betrays his conflation of "racial style" and political positionality. Not only is there the inference that black women are "angry" sapphires, and "wild" and "animalistic" jezebels, but Source's use of the word "militant" to describe Cleaver does not simply mean aggressive or angry, but connotes the uniformed look of the military – he reads her hair as part of the BPP uniform - he suggests that race is performative. Moreover, later in the story, Anastasia returns to the Kathleen Cleaver analogy and reveals that she "wanted to *be* Kathleen Cleaver" and her passing act was just not an imitation, but an attempt at transfiguration, of becoming the subject (153). Similarly, Walker's use of the word "absurd" to describe Anastasia (154) and her unconscious use of the same word to describe Cleaver demonstrates some parallels between these two figures and we can read Anastasia as Cleaver's double, her alter-ego.

Cleaver's dual status as spokeswoman for the 'Black is Beautiful' movement and as a light-skinned black woman who embodies the very characteristics of the passing-for-white figure, places her in a fascinating position of apparent ambivalence and contradiction; Walker thus invokes her to parody both the traditional passing figure and her 'opposite,' her foil, the black beauty (see Chapter 1). Cleaver is not only a proponent of the 'Black is Beautiful' movement, but its poster child. Best known for her loyalty to the tenets and values of the most visibly recognizable black political group in American history, the Black Panther Party, Cleaver is the complete opposite to Anastasia. While Anastasia is apolitical and lays no claims to blackness even though her parents are African American, Cleaver is

described by Historian Angela Le-Blanc Earnest as “the most prominent and influential woman during the formative stage of the BPP” (308). Moreover, her ‘black’ style is iconic. In a compelling 1968 video, Cleaver is filmed on a demonstration and surrounded by her peers, comments on the pressures of colourism and in particular, her decision to wear her hair in a natural afro:

This brother here, myself and all of us were born with our hair like this, and we just wear it like this because it's natural. The reason for it, you might say, is like a new awareness among Black people that their own natural physical appearance is beautiful and is pleasing to them. For so many years, we were told that only white people were beautiful--that only straight hair, light eyes, light skin was beautiful so Black women would try everything they could -- straighten their hair, lighten their skin--- to look as much like white women. This has changed because black people are aware. White people are aware of it too because white people now want natural wigs like this. Dig it. Isn't it beautiful? Alright.

Cleaver’s charm and charisma are undeniable as she smiles to the interviewer, “Dig it. Isn’t it beautiful” and the segment ends with the camera panning across a sign, painted in white, which reads “Black is Honest and Beautiful,” as the melodious voices of campaigners singing “‘Black is Beautiful’ (Free Huey)” can be heard. This image, is without doubt one that Barbara Neely and Toni Cade Bambara are celebrating in their fiction (see Chapter 1). However, as Cleaver educates the viewer in the video about the damaging legacies of being told that “only straight hair, light eyes [and] light-skin were beautiful,” one cannot help notice that with the exemption of her hair, Cleaver herself possesses two of these characteristics. It is this juxtaposition, this paradox that makes Kathleen Cleaver such a figure of interest for Walker.

To return to the NYPL interview, Walker’s mention of Kathleen Cleaver reminds Margo Jefferson of a story that exemplifies this very notion that all race is artifice, is fashioning:

MJ – “Oh, Alice, you’ve just reminded me of a painful story. In the height of the Black Power movement, I had a friend who had dead-

straight hair, as we used to say, and was very light. So there she was in New Orleans, which was very hot, in a huge Afro wig in a restaurant one evening. She got up to go to the bathroom, basically to take a wig break. [laughter] She walked into the bathroom, and there, facing her, was a woman, a browner-skinned woman, who was also taking a wig break, but she had taken off her straightened wig and, yes, and underneath was a small version of the Afro that my friend craved. According to my friend, first they saw each other in the mirror and then they exchanged a look that meant, "Something will be learned from this," but they then each had to put the wig back on and return to their place, [laughter] but I think my friend ceased to wear her wig shortly after that. But it happened and that's comic, though not entirely, but terrible things were done in the name of all that. (254)

As F. James Davis observes "[m]any lighter persons reacted" to the Black Power movement "by displaying 'Afro' hairstyles and other symbols of blackness" (70), and "many light mulattoes felt strong pressure to affect 'Afro' hairstyles" (146). Maxine Leeds Craig explains, "[a]s the natural travelled ever farther from its origins among dedicated activists, an oxymoron was born: the natural wig" which became "the basis of a booming industry in the 1970s" (104). She cites an interview with a hairstylist who recollects that wigs sales increased with the popularity of that other light-skinned icon of black power, Angela Davis (104). Indeed, Kathleen Cleaver herself makes it clear that even natural hair is stylized when she explains "white people now want natural wigs like this" and that that is "beautiful" too. The binary opposition that Blanche White draws between black hair as either natural (afro) or artificial (straight) is, as Shirley Tate reminds us, becoming increasingly blurred and to read the straightening of hair as an expression of 'white assimilation' – as Neely's Blanche White does (see Chapter 1) is over-simplified (*Black Beauty* 5). In contrast to bell hooks's assertion that to straighten one's hair "as an expression of individual freedom and choice would make me complicit with a politic of domination that hurts us" ("Straightening Our Hair"),<sup>166</sup> Tate writes that "judgment is always partial and contingent," that there

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<sup>166</sup> For more on Walker's views on hair see Caraway's *Segregated Sisterhood* (94) and Walker's speech "OPPRESSED HAIR PUTS A CEILING ON THE BRAIN" (1987).

is no such natural or artificial beauty, indeed no beauty as such, which pre-exist their representation and reading in culture. Beauty is not something that simply is but it is rather *done* and *translated* for its cultural intelligibility. (Emphasis mine; 9)

And so Walker invokes the ‘passing figure’ of Anastasia, and her doppelganger Kathleen Cleaver to draw attention to race, and the ‘embodied’ racialised beauty I discuss in Chapter 1 is *done* and *translated*. In her unmasking of blackness, race, passing, and beauty as performance, Walker performs a metaphorical act of divesting Cleaver of her afro and silencing her in “Source”; Anastasia recounts meeting “her once at a party before *she* was Kathleen Cleaver. She had long straight, light-coloured hair, like mine, *just* like mine, and she sat in a corner all evening without saying a word” (153).

In “Source,” Anastasia is able to pass-as-Cleaver and pass-as-white. By comparing Anastasia – somebody without politics, race loyalty, or a ‘readable’ racial appearance to somebody as iconic as Cleaver – Walker denaturalises the ‘black’ aesthetic associated with the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement and reminds us that ‘blackness’ as well as whiteness can be performed, stylized, and self-fashioned. Clothing, wigs, and accessories are used to convey a sense of racial authenticity, but are paradoxically evidence of a commodification of blackness.<sup>167</sup> As Morrison explains:

[n]ow people choose their identities. Now people choose to be Black. They used to be Black. That’s not true anymore. You can be Black genetically and choose not to be. You just change your mind or your eyes, change anything. It’s just a mindset. (qtd. in Li, *Signifying* 70)

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<sup>167</sup> Anastasia is eerily reminiscent of Rachel Dolezal, the NAACP leader who earlier in 2015 was outed as “passing for black” by her white parents. Dolezal’s use of make-up and hair weaves to create a black ‘look’ mirrors what Anastasia does during her Cleaver days. Perhaps no case better amplifies the continued centrality of race to identity politics as this, and Dolezal’s rejection from the ‘black community’ reverberated across media platforms. For a really useful introduction to the case, see The Guardian’s newsfeed for an archive of responses listed under “Rachel Dolezal” in the Works Cited list.

As Stephanie Li remarks, “Morrison’s description of blackness as a mindset counters essentialist approaches to race by locating identity firmly within the individual” (*Signifying* 70), but it also articulates what passing-for-white is actually all about. Perhaps there is no better character in short fiction that demonstrates this principle than Anastasia in “Source.”

To conclude this section, I briefly want to highlight that this is not the first time that Walker has signified on passing, stylization, and self-fashioning in order to deconstruct the racial authenticity of black cultural nationalism. As Barbara Christian notes, in Walker’s early works, she criticises “the uses the Black Power Movement made of Africa, particularly the movement’s tendency to turn Africans into artefacts” (Introduction 13). Walker deftly conveys these issues in her frequently anthologised short story, ‘Everyday Use’ in which Walker focuses on fabric and costuming as motifs misappropriated by the character Wangero (Dee) to ‘prove’ her racial authenticity.

In this parody of pan-Africanism narrated from the perspective of a middle-aged African American mother, Walker describes a visit home from Dee, the narrator’s estranged light-skinned daughter, who is accompanied by her new husband. Perhaps influenced by her husband, Dee has adopted the Afro-Centric name ‘Wangero’ and dresses in a pan-African style. The opulence of Dee’s garments (“a dress so loud it hurts my eyes”, “gold” earrings and “dangling bracelets”; 49) could not be further removed from the humble attire of her mother and sister and rather than conveying a ‘natural’ and ‘authentic’ black identity, is portrayed as artificial, inauthentic and far removed from Dee’s actual roots in the American South. Dee’s disrespectful “rifling” through her mother’s trunk in the pursuit of artefacts that can substantiate her claims to blackness results in her discovery of two patchwork quilts – which she is horrified to learn have been promised to her sister, who she fears will put them to “everyday use” (53-54). In this story, Walker, like her mentor Jeffers, is particularly damning of those like Wangero who “strut[...] into the white bourgeois world (today wearing African garb)” and who only imitate

authentic black folk culture (37).<sup>168</sup> She criticises those who seek to fashion and appropriate very authentic black *experiences* through the commodification of objects. As Barbara Christian notes in her introduction to the text, this story is, in part, Walker's response to the concept of heritage as articulated by the black movements of the 1960s" which "extolled an unknown ancient history" but "denigrated the known and recent past..." (10-11) and reflects Walker's disdain for a black nationalist politics "in which black Southern culture was often thought of as backward" (13).

'Everyday Use' also very subtly plays with the passing genre's central trope of the "abandoned mammy" (see my Introduction). The mother in 'Everyday Use' observes that Dee has "lighter skin" and "nicer hair" than the rest of her family, imagines herself "the way my daughter would want me to be [...] my skin like an uncooked barley pancake" (46). Walker signifies on the theme, however, and in this story, the mother is rejected by a light-skinned daughter who rather than laying claim to whiteness (like Pinky or Peola), ironically claims to be more authentically 'black' than her darker-skinned, Southern mother and sister because of the material objects she lays claim to. And so in "Everyday Use," published almost ten years before "Source," Walker signifies on the passing trope to deconstruct and critique the idea of [black] racial authenticity. If we read 'Everyday Use' as Walker's response to the nationalist aspect of Black Power, we can certainly read "Source" as an extended critique of its aesthetic vision.

In both "Source" and 'Everyday Use,' Walker denaturalises race and draws attention its constructedness and stylization. In her fiction, we cannot read the body for "race" because skin tone and hair texture are not reliable signifiers for racial politics or racial authenticity. By including a fictionalised version of Kathleen Cleaver who, it is implied, is capable of passing-for-white, Walker exposes the credos of 'Black is Beautiful' as baseless. Walker's fiction thus fits into a broader

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<sup>168</sup> Interesting, Blanche White reflects that "in the sixties, women who looked like her became status symbols to be draped on revolutionary black arms like a piece of kinte [sic] cloth" (*Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* 36).

body of work which “[t]aking up the tenets of black identity and racial formation in the post-civil rights, Black Power era, [...] critiques the ways Black Power intellectuals, particularly some of the cultural national camp, employed ‘blackness’ as a weapon against other black people” (Rushdy, *Remembering Generations* 56).

### Concluding Thoughts: Irrecoverable Genealogies

O Earth, O Sky, O Ocean, both surpassing,  
O heart of mine, O soul that dreads the dark!  
Is there no hope for me? Is there no way  
That I may sight and check that speeding bark  
Which out of sight and sound is passing, passing?

(Paul Laurence Dunbar, “Ships that Pass in the Night”)

Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark.

(Larsen, *Passing* 181)

To conclude, Morrison and Walker rework Larsen’s passing novel in a way that makes it incredibly difficult to reliably uncover any genealogical traces or visual markers of race. While Neely uncovers evidence proving and substantiating the racial identities of her characters, and West and Neely ‘salvage’ and ‘reclaim’ lost and hidden genealogies, Walker and Morrison begin to undermine the notion that any kind of racial genealogy can be claimed at all. To return to Larsen’s two ways of identifying race, ‘by kinship’ or ‘by seeing,’ as Irene suggests, neither of these hold fast in “Source” or “Recitatif.” The relationships between Clare and Irene, Anastasia and Irene, Maggie, Twyla and Roberta, Dee and Wangero are tense and fractious and Morrison, Walker and Larsen all suggest that race has the power to fracture the relationships between black women rather than cement them.

The moments when Clare and Irene are reunited in *Passing* are typically characterised by an atmosphere of uncertainty and unease caused by the need to read race. As Clare approaches Irene at her table at The Drayton, beset with terror that her passing act is about to be discovered she experiences “anger, scorn, and fear” rather than some of the hope and anticipation associated with a typical reunion narrative (16). Their second encounter – Irene, Clare and Gertrude’s impromptu ‘high school reunion’ tea – is similarly characterised by a deep sense of discomfort. Even before Clare’s husband John Bellew interrupts their afternoon with his racist rantings, Gertrude is “a little ill at ease” and Irene experiences “defensive and resentful feeling[s]” (46). Far from representing a moment of sisterly love and female bonding, this gathering of women leaves Irene with a sense of “aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind” (46) and rather than enjoying this moment with other women, she “had wanted to be free” of them, “to be alone; for she was still sore and angry” (64).

This sense of discord is no more evident than in the oft-discussed ending of Larsen’s novel and a comparison here, between Larsen’s use of imagery and Longfellow’s “ships” only emphasises this. While Longfellow’s poem ends with his hero John’s safe voyage ‘home’ to his beloved Elizabeth, Clare’s trips to Harlem end in tragedy and death and her dreams of making Harlem her home and being reunited with her kin are thwarted when she mysteriously plummets from the top floor of a Harlem townhouse (176). As bell hooks observes, Clare “is the only character who desires ‘blackness’ and [...] this desire that leads to her murder” (*Black Looks* 9). Irene’s vanquishing of Clare and refusal to be “the link between [Clare] and her poorer darker brethren” signals a central message: race is no foundation for kinship in *Passing* (81). Crucially, her paramour Irene (who may or may not have pushed her) “wasn’t sorry” she was dead (177). While Longfellow’s couple are reunited in a hopelessly romantic snowy scene in Verse II in which John arrives amid “the musical jangle of sleigh bells,” in Larsen’s *Passing* the “ringing bells” of Clare’s laughter are “Gone!” (177) as her body, wrapped in a “shining red gown” (165) lays motionless amid the snow below (172). Longfellow’s ships have peaceful journeys as they drift across the sea, conveyed through a delicate use of

sibilance (“ships,” “pass,” “speak,” “darkness,” “voice,” and “silence”), but Larsen’s ships are wrecked and sink at the end of the novel; Clare capsizes out of the window, while Irene “quakes,” “sinks,” “submerges,” and “drowns,” into “darkness” with grief (181-2).

In this sense, African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar’s version of Longfellow’s poem might prove to be a more apt comparison. In “Ships that Pass in the Night” (1896), Dunbar’s poetic persona looks out into the darkness waiting for a ship to rescue him, but no matter how hard he looks or how loud he cries, the ship passes “out of sight and sound.” Like Dunbar’s ship, Clare and Irene are “passing, passing” in multiple ways both literal and symbolic; they not only pass-as-white, but “out of sight and sound” – Irene by fainting and Clare through death.<sup>169</sup> In her 1998 article “Nella Larsen’s Passing and the Fading Subject” (1998), Nell Sullivan identifies several moments throughout the story where such moments in which passing out of consciousness and drowsiness drive forward the action of the novel (for instance, at the beginning of the story). Larsen uses passing (out) metaphorically to explore consciousness, knowledge, ocularity and liminality – ideas which are imperative to the passing-as-white plot (Sullivan 376-7). Indeed, the etymology of the word ‘faint’ is to feign, to pretend or to simulate – which is exactly what the passing figure does. There is a semantic connection also to the passing body is a fainter version of the darker-skinned African American body. The multivalent passing trope then encourages the reader to question how we know or can perceive who somebody ‘truly is,’ what it means to truly belong or be present in a moment, and how memory, knowledge and lapses of time contribute to our ability to lay claim to any sort of truth.

Certainly, there is no love lost between the women in “Source” which, again, suggests that a kinship based on race is difficult to attain. “There was a side of Irene that Anastasia did not like” and Irene literally disrupts the ‘Peace’ when she

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<sup>169</sup> Nell Sullivan reads Clare’s vanishing as a symbolic foreshadow of Larsen’s own “hazy origins” and “traceless ‘disappearance’” in American literary life (373).

calls Anastasia's friend of that same name a "bitch" under her breath following an awkward conversation about race, and again when she storms out of their meeting with Source. In "Recitatif," Roberta calls Twyla an "asshole" in Howard Johnson's for not knowing who Jimi Hendrix is, before dismissing her without saying goodbye (163), and their argument over whether Maggie was pushed down or fell in the orchard (166), and whether she was black or white (169) reaches a climax during their protest about school desegregation.

Just as certainly as we cannot 'read' all of the characters in *Passing* and "Recitatif," we must remember that the women within each text misread and misinterpret each other, again emphasising the difficulty in tracing any true connections between them. Just as Irene 'reads' Clare as furtive and illegible, Twyla cannot ever really 'see' Roberta. When the girls first meet, Roberta "stands with her back" to Twyla and memories of Roberta's face fade over time, as Twyla recalls, "[I]ittle by little she faded. Her wet socks with the pink scalloped tops and her big serious-looking eyes. That's all I could catch when I tried to bring her to mind" (161). When they meet in later life, "Roberta's big hair obscured her face" (162), which is covered in a "mask-like make-up" and when Twyla cuttingly asks her how her mother is, "[h]er grin cracked her whole face" and her visage shatters (163). As Trudier Harris argues, "Twyla and Roberta cannot forgive each other for who they are (a black woman and a white woman) or what they have done (refused to forge a true interracial friendship in spite of the shared suffering of their lives)" (*Watchers* 115). She continues that,

Morrison debunks her initial thesis that race does not matter – or at least she severely calls it into question. Absence of racial markers aside, black and white human beings on American soil seem incapable of peaceful coexistence with tension based on race. It is the norm, and everybody seeks after the norm. (115-16)

Even though Morrison's retelling of Larsen's novel features a black woman and a white woman (rather than two African Americans), crucially as Susana M. Morris implies, *Recitatif* is a story about women who depend on race, and "*depend on each other to make meaning of their world*" (emphasis mine; 160). The picket line scenes

where Roberta and Twyla argue with each other via protest signs illustrates this beautifully, as Twyla recollects, “[p]eople changed signs from time to time, but Roberta never did and neither did I. Actually my sign didn’t make sense without Roberta’s” (also quoted in Morris 172). As Harris suggests, “Roberta mirrors Twyla in so many ways that she is like a part of her,” “[f]or Twyla to reject Roberta, or vice versa is to deny the validity of her own experience,” and “Twyla and Roberta need each other, need to know that the other still exists in order to define each other” (“Watchers” 115-16). As Morris summarises, “Twyla and Roberta are dependent upon each other in order to make meaning of their lives (literally in this case), something they cannot do well if they only view each other in fixed opposition” (172). Despite its interracialism, “Recitatif” is still a story about the ways that identity politics based on racial identification preclude any meaningful social connections, and indeed speaks to the fear that individuals have in relinquishing racial identities, which is what makes Anastasia so unnerving to Irene.

Walker conveys this same idea in “Source” when at the close of the narrative Irene drunkenly describes and acknowledges Anastasia as her “objective correlative” (289). Given that the girls have been revisiting their college days in conversation, it is perhaps not unusual that Irene remembers a term used by T.S. Eliot in his essay “Hamlet and his Problems” (1919) which she may have learned in the university classroom. Eliot suggests that, “[t]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (Eliot 58). Louis Menard reflects:

when we feel that an image (or any other element) in a work fails to embody the “particular emotion” required or that an emotion is being described rather “presented,” we say that the artist has not found an object correlative. And when we suspect that some emotion of the artist’s has not been fully expressed, we say that the work itself is an inadequate objective correlative. (963)

Certainly, in “Source,” Irene and Anastasia see each other as their object correlatives, as (to paraphrase Menard) the racialised “embodiments of a particular

emotion” they each feel. In this sense they are very similar to Twyla and Roberta. For example, Irene states that Anastasia’s “confusion” made her own confusion “seem minor by comparison,” and Anastasia concedes, “I was attracted to you because your destiny seemed so stable. Whatever else, you would remain a black woman” (166). Anastasia’s ambiguous racial identity and Irene’s static identity politics and identification as a black woman serve as an “anchor,” to borrow Walker’s pun, for their feelings and race not only tethers these women, but serves as an emotional metonym. In *Passing*, Clare is Irene’s “object correlative,” a symbol for Irene’s fear of losing her “security,” “safety,” and her “permanence” as an American woman and the “life that she had so admirably arranged” for her husband and children (169) and in “Recitatif,” and as we’ve already seen, Twyla’s racial ‘signs’ do not make sense without Irene’s.

I want to conclude this section with a reading of the closing of Walker’s short story, which, while vehemently repudiating the idea that any meaningful connections can be forged on the basis of race, insists that genuine connections can be sought between women. In “Source,” Irene and Anastasia’s relinquishing of race as the bond that connects them is positive and Walker’s narrative closes with each woman viewing the other not “in fixed opposition” as Twyla and Roberta do. Walker writes: “[t]hey were still linked together, but it was not, now, the link of race, which had been tenuous in any case, and had not held up. They were simply two women, choosing to live as they liked in the world. She wondered if Irene felt this” (165). Walker describes *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* as a book filled with women who “have in any event freed their imaginations and their tongues” (Introduction ix). When read in this light, *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* can be interpreted as a volume dedicated to women who are less bound by the discourse of race, by prescriptive notions of race and gender, and who are prepared to lay claim to whatever identities they choose. Walker’s choice of “Source” as the final short story in collection is particularly poignant given the bond the two women establish at the close of the narrative:

“Write,” said Irene. “I’ve missed you.”

"You *have?*" asked Anastasia.

Irene hugged her with a hug that was not an embrace of shoulders; she hugged her whole body, feeling knee against knee, thigh against thigh, breast against breast, neck nestled against neck. She listened to their hearts beating, strong and full of blood. (290)

While Larsen's novel opens with Irene's dread when she receives Clare's letter, in Walker's revision of Larsen's narrative, she closes with Irene inviting Anastasia to write before embracing her body. The mirroring of their "knees," "thighs," "breasts" and "necks" reflect a true meeting of women and their bodies; their "hearts" and "blood" are united through a forgiveness that transcends politics. And so, these three narratives are not simply about passing-for-white, but are texts that use the passing trope as a way to test the limits of women's sisterhood and friendship in a society shaped by racial discourse. In *Passing*, Larsen's offers a bleak vision of racial sisterhood in which Irene fails to fully embrace her old friend Clare, in "Recitatif," Morrison offers a fractious image of sisterhood in which white women and black women must repeatedly come together to discuss and revisit old wounds before moving on, and in "Source," Walker offers an optimistic vision of sisterhood predicated on forgiveness and love rather than politics and race. As Caraway explains "Walker turn[s] a white-induced discourse of self-hatred [colourism] into a collective call for Black feminist unity and self-actualization" (97).

To conclude, in Larsen's, Morrison's, and Walker's work the very idea of passing radically destabilises identity politics and undermines 'Black is Beautiful' rhetoric. It calls national identities, racial allegiances, family ties and sisterly bonds into question and undercuts any meaningful claims to racial authenticity. An interrogation of ways that Larsen, Morrison and Walker incorporate passing in their work and the specific techniques they use to facilitate our 'readings' of the passing body reveals how they use the genre to amplify a sense of ambivalence, dissonance and fragmentation. Through the characters in their fiction, Larsen, Morrison and Walker are able to ventriloquize discussions about passing and vicariously parse/pass the topic through the bodies of their characters. By making the evidencing and testifying bodies of their characters impossible to locate and by

punctuating their prose to mark and convey that which cannot or should not be said, they also express great ambivalence towards the taboo topic of passing – needing to acknowledge, recognise and discuss the topic without having to talk about it directly.

## **Conclusion: Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015)**

It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that colour. [...] You might think she's a throwback, but throwback to what?

(*God Help the Child* 3)<sup>170</sup>

While Toni Morrison's eleventh novel sits outside of the date range for this project, *God Help the Child* (2015) – a fascinating tale of the power of colourism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – attests to her continued use of the passing trope to facilitate a genealogical exploration of the past in order to understand the present. By means of drawing together the arguments I have made in this thesis, and by way of conclusion, I return to Sweetness, to the character that opened this project, to her ghostly, anachronous voice that speaks out of a past when passing and light-skin was prized, in order to reflect on the continued significance of the passing trope in contemporary black women's fiction.

### **Passing and Genealogy**

As discussed in the 'Introduction,' colourism casts a long shadow over the relationship between light-skinned Sweetness and her dark-skinned daughter Lula Ann/Bride. Morrison is unequivocal in her message: Sweetness's colourist attitudes are inextricably linked to a cultural penchant for passing, or as Morrison herself phrases it, "the principal thing [in this book] was the pain of being very, very Black in a house that has spent a lot of their energy on passing or being very, very light" (Griffin "Toni Morrison's").

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<sup>170</sup> For more on the "good hair" Sweetness mentions, see hooks's "Straightening Our Hair" and Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair* (2009).

In traditional passing novels, the “brown specter” of invisible blackness often arrives in the form of an innocent new-born baby, and this is a theme that Morrison repeats and updates (“How it Feels” 153; Gubar *Race Changes*, 244). While in Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*, Nedeed is horrified by the matrilineal ghostly whiteness of his son (Chapter 2), Sweetness is more like Gram in *The Wedding*, who finds her great, great, grandchild’s darkness abhorrent; to Sweetness, Lula Ann is an aberration who casts her family’s light-skinned lineage into disrepute. Lula Ann’s arrival signifies on the horror of recessive blackness found in conventional passing novels, such as Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. As Clare explains to her girlfriends over tea, she “nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark” because the “strain” – a double entendre for stress and blood – “is simply too-too hellish” (49). Indeed, as Stephanie Li summarises, “[e]ven when marks of racial difference are not visible on the skin, as explored in many passing narratives, [...] there is always the threat that the color of a child may betray its mother or more subtle marks like hair texture or fingernails may give away one’s true racial identity” (*Signifying* 68).

Even as Larsen’s Gertrude explains that any resurgent blackness “might go way back” and a child might “turn out dark no matter what colour the father and mother are” (49), this is something that Sweetness and her husband Louis in *God Help the Child* refuse to believe; as she reflects,

I’m light-skinned with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann’s father. Ain’t nobody in my family anywhere near that colour. [...] You might think she’s a throwback, but throwback to what? (4)

A throwback without a referent, to her own mother Sweetness, Lula-Ann is a racial anomaly, without family, without lineage, who exists outside of a genealogy that she cares to remember. Sweetness is so ashamed of her daughter’s darkness, that “once – just for a few seconds – [she] held a blanket over her face and pressed,” a symbol of her desire to smother, repress, and contain Lula-Ann’s ghostly revisit from a dark, slave past (4). Certainly, like Barbara Neely’s Blanche White,

Sweetness perceives Bride's throwback blackness as African (more specifically, as "Sudanese"). But while Neely turns to a deep, black, African ancestral lineage for validation, Morrison evokes Africa in order to heighten a sense of dissonance and alienation for Sweetness. In a particularly startling image, Sweetness pictures herself as an inverse and peculiar white mammy, claiming, "for me, nursing [Bride] was like having a pickaninny sucking at my teat" (5-6). When first encountering her narrator's antiquated imagery of the mammy and anachronistic language of "quadroons," "mulattoes," and "negro blood" (3), it would be easy to assume that Morrison's *God Help the Child* was set in the Jim Crow era (or earlier) and that Sweetness is an elderly woman. This makes her sudden mention of the contemporary time period ("back in the nineties when Lula Ann was born") jarring for the reader. By bringing the 'baggage' of the antiquated passing genre into what stands as her most contemporary novel to date, Morrison is clear – the racial vocabulary and grammar of passing persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *God Help the Child* is emblematic of Morrison's literary rendering of the black genealogical line as somehow untraceable and unknowable, and confirms that the spectre of invisible blackness continues to haunt contemporary fiction. Continuing the work she begins in *The Bluest Eye* and "Recitatif," Morrison signifies on the passing trope to emphasise the limitations of genealogical recovery and kinship.<sup>171</sup>

Morrison's inclusion of the enigmatic and mysterious character, Queen Olive (Booker's aunt), further enables her exegesis on the limits of genealogical recuperation. While Sweetness and Bride remain separated in the text both in terms of narrative voice and geography (we never witness their reconciliation), Bride turns to her partner Booker's aunt to find the maternal love she's been craving. Queen serves as a symbolic other-mother for Bride, much like Maggie does for Twyla and Roberta in "Recitatif" (see Chapter 3). Moreover, Bride's arrival to Queen's home is welcome, as for reasons not disclosed, much like Luwana Packerville, Evelyn Creton, and Priscilla McGuire in Naylor's *Linden Hills*, Queen has lost her children to husbands who 'seem' to know better (159). Her home,

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<sup>171</sup> For more on Morrison's literary references to Africa, see La Vinia Delois Jennings's *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (2008).

decorated with symbolic quilts and other hand-stitched items ostensibly represents a maternal and ancestral home for Bride, much in keeping with Alice Walker's vision in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," "Everyday Use," and "Source."

And yet, Queen does not represent "the dark skinned mother" that Walker invokes in "If the Present Looks Like the Past," and is herself a figure of racial ambiguity. Not only does she share a name with Alex Haley's mulatta grandmother, but her last name denotes light skin, she has "woolly red hair" (144), lives in a pale yellow mobile home (142), and her skin tone is never mentioned once. Like Willa in *Linden Hills*, who discovers her light-skinned in-laws by rifling through documents (intertexts) among her husband's belongings, Bride discovers her prospective and possibly light-skinned in-law, Queen, after rummaging through Booker's post; she finds an unpaid invoice for Salvatore Ponte's Pawn and Repair Palace (63; 74), which leads her to Queen's address in Whisky, California. Once there, Queen provides more documentation, poems and writings from Booker, which lead her 'home' to her man.

In typical Morrison fashion, the kinship between Queen and Bride is short-lived, as less than a day after Bride's arrival, in dramatic scenes evocative of Morrison's 1973 novel, *Sula*, Bride's mobile home – much like the infernal Nedeed house in *Linden Hills* – goes up in flames. Even though Queen is rescued from the building, Morrison, in characteristic magical realist style, foreshadows the dangers of holding onto an ancestral past; as her devoted nephew Booker desperately attempts to resuscitate his aunt, "[s]uddenly a spark hiding in Queen's hair burst into flame, devouring the mass of red hair in a blink" (165). While Queen fights for her life in hospital, Booker and Bride unwittingly prepare her body for death. Queen "had to be scoured, oiled, and rewrapped" and Bride, "not trusting the indifferent hands of the nurse, did [it] herself as tenderly as possible. And she bathed her one section at a time, making sure the lady's body was covered in certain areas after cleansing" (166). Similarly, Booker, "insist[ing] like a daily communicant at Easter, on the duty of assuming that act of devotion," "soaped then rinsed Queen's feet, finally massaging them slowly, rhythmically with a lotion that smells of heather"

(167). Tragically, just as the couple plan to get “a place where all three [of them] could be together,” Queen passes away (172). Like the racially ambiguous Maggie in “Recitatif,” who passes out of reach from Twyla and Roberta, Queen similarly vanishes. In letting go of past – symbolised by Queen – Booker and Bride are, however, ready to embrace their future as parents. In the closing scenes of the book, Bride learns she is pregnant and, recalling the letter motif from the start of the novel, writes to her mother, without leaving a return address, to share the news. Although, given the tendency for history to repeat itself and for the past to haunt the present in Morrison’s world, Sweetness’s final lines are apt: “Good luck and God help the child” (178).

### **Blackness, Commodification, and Authenticity**

In this novel, like the texts I examined in Chapter 1, the passing trope is also invoked in order to comment on black beauty aesthetics and embodiments of value. As Morrison explains, she wanted to locate Bride in a space where “the look is more important than anything else in the world” in “[f]ashion, cosmetics, commerce” (Griffin “Toni Morrison’s”). As a regional manager for ‘Sylvia, Inc.’, Bride is responsible for one of “six cool cosmetics lines,” which she names “YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium” (10). As she explains, with an avarice that the Neddeeds would be proud of, “[i]t’s for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk. And it’s mine, all mine – the idea, the brand, the campaign” (10). Importantly, even in this multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial era, Bride, like Blanche White, draws strength from her “black black” beauty. As author Bernardine Evaristo observes, “unlike Pecola born two generations earlier, Lula Ann [Bride] is of an age where her darkness, deliberately offset with stylish white clothes, is now considered exotically beautiful.” Bride thus signifies on the symbol of her mother’s scorn – her dark skin – transforming it into one of perceived value, or in Morrison’s words “she begins to use blackness as glamour and beauty” and “blackness becomes her weapon and she wins” (Griffin “Toni Morrison’s”). In many ways, as the ultimate racialised symbol of desirability, Bride is a revision of the

beautiful passing-for-white figure from Chapter 1 of this thesis. Even as she peddles in cosmetics, unlike Miz Della and Veronica Tatterson, and rather more like Tina, Bride wears “no makeup. Not even lipstick or eyeliner. None” (34), suggesting that her natural beauty, like that of the conventional mulatta, is inimitable, and that make-up will only detract from her image of ‘pure’ blackness.

But like all ‘pure’ commodities, Bride’s blackness, while valuable, is both objectified and subject to the demands of the market. Much like the black aesthetic parodied by Alice Walker in “Source” and “Everyday Use,” racial stylization becomes a form of auto-commodification for Bride. Gazing upon her form with an expert and commodifying eye, Bride’s stylist Jeri sees “Hershey’s syrup,” “licorice,” and “whipped cream and chocolate soufflé” in her skin, especially when accentuated by her white clothing (34).<sup>172</sup> Morrison’s reference to racialised beauty as something that can be manufactured, consumed, and/or ingested builds upon her earlier references to Mary Jane sweets in *The Bluest Eye*, as well as the red and white Valerian candies in her 1981 novel *Tar Baby* (47). In fact, Bride – who resembles Jadine’s haunting vision of blackness – is styled as her photo-negative. Jeri’s description of Bride as “sable and ice,” a “panther in snow,” with “wolverine eyes” (34), is an inversion of the image of a light-skinned Jade with her sealskin coat (*Tar Baby* 112-114).

In keeping with her message in “Recitatif,” in which the urge to imbue skin tone (dark or light) with any value judgement is categorically denied (see Chapter 3), in *God Help the Child*, Morrison resists investing colour with any sort of value. As she explains,

Color as a sign of something pure and wonderful or something degrading always struck me as strange and *absurd* and fundamentally silly. I didn’t want Bride – having escaped the condemnation of her mother, to get to a place where the thing her mother despised was the only thing that she flaunted – I didn’t want it to be the only thing.

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<sup>172</sup> Jeri’s name is an allusion to the ‘Jheri Curl’ hair style, a style popular among black people in the 1980s, which has long passed out of vogue. With this reference, Morrison hints that no ‘black’ style stays fashionable for long.

There is a human being in there somewhere. (Emphasis mine; Griffin  
“Toni Morrison’s”)

Morrison's use of the word "absurd" echoes Walker's use of the term in "Source" to describe exactly the same idea. Indeed, Bride is consumed by the commodification of her blackness in a world in which "black is the new black" (33), and "Black sells" (36). The beauty industry in *God Help the Child* is thus reminiscent of the Neddeeds' obsession with buying and selling blackness in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, and constitutes a contemporary and symbolic form of racial trafficking. Like Naylor's successful black businesswoman, Laurel Dumont, Bride drifts away from the corporate world when she realises that you cannot buy happiness. When Farah Jasmine Griffin asks Morrison, "[w]hat's the danger of investing in beauty as Bride does?" Morrison replies, "[t]hat's all she's invested in. She's not complete. Using it as a boost or being destroyed by it. Either one of those things is destructive" ("Toni Morrison's"). Certainly, while in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison dismantles models of 'white' beauty (symbolised most strikingly through Claudia's dismemberment of white dolls), in *God Help the Child* she deconstructs (quite literally) Bride as a model of 'black beauty' in order to expose, much like Walker does in "Source" and "Everyday Use," 'blackness' as a fetishized, as well as commodified, racial construct.

### [De/Re]constructing Beautiful Bodies

This "destruction," this being "destroyed," manifests itself in the narrative as a cyclical and paradoxical process of regeneration following violent erasure. Like *Linden Hills* (in which Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla are "erased"), *God Help the Child* also implies a relationship between the memory of passing and the erasure, disappearance, and invisibility of black bodies that Juda Bennett hints at (see my Introduction; *Queer Pleasure* 18).<sup>173</sup> For instance - troping on the passing genre's theme of invisibility as she does in *The Bluest Eye* - Morrison includes a scene in which Bride is brutally beaten into "erasure" by Sofia Huxley, whom she has falsely

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<sup>173</sup> I lift this phrase, of course, from Richard Slotkin's study of myth and masculinity in his book of the same name.

accused of molestation (38). I should say here that, like Neely, Morrison – a fan of the American courtroom drama *Law and Order*, the British cold case series *Waking the Dead*, and the detective fiction of Ruth Rendell and Martha Grimes – indulges in the crime genre here as well the motifs of passing (Als “Ghosts”); courtroom scenes, a visit to a prison, and a string of child murders are all key to understanding the characters’ motivations.

Ironically, Bride’s testimony against Sofia was her way of becoming visible in the eyes of her neglectful mother, and Sofia’s revenge renders her invisible again. Just as Pecola is desperate to be noticed and seen by her mother Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, Bride wants to be seen and embraced by Sweetness – and her tactic works. As Sweetness later recalls, “[a]fter Lula Ann’s performance in the court, and on the stand, I was so proud of her, we walked the streets hand in hand. It’s not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites” (42). When an adult Bride attempts to atone and ‘make-up’ (quite literally) for her mistake, buying her way out of her guilt by taking Sofia a bag of You Girl! cosmetics and an envelope of cash, Sofia destroys Bride’s face.

Bride’s ‘friend’ Brooklyn’s unsympathetic description of her injuries is very telling:

A quarter of her face is fine; the rest is cratered. Ugly black stitches, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead, lips so Ubangi she can’t pronounce the *r* in *raw*, which is what her skin looks-like – all pink and blue-black. Worse than anything is her nose – nostrils wide as an orangutan’s under gauze the size of half a bagel. Her beautiful unbruised eye seems to cower, blood shot, practically dead. (26)

Morrison includes Brooklyn’s perspective as a reminder that black beauty is seemingly always subject to the white gaze. The narrator uses racist similes, suggesting that Bride has ‘thick’ lips resembling those of African women wearing lip plates and nostrils like a primate. Morrison argues that the very idea of ‘Black is Beautiful,’ is paradoxically a feature of a Du Boisian double consciousness, of seeing oneself through the eyes of others (in other words, ‘Black is Beautiful’ is a response

to the white gaze). And so the message here is clear here, both Bride's ugliness and her beauty are contingent on value judgements made by white people (*The Souls of Black Folk* 2; "Toni Morrison Remembers"). Indeed, Bride's blue-black skin is only beautiful when, to borrow from Zora Neale Hurston, "thrown against [the] sharp white background" of her white designer clothing ("How it Feels" 154). Moreover, Bride is quite literally stripped of her beauty, her black skin; with her pink flesh exposed, and her "practically dead" and "blood shot" cowering eye, Bride's new zombie-like form connotes a ghoulish and horrifying return of the passing figure, violently disavowed of her blackness.

Crucially, even though Sofia destroys Bride's form physically, she attempts to amend for this symbolically in her work in a hospice, by imaginatively restoring her in scenes that stand in stark contrast to those of Bride's childhood:

When I tend to my patients – put their teeth back in their mouths, rub their behinds, their thighs to limit bed sores, or when I sponge their lacy skin before lotioning, in my mind I am putting the black girl back together, healing her, thanking her. For the release. (77)

I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth (31).

The intimate care that Sofia symbolically shows Bride, and the tactile care Bride shows Queen, both stand in stark contrast to Sweetness's cold and detached mothering. While Sweetness attempts to negate her daughter's blackness through neglect, Sofia, rebuilds Bride's blackness and "put[s] the black girl back together" (77).

Bride is similarly erased, or rather deleted, in an episode when Queen tells her she "look[s] like something a racoon found and refused to eat":

For the past three years she'd only been told how exotic, how gorgeous she was – everywhere, from almost everybody – stunning, dreamy, hot, wow! Now this old woman with woolly red hair and

judging eyes had deleted an entire vocabulary of compliments in one stroke. Once again, she was the ugly, too-black little girl in mother's house. (144)

The “ugly, too-black little girl” is, of course, an allusion to Pecola Breedlove, who, reminiscent of Beloved, returns from the past to haunt this text, and is channelled by Bride who seemingly and supernaturally transforms (or reverts) into Pecola during the course of the text. As artist Kara Walker – herself renowned for her own spectral works – observes in her review of the novel for the *New York Times*, “there are ghostly developments throughout [God Help the Child]”; Bride starts losing her body hair and her breasts. Her body becomes smaller and smaller, her period is late” and she fears she is “changing back into a little black girl” (*God Help the Child* 142).

Several reviewers of *God Help the Child* have observed the similarities between Morrison’s most recent novel and her debut published thirty-five years earlier, reading them as bookends to Morrison’s career (thus far). Evaristo, for example, suggests that “[t]here is [...] the sense of a circle being completed with this new work because Morrison’s very first novel shares [the] two main thematic preoccupations of child abuse and shadism” as *God Help the Child*. However, as Morrison explains in an interview with Farah Jasmine Griffin, “[t]here is a temptation for [Bride] to become a Pecola and just collapse, but she doesn’t” (Morrison, “Toni Morrison’s”). Bride does not capitulate into self-erasure as Pecola does because she is regenerated through pain and growth.

Like so many of the texts here, the passing trope in *God Help the Child* offers the reader an opportunity to dismantle and pick apart the ways in which colourism and race continue to shape the way we see the world. Perhaps the ultimate ‘deconstructing’ narrative in the novel is hidden away towards the close of the story, when Booker, a graduate student in economics explains to Bride that “race is just a color,” that “there is no such thing as race” (143). As Morrison describes him, Booker’s “an intellectual, he is a thinker. He has plans to write these books, he writes notes, ideas” (Griffin, “Toni Morrison’s”). A topic for further reflection, in an extension of this project perhaps, might be the way that passing facilitates a

postmodern, metanarrative discussion of passing and race. This area of study and research permits a kind of intellectual commodification and appropriation of racial experience for academic purposes. So many of the writers I mention are themselves researchers and teachers and the world of academia permeates several of the novels I discuss. From Deck in *Caucasia*, to the author of *Woman as Warrior* Mattie Harris in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, to the historian Daniel Braithwaite in *Linden Hills*, through to the politically-invested adult literary teacher Irene in “Source,” Morrison is not alone in using the passing trope to invite her readers to consider their own investment in reading, learning, teaching, and capturing racial knowledge, and like Senna, Neely, and Naylor, she queries and critiques the investment that academics have in these discussions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

To conclude, then, this thesis clearly demonstrates that despite the critical silence on literary passing in post-civil rights African American fiction, black women writers – including Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Neely, Gloria Naylor, Dorothy West, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison – are in fact revisiting the antiquated and anachronistic passing genre in their fiction, and crucially, they are creatively refashioning, revisioning, and reimaging its key themes and characters in order to address contemporary and historical contexts and manifestations of colourism in their aesthetic, economic, and political forms. Indeed, the popularity of the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the growth of the black middle classes and rise of Black Capitalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and debates around identity politics and neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s are climates that foster a return to the passing genre.

As I argue in Chapter 1, even though the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement is so often cited as the reason why passing fell out of style and became a passé trope, Bambara and Neely both parody the passing figure as a way of affirming and advocating a ‘Black is Beautiful’ aesthetic, one that redresses the colourist and

racist nineteenth-century model of white (and mulatta) femininity championed in the conventional genre. With their characters of Miz Della in “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drugs N Goods” (1974) and Veronica Tatterson in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994) – two light-skinned black female characters who rely upon artificial and cosmetic constructions of ‘whiteness’ to affirm their sense of superiority over their peers – Bambara and Neely undermine the aesthetic value placed upon light-skin, remove the light-skinned mulatta character from the centre of these narratives to the margins, and offer a vision of genealogical black beauty which harkens back to Africa. Indeed, both authors contend that a bona fide black genealogy can be traced, located, and uncovered. Neely’s use of the detective form, in particular, which lends itself neatly to the notion that [racial] truth can be revealed, means that her sophomore novel much like her debut, *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) advocates a (problematic) model of black authenticity.

The first chapter of this project also signposts Toni Morrison’s willingness to challenge this idea. Like Bambara and Neely, Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), similarly evokes passing as a response to the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement, although this time, the author expresses caution and concern over the necessity of the claim. Certainly, Morrison’s characterisation of mulatto/a characters, such as Soaphead Church and Maureen Peal, undermines the long-standing relationship between “beauty” and “virtue” that underpins colourist thinking (*Bluest Eye* 95). This said, her haunting character of Pecola, who ‘makes up’ whiteness in a different way to Della and Veronica, by fantasising about possessing a metonymic marker of whiteness – blue eyes, serves as a reminder to Morrison’s post-civil rights readers that black has not always been beautiful. This text, despite the timeliness of its publication, thus resists any straightforward championing of popular black identity politics associated with Black Cultural Nationalism.

In Chapter 2, I make clear that the passing trope is additionally invoked by black women writers in response to the rise of the black middle classes, the growth of black capitalism, and to engage in debates about colourism, class and privilege. Both Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1985) and Dorothy West’s *The Wedding* (1995)

rely upon a reworking of the traditional genre's theme of genealogical hypodescent and economic ascent in order to figuratively convey and question the passing down of racial legacies, the transmission of class status, and intersecting (race, class, colour, gender) hierarchies of power. Specifically, both West and Naylor focus upon the institution of the black family in order tackle these issues, refiguring the literary interplay between the tragic mulatta, the absent (white) father, and the abandoned (black) mammy of the conventional genre.

Importantly, even though her 1995 novel is one of the more contemporary examples I draw upon in this project, Dorothy West, as a literary figure, usefully complicates and resists the historical framework and narrative offered in this thesis. West began work on *The Wedding* in the 1930s, halted her efforts in the 1960s (because, as critics suggest and I concede, the 'Black is Beautiful' movement did deter some writers and publishers from 'promoting' narratives with light-skinned middle class or bourgeois characters), eventually parted with the manuscript in the 1990s, and used 1953 as her diegetic setting. As such, the work bridges the historiographic gap this thesis addresses, bringing stock characters and plot dynamics from the early twentieth-century genre into a Civil Rights era, for a contemporary audience. Crucially, what unites the work of Naylor and West is their determination to use the theme of passing to recuperate and recover lost genealogies. In Naylor's novel, this is a mulatta genealogy that is denied by the patriarchs of Linden Hills, and in West's novel, this is the interracial genealogy of the black middle classes, emblematised by the inclusion of the Coles family tree on the opening pages of her book.

If Neely and Bambara revisit the passing trope to uncover genealogies, and West and Naylor reimagine the genre in order to recover them, as the final chapter of this project argues, Walker and Morrison signify on Nella Larsen's seminal novella *Passing* (1929) in order to suggest that racial histories and lineages are ultimately irrecoverable and fragmented. All three authors use narrative occlusion, punctuation and grammar, and the theme of self-fashioning and stylization to help convey the theme of passing and to critique the very same identity politics that

Bambara and Neely relish. Even though it would seem that these three stories have never before been compared, Chapter 3 makes a solid case that Twyla and Roberta in “Recitatif” and Irene and Anastasia in “Source” are contemporary revisionings of Larsen’s Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. The influence of Larsen’s prose upon contemporary post-civil rights writers therefore cannot be denied and it is clear that the passing narrative of the early twentieth century shapes and influences Morrison’s and Walker’s work in the 1980s.

Throughout all three chapters, issues of textuality and history have been central. Not only is the past reckoned with through signifying references to intertexts (in particular, to canonical passing novels including *Clotel*(*le*), *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, *The House Behind the Cedars*, *Imitation of Life*, and *Passing*), but paratexts (the family tree in *The Wedding*), diegetic palimpsests and textual objects (letters, photo albums, and notes in *Linden Hills* and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*), and punctuative devices including footnotes, ellipses, and parentheses (“Source” and “Recitatif”), which both symbolise and facilitate the efficacy of the passing trope as a way of reading into the past. Indeed, the reawakening of the haunting passing figure (Clotel, Clare Kendry, Rena Walden, the Ex-Colored Man, and so on) in these contemporary works – as Pecola, Miz Della, Veronica, the Nedeeds, Laurel DuMont, and Maggie, for instance – reminds us that despite an often uneasy and unclear relationship with the history of racial passing in America, none of the authors fully vanquish from their texts this racialised and literary past, even in a so-called ‘post-race,’ neo-liberal era.

While this thesis does not explicitly address the question of form, the range of texts discussed (including canonical and non-canonical novels, short stories, creative non-fiction, genre fiction, and, in footnotes, poetry) suggests that there is more to say about the survival and re-materialisation of the passing genre in such a wide-ranging selection of black women’s writing. Moreover, while this project is attentive to issues of femininity and class, the commentary these black women writers offer about black masculinity and passing, and the added issue of sexuality and queer identities within the genre, would be a promising future topic to explore.

What this thesis does make clear, however, is that for Bambara, Neely, Naylor, West, Walker, and Morrison, rewriting passing is a gendered business, one that necessitates engaging with difficult and problematic stereotypes (the tragic mulatta, mammy, the black brute), and, when this work is at its strongest, undermining, challenging, and undercutting these archetypes and posing radical challenges to sexist and racist regimes of power, and the vocabulary used in hegemonic mythmaking and storytelling.

Passing-for-white is a key theme in contemporary black women's writing. In *God Help the Child*, as in all of the novels I discuss in this project, the signifying and intertextual passing trope is used to evoke a racial genealogy, to trace the past, and to convey intergenerational fissures and frictions that are caused by or encoded as colourism. The passing theme is updated to respond to contemporary post-civil rights debates about racial identity, including 'Black is Beautiful,' Black Cultural Nationalism, Black Capitalism, and the neo-liberal commodification of blackness. It is used to track wealth, privilege, money (and less desirable bequests) as they are inherited and descend from generation to generation. For African American women writers who themselves are too dark skinned to pass, to first reclaim a genre of passing that grossly misrepresents them, to rewrite its principal characters, and all in order to reject the stereotyped images of black women (light and dark) that the genre is renowned for, is a literary act of immense political significance. As this thesis demonstrates, black women writers continue to be haunted by this antiquated genre in the post-civil rights era; the ghosts of the beautiful, yet tragic mulatta, the abandoned mammy, and the disinheriting father linger, and the spectre of passing persists.

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